Into Esthar
by Chemotaxis, Wolkje

Summary

Set two and a half years after the Second Sorceress War. Squall and Seifer have moved on with their lives, but a chance encounter in Esthar confronts them with their past.

Notes

This is an old collaboration that is co-written by Wolkje <3 We've finally found some time to work on it again - yay! Many new chapters are almost ready :) We started writing this in 2010, so the writing matures with the story ;) Hope you enjoy it! And thanks to Aerawyn and Sway for betaing and to everyone who’s been following this story on FF.net or AFF <3
Pulled from a deep, dreamless sleep by the unforgiving blare of his alarm clock, Squall immediately started into awareness, alert eyes opening to complete darkness. With a quick move he silenced the obtrusive sound before it could travel through the apartment and wake Rinoa. Letting his mind float along the intimate bond tying them together, he immediately brushed upon the familiar presence of his sorceress. Reassured the raven haired woman was still sound asleep, he languidly rolled onto his back and allowed himself a few more minutes under the soft duvet before the inevitable start of a long day. His schedule for the day was a busy one; he most likely wouldn't see his bed again until very late that evening.

After a last stretch of long limbs and a reluctant glance in the direction of glowing red digits signaling yet another minute had passed, Squall pushed up from the mattress with a soft groan. Padding to the large floor-to-ceiling window taking up the entire south wall, he drew back heavy curtains, ignoring the switch located just above the bedside table that would do the easy task for him. He would never get used to such unnecessary luxuries, but the large apartment Rinoa had picked some six months ago was littered with them. Though apartment was hardly an accurate term. Somehow she'd managed to find a two-story penthouse in what she called a 'prime location' between Odine's lab, the presidential palace, and the bustling shopping district at the heart of Esthar: three places Squall would rather avoid. But there was no denying the convenience of being less than a twenty-five minute drive away from Odine's lab. Rinoa's deteriorating condition had become too alarming and exceeded Kadowaki's abilities to treat. As a result they had moved to seek the assistance of the eccentric doctor.

In spite of the steep rent and the overly spacious interior, he had indulged Rinoa when she'd set her eyes on the place. He had wanted to make the move away from Balamb Garden as relaxed and void of stress as possible for her. If the ridiculously lavish penthouse could offer her some distraction, then the price tag attached to it didn't matter much. Besides, ever since they moved to Esthar he rarely stayed for longer than a week at a time anyway, his position as commander often keeping him away from the high-tech capital for long periods. Most of his nights were still spent in standard SeeD quarters, nondescript hotel rooms, or field beds if his mission allowed for even such comfort.

In reality, Rinoa's choice in apartment was of little consequence to him, save for some mild annoyance whenever he came back from a longer mission and had to readjust to such fanciful things as needlessly large walk-in closets or toilet seats cleaning themselves with an automated whir. Some Estharian technology was just absurdly excessive. He had been told by his friends that Rinoa had managed a tasteful job of decorating the place, but he could care less about interior design, practicality always being foremost on his mind. He was happy enough that Rinoa hadn't resorted to the color scheme of her quarters in the Forest Owls' former base.

With the curtains drawn back completely, cold neon light fell into the guest room and cast odd shadows across the bare walls. Outside a soft haze of light pollution lay over the city, the darkness of night never really claiming the brightly lit metropolis. There were no stars visible, even though sunrise was still more than an hour away. Letting his eyes wander the pristine walkways below and the gleaming horizon of glass and metal skyscrapers, their shapes too odd and irregular, Squall let
a sigh escape as he rested his forehead against cool glass. He'd only been back for a few days and already he felt out of place. He doubted Esthar would ever feel like home, the quiet and thinly populated town of Balamb suiting him far better. When they had first moved to Esthar, he'd been surprised to find that he missed the salty air and temperate sea breeze. For as long as he could remember, he'd always lived by the sea, while Esthar lay in the middle of a vast desert.

Starting from his reverie, he dragged a slow hand through brown bangs and turned his back to the panoramic view of the sleepless city. He had to start getting ready, if he still intended to go over the documents for work and not be late. Closing the door of the guest room behind him, careful not to make any noise, he walked into the hallway. As he quietly passed Rinoa's bedroom, he could practically feel her, the image of long black hair draped on a pillow and soft features innocent with sleep easily materializing in his mind's eye. Her aura seemed peaceful, undisturbed. Hopeful that her frustration with him had dwindled somewhat over the past two days spent together, he didn't linger and made his way to the kitchen downstairs.

With his usual meals consisting of a quick visit to the cafeteria or vacuum wrapped rations, he was hardly a mastermind in the kitchen. A simple breakfast of coffee and toast would suffice though, especially keeping in mind the formal banquet he was supposed to attend later that day, along with the dignitaries that would be present at the morning's meeting. He inwardly groaned at the unappealing prospect, but Quistis had pressed him into agreeing, maintaining it was crucial for Garden and SeeD to showcase their good intentions. Considering the sensitive nature of the matter that would be discussed, Squall knew the strict woman was right, but it didn't make him any more eager to start the day. Diplomacy wasn't in his nature, the necessity to keep his blunt opinions to himself when faced with incompetent officials a taxing one. He'd been awake fewer than fifteen minutes and already a scowl had found its way onto his face.

Steering clear of the more complicated kitchen appliances, Squall went about the simple tasks of starting the coffee machine and popping two slices of bread into the toaster. Procuring some jam from the fridge and a large mug from the cupboards, his unimaginative breakfast sat ready on the kitchen table next to his laptop a few minutes later.

Woken by the brunet's early morning activities, Angelo came padding into the kitchen with a lazy trot, dark eyes peering at the source of soft noises and appetizing scents with a hopeful gleam of curiosity. Well aware that the large dog would be staring at him with pleading eyes for the better part of his breakfast, Squall gave dark fur a thorough ruffle before he walked up to the leftmost lower cupboard. This earned him a happily wagging tail as Angelo followed him across the kitchen, the dog fully knowledgeable about the scrumptious treats residing in said cupboard. Having set out a bowl of water and a tray filled with slippery, meaty chunks, Squall sat himself down for his own morning ritual.

As he absentmindedly ate his bland meal, he worked his way through some mails and confirmed the rendezvous point where he'd be meeting up with two SeeD officers. Opening the files Quistis had sent him for some last minute revision, focused eyes skimmed over the list of people who would be present at the meeting one last time, absorbing the information listed under each name and the accompanying pictures. Some of them were politicians he'd already met in the course of his career, but there were still quite a few new faces; mainly key figures from the Estharian government, military and SCTA.

Having plowed through all the necessary documentation and certain all details of the day's meeting were imprinted in his mind, Squall finally closed his laptop and cleared the kitchen table. Moving to put his plate and mug in the dishwasher, he halted in his footsteps when his eyes caught the calendar hanging nearby. Roused from her post-binge nap, a silent huff sounded as Angelo pushed up and trotted after him, the dog hoping for some pats that didn't come.
Rinoa's flowing and rounded handwriting was scribbled all over, the young woman clearly keeping busy whenever he wasn't home. Everything from plans with friends and birthdays of people he didn't know to the date her library books were due was featured on the brightly colored calendar. Struck by the fact that their lives couldn't be any more different, his eyes traveled to the bold red writing adorning October the fifth.

The enthusiastically underlined words "pick up Squall" caused a familiar twinge of guilt to well up in his chest. He had thought he'd be able to make it to Esthar by the fifth, but his mission had lasted well until the twelfth. The circumstances forcing him to stay in the field longer than anticipated had been beyond his control, but that mattered little to Rinoa when it meant his time in Esthar had been shortened by seven days. His periods of absence had long been a sore point between them and were part of the reason their relationship had ended.

Staring at the bright red letters for a few seconds longer, Squall's gaze was drawn to the neatly written "2:00 pm, Odine" next to October the fifteenth. As usual, Rinoa had asked him to come along to her appointment, the young woman not at all comfortable in the presence of the harebrained scientist turned doctor. Wanting nothing more than to help relieve her anxiety, he had instantly agreed. Even if they weren't a couple anymore, he would always be her knight. As long as Rinoa needed him, he'd always come back to their apartment in Esthar. In a way they both still needed each other. After the war his sorceress had dulled his nightmares and anxieties for him one by one and made him numb to the wound left by the Second Sorceress War. Thanks to her soothing presence at the back of his mind, he had remained functional, his thoughts mercifully empty whenever he needed them to be.

Besides, in reality not that much had changed. There hadn't really been any intimacy for a long time by the time Rinoa had ended things. His relocation to the guest room had been the only noteworthy change, a merely formal one at that. And just as before, he was more absent than present. Not much had changed at all, his life still pretty much the same as it had been before their breakup. Squall couldn't help but wonder what that said about their failed relationship. If he was completely honest with himself, he didn't understand much of it. But then again, he'd never exactly been boyfriend material to begin with. Perhaps he was just missing the glaringly obvious.

At the soft press of a wet nose against his hand and a questioning whine, he tore his eyes away from the calendar and his mind from darkening thoughts. Meeting Angelo's confused gaze and squatting down to rub and scratch behind keen ears, Squall wished his own worries could be dispelled so easily. With a last soft pat and a firmly spoken command to "stay," he directed his thoughts back onto the right track, before he got up and headed towards the bathroom attached to the guest room upstairs. Stripping down and letting his drawstring pants drop to the floor, he stepped into the shower and let cool water run down his limbs in order to clear his mind. With a soft sigh, he briefly focused on the sound of the hard spray drumming onto his shoulders and back, before he started to methodically wash himself down and prepare mentally for the coming day.

Towel wrapped around his waist, he emerged from the bathroom moments later and made for the "closet" he shared with Rinoa across the hallway. One glance in the mirror had told him he didn't need to shave just yet, so halfheartedly combing his fingers through rebellious wet locks and a quick spray of deodorant was all the grooming he would conform to. All that was left was locating his uniform, which was easier said than done.

Several minutes later, after having examined rotating racks, drawers and shelves containing clothes Rinoa had picked out for him, he still hadn't found what he needed. Grumbling a silent complaint about owning more crap than he'd ever get around to wearing, he eyed the tidily stacked abundance of plain clothing with a scowl. Though he understood the logic of dressing more inconspicuously when amongst civilians in order not to stand out too much and protect his identity, he definitely
preferred his battle-worn gear. He'd choose the feel of leather softened with use over starkly pressed dress shirts any day.

"Looking for this?"

Startled by the soft voice coming from behind him, Squall turned around to regard the sleep mussed woman with a raised eyebrow. Only wearing one of his larger t-shirts and the jewelry that made up her magic inhibitors, Rinoa stood in the doorway and teasingly dangled his SeeD uniform in front of him, neatly arranged on a hanger. "I picked it up from the drycleaner yesterday. I told you I left it in the laundry room."

"Did I wake you up?" he asked evasively, not commenting on her implication he hadn't been listening again.

"No," she replied simply, brown eyes studying his undressed state for a few seconds, before she walked in farther and handed Squall his uniform. Small hand resting on his arm and gaze unreadable, the raven haired woman lingered close enough for him to smell the lavender scent clinging to her hair and skin. "Want me to make you some breakfast?" she offered in a soft tone of voice, tendrils of her consciousness softly snaking and weaving into his in the kind of morning greeting he hadn't received in a long while.

Puzzled at the kind treatment he was receiving, but wise enough not to question it, Squall allowed for the warmth coursing through their bond to soothe his nerves. If anything, he was glad Rinoa's mood seemed to have picked up considerably in comparison to the night before. He felt himself relax as their minds softly intertwined, the touch frail but comforting. "I already ate," he answered after a moment's delay.

An approving hum was all the answer he got, as Rinoa cocked her head to the side and eyed him curiously, able to feel his restlessness through their bond. "It's rare for you to be this worked up over a meeting," she pointed out neutrally, fingertips brushing along his lower arm a second longer before reluctantly breaking contact.

"I'm not," he replied curtly, a frown betraying his annoyance with himself. Distancing himself from his sorceress and turning his back to her scrutinizing gaze, Squall pulled his uniform from its hanger with a little bit more force than necessary. He didn't like the thought of having to disclose his identity to yet a few more possibly backstabbing politicians and military figures, especially considering the fact that Garden's proposition that day wouldn't inspire much goodwill in any of them. Dropping his towel, he selected a black pair of boxer briefs and started to dress with brisk movements, his mood souring once more. He wasn't very good at first impressions, disbelief and mockery always amongst the first responses he received upon revealing himself as Commander Leonhart. Not that he cared about what anyone thought. He could just do without the waste of time it took for others to take him seriously.

"They always do in the end," Rinoa's voice sounded firmly in response to his thoughts. Stopping mid-movement of buttoning up his pants, Squall glanced over his shoulder with a slight frown in place. Rinoa just stood leaning against the door frame, eyeing him intently.

"Don't do that," he muttered, returning his attention to his uniform and slipping on the uncomfortably stiff shirt. If his sorceress's calming effect was a perk of sharing a bond with her, then having his head peered into was an undeniable down side. She hadn't done so in ages, which left him confused, but apparently this morning was different in several ways.

"What? Look at you?" Rinoa questioned irritably, clearly irked by his dismissal. "Come here," she ordered immediately after, brown eyes taking in the brunet's too rushed movements and the sloppy
result. Receiving only a warning look in response to her prompt, she sighed in exasperation. "Come here, so I can help you with that," she explained, pointing a finger at the careless arrangement of his uniform.

"I don't n—" he started, but quickly reconsidered at the growing touch of dejection to Rinoa's expression. He could feel it rather than see it, but it was there. Not wanting to ruin her mood or remind her of her anger with him the past few days, he decided it would be best to humor her this time. Walking up to the young woman, he let her fuss with the buttons and pressed collar, relieved at the small upward curl of rosy lips.

"You don't care half as much about appearances as you should," she reprimanded with a playful tug at his collar. Slender fingers traveled down unhurriedly, before they moved to tuck his shirt into black pants with slow deliberate moves. "You don't do things their way, yet you're successful. That's what confuses them, you know. More than your age..." She paused briefly to inspect her work from a slight distance. Looking up to meet Squall's gaze, she continued softly, "...or your face."

Increasingly uncomfortable, dark eyebrows drew together in confusion at his sorceress' behavior and words. Usually she avoided close proximity like this. "Rino-

"Now the jacket," she immediately interrupted, pulling away before he had the chance to. Retrieving the black uniform jacket and pushing it into his hands, the young woman watched with an inspecting gaze as he put it on. Apparently she was pleased enough with the outcome, since no corrections ensued. Compliantly, he let her add the touches that would distinguish his uniform as that of the Commander and quelled his annoyance.

"Relax, Squall," she admonished as she arranged the more elaborately embroidered shoulder pieces, their gold and red threading gleaming under the soft overhead light. "Hand me the chains," came Rinoa's next order, her one hand held out whilst the other was still making minute adjustments to his shoulder pieces. No choice but to comply, he stood still as ornamental chains and dark red belts were attached to hold the contraption that was his rigid uniform together, the clasps fashioned to resemble his Griever necklace.

Twisting out of her reach, he gave a few testing shrugs of his shoulders and groaned inwardly at discovering the uniform felt just as uncomfortable as the last time he had worn it.

Eyes sparkling in amusement at the brunet's obvious dislike of the uniform, Rinoa supplied as sweetly as possible, "Ah. I forgot the cuff links."

"Having fun?" he muttered darkly, but immediately felt his annoyance dwindle at the sight of the smile playing on those lips. It was good to see her smile like that after two days of being ignored.

"Yes," she teased, closing in on him with feigned evil intent, before she pinned the silver cuff links in place. Humming her approval at the final result, she said quietly, "To think you worry about first impressions."

The statement made Squall frown in puzzlement. "Even you didn't like me much at first," he pointed out evenly. Which was an understatement. To his surprise, Rinoa laughed in response.

"Oh, but that was my second impression," she replied in a conspiring sort of way. When no understanding dawned in gray-blue eyes, the girl sighed. Deciding to take pity on the clueless man, she let the issue rest. "When do you have to leave?" she asked, as she turned around and left the room.
"Seven o'clock," he replied, his answer coming somewhat late as he followed her downstairs. Rinoa's comment hadn't been very comforting, nor had it made much sense.

In the hallway, Angelo skidded across slippery tiles as she raced to meet her mistress. Not allowed to go upstairs, she had been waiting impatiently at the bottom of the stairs and now her tail swooshed back and forth in barely contained excitement as she coozed up against Rinoa's legs. "That's in ten minutes," the girl thought out loud, before stooping down and giving Angelo a few greeting pets. "Not now, smelly breath. I'll take you for a walk later," she apologized to the frolicking dog, before ushering Squall into the living room and closing the hallway door behind them.

"Did you give her that tuna thing again?" Rinoa questioned with a slight curl of her nose, as she turned to meet Squall's gaze. Greeted by total indifference, she dismissed the issue with a soft sigh. "Never mind. I'll go get your coat," she offered whilst ignoring the whines that came from the door behind her. Not waiting for an answer, she headed for the laundry room without another glance his way.

Starting into action, Squall went about arranging the most important files and his laptop into a leather workbag. By the time he had managed to fit it all inside, soft footsteps signaled Rinoa's return. "Here," she said simply, one hand holding out a black trench coat that would cover his uniform, the other a shoulder holster carrying two semi-automatic handguns. "Your favorites."

Taking the items from his sorceress unblinkingly, knowing what the addition of the holster implied, Squall asked curiously, "I just came back from clearing out entire monster nests and you're worried now?"

A noncommittal shrug was followed by Rinoa's softly berating voice. "Put the damned things on, Squall. I understand you can't go around carrying a gunblade in broad daylight, so just use these instead."

"I always have Lionheart nearby for emergencies. You know that," Squall reassured, but still slipped the holster belts over his shoulders in order to appease her. "It's just a meeting. Like you said."

"The hidden agendas of men are much more dangerous than any monster nest," she replied simply.

Unable to deny the truth to her statement, his life targeted on numerous occasions in the past and not by wild monsters, he swung his bag over a shoulder. "I need to go."

Nodding softly in understanding, Rinoa followed him back into the hallway, warding off a happily bouncing Angelo in the process. "Don't forget about the appointment," she reminded him, when they reached the elevator.

"I know. 2:00 pm. I'll be there," he supplied quickly, before she could express any doubt. Turning around for some last parting words as the elevator doors opened with a muted ding, he was caught off guard by a chaste kiss pressed to his lips and the distinctive scent that was a mix of lavender and Rinoa.

Too surprised to string together a response, he was pushed backwards into the elevator by two insistent hands. "Be safe," his sorceress said quietly with a small wave, before she disappeared behind two metal doors sliding shut, leaving her knight utterly confused.
Placing his key in the old lock, Seifer pushed open the door to his apartment. The living room was cast in darkness, and the faint smells of gunblade oil and metal greeted him, marking the place invariably as his. Despite the apartment's placement in one of the cheapest neighborhoods in Esthar and the building being about a hair away from falling apart, it had been his home for just over one and a half years and had grown to instill in him a sense of belonging. His apartment wasn't much, but it was his. He had earned everything in it the hard way.

It had been weeks since he had last set foot in it and all he could think of was collapsing on his comfy bed. Weeks on the road had left his body tired and battered and his limbs exhausted to the point of aching at his every move. For the briefest of moments he switched on the lights and scanned the apartment to make sure everything was as he'd left it.

Sliding his worn bag off his shoulder, he passed a hand through his hair and turned the lights back off. Unable to think straight any longer, he headed directly for his bedroom where he collapsed on top of the bed, his weary body smelly and covered in grime. He knew his bed would be caked in dirt by the time he had to get up, but he couldn't care any less. He let his body mold against the soft sheets and let his head sink deeper into the pillows as his mind drew a complete blank.

A low grunt left him mere hours later as he subconsciously moved a pillow to shield himself from the obtrusive light that spilled in through the window. Ignoring the sun's relentless attempts at stirring him awake, he turned in his bed and groaned in annoyance. As more hours passed and the heat in the room slowly became too much, he was finally pulled from his deep slumber and opened his eyes to take in the world around him. Bringing his fingers to his furrowed brow, he kneaded firmly in an effort to ease away the tiredness still all too present. With a groan, he pushed himself out of the bed and took uncoordinated steps towards the bathroom as he clumsily removed his dirty clothes.

Spotting himself in the mirror, he couldn't help a low chuckle at his own appearance. Long unkempt locks were matted with dirt, as was his tanned skin. A full grown beard framed his cheeks. "Fucking sexy, Almasy," he greeted himself, shaking his head in disbelief at his rough appearance.

Entering the shower moments later and twisting the setting to scalding hot, he enjoyed the feeling of steaming water flowing against his body. It had been weeks since he'd felt such luxury. Sighing, he began lathering himself up, his mind already moving on to plan the day ahead. He would have to pay the SCTA a visit to inform them of his return. He'd worked at the local Specialist Combat Training Academy for just over a year as a gunblade instructor. Even though he was still on the lowest instructor wage and only worked there two nights a week, he enjoyed it nonetheless. If he was lucky, he would be able to return to his usual teaching hours the following week. He couldn't wait to see if the brats had improved any since he'd been away. If not, then he would definitely take sadistic pleasure in making them painfully aware of their lack of progress. Shaking his head as he thought of the substitute instructor they always used when he was away, he couldn't help a self-satisfied smirk. The Tiamat SCTA had been damned lucky to find him.

After his stop at the SCTA, he planned on visiting his other employer, Arc Balios. Knowing the man would be impatient to get started on the weapons Seifer had just been out gathering materials for, he easily predicted a fair amount of hours spent slaving away at the forge. Even though the trips out where boring and tedious as hell, their sole content consisting of buying materials off far away strangers and digging for ore, they earned him just enough extra gil to keep him from going into the negative. When Arc had reluctantly offered that Seifer become the man's apprentice, it had been under the condition of low wages in return of hard labor for as many years as Arc deemed
necessary for Seifer to prove his worth. In reality, the blond knew it was the man's way of testing his sincerity and determination, nothing more, yet it didn't really matter as he had no need for anything else.

Thoughts returning to the tasks ahead of him, he remembered some shopping would be in order as well. Anything left in his fridge would have grown a life of its own since he'd been away. From his quick glance in the mirror earlier, he also knew he'd have to fit in time for a haircut. No one would be able to recognize him if he didn't. And with the rather thoughtless abuse of his bed linen, he had to take care of that too. Unable to suppress a sigh at his growing list of menial chores, he groaned inwardly. Trained as a fighter, he had never expected his life to take such a turn for the mundane.

Drying off whilst brushing his teeth, he was pleased at the image that greeted him in the mirror. The tan he'd worked up over his weeks on the road went well with his blond hair and green eyes. Getting out his razor and shaving cream, he was almost back to his old self, his blond locks the only thing still in need of fixing. Fishing out his hair trimmer from the back of the rather cluttered cabinet under the sink, he plugged it in and began the tedious process. Zoning out, it wasn't long until he finished his task, smirking in satisfaction at the result. There was no way he wasn't getting laid that evening. He was simply too irresistible. Switching off the lights in the small bathroom, he turned around and left the room in search of clean clothes.

Donning a pair of well worn jeans and a black t-shirt, he decided he might as well get started on his long list of chores. Only managing to change the bedding, he was almost immediately distracted. Making plans for the night suddenly seemed much more interesting. Picking up his cell phone, he sat down on the clean bed and punched in the familiar number. Enjoying the cool breeze that filtered through the open window, he smiled ever so slightly as he waited for the other person to pick up.

"Calder," a male voice greeted.

"It's me," Seifer spoke, not giving away his identity, wanting to see how long it'd take for the other man to catch on. Whenever he was out on one of his trips, he never stayed in touch. He had never been one for texts, hating the act. If he wanted to talk to someone, he'd do just that. Spending ages on typing something he could easily say within seconds just seemed absurd. And distractions whilst on the road never led to anything good.

"Seifer?" the man asked, his voice easily betraying his excitement.

Seifer chuckled softly as he gave his reply. "Indeed." He couldn't help but gain satisfaction from how eager Calder sounded. Three weeks without sex was far too long. "So, you got time to meet up tonight?" he asked, never one to mince words.

"Sure," Calder replied almost instantaneously, needing no time to ponder the question. "We sparring as usual?"

Quickly running through the list of things he had to deal with before he could indulge in some much needed physical relief, Seifer grimaced, annoyance sneaking into his voice. "I still have a lot to take care of today. I don't think I can meet up until late." He paused briefly to turn his mood back around. "How about we go out to celebrate my return tonight?"

A low chuckle sounded from the other end of the line. "You're insufferable," the man commented.

Smirking in reply, Seifer got up from the bed. "Now, I know that's not what you think," he retorted.

There was another bout of soft laughter before the other man spoke again. "Where are we going
"You decide. Some decent music is all I need." It wasn't like Seifer was planning on staying out for long anyways.

"Sure, how about going to the Nexus then?"

"Sounds good. I'll pick up some Avalanche on the way," Seifer agreed.

More laughter filtered through the line at the added information. Calder knew exactly what Seifer meant by those words. "Well, at least I know what mood you're in," he said, knowing full well Avalanche was a favored drug of the blond's for a night of sex.

"It's been three fucking weeks," Seifer replied gruffly.

"I know. I'm not complaining," Calder commented. "Promise to get us a good supply, huh? I'm all out at the moment."

This caused a blond eyebrow to rise. "Yeah? You been busy whilst I've been away?"

"Only a couple of times..." was Calder's measured reply as he downplayed what he'd been up to whilst Seifer had been away.

Somewhat annoyed that Calder had sugarcoated his words when jealousy had never been a factor in the relaxed thing they had going, Seifer decided to ignore it and tease the guy instead. "Anyone good?" he asked with a smirk on his lips, certain the other would answer in his favor.

"You know no one is a match for you," Calder spoke smoothly, speaking the exact words he knew Seifer wanted to hear.

Smirk growing bolder, Seifer did nothing to hide his smugness at the words. "Don't you forget it." Standing up from the bed, he reluctantly resigned himself to getting on with his program for the day. "Well... I'll see you tonight then. Around one?"

"Sounds good," Calder agreed, not needing much time to ponder his reply. After a moment's pause, Seifer hung up.

Walking over to the window, Seifer closed it as he eyed the busy street below, a playful smile tugging at his lips. After he had moved to Esthar he had stayed on his own and kept to himself for a long time. He'd had it rough after the war and had led a strangely solitary lifestyle, far removed from the attention seeking teenager he'd grown up as. Calder had been the one to change that. A gunblader as well, they spent most nights together when Seifer was in Esthar.

Distracting himself from his pointless thoughts, he walked into the living room. After grabbing some food, he began emptying the bag he'd brought upstairs the night before onto his work table. He always kept some materials for himself to experiment with. Eyeing the pieces, he was suddenly eager to go to Arc's and get started on the weapons they had prepared for.

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"If you would please step over here, sir, and place any weapon or communication device you may have on you into the designated tray. Your belongings will be returned to you after the conclusion of the banquet later today."

Gesturing in the direction of a large table set up at the side of the entrance hallway to the conference building, the young woman that had addressed Squall in a pleasant tone of voice sent him a friendly smile. Lined up along the walls were heavily armed palace guards, their somewhat outdated occupation title quite misleading when spotting their high-tech armor and state of the art rifles. If the kind-faced hostesses were meant to lessen the suffocating atmosphere of tight security, then the effort was wasted, the effect of their welcoming smiles easily negated by the multiple cameras mounted on the ceiling and several sets of unseen gazes peering from behind dark visors. Hardly intimidated, Squall walked over to the indicated table without any qualms and placed his two guns into the tray carrying his identification code. Firearms were hardly his preferred choice of weapon anyway, the ice goddess residing in his mind far more lethal. Parting with his cell phone next and watching the friendly woman take off with his tray after a slight bow, the brunet awaited further instructions. He'd already been subjected to an iris and hand scan, his invitation letter scrutinized and confirmed several times over, before he was even allowed beyond the entrance gate. Annoyed at the excessive measures taken for a single meeting, Squall pondered the irony of owning a high level key card to Loire's private quarters and most access codes to the palace grounds, given to him by the president himself in case he wanted to "visit." He highly doubted Kiros had agreed to this or even knew of the privileges Loire had decided to grant his son. As the chief of the palace guard, the man would most likely blow a fuse.

"Please step this way, sir," another hostess requested in a friendly manner, guiding him to a large metal construction connected to a monitor and two stern-eyed overseers. Knowing from experience this meant a full body scan was next on the agenda, Squall suppressed a deep sigh. He was already running on the late side, thanks to the unnecessarily long detour his bodyguards had insisted on taking, and apparently he had been the last to arrive at the check-in point.

A few uncomfortable moments of invisible lasers raking his body later, and having received the go-ahead to proceed to the waiting room reserved for all Garden officials, the impatient brunet emerged from the lavishly mirrored elevator that had carried him to the third floor of the conference building. Walking with hurried strides through the brightly lit hallway, he could already imagine the subtle annoyance lacing Quistis's greeting words.

Coming to a halt at the double doors sporting the sign "Garden," he slipped off his black trench coat in one smooth move and stepped into the room without further delay. Inside, all heads turned to regard the latecomer. Ignoring them, Squall walked over to the coat hangers nearby.

"Unusual for you to be this late," a somewhat berating voice sounded from behind him, his presumption confirmed at detecting the hint of displeasure in Quistis' voice.

Irrked, he turned round to face the immaculately dressed woman with an unimpressed glare and supplied dryly, "Tell that to the Trepies you set me up with."

The disgruntled reply caused the blonde to quirk an eyebrow, the young woman obviously not having expected the other's abysmal attitude. "What matters is that you're here now," she said
firmly, not about to tolerate the conversation being steered by Squall's bad temper. "Did you go through the documents I sent you last night?"

"Yes," the brunet replied in an only slightly more affable manner. He needed to be calm in order to make it through the meeting, but that was easier said than done. "The engineers managed the deadline after all?" he asked, gaze wandering to the far back of the room where Cid was getting up from a luxuriously cushioned chair, the man excusing himself and obviously intending to leave the other two headmasters to continue the conversation on their own.

"They pulled through, with the right amount of encouragement," Quistis answered in a deceivingly neutral tone of voice, a little smile playing on her lips as she handed him an updated set of blueprints, fresh off the press. "At least this is something we can hand over to Estharian technicians without having to feel embarrassed."

Skimming through the papers, he gave a curt hum of approval, before he glanced past Quistis. "Sir," he greeted succinctly when Cid joined them with a broad smile.

"Squall," came the too cheerful reply, the middle-aged man landing a friendly pat on his shoulder. "It's been too long, hasn't it? Though I suppose it can't be helped. Missions wait for no man, isn't that right?" he spoke amicably, with the air of someone who knew all about mercenary life.

Annoyed but curbing his urge to express said annoyance at the stern look Quistis sent his way, he offered an acknowledging nod instead, remembering the right amount of respect he was supposed to muster at such an occasion.

"I've read the reports and I must say, you handled your latest mission expertly," the unaware headmaster continued jovially. "President Loire informed me that work at the refinery has already resumed, now that the oilboyle nesting grounds are a thing of the past."

"If anything, it's good timing," Quistis added thoughtfully, taking the blueprints back from the brunet's idle hands and storing them away neatly in a manila folder. "It's a good reminder that even Esthar needs Garden assistance."

"Ah yes. There's that too," Cid commented with an agreeing nod. Chuckling fondly, he continued, "They won't know what hit 'em, consenting to you as the meeting's moderator."

With a soft shake of the head, Quistis admonished the older man, "You know I have to remain impartial. I'm just laying out the facts and files. For this to work, all parties need to get their say." Pausing to add weight to her words, she fixed the headmaster with a level gaze. "And you know the things you have to say. We need your full back-up on this one," the blonde continued, firmly dissuading any tendency of the older man to leave the talking to others.

"Yes yes, don't you worry," Cid reassured with a dismissing gesture. "I'm sure things will go just fine."

Clearly remembering how the headmaster had shirked his responsibilities and shoved the Garden broadcast mic into his hands, randomly and non-democratically instating him as Commander in the process, Squall couldn't help but raise a dark eyebrow and share a pointed look with his former instructor.

Releasing a soft sigh, Quistis shook her head almost indiscernibly. They both knew they needed the man's seniority and connections, no politician willing to listen to someone their age without it, regardless of their experience and expertise.
Glancing down at her watch, the blonde remarked pensively, "We'll have to leave any minute now." As her gaze traveled back to meet Squall's, the brunet braced himself for the well-meaned "advice" he knew was coming. The look that greeted him was the one cadets were loath to find themselves the target of. Their commander formed no exception to the rule.

"I'll start off with the introductions, Quistis began evenly, clearly hinting at the part of the meeting he was least excited about. "I know certain... reactions are unavoidable, but if you could please try not to—"

A loud knock started everyone in the room from their conversations, the double doors swinging open wide and revealing a friendly, smiling hostess. "All the other dignitaries have already taken their seats and are awaiting your arrival. Please allow us to escort you to the conference room," she announced pleasantly upon entering, extending an arm towards the doorway in invitation. Outside, two palace guards stood at attention. Thanking Hyne for the welcome interruption, Squall quickly made for the hallway, not bothering to turn around and discover Quistis's expression.

Behind him he could hear Cid comment lightheartedly on "the impatience of youth," Quistis only sighing exasperatedly in reply. Not paying any notice, he stepped outside and gave the two guards assigned to their party an acknowledging nod as he walked past them. Focusing on his footsteps echoing along the marble floor, he tried to calm his mind in preparation of several hours of frustration and boredom. Meetings like these always tended to drag on, unimportant details and seemingly endless squabbling taking up unnecessary amounts of time, as most politicians were only ever willing to serve their own causes.

Calling down and holding the elevator, he waited for Quistis and the headmasters to catch up, but the first to round the corner was the hostess. Looking somewhat flustered yet still smiling broadly, the young woman hurried toward him as elegantly as she could manage in a pencil skirt and high heels. "Sir, please allow me to do that," she requested, her voice a tad embarrassed as she stepped into the elevator and placed a staying hand against metal doors. Realizing he'd only confuse her further if he maintained behavior unbefitting of some high official, Squall simply let his arm fall down and walked inside to lean against the far mirrored wall of the elevator. Already he was more than fed up with all the unnecessary pretenses.

Supplying a brief word of greeting he had failed to offer earlier as the headmasters of Trabia and Galbadia Garden filed into the elevator, he immediately fell silent during their ascent to the top floor. Next to him Quistis was nudging her spectacles into place and seemed to be checking the stack of folders in her arms for the umpteenth time. Even Cid had assumed an appropriately serious demeanor.

As the elevator came to a stop, a collective moment of minds steeling themselves was tangible in the air before the party of Garden representatives walked out into the lavish hallway. A multitude of muted voices buzzed loudly from behind the large set of doors at the end of it. This was it. Squall could only hope that Quistis would manage to run a tight ship and keep time loss to a minimum.

At the nudge of a sharp elbow in his side he glanced sideways to see said blonde regard him seriously, her lips mouthing the words "no glaring" slowly and articulately. Not leaving him any time to respond or protest, she walked ahead with a determined stride and pushed open one of the doors, the buzzing of voices coming to an abrupt end as she disappeared inside.

Not about to linger in the hallway by himself, he followed after her and made a conscious effort to smoothen out his features into a suitably neutral expression. The many eyes gravitating towards him as he walked into the suffocatingly silent conference room didn't help make the feat any
easier. Spotting a sign reading "Squall Leonhart," placed in front of one of the five remaining free chairs, he immediately realized why he already was the center of attention.

An inward groan the only reaction he could permit himself under such intense scrutiny, he walked to his seat with confident strides, returning the curt nods he received in greeting from the heads of state as he traversed the room. He'd already dealt with them in the past and earned their respect. The ones possibly posing a problem were currently boring their eyes into him, clearly disbelieving and waiting for the moment he'd actually sit himself down in the commander's chair. The moment he did, the heavy silence broke like glass falling to shards, whispered comments instantly filling the air.

More than used to his appearance not living up to the larger-than-life expectations that were associated with his name, Squall easily brushed off the incredulous stares sent his way by the Estharian Secretaries of Defense and Foreign Affairs. To their right, a composed and unaffected Loire was lending a sympathetic ear to the Secretary of Economy, the round-faced man obviously surprised and in need of reassuring.

Harder to ignore were the two rather large men seated at the end of the u-shaped table, right next to the slightly elevated platform where Quistis was going to make her presentation. Burly postures leaned forward to better study the anomaly that just walked into their midst, their gazes were invariably contemptuous whenever they looked up from their outraged exchange. Squall immediately recognized them from the files he had looked through that morning. Borecco, the Estharian Chief of Police, and Reardon, the General of the Estharian Army. It wasn't all that difficult to guess at the reason for such instantaneous hatred. His general lack of brawn and masculinity usually inspired such a reaction in men who considered fighting and combat their trade. For someone like him to be a commander was considered a personal insult.

Able to overhear such words as "absurd" and "ridiculous," the two men unsubtly made sure he knew exactly what they thought of him. Having trouble keeping his expression in check, Squall felt his anger flare dangerously on the inside, but refused to let them gain any leverage over him by expressing any shape or form of emotion. It was no different from the times he had fought off muscle heads as a cadet, often mistaken for an easy target. It was nothing. Just like those assholes, they'd learn to think differently soon. All in good time. Anger simmering down to a cold boil at the back of his mind, he directed his attention away from the infuriating display, his gaze landing on the somewhat fidgety man sitting directly in front of him.

Lantos Farkas, the new Mayor of Fisherman Horizon, though less xenophobic than his predecessor still seemed highly uncomfortable in the presence of some of the world's most important dignitaries. Aware that he had Squall's attention, he seemed to attempt to sink away in his chair. Indifferent towards the man's discomfort, steely gray-blue eyes moved on to travel past the others present, filing away faces under their correct names and titles.

Stopping at a pair of narrowed eyes, Squall knew he was looking at trouble. Unremarkable of build and appearance, Darman Zautra wouldn't stand out much if it wasn't for that calculating gaze, something about the man making it impossible to ignore him. Knowing full well that of those present the Chief Executive of the SCTA would have the least to gain from their proposition that day, the fact that the man was now staring at him so coldly didn't bode well.

"Good morning. I am Quistis Trepe, Head Instructor of Balamb Garden and Headmistress in training. In the capacity of today's moderator, I hereby call this meeting into session." Clear and to the point, the blonde's voice cut right through all the commotion, demanding everyone's undivided attention. All eyes traveling to the presentation area at the open end of the meeting table, Squall couldn't help but feel grateful for the temporary reprieve and turned to watch his friend as well.
Standing confident in front of a large presentation screen, clipboard and laser pointer in hand, Quistis was the picture of competence. The sight reminded him of how she thrived when confronted with an audience, duty or any challenge for that matter, the young woman having come a long way since the war. She was far better suited to a position of authority than he would ever be or ever had been, the mere thought of having to speak later during the meeting enough to make him uncomfortable. Addressing his troops on the battle field was entirely different to speaking in front of a room full of self-conceited officials.

"The summon for this gathering has been issued by Garden, but was only realized thanks to the hospitality of President Loire and the Estharian government. For this we extend our sincerest gratitude," she stated formally once all conversation had finally died down. "Representing Garden are Headmaster Kramer from Balamb Garden, Headmistress Blackwood from Trabia Garden, Headmaster Tavares from Galbadia Garden, and SeeD Commander Leon—"

A derisive snort interrupted Quistis' introductions at the mentioning of the brunet's name, the sound loud enough to be heard by all. Only taken aback for the duration of a second, the blonde immediately got back on track after sending General Reardon a withering look for resorting to such tasteless tactics. "—and SeeD Commander Leonhart," she continued firmly, emphasizing the name to clearly convey the issue was not up for discussion.

"You really expect us to believe that *this* is the SeeD Commander?" Zautra asked in a composed manner, stating each word unflinchingly as he leaned back in his chair and eyed Quistis levelly.

Not having expected disturbances from that corner of the table, nor such an uncouth question of Squall's identity, the young woman stood temporarily stunned as the comment caused the conference room to be plunged back into disorder. At the other end of the table Borecco and Reardon seemed quite entertained by the Chief Executive's audacity, leaning back in their chairs as well to await Quistis' response with mock attention.

Before Squall could even begin to feel properly annoyed at such disrespect, the scraping of a chair being pushed back caught his attention. Having a rather accurate suspicion at what would follow, he watched the scene unfold, barely restraining the urge to bring his hand up to pinch at the bridge of his nose in frustration.

At the head of the table Loire came to a stand, his features deceivingly composed. "Gentlemen," he began seriously, his voice loud enough to rise above the noise. "I can assure you that the man in your presence today is indeed Commander Leonhart. Now as I am certain you are aware of his accomplishments, it would only be prudent to show the proper amount of respect." The entire room fell silent at those words, uncertain gazes traveling back and forth between himself and the president.

Schooling his expression, Squall tried to curb the annoyance he felt at having someone else fight his battle for him. Especially Loire, no matter how irrational the sentiment was. Years of having fended for himself had left him with a deeply ingrained sense of independence and with no desire whatsoever to receive any help from his absentee father. Not that any of them knew. Now *that* would be a riot.

None the wiser to Squall's displeasure, Loire hadn't run out of steam just yet and continued firmly, "Not only that, but as you know, a large amount of the security measures taken for today's meeting were set up to protect the man's identity. There would be no benefit to Garden in employing a decoy for the duration of this meeting, only instead an added risk at exposing their commander. Obviously he is here not only to partake in the meeting but also to show Garden's trust and goodwill towards all participants." Pausing to let his gaze travel over all those present, a cautioning
edge to usually friendly eyes, he concluded, "Let us all aim to repay such courtesy."

"Thank you President Loire," Quistis began immediately after the longhaired president had finally sat himself down again, not permitting anybody else to take the word. "Now if you will please allow me to continue," she spoke sternly, cerulean eyes regarding each troublemaker levelly, "then I would like to lay out the agenda for this gathering."

Confident that finally everyone's attention was back where it was supposed to be, the blonde immediately cut to the chase, her voice reined in to a professional tone once more. "First of all I will explain the purpose of this meeting and run through the details of the plans Garden wishes to bring into motion. After a short break, there will be opportunity to address any concerns or questions you may have." Taking a small remote control in hand, Quistis pointed it at the large presentation screen and brought a detailed 3D model of a state of the art building into view. As the image in the background slowly rotated to reveal the planned design from all angles, she announced without hesitating, "The topic we wish to bring up is the possible expansion of Garden to include a branch in Esthar." Pausing briefly for impact, she continued, "What you see here is Esthar Garden."

Stunned silence rang throughout the room, but the moment only lasted for a few seconds, the Estharian representatives effectively in an uproar once their brains had caught up on the implications of what had just been said. Borecco and Reardon erupted into an outraged litany at the same time, the General's hands slamming onto the table's surface as the older one of the two shot up from his chair in his temper. Zautra merely watched the revolving model with narrowing eyes, silently seething. Nobody seemed to be able to keep their opinions to themselves.

Watching the display with a growing frown, Squall let go of any hope the meeting would be over anytime soon. As he settled into his chair as comfortably as possible, he resigned himself to a long morning.

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[The Tiamat SCTA, Wednesday, 15th of October, 2:06 pm]

The double doors of the entrance to the Tiamat SCTA slid apart soundlessly as Seifer stepped inside. The place looked like usual, the large foyer mostly empty. On both sides of the room chairs and tables were placed in small groups, serving both as waiting areas and places where students and employees could relax or eat lunch. Walking down the polished wooden floor leading to the tall semicircular reception desk, Seifer's eyes quickly traveled to the man seated behind the desk.

"Madden," he said, drawing the man's attention immediately.

"Almasy," the receptionist replied and nodded in greeting. "Good to have you back."

Returning the nod, Seifer placed an arm on the glass surface of the desk and leaned in. "Listen, is Doreen in?"

"Yup, she's in her office right now I believe."

"Thanks," Seifer said as he pushed away from the desk and came to a proper stand once more. Sending the other man a slight nod, he turned to head down the hallway that veered off to the right of the reception desk. Picking up his stride, he quickly made it to the fourth door on the left and entered the small office. Doreen sat at her usual desk, the surface more cluttered than normal. Large piles of papers, most likely some of those god-forsaken forms she made everyone fill in regularly, were placed rather chaotically on the too small surface.
"Mrs. Callanach," he spoke fondly, as he put on his most charming smile and walked over to where she was sitting. He wanted to stay on friendly terms with the admins, already used to the perks it gained him.

Smiling broadly, Doreen looked up from the mass of forms she had been organizing. "Seifer," she said in greeting, her voice warm and friendly. "We weren't expecting you back for a while yet."

"I know," Seifer said, his smile growing. "Things went a lot quicker than expected." He hadn't thought he'd be back for another two weeks, but through hard labor and little sleep he had managed to cut down his time away from Esthar. He wasn't fond of his trips out, much more content to be at home working in the workshop and at the SCTA, but he still went out whenever Arc asked him to. It was the least he could do after all the man had done for him.

Raising the pile of papers cradled in her hands, the middle-aged woman arranged them neatly on the surface of her desk. "That's good to hear, dear," she commented in a pleasant tone of voice. Curbing his annoyance at the overly affectionate term, Seifer's smile never wavered. He wanted to stay in her good books as he was always low on cash and she had helped him in the past by arranging pay advances. If he had to suffer the infrequent use of the dreaded term, then he'd do just that. The added bonus of her filling out his forms as well made him even more determined to stay on her good side.

"So when can we expect you to return?" she asked, putting down the neat stack of forms.

"As soon as possible," Seifer replied, needing no time to ponder her question.

Smile faltering ever so slightly, Doreen looked down at the calendar on her desk for a brief moment. "I'm afraid it's too late to cancel Healey's lesson tomorrow. How about Monday? Does that work for you?"

Nodding at the answer he had already anticipated, he let his smile blend into a smirk. "Of course. Tell the kiddies what to expect." He couldn't wait to torture their sorry asses.

Laughing softly, Doreen's green eyes sparkled in amusement. "Don't worry. I'm sure the rumors will spread in no time."

Seifer's smirk grew smug as he nodded in agreement. Deciding to indulge the woman in an ounce of small talk, he relaxed his smirk back into his best smile. "How are the kids?"

Leaning forward in her seat, obviously enjoying the ex-knight's company, Doreen seemed delighted at the question. "Aidan is growing more and more impatient to start at the SCTA by the day. You know what it's like to be a boy at that age. Kacey just brought home her first boyfriend the other day... It gets harder and harder to keep up with them."

"I'm sure," Seifer commented with an easy smile. "Has Aidan decided which weapon he'll be taking up?" Just a little more small talk and he knew she'd be happy to fill out those horrible forms for him for another term.

"Let's hope it's not the gunblade, huh? I hear their instructor is rather ruthless," she said as she eyed him with a teasing glint in her eyes.

"Well, at least they got that part right," he joked back with a smirk. "Tell him he can come see me for a taster if he wants."

Eyes glazing over in thought, the woman seemed to ponder his offer for a second. "I'll be sure to
Giving the woman one last smile, Seifer straightened out of his relaxed position. "I'll be off then," he said as he gave her a mock salute. Leaving her office, he walked back down the dim hallway until he was back in the brightly lit foyer. Walking past the reception, Madden called out to him from his position behind the desk. "Hey, Almasy."

Turning around to regard the man, Seifer walked up to the desk. "Yeah?"

"I forgot. I've got a new key for you for the training rooms. We need your old one back," Madden said as he began looking through a drawer, quickly locating the key.

Fishing out his keys from his back pocket, Seifer placed both of his elbows to rest on top of the tall desk. "How come?" he asked as his eyes narrowed slightly in thought.

"We had a break in whilst you were away," was the simple reply, a slight frown finding its way onto Madden's brow as he remembered the incident.

Fighting the immediate worry that surfaced at the back of his mind, Seifer's eyes narrowed further. "The gunblades?" he asked in growing concern, just about managing to keep his voice even.

"Safe. It was the nunchaku room that was targeted," the other man replied without looking up from the form he was filling in to register the exchange of keys.

Even though he felt relief at the words, Seifer still couldn't quell the unease that filled him and tapped his hand clutching the key ring against the counter in impatience. Forcing himself to ignore his unfounded worry, he brought his focus back to his key ring and removed the universal key to the training rooms. "Was much taken?" he asked in curiosity as he inserted the key Madden had placed for him on the glass counter.

"No. Only the most expensive models," the man replied, eyes returning to Seifer.

"Hn," Seifer said and nodded, his apprehension growing once more. "I'll see you tomorrow, Madden," he added in parting as he gave the other man a slight nod and pushed away from the desk.

"See you, Almasy," the man replied as he watched Seifer turn around and head down the hallway that led in the opposite direction of the administration office.

Even though he knew he had nothing to worry about, Seifer also realized he wouldn't feel at ease before he laid his eyes on Hyperion. Quickly making it down to the gunblade training room, he slid the brand new key into the lock and opened the door. Instantly his eyes were on black metal at the other side of the room, the light spilling in through the overhead windows just enough for him to make out the familiar shape. Sighing, he switched on the light and entered the room properly.

Calmly, he made his way over to the glass cabinet that took up most of the far wall. Stopping to study the blade in its mounted position inside the cabinet, placed in-between similar models, Seifer kept his hands idle by his side.

It had been almost half a year since he'd decided to leave Hyperion there. The blade was still his, but he had figured the security was better at the SCTA than at his apartment. And he rarely used her anymore. Just like he never used the blade hanging next to her; the first gunblade he'd ever forged. Besides, rather than letting the gunblades collect dust, he figured the brats could use the experience of practising with them, the models being slightly different to the rest of the blades in the SCTA's collection. It hadn't been a hard decision, really, but at Madden's earlier words he'd...
been paralyzed with worry over losing Hyperion. Getting his keys out of his back pocket to open the cabinet, he didn't hear the muted steps of someone else entering the room.

"Sir?" an adolescent voice called from behind him, the word ringing out nervously.

Quite familiar with all of his students’ voices, Seifer dropped his hand and turned around with a lopsided smirk. Upon seeing the slightly nervous student eyeing him with bright blue eyes, Seifer couldn't stop himself from toying with the boy. Especially not since the boy was standing way too hunched over to demand proper respect, something Seifer felt was his personal duty to correct. He wouldn't allow any of his students to leave the SCTA a weakling or without the backbone befitting a fighter.

"Straighten up Mack," he demanded harshly, the boy immediately standing at attention at his command. "Show me your blade."

Walking further into the room, the boy held out his blade in the way Seifer had taught him. Seifer didn't move to take it out of the boy's hold as expected. Instead, he watched in silence for long moments until the tip began to swerve slightly. Eyes narrowing at the sight, Seifer lifted his gaze to regard the young student.

"Did you do those exercises I showed you?" he asked, not impressed in the slightest by the lack of strength the boy was displaying.

"Yes, Sir," the boy let out, his voice nearly breaking on the words.

"Then why the hell can't you hold your blade straight?" Seifer demanded sternly, keeping the boy the object of his firm gaze.

Not knowing how to answer, the boy's eyes fell to the floor in shame, his arm starting to tremble at the continued strain caused by the heavy weight of the blade.

Watching as the boy slowly lowered the blade to hang at his side, the tip resting against the floor, Seifer knew he still had his work cut out for him. Not only did the kid lack strength, but also discipline. He'd been sure Mack had been improving before he'd left for his trip, but obviously the boy hadn't kept up the exercises as promised.

"Did I tell you to relax?" Seifer questioned grimly, increasingly unimpressed at his pupil.

"No, Sir!" the boy said loudly in reply as he forced his hand and arm into its previous position despite his protesting muscles.

Seifer's eyes eased up slightly as he noticed the determination that entered Mack's eyes and demeanor. Regardless of Healey's useless classes, more often causing setbacks in the students than not, Seifer was determined he'd make a strong man out of Mack and the rest of the useless bunch. It'd be hard, but he'd make it work. He wasn't going to have a bunch of pussies parading around saying he'd been their teacher.

"Now tell me why the hell you can't hold your blade straight," he demanded once more. He wanted the boy to feel guilty over having let his training slip.

"I... I don't know, Sir," the boy said, his features plainly showing his frustration at having no better answer for his instructor.

Knowing Mack had never been one to lie, Seifer studied the young boy more intently. Maybe he had judged him too harshly. Maybe the boy really had been doing the exercises but needed an even
more thorough workout or a change in routine.

"Hmmm," Seifer let out and tilted his head back slightly as he continued his scrutiny. He needed to study Mack whilst the boy performed the exercises and then work out ways for him to improve. "Stay after the lesson on Monday. Can't have you walking around with sissy arms like that. You need to beef 'em up." Knowing the teenager's arms would be close to giving in and had to hurt like hell, he finally decided to cut the boy some slack. "At ease."

Blade immediately moving to hang at his side, Mack tried hard to hide his relief at no longer having to hold out his blade. He knew displaying any kind of weakness in front of his instructor only caused the man to drive him harder. "Yes, sir," he said and nodded, feeling slightly reassured when the man didn't order him to bring the weapon back out. He knew Seifer only meant him and the others the best. Since Seifer had started teaching them, none of the other weapon specialization students had been able to keep up with them any more. Even though the man drove them hard, Mack knew it was worth it. He knew they would be some of the most sought after graduates to leave the SCTA. And thus, it was always bothersome when Seifer went away on his trips. Hopeful, Mack couldn't curb his question. "You're back, Sir?"

Chuckling, Seifer shook his head in disbelief. "You can be a fucking idiot you know that, Mack? Didn't I just tell you to stay after the lesson on Monday?"

Nodding, Mack didn't know why he was being laughed at, his forehead scrunching up in thought. "Well, what does that imply?" the blond instructor questioned with an amused smirk.

Realizing his mistake, Mack's frown deepened even though he was relieved at the news. "That you'll be teaching us again."

"That's right. Now go tell all the other fuckheads that their holiday is over. From Monday it's back to working until you drop dead from exhaustion," Seifer said as he kept his arms crossed in front of him, still watching the boy intently.

Unable to suppress a small smile of excitement at having Seifer back, Mack didn't think to restrain his words. He couldn't wait to tell the others. "Yes, Sir. Good to have you back, Sir."

Amused at the young boy's eager comment, Seifer cocked his head backwards before sending Mack on his way. "Now get out of here and work out those wimp ass muscles of yours."

"Yes, Sir," Mack let out firmly and nodded. Giving Seifer a slight smile, he turned around and left the room.

Letting his smirk relax into a smile as the boy left his view, Seifer couldn't conceal his own happiness at being back.

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[Arc Balios' Weapon Shop, Wednesday, 15th of October, 4:56 pm]

Driving down an old side road in Esthar, Seifer pulled in and killed the engine of his pick up truck. The road was completely empty, the industrial part of the Tiamat District in Esthar rundown and practically desolate. There were no endlessly tall buildings in that part of town, instead large and mainly abandoned warehouses lined the roads. Stepping out of his car, the ex-knight's boots landed on sand, the grains blown in from where the city's border kept the advancing desert at bay less than a mile away. On his left, an old sign with capital letters spelling out the word 'weapons' hung at an odd angle, a couple of the bolts having given in under the strain of time. The rest of the facade
didn't help matters much, the large windows slightly cracked and almost impossible to see through due to the sand and grit that had collected over the years. From looks alone, no one would be able to tell that the building housed a highly renowned weaponsmith.

The old bell stirred to life when he pushed open the door to the shop, but no one came to the desk to service the potential customer. Seifer could only image Arc out back, far too absorbed in his work to even take notice. A small smile came to his lips. He'd missed the man. He'd missed the place. When he'd first arrived in Esthar Arc's place had been his home for just under a year and he'd liked it there. Arc had been the one to finally give him a break when no one else had been willing to.

Eyes skimming the cluttered mess of the front room, Seifer walked along the narrow path leading out back. All around him weapons were haphazardly stacked against each other, taking up almost all of the floor space and stacked up high on shelves covering the walls. Most of the weapons were covered in dust and cobwebs, old models Arc had never parted with or models the man had bought for the purpose of studying their inner workings. No one ever came to buy any of those; not that Arc would have ever sold them. Instead, the buyers always came to commission state of the art weapons, and they always wanted them personalized to hell and back. That was one thing Seifer had learned from his time there, working as Arc's apprentice. Men of battle were just as vain as the rest of them. Not that Seifer held any grand illusions that he was above such vanity. His latest gunblade, Kronos, was riddled with symbolism and he had used nothing but the best materials and everything he'd learned from Arc to place the blade in a class of its own.

Making his way into the back, Seifer's eyes quickly landed on the old man hunched over one of the work tables. Smiling, he walked closer to observe the smith at work. Listening to Arc's mumbled running commentary, Seifer couldn't curb his amusement at the man's continued lack of awareness of his presence. Shaking his head softly, he expertly anticipated which tool Arc would need next and placed it in the man's unsuspecting hand. Entirely too distracted, the old man didn't notice the offered tool for long moments until his dark blue eyes finally landed on the heavy weight.

Old eyes crinkling at the corners in delight, the man turned his head to regard the young blond. "Back, I see." A heavy hand impacted against Seifer's back as the old man gave him a pat.

"Yup, old man," the blond spoke warmly, as he inspected the schematics of the blaster edge Arc was working on. After a minute or two of going over the work in progress, he grinned in mischievous triumph. "Not bad," he commented as he adjusted a couple of the calculations on the blueprint.

Huffing, Arc studied the corrections, one of his bushy eyebrows rising in surprise. "Not bad indeed, son," he said, eyeing Seifer levelly. "We'll make a good weaponsmith out of you yet."

Inwardly rolling his eyes at the man's reply, Seifer headed back in the direction of the entrance. "I've got the stuff out in my pick up," he informed, just about to leave the room.

"Surely you have time for a quick drink first?" Arc questioned, effectively stopping Seifer in his tracks.

Smirking, Seifer returned to the older man's side. "What've you got for me today then?" he asked. An afternoon drink had become a common occurrence between them.

Chuckling warmly, Arc walked over to open an old wooden cupboard and fished out a dusty bottle of liquor from the back. "Did you get the Orihalcon?"

Seifer nodded and Arc's smile grew. "There's a good boy," he said, unscrewing the cap on the
bottle of alcohol before taking a sniff of the strong contents.

Never liking to be called a boy, Seifer's eyes narrowed. He knew Arc meant nothing bad by using the word and that the man practically viewed him as a son, but he could never erase the memories the name brought with it, the word a favorite one of his deceased mistress.

"Aaah, smell this," Arc said, walking closer whilst holding out the bottle for Seifer to smell. Bringing the bottle to his nose, Seifer almost had to cough at the thick scent of strong alcohol that settled at the back of his throat. Arc had always had a weakness for the strong stuff and the bottle held beneath Seifer's nose was definitely some of the stronger stuff indeed. Chuckling at the older man's antics, he walked over to where Arc was already getting out two shot glasses.

A couple of shots later, the old man coughed warmly as he put his hand to Seifer's arm. "Good to have you back, son." Dark blue eyes then glazed over as the man became lost to thought, as if he was remembering something.

Used the such an occurrence, Seifer straightened up. "You're just glad to have your slave laborer back, old man," he said, his green eyes betraying his amusement.

Eyeing his apprentice fondly, Arc smirked. "Indeed. Now get back to work," he ordered good-naturedly as he walked back over to the blaster edge he'd been hovering over earlier.

Shaking his head once again, Seifer went outside to finally get started on the task of unloading the goods he'd brought with him, resigning himself to the several trips it would take from his pick up to the back of the shop to get all of the heavier stuff moved.

~ o ~

[Rinoa Heartilly and Squall Leonhart's apartment, Layon Tower, Thursday, 16th of October, 12:29 am]

Slumped back and staring at the black screen of a too large TV, Squall's back was starting to complain. The white designer couch wasn't nearly as comfortable as it should be, considering the effort it had taken to get the monstrous piece of furniture all the way up to the top floor. Huddled up next to him and lost to sleep, Angelo didn't seem all that bothered, her head perched on his thighs comfortably. He vaguely remembered Rinoa telling him not to let Angelo on the couch, but he couldn't care less about what constituted proper pet regulations. He had half a suspicion the dog only saw him as a makeshift pillow or a walking food dispenser anyway.

Propped up awkwardly against the low back of the couch, he had been sitting in the same place for over an hour. The late night news hadn't been able to distract him much and any other form of entertainment on at that hour didn't quite agree with his tastes. So he'd turned the thing off some time ago, which had given his thoughts free rein to run in circles. He had gone over his day several times, but no matter how he looked at it, there had been no avoiding the outcome. He had missed Rinoa's appointment with Odine. Not just run late, but entirely missed it and there hadn't been a damned thing he could've done about it. At the meeting things had gotten out of hand. An initially short recess had ended up lasting well into the afternoon. By the time the meeting had finally come to an end, it had already been too late and an angry message had been waiting for him on his phone.

Skipping the banquet that had been delayed to take place in the evening had been pointless by then. He already knew he'd only come home to an empty apartment, Rinoa's mood instantly reverted to the silent anger of the days previous. Not wanting to piss off Quistis in addition to his sorceress, he had ended up staying for the banquet in spite of his urge to skewer the majority of those present with his gunblade. Not that staying had done any good. Quistis was delusional if she
thought him sitting through dinner with the likes of Reardon or Zautra had helped their cause any. Under the strained atmosphere and hateful glances cast his way, the only thing he had gained from the experience had been added stress.

Men like them hardly ever reconsidered their first impressions of him. They just couldn't get over how different he was from the worthy leader and fighter they had imagined. Even if his face had been known all over the planet along with his name, it wouldn't have made a difference. The shocked expressions of incredulity and ridicule might've been avoided, but in no way did that outweigh all of the advantages that came with remaining anonymous.

When Cid and Quistis had first suggested the approach of keeping his identity concealed, he had jumped at the chance. Deaf to their concerns for his safety and indifferent toward their plan of turning him into some sort of enigma as a way of strengthening Garden's image, he instead found the idea of remaining out of the limelight and hidden from the public's eye much more persuasive. As long as he could continue to go on covert missions and keep his private life just that, he didn't care about having his name used as some PR tool or the ensuing disappointment in those who learned of his true identity. Though, thinking back to the meeting, to call it disappointment would be an understatement.

Letting go of a deep sigh and dropping his head backwards against the couch, he was startled from his train of thought at the slight buzz vibrating against his thigh. Digging his cell phone out from his pocket, he flipped it open and saw he had received a message from Rinoa. He hadn't expected to hear from her after her last message, it having succeeded well enough in conveying her frustration with him. Though she had told him not to, he'd still decided to wait up for her. Maybe she had sensed he was still awake. Opening the text, he stared at the words for long seconds, before his mind backtracked and took in its possible meaning.

- Message from Rinoa / 12:36 am / I'm not feeling good. Come pick me up. -

What did she mean by that? Had she become unwell? And where did she want him to pick her up? He didn't have the slightest idea where she was, only that she had gone out and didn't intend on coming home until late. Feeling worry begin to set in, he immediately quelled the emotion as he typed a response.

- Message to Rinoa / 12:38 am / Where are you? -

Pressing "send," he pushed aside a disgruntled Angelo and got up from the couch to get his keys, ready to leave the instant he got a reply. But none came. Unease growing as the seconds ticked away and merged into long minutes, Squall kept glancing at his cell phone as he paced the hallway. There was hardly any point in aimlessly driving around the city, it's expanses too vast to start a random search. And if something serious had happened, the message wouldn't have been so vague. She had probably just gotten unwell at a restaurant. Or had a few drinks too many.

He knew for a fact she often exceeded her tolerance for alcohol when out with friends, making no secret of her nights out. He'd overheard her stumbling up the stairs at ungodly hours more than just a few times. He'd helped her out of a cab, even cleaned up her mess once or twice. And those were times he'd been home to witness it. He was afraid to consider how much of a habit it had become. Indeed, for her to be stuck at a bar somewhere without a ride home wasn't all that improbable.

But then why hasn't she replied yet? a nagging voice questioned at the back of his mind, his instincts as a knight guiding him in an entirely different direction. He hadn't been able to feel her ever since he had been late for her appointment with Odine and had thus chalked it up to her anger. Now, he wasn't so sure anymore. He couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone wrong, his thoughts easily veering from what was most likely to what was worst. The fact that she'd been to
Odine's just that afternoon seemed like too much of a coincidence. They hadn't moved to Esthar on a whim. It had been a crucial decision, with Rinoa's condition deteriorating further every day. It had started innocently. Sometimes she had sleep walked or burst out in an unprovoked fit of anger. Some days she had just stayed indoors and hardly responded to anyone. It hadn't taken long for her strange behavior to escalate, her slipping grasp on her sorceress powers more dangerous than anyone had initially thought. She had even learned to purposefully cloud their bond, whenever she didn't want to be found by her knight, as she had been doing since that afternoon.

He could still clearly remember the paralyzing panic he'd felt when she had disappeared for three days. The fourth day she had simply wandered back through the front gates of Balamb Garden, unharmed and claiming she couldn't remember where she'd been. But the golden gleam to brown eyes hadn't gone unnoticed with him. That had been the first incident in a series of many, the last being the reason he'd finally managed to persuade his scared sorceress to relocate to Esthar, together. Half a year and many prototypes of magic inhibitors later and she was almost back to her old self. Almost.

And now this. What if her condition had taken a sudden turn for the worse? The thought wouldn't leave his head the moment it took root. What if Rinoa was out there, suffering from a relapse and all by herself? And if she wasn't alone, then it wouldn't be safe for whoever was with her. Either way, he had to find her. Flipping open his cell to type in another message, he could no longer suppress his concern.

- Message to Rinoa / 12:45 am / You have to tell me where you are. Are you alright? Do I need to bring the pills? -

He didn't wait around for an answer, as he ran upstairs to retrieve the medication Odine had prescribed her. Dashing into the main bathroom, he got her pills as quickly as possible and placed them in one of Rinoa's purses. Eyes traveling to the necklaces and bangles laid out on the vanity table, the items crafted specifically to inhibit magic, renewed worry surged through him as he noticed the simple set of twin bracelets he knew Rinoa had been wearing that morning.

That was the last straw, his composure snapping at the sight. The fact he still hadn't received an answer only added to his alarm. Deciding he'd just go wherever his gut feeling took him, he snatched the inhibitors along with the purse he had filled with her pills and rushed back downstairs and out of the apartment. Making it to his car in no time, Squall soon realized he had absolutely no way of starting his search however desperately he wanted to. Remaining idle in the driver's seat, his worry grew as the seconds ticked by. When his phone began vibrating, indicating he had just received a new message, he fumbled to flip it open in his haste.

- Message from Rinoa / 12:53 am / I'm at some club. Somewhere in the Tiamat District. Hurry. -

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Thursday, 16th of October, 12:52 am]

Back in his shower after a long evening of working with Arc, Seifer was getting rid of the smell of the workshop. Already thinking ahead to what he'd be doing back in bed with Calder just a few hours later, he thoroughly scrubbed down his skin. While a few men probably liked the scents of oil and metal, he knew Calder wasn't one of them.

Slicking his hair back into its usual style, he looked at himself in the mirror. His old choker was missing, the thing lost at some point during the war. Relieved he'd been able to keep in shape whilst on the road, he eyed the black tattoo of a cross sword that lined his right upper arm. It was one of the many marks on his body that still reminded him of the time before he'd come to Esthar, but at least that one had been of his own choosing.

Stopping his mind from venturing further along the downwards slope it was heading on, Seifer put on some aftershave and walked back into the bedroom. Grabbing a pair of black boxer briefs, he got dressed and put on some black pants and a matching shirt. Leaving the top buttons of the shirt undone, he ran a hand through his hair, the habit impossible to break.

Hair slightly mussed, he grabbed his cell phone from on top of his dresser and eyed the time before cursing under his breath. It was already five past one. He was going to be late. He didn't want to drive to Pulse and the walk usually took twenty minutes on its own. Add another five or so minutes to buy the Avalanche and make it to the Nexus and he knew he was screwed. Calder would not be in an accommodating mood after having waited around that long. Or maybe he would, considering the extra time it gave the man to drink. Sliding his phone open, Seifer tried reaching the guy, but was met with the man's voice mail. Leaving a message that said he'd be late, Seifer hurried out the door.

Seventeen minutes later he was waiting in line outside Pulse where he usually bought his Avalanche. Shivering, he couldn't wait to get inside, warm up a bit, and get the purchase over and done with. He'd forgotten how cold it was during autumn in Esthar, and the warm sun that had been out during the afternoon had not helped his memory one bit.

Finally making his way into the night club, Seifer ran a hand through his newly cut blond locks once more. He had been back in Esthar for less than a day, but impatience filled him as he scoured the crowd. As a teenager he had been too distracted to consider sex, the harsh guidelines at Garden not helping matters much. The few sexual experiences he'd ended up having hadn't left him wanting more and as such he'd forgotten about the whole ordeal until well after the war, more concerned about excelling and being the absolute best during his time as a cadet. Upon his reacquaintance with sex and coming to terms with his own sexuality, it had become somewhat of an addiction, however.

When he was at home in Esthar, not many nights went by where he was alone in bed. Usually he'd fuck Calder until neither of them could stand, but they weren't exclusive and it wasn't unheard of that they went out on the prowl together. That and he wouldn't say no to a quick fuck or blow job if someone came on to him. Life was just too short not to take advantage of such things. His trips out of Esthar were the exception, and thus he was way beyond his limit that night, three weeks of self imposed celibacy proving almost unbearable.

Going from freezing to almost too hot in the span of a minute as he made it inside, he quickly felt perspiration settle against his skin. It was dark in the club, the hot air stifling and the warm bodies
around him almost overpowering in their intensity. He knew he should have had a drink before he left his apartment. Clubs were okay but never until he had some alcohol in his system.

As he pushed himself through the crowd, his eyes on the alert for his supplier, the outline of someone else, someone infinitely more familiar, registered out of the corner of his eyes. The determined grace to the man's moves brought his mind back to a place in the past and within a split second his eyes were glued to the man, the brunet only a short distance away stealing all of his attention, any and all other plans immediately forgotten.

Unable to believe his own eyes, Seifer stood stock still in his path and watched as the man roughly made his way through the crowd, the guy scanning the people around him as if he was looking for someone. The brunet looked to be in a foul mood, his brows furrowed and movements rigid as he elbowed his way through the crowd. A pair of dark gray denim pants hung low against the man's waist and a plain white tee clung to his firm upper body. The somewhat normal outfit made him stand out from the rest of the crowd, giving all the more credence to it being the Squall Leonhart, pansyboy and ice prince extraordinaire, that walked past him in a busy club in Esthar.

A strange sensation grew in Seifer's chest as he noted the man's slightly longer brown locks. Unable to pinpoint the feeling as either excitement or apprehension, he studied effeminate features, the younger man as pale as ever. Brought back to a time filled with regrets, Seifer's mind was quickly spinning out of control, bombarded with thoughts of the past. Entirely unprepared for ever running into the other man again, he was stuck in place, speechless, his eyes widening in surprise. However many times he had recalled the imagery of the man before him in the past, it was shocking how little justice those fleeting memories did to the striking reality. If there had ever been such a thing as perfection, Squall was certainly it.

As his mind returned farther back in time, back to a time before sorceresses and wars, to the countless nights he'd spent trying to outdo the brunet in all aspects and put the younger man in his place, an upwards tug pulled at the corner of his mouth. Soon, a fully fledged smirk graced his lips as a particularly fond memory played back in his mind. Keeping his gaze trained on Squall, unwilling and wholly unable to tear his eyes away, he could do nothing but watch.

Tired and worried, Squall's frustration quickly mounted at not finding Rinoa. Upon receiving the text from Rinoa saying she was at a club in the Tiamat district, he had driven there like a madman. He still couldn't help but worry if something had gone wrong after her appointment with Odine, even if her being at a club meant it was much more likely she'd just be drunk. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to her because of his neglect. Much preferring to nurse the girl through a particularly bad hangover to the other alternatives that played through his mind, he strongly hoped drunk would indeed be the case and that this would be the club where he'd find her.

'Hurry.'

The word that had ended Rinoa's last text message had wrapped around his brain with unforgiving urgency. She needed him. The heavy brick sitting in the pit of his stomach wouldn't go away until he had his sorceress with him, safe and unharmed. Pulse racing with an all too familiar kind of worry, reminiscent of the time just before their move to Esthar, Squall's frustration soon reached its boiling point. Angry at the dancing mass obstructing his path and angry at Rinoa for not leaving him any clearer location, Squall felt the last of his patience slipping away. He had already looked through one club without finding her.

As he roughly elbowed his way through sweating bodies with renewed vigor, he suddenly sensed intense eyes fixed on him, watching him. Noticing someone had stopped dead in his tracks in his peripheral vision, Squall turned to meet the other with a dissuading glare and found himself staring
into vibrant green eyes.

**Seifer.** It was undeniably Seifer standing there, sizing him up. Utterly unprepared, Squall froze in place. Having found no resolution to what had happened during the war, the mere mention of the ex-knight's name at an unguarded moment was enough to send his chest clenching. The actual sight of his childhood rival, the man very real and just a few meters away, was far worse. Thoughts of Rinoa were effectively disrupted as Squall stood transfixed, his mind refusing to grapple with the highly unlikely encounter. Any past plans or notions on what he'd do when offered the chance to confront Seifer bled from him as his eyes raked the tall form in front of him. He didn't feel the expected rage or even relief. His legs wouldn't move. His hands didn't clench into fists. Instead Squall found himself cataloguing away every single change in the tall blond with a detached sort of attention for detail. Anything to keep his mind from derailing.

Apart from a deeper tan, the ex-knight hadn't changed much, his broad shoulders and muscled arms filling out his black dress shirt a telltale sign he hadn't let his shape slip in the slightest. Upon registering the absence of a gray trench coat, silver choker, and Hyperion, Squall couldn't help but find the resulting look strangely disparate from the image residing in his memory, but it seemed the essence had remained the same. The older man was as impressive as ever: his short blond hair slicked back, pose arrogant, green eyes intense, and that **smirk**. Pulled back in time, the sight reminded him of a simpler life, a time before that smirk changed into a dangerous grin, insane and void of mercy. Seeing Seifer looking so much like he used to caused painful regret to well up inside Squall—regret that he hadn't been able to stop things from going the way they had during the war and regret that he'd lost his sparring partner without ever knowing why.

The moment ended abruptly when he was pulled from his stupor by the incessant vibrating of his cell phone. Instantly remembering Rinoa and his purpose there, Squall forced his gaze away from Seifer to fish his cell out of his pocket. Worry setting back in, he gratefully took the sudden distraction for the saving grace that it was and quickly picked up, pale hands clamped over his ears in an attempt to block out the loud music.

At hearing Rinoa's indistinct voice, unable to make out much of her drunk bawling with the loud background noise, an angry frown returned to his brow. *So drunk it is then.* Far from being an isolated incident, the girl was putting his nerves to the test yet again. Catching a slurred "upstairs" from the string of unintelligible words, Squall remembered the set of stairs he passed on his way in.

Seifer would have to wait, he decided, ignoring the emotions surging inside him at encountering the blond. His sorceress would always be his priority, no matter what. Detaching himself from a possibly disastrous situation to tackle a merely stressful one, he spared Seifer one last glance before he abruptly turned his back to the blond and started walking in the other direction, phone still held to his ear in the hopes of getting more useful input out of the drunk woman. Concern driving him further, he didn't stop to consider the fact that he had stopped breathing for long seconds, the pressure lifting off his chest with every distancing step he took away from the ex-knight.

Only a few things could get Seifer's temper to flare within a split second—well, maybe not a few but quite a few—but one of them was without doubt, hands down, being ignored by pansyboy. Never in his wildest imagination had he predicted a chance encounter between them to play out like that. It had been anticlimactic to say the least. He would have preferred some kind of reaction, any kind of reaction, to Squall just utterly ignoring him. Hands clenched and mood impossibly dark, he swore under his breath as he stalked after the younger man. Speeding up, he got close enough to grab hold of one of Squall's shoulders. Strengthening his grip and stopping in place, he forced the younger man to turn around on the spot and face him.
"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?" he spat angrily before he could help himself, eyes narrowed in venom.

Quelling his annoyance at the taller man pinning him in place, Squall fought the instinctual urge to strike back in retaliation. Slowly he lowered the hand holding the phone, ignoring the almost painful hold on his shoulder whilst steeling himself. With an inward curse at the horribly timed confrontation, he glared at the tall blond towering over him and pulled back slightly in distaste at the overwhelming smell of heavy aftershave surrounding the other man. The only scents he had ever associated with the man were those of metal, gunpowder, and sweat. And later blood. Hyne, he wasn't ready for this. He did *not* have time for this.

At Squall's distancing move and annoyed expression, Seifer felt the last of his composure faltering. He couldn't believe the brunet's nerve, that Squall wanted to simply ignore him after everything that had happened. What he'd done to Squall and the rest of the world during the war had been atrocious, not something to be discounted with the shrug of a shoulder. Or was that Squall's point, that he just couldn't care less about some inconsequential shit like Seifer? That he was just some measly, worthless piece of trash undeserving of the great Commander's attention? Regardless of the other man's reasoning, Seifer felt himself dangerously close to losing control, already imagining sending a fist connecting with pretty boy's face.

"Two fucking years and you just *walk away*?" he managed in blind fury, absolutely incredulous at the younger man's behavior.

Nearly flinching at the biting words, Squall realized Seifer wasn't planning on letting him go any time soon. A quick downward glance at the cold blue glow of his cell phone told him the call hadn't disconnected yet, his attention torn between his distraught sorceress on the other side of the connection and the man he had wanted to face ever since the war.

Clenching his free hand into a hard fist, Seifer knew it was only a matter of seconds before his self-control would take a dangerous turn for the worse. He knew outright assaulting Squall in the middle of the club was not the way to go, was far from the apology he'd always planned to make if he'd ever cross paths with the man, but Squall was pushing all the right buttons, each and every one of the man's moves making Seifer's already limited amount of self-restraint become next to void.

Pale features growing exasperated, Squall looked back up to meet Seifer's eyes, a sense of urgency present in gray-blue. He needed to find Rinoa, not drown in the past. Smothering the flare of emotion at having Seifer so close, he barely maintained an indifferent demeanor. "Not now, Almasy," he stated coldly, before he twisted out of Seifer's hold and made a beeline for the large set of stairs that led to the upper level of the club. With every purposeful stride, he tried hard to push away thoughts of the blond inhabiting his darker dreams, firmly focusing on his sorceress instead and vaguely imagining he could feel a slow trickle of her energy bleeding into their blurred bond.

Seething, Seifer stood rooted in place. Watching as Squall moved through the crowd, away from him, his clenched fists tightened, his grip becoming almost painful. His eyes were mere slits, his jaws clenched, his teeth gritted, and his posture rigid. He wanted nothing more than to stalk after the man, but he knew if he did, blood would spill. There was a moment of indecision, a moment where his body almost decided for him as it moved half a step in the other man's direction before he could stop it. How sweet it would feel to throw the other to the ground and let his fists do the talking.

Taking a deep breath, he forced his mind to still, forced his eyes away, but his anger didn't abate.
He couldn't believe what had just happened. He couldn't believe Squall had just treated him with such disregard. Why the hell hadn't he punched Squall like he should have?

The poisonous yellow eyes of his mistress flashed before his eyes. The red of open wounds he'd caused on his teenage sparring partner and rival when they had been locked in a deadly battle. Their last battle. Throwing Squall against the harsh gray wall of a prison cell. Watching as the other's body convulsed in seizure under the hands of his torture.

It hurt. The memories of the war hurt, the passage of time not having dulled them in the least. They remained sharp and bitter; filled him with regret. What he had done had been inexcusable.

The anger slowly simmered away. He decided he would get what he had come for. He would find his dealer and then he would wait for Squall. There was no way he could leave with the knowledge that Squall was close by. He had to apologize for what he had done. Squall would just have to listen. Somehow he'd make him listen.

Relieved when he no longer felt the blond's looming presence, having been successful in deterring the man from his pursuit, Squall gratefully left the mass of dancing people behind him and managed to reach the flight of stairs. The feel of sweating bodies rubbing against him as he pushed past them left him repulsed and on edge. Everything about the place did: the pungent smells and stale smoke hanging in the humid air; the intoxicated people shamelessly grinding into each other; the appreciating glances brushing over his body. All of it made him want to get it over with as fast as possible. Why on earth did Rinoa like to frequent places like this? His steps faltered slightly as he started climbing upstairs. Why was he in this kind of place?

His gaze was drawn back to where the tall and fuming blond had been standing. Observing Seifer's trek across the dance floor towards a smartly dressed man, Seifer's expression no longer one of blind fury, Squall squinted to better make out the figure beckoning the blond, but before he could ponder his unprompted curiosity or reluctance to leave, renewed worry for Rinoa demanded his attention. Tearing his eyes away from the ex-knight, he briskly turned around with a growing scowl in place and continued his way up the stairs, hoping against hope that his retrieval of the drunk girl would go more smoothly than the rest of his day had.

Once upstairs, Squall's eyes immediately singled out the person he had been looking for, the sight temporarily dispensing all other thought. Pocketing his cell phone, he let out an unsteady sigh of relief, some of the tension that had built up in his muscles and crept into his posture starting to drain from him at finally locating his sorceress. With great effort he reined in the powerful urge to storm over to where she was sitting, instead keeping his steps short and measured as he wove a path through the crowd. The last thing he wanted was to draw unnecessary attention to himself.

Determinedly, he kept his eyes trained on Rinoa as he made his way over to her, the girl seemingly dazed and slumped down on one of the lounge chairs lining the farthest wall. She was unharmed as far as he could tell, her eyes a normal color and staring off into the distance as she clutched her cell phone. She seemed calm enough, no sign of powerful magic crackling in the air, the dried tear tracks running down her cheeks the only trace of her previous distress.

Relieved that his mad hunt was finally over, Squall didn't immediately notice the man seated next to her, the man's arm draped intimately across her frail shoulders. Nearing the other side of the large room, bodies moving out of the way and clearing his view, Squall's unsuspecting gaze fell to the close press of the man's chest against the unresponsive girl's side. The man's tongue daringly traced the outline of her ear and nibbled at her playfully, whilst a coaxing hand urged her to get up from the chair.

Blinking just a few times, taking in the scene before him, Squall immediately felt his anger rise.
Not that he didn't have a general idea of what Rinoa was up to when she left the apartment and stayed out for the night. What she did with whom was none of his business. Not after she broke up with him, he tersely told himself, almost believing he didn't care about his ex-girlfriend's promiscuity. But this. This was something different entirely. Mad with worry, he had driven across town, only to find her utterly drunk with some undeserving prick draped all over her. She had involved him in her nighttime outings, when he wanted no part of it. Being shitfaced when out partying didn't usually prompt her to call him in for assistance, a taxi just as able to get her home in one piece. Anger rising at her astounding lack of consideration, Squall cracked under the strain of all the emotions laying siege to his already tired mind.

Did she want him to see her flirting with men like that? And what the hell did the guy think he was doing, taking advantage of a drunk woman in such a way. She wasn't in her right mind. She needed the guy to get his hands off of her. Protective instincts kicking in, he sped up his steps with determined calculation and made for the couple sitting next to each other far too comfortably, before he pulled his sorceress out of the man's loose embrace.

"We're going," he bit out tersely, immediately turning around and dragging her along.

Starting from her daze at the rough treatment, Rinoa looked at him in confusion. Mindlessly she let herself be pulled across the room, before brown eyes widened, the young woman suddenly bursting into a fit of anger. "Let me go!"

Trying to free her arm from his iron grip, she kept cursing at him, the reek of alcohol on her breath making Squall's nose wrinkle in revulsion. People were starting to look up from their drinks, curiously following his struggle towards the stairs with the livid girl in tow. Looking over his shoulder, his gaze meeting Rinoa's eyes burning with resentment and tears, his mind buckled at his utter lack of understanding. A confused frown graced his brow, as he pointed out evenly, "You wanted me to come and pick you up."

Looking at him incredulously, Rinoa let the brunet's neutral statement sink in for a moment. "That's it? You-You see me here with another man and that's all you have to say?" Tears starting to stream freely down reddened cheeks, the young woman's features contorted as she snarled, "Fuck you, Squall! Let—me—go!"

So she had done it deliberately. To hurt him? To gauge his reaction? Unable to fathom her motives for humiliating him in such a way, Squall tried to keep his anger in check. What the hell did she want him to say? Ever since the day she broke off their relationship, there wasn't anything left to say.

"You're drunk. Stop making a scene and let's go," he commanded tersely, but still she dragged her feet along the floor in an attempt to stop his advancement. Her vicious words lashing out at him only waned his patience further. Feeling increasingly embarrassed at the looks they were getting, he tried to speed up, when suddenly Rinoa's wrist was yanked from his grip, followed by an angry voice booming in his direction. "The girl clearly doesn't want to leave, so where the fuck do you think you're taking her?"

Slowly turning around, he came face to face with the man that had been sitting with Rinoa. The man was furious, eyes narrowed in anger and chin thrust out in arrogance. Groaning inwardly, Squall couldn't muster the patience to get rid of the guy tactfully. The night had already been far too taxing on his nerves and he desperately wanted to leave.

"Home," he replied calmly, before continuing in a voice that promised pain, if the man was unwise enough not to step out of his way. "Back Off."
The man's face reddened in fury as he foolishly decided to swipe out a fist. Annoyed and secretly pleased at the chance to vent some of his pent up stress, Squall easily sidestepped the clumsy attack and hit the guy square in the face, channeling all of his frustration into the immensely satisfying act. Crashing to the floor, the man released a string of curses, but Squall didn't linger. Quickly making his way to the stairs, he hoped to avoid any further escalation of the situation, but by then Rinoa was effectively in hysterics, the girl putting up even more of a struggle.

When they had made it halfway down the staircase, angered shouts sounded from behind them, signaling the man was in hot pursuit and seriously pissed off. In no mood for another confrontation, Squall ignored Rinoa's protests and kept his focus on reaching the exit. Making his way through the suffocating crowd, still feeling Rinoa's resistance to his rough steering, he briefly looked over his shoulder, when a sudden stinging slap to his cheek stopped him in his tracks. Stunned, he brought up a hand to heated skin, as he turned fully to regard his angered sorceress.

"Listen to me!" she hissed dangerously, opening the sluice gates of their connection and her power over him. A wild torrent of rage and hurt tore through their bond, demanding his undivided attention and rendering him speechless. Immobilized, he felt bile rise at the back of his throat at the unnatural manipulation. Mind reeling at the intensity of his sorceress, Rinoa's hand slipped from his grasp, as the man cradling a heavily bleeding nose caught up with them and forcefully pulled Rinoa to his side.

"This is just not working out anymore," Rinoa bit out, almost trembling. "I—I'm done waiting for something that will never happen. You just don't care about me," she added with accusing force, causing him actual physical pain.

Nauseated at the waves of unbridled anger accompanying each harsh word, the bewildered brunet looked at Rinoa in disbelief. "I don't care? You're the one that—" Quickly swallowing the rest of what was laying on his tongue, remembering they were far from alone, Squall felt increasingly ill at ease. He resolutely reined in his temper, needing to abate Rinoa's anger and put an end to the scene she was causing. "Just come home with me," he urged, battling the onslaught of magic gushing through their bond. "Let's talk there."

Snorting at Squall's request, Rinoa looked at him squarely. "No," she declared firmly, before continuing to disclose private details to all who could hear. "Did you ever stop to think why I broke up with you? You didn't even flinch when I did. You don't even care when I'm with other men."

Blinking at the absurdity of what Rinoa was insinuating, the overwhelming pressure of her hold over him caused the blood to drain from his face. Throughout their entire relationship he had done everything within his power to please her. But it hadn't been enough. When she broke up with him, he simply figured what he had to offer didn't suffice. And in a way he understood. It wasn't like he could change anything. Change himself. But he had always cared deeply for Rinoa. Even now. That's why he had stayed as her knight.

Not seeing the reason why Rinoa apparently found him deserving of public humiliation and unwilling to discuss such private matters in front of an audience, Squall just cast her a warning glare, barely managing the sign of defiance in the face of his seething sorceress. As silence stretched on, a hurt look entered deep brown eyes, causing his head to throb painfully at the renewed assault of raw emotion pounding away at the inside of his skull.

"I see..." she muttered in defeat. "When you look at me, all you see is responsibility. Someone to protect." Faltering briefly, Rinoa slammed their connection shut with resonating finality, the
sudden lack of lashing and coiling magic almost stealing the air out of his lungs. An unreadable quality entered her gaze as she stated evenly, "Well, Squall. I relieve you from your duty."

"...What do you mean?" he managed uncertainly, horrid suspicion forming at the back of his mind.

"I want to cut our bond," Rinoa stated more bravely than her small trembling frame suggested. "It's why I agreed to come to Esthar in the first place. I don't need you anymore."

Feeling a detached sense of dread settle over him at Rinoa's poisonous words, Squall merely stood there, his features turning expressionless. He refused to accept what was happening. He'd always be her knight.

Looking increasingly defeated at the brunet's lack of response, dark bitterness entered Rinoa's voice as she whispered coldly, "...That's what I thought. To think I expected anything else... Goodbye Squall." Chin starting to tremble, she quickly turned around and allowed the man to wrap a stabilizing arm around her waist as they walked out of the club together.

Vaguely aware of the abnormal disconnect between the severity of what Rinoa had just announced and his inability to act on it and pursue her, Squall released a trembling breath. She was serious. He had felt it. Stirring from his shock long seconds after Rinoa had disappeared into the crowd, his surroundings started to register with him again. Blaring music filtered back in, heedless of his distress. Voices of strangers buzzed around him loudly, varying from scandalized to amused. Escape foremost on his mind, he scowled darkly at the people gawking at him, as he convinced his limbs to move and plowed through the crowd once more, but the feeling of those eyes on him, the same as before, forced his gaze away from the exit.

Seifer was staring at him. Intently. He had forgotten all about the blond. Dark eyebrows lifting in undisguised surprise, he stood rooted into place, unable to deal with what the night was throwing his way. The sudden understanding dawned on him that the man had probably witnessed everything. He felt almost sick as acute shame knotted his stomach at being degraded in such a way. Running an unsteady hand through his bangs, he knew he couldn't avoid what came next. He had to deal with his past, had wanted to for so long. But he couldn't stand to stay there a second longer either. Weighed down by the importance of the moment and his decision, his train of thought was paralyzed.

Fully aware that Squall had spotted him, Seifer pushed away from the bar and headed in the direction of the brunet. It was time. He didn't know what to make of what he'd just witnessed between Squall and Rinoa, but it didn't matter. He hadn't even heard what had been said, only looked on as the scene had unfolded. Raijin and Fujin had told him the two had become an item shortly after the war, but that had been ages ago and his friends had lost contact with anyone from Garden since then, so things could easily have changed. Not that any of it mattered. Only one thing did.

Advancing upon the brunet, he kept his gaze firm. He wouldn't let Squall get away. He really hadn't expected to ever see Squall again. He had wondered about it, considered how he would make his apology for what he had put the man through during the war, but never expected it. With Squall being the SeeD Commander, he hadn't imagined them frequenting the same places and had been relieved by the thought. It was much easier to plan apologies when the likelihood of having to follow through were next to none.

Keeping his expression neutral and averting his eyes, he came to a stop next to the brunet. "Want to get out of here?" he asked, his voice loud enough to be heard without him having to lean in and upset the man's comfort zone.
Looking up at Seifer, the man's determined approach having decided his course of action for him, Squall was temporarily confused by the unexpected offer. He had been bracing himself for anger or derision, his public humiliation just moments ago providing the blond with perfect subject material. Instead Seifer seemed almost... considerate.

With an inward huff he dismissed the odd thought and let his gaze settle back on their gaping audience. Quickly sobering from his surprise, he gave a terse nod in reply. He was far from at ease and wanted to leave badly, even if it meant going along with the blond's suggestion. "I was going anyway," he deadpanned, not granting Seifer another look as he started toward the exit.

Following the brunet outside, Seifer didn't quite know what to make of the situation. He could imagine Squall being shaken up by what had just happened, unless the ice prince was still his good old self and nothing got to him. Realizing it most likely wasn't the wisest of times to engage Squall in conversation, not that such a time ever existed, he forced himself not to back down. Good time or not, it was the reality he had been dealt. Outside in the fresh air, he took a deep steadying breath before he let Squall take the lead, not knowing what to expect from the man.

Drawing his arms close to his body as the chill night air met clammy skin, Squall couldn't suppress a shiver from running down his spine. Hearing the blond's subdued footsteps follow him outside, he quickly kept walking, unable to look the other's way. He couldn't believe Seifer was trailing quietly behind him, the situation unlike anything he would've imagined. The man seemed to have forgotten about being ignored or at least wasn't angry anymore, which was unusual. Seifer didn't forget about unsettled scores, was never one to leave a retort unsaid or a debt unpaid. The thought left him cold inside. There was no way their reunion could play out peacefully.

He couldn't imagine Seifer wanting a civil talk, not with all the bad blood between them. Why had he offered to leave the club together? Why hadn't he beaten Squall within an inch of his life yet? Perhaps the taller man was waiting for a more opportune time and setting. A deserted back alley. There were plenty of those in the unsavory neighborhood they were passing through. Squall wasn't sure he'd be able to fight back. Not again. Not without answers.

As they walked side by side in silence, the flashy scenery of noisy clubs and daringly dressed people on the prowl grew more desolate and was slowly replaced by quiet streets and the occasional insomniac on a late night walk. Thoughts racing and confused, Squall couldn't decide what was more disturbing: his formal rival witnessing what had happened with Rinoa or the fact that the blond wasn't rubbing his nose in said fact. If not a head-on physical attack, then he at least would've expected to be the focus of some sort of verbal abuse. Considering the circumstances, the man was uncharacteristically silent.

Casting Seifer a sideway glance in an attempt at gauging the other's mood, Squall found nothing to clue him in to the blond's intentions. The sharply outlined profile of the taller man only managed to squirm his stomach into a tighter knot. Giving up on trying to make sense of the situation, he quickly turned his gaze away. He'd just have to come up with a plan once they reached his car.

Arriving at his car short minutes later, Squall stopped and slowly turned to face Seifer. No plan had dawned on him; no fitting words had presented themselves. Over two years of doubt and questions burned at the back of his mind, but when push came to shove, he couldn't voice any of them. He feared the truth more than the ex-knight's fist. A fight he would've understood. Rage he could've dealt with. But not this. All Squall could do was remain in place and keep uncertain eyes trained on the blond as he awaited the other's move.

Unable to suppress the frown growing on his features, Seifer was completely thrown off by Squall leading him to what he could only assume was the brunet's car. He knew Squall wasn't planning on
taking him anywhere. Which meant this was it. Sensing gray-blue eyes studying him, he looked away, unable to meet the younger man's gaze as he brought up his hand to scratch at the back of his head, cursing the stupid move that easily betrayed his unease.

"I guess this is it then..." Seifer finally spoke in a low voice, not really knowing what else to say or how to start his awkward apology. "Look... I don't know what happened back there..." he began and shifted his gaze to the ground, his hands tucked into his pockets.

"And I know this is bad timing and all..." he continued as he moved his gaze to the stars, temporarily lost to contemplation, his features no longer able to mask his distress. Just thinking about what he'd done made him feel sick to his stomach. He could still see the flares of electricity pulling Squall's body tight on the metallic cross and hear the silent screams. "But for what it's worth, Squall," he said, finally gathering the courage to look at the younger man, green eyes utterly sincere, "I'm sorry."

After moments of silence he turned around and started walking back in the direction they had come from, his steps slow and measured.

Gray-blue eyes widened at the unprompted and out of context apology. Not at all having anticipated such an abrupt end to their short meeting, Squall stood shocked into place by the honesty in Seifer's eyes. His mind providing him with a bewildered *What?*, he was given no time to process the laden words as the other walked away from him. Something about the sight of Seifer's retreating back, more so than the man's words, struck a deep chord within his chest. As sudden urgency spurred him into action without intervention of rational thought, his feet carried him after the blond.

"...Wait!"

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Unexpected Turns

[A Backstreet in Esthar, Tiamat District, Thursday, 16th of October, 1:53 am]

"...Wait!"

The sudden shout rang loudly through the night, its tone not quite pleading but still betraying whatever emotion it was that had led Squall to put up with Seifer accompanying him that far in the first place. Turning around at the unexpected word, Seifer studied the younger man. Squall had moved a couple of steps in his direction, his dark eyebrows drawn together in confusion, as if he hadn't quite meant for the yell to escape him. Not sure what to make of the unexpected call, Seifer returned Squall's gaze tiredly. He didn't care to prolong their time together, already drained from remembering a past he'd rather forget.

Having prevented the blond's disappearance, at least for the time being, Squall's brain reluctantly caught up with his actions. Cringing inwardly, his unease was magnified tenfold as he realized an undoubtedly desperate edge had crept into his plea. He needed to get a grip, fast, but he also needed to understand what the hell Seifer had meant by the more than vague apology. Schooling his expression into a show of composure he didn't feel, he fixed the ex-knight in place with what he hoped was a serious gaze in demand of an explanation.

Met with the brunet's firm gaze, Seifer couldn't suppress his instinctual irritation at being studied so closely. Increasingly edgy, he let out an annoyed, "What?"

"Two years, and you just walk away?" Squall demanded, mimicking Seifer's earlier words in an attempt to stall their inevitable parting. He knew the repeated question was hardly fair but hoped it would at least manage to irk the blond and keep the man within his reach until he could think of the right thing to say.

With jade eyes still trained on him, his next words came more uncertainly. "Before I had to—I couldn't stay before, but maybe now we..." he tried, but the last of his words died away completely. Choking on the request he wasn't sure he wanted to make in the first place, he took a step back and began fumbling in his pockets in search of his car keys, looking at anything but Seifer.

Frowning at the uncharacteristic display of emotion, Seifer suppressed his confusion as he tried to understand what was happening. It seemed Squall wanted to talk, but that couldn't be right; the man had never wanted to talk before in his life.

When the brunet's hand emerged from his pockets and two successive beeps signaled the car being unlocked, Seifer found himself closing the space between them and taking hold of Squall's wrist as the man reached out to open the door to the driver's seat.

"I know a place close by... or if you want, I live five minutes from here by car," he said, keeping his eyes firm on Squall.

Uneasy at the other's close proximity and the hand confining his wrist, Squall shook off Seifer's hold. Surely he hadn't heard that right, the reluctant offer not at all normal behavior on the blond's part. But as he stared at the key fob held tightly in his hand, the man's inexplicable offer echoed in his mind. Somehow he had managed to convey his intent, he figured. Or he was walking into some kind of trap. Their past not offering any guiding precedent, he couldn't tell if he was being paranoid or if Seifer actually intended to be civil.
Contemplating the evils of the decision that had already formed in his mind, he quickly reached the conclusion that he needed closure. "Anywhere's fine. I... don't really... just somewhere we could talk," he managed quietly in indication of both his assent and disinterest in choice of setting.

Annoyed at Squall's dismissal of his grasp, Seifer's eyes narrowed. "Let's go then," he said, unable to hide his irritation as he moved to the other side of the car and waited for Squall to get in, wanting the brunet to make the final decision.

Squall hardly cared about the blond's annoyance with him, the reaction reassuringly familiar and easy to ignore. If anything, it meant some semblance of normality when everything else about their current interaction was decidedly abnormal. Before he could change his mind, he took Seifer's grumbled reply as his cue and slid into the driver's seat.

Don't think. Deconstructing the sound of the blond getting into his car into a soft click, the creaking of leather, and the muffled slam of the car door, it almost seemed unreal. But he couldn't filter out the strong reek of the blond's cologne, nor the feel of the man's eyes boring into him. Don't think. Just drive. Starting the engine with a slow turn of the key, he looked over at Seifer when he finally felt sufficiently in control of himself again and awaited further instructions.

Scolding himself inwardly for reacting so strongly to behavior he knew was typical for Squall, Seifer briefly studied the man. He greatly disliked the lack of emotions present on Squall's face, especially knowing he was the cause. Even though Squall's uncharacteristic display earlier had been eerie, the schooled expression of apathy always grated on his nerves. Ignoring the tension hanging heavy in the air, he leaned back in the cold seat and forced himself to relax.

"I live close to the lift access point on the corner of Gayla Street and Centra Avenue," he said, looking out the window. "You know where it is?"

A brief nod was Squall's only reply as the brunet fixed his gaze in front of him and pulled out of the parking space.

"Just use the parking lot by the lift access point," Seifer continued, keeping his hands on his knees and his face turned away from Squall in an effort to hide his edginess.

Cringing inwardly, Seifer became more and more aware of the fact that what was happening most likely, probably, really wasn't such a good idea. Never in his wildest imagination had he expected to be bringing Squall back to his apartment. So much for a night of sex.

Looking out of the car window, watching the trails of neon lights whiz by, the recent memory of a drunk Rinoa surfaced. Her appearance hadn't changed much, the girl still looking every bit as naive as when he'd first laid eyes on her years ago. He couldn't help but wonder what she had been doing at the club. It was obvious Squall had come there because of her and that she had been the reason Squall had ignored him. She had been with another guy. That much had been clear. Not understanding why Squall had just accepted the slap and let her leave, Seifer's brow furrowed. Were they still together? And if they were, then why did Squall just let her go like that? It didn't make any sense.

Neither did Squall wanting to talk to him. When had Squall ever wanted to talk to anyone? It was surreal and not just a little unsettling. It was going to be one hell of an awkward night, that much was certain. What did he have to say to a man he hadn't seen in years? The man he had tortured mercilessly and tried to kill at his mistress's bidding. The man he respected more than anyone else but knew he didn't deserve any respect from in return. Gritting his teeth at the stupid decision to bring Squall back to his apartment, he briefly considered the option of getting out of it whilst he still had the chance. All he had to do was mess up the precarious balance they had going and return
to the nightlife that was waiting for him. It would be easy, but he had never cared for easy.

Unable to keep unwanted thoughts from emerging as the minutes melted together into one long awkward silence, Squall's hands clenched against the steering wheel. There was hardly enough traffic late at night to demand all of his attention. Even as he tore through the streets faster than was necessary, the blond's return to muteness blared louder in his ears than the low rumble of the car engine, the ex-knight's presence increasingly stifling.

As time lapsed, it became apparent that Seifer wouldn't instigate conversation of any kind, which left quite the unappealing alternative. Squall knew what he wanted to ask, what needed to be said, but no matter how many times he tried to work it out in his head, he couldn't think of a way to go about asking it. Uncertainty gnawed at him. Why had Seifer apologized? It was incriminating to say the least. Was the man next to him innocent or a murderer? Had he abandoned his childhood rival or had he been too weak to do what had needed to be done? How did one ask such questions? Thoughts descending into times of war, Squall's gaze darkened and the scenery sped by a little faster, his foot pressing down on the gas pedal with slightly more force.

He hadn't known what he was doing at all. He had been a mere teenager, inexperienced and forced to make decisions that could easily have turned out horribly wrong. Many had died. Many things could've been done better. He could've done better. Instead he had been strung along by higher powers, a puppet in their unfolding play. The dawning realization that perhaps it had been the same for Seifer, the blond a victim just like the rest of them, had plagued him ever since the end of the war. At the time all he had managed to find out was that Seifer had survived time compression. He had tried coming to terms with never finding out the truth and had sworn he'd never let such a thing happen again.

After the war he had pushed himself and striven to become a true commander worthy of the title and the responsibility that it represented, not the joke he had been during the war. Not because he had wanted to, but because there hadn't been anybody else. Because he had needed the distraction and it was his way to make up for past mistakes. In becoming a man of duty above all else, he thought he had managed to bury his insecurities and doubts. But here he was, seated next to the man he had never expected to meet again and not feeling a shred more competent as he pulled into the parking lot the blond had specified.

Torn from his thoughts as the car came to a halt, Seifer unbuckled his seat belt and got out without a single glance in the brunet's direction. Picking up his stride, he set a brisk pace towards his apartment, the corner of his lips sloping downwards. He didn't like where things were going. It really had been the mother of all stupid ideas to bring Squall home. It was his private haven and he really didn't like the idea of the guy setting foot in it. Squall was his past, his apartment his present; two different realities he didn't want to merge. He knew there wasn't much pride left after he'd been reduced to Ultimecia's bloodhound, but the thought of Squall's scrutinizing eyes upon his home, all he had managed to gather together since the war, made his skin crawl. There was no doubt the man would recognize the area as one of the cheapest in Esthar and from that infer just how low Seifer had sunk after the war.

Continuing in his stride, Seifer didn't look back to see if Squall was following, just placed his hands in his pockets as he felt the cold night air cut through the thin layers of his clothing and tried to empty his mind.

As they made their way down a side street to Centra Avenue, the buildings quickly lost their sophistication. They were still good examples of Estharian architecture, but it was easy to spot the advancing age of the materials. Some of the white arches and blue walls were losing their luminescence, their slight flickering blemishing the entire atmosphere of the place. Three large
skyscrapers were lined up to their right, each one looking more run down than the last. Reaching the entrance of the second one, Seifer cast a brief glance over his shoulder to check if Squall was still there.

Squall merely stood there, no judgment or surprise apparent in his eyes as he looked up at the tall building in mild curiosity before following Seifer inside. During their drive there he hadn't really noticed that they had ventured into one of Esthar's more dilapidated neighborhoods, but now that he had, he tried to imagine how Seifer could've ended up there. He clearly remembered the blond cadet complaining about having to share cramped dorm rooms, each roommate more unworthy and stupid than the last, and declaring arrogantly that he'd find a place more befitting of someone of his ability. The apartment building hardly looked like it would house the lavish quarters his onetime rival had envisioned. Dismissing the useless train of thought, well aware that war changed everything, Squall softly shook his head. He couldn't care less whether Seifer lived in a villa or a motel room.

Inside the entrance hall the ceiling hung low, almost claustrophobically so, nothing at all like the skyscrapers of a more recent date with their grandiose lobbies. The floors were dirty and littered with discarded newspapers and other trash. Walking over to one of the many lifts that were the only other exits to the room, Seifer pushed a button to call it down.

As they waited for the lift, Seifer leant his shoulder against the wall, his hands still tucked into his pockets as he finally let himself study the brunet. It was strange seeing Squall in such plain clothes. He couldn't remember a time when Squall hadn't been obsessed with leather and belts. For years it had been yet another source of ammunition when teasing the guy. But after the war, after Seifer had realized his attraction towards men, he had become painfully aware of the style's appeal. Many of his fantasies had involved Squall's infamous belts, the thought of their removal and subsequent use downright irresistible.

When a ding signaled the lift's arrival, Seifer straightened up and walked inside, not waiting for Squall to enter. Pressing the number 9, he placed himself as far away from the other man as possible.

As Seifer left as much space between them as the confines of the elevator allowed, Squall frowned. One moment Seifer was boring his eyes into him, the next he was being utterly ignored. The uncharacteristic silence did little to ease his discomfort either. Seifer had never bothered avoiding him before, always eager to push his buttons. At the deep sigh following the elevator jerking into motion, he chanced a quick glance at the blond. Judging from the man's dark expression, Seifer was far from pleased about his presence, but then why had he extended an invitation in the first place? To his own place no less?

Quickly cutting off returning thoughts of a trap, Squall willed himself to remain composed, but slender fingers disobeyed and fidgeted almost unnoticeably. The air felt too heavy. Increasingly uneasy as stifling silence filled the small space, he absentmindedly brushed away some dark strands of hair clinging to his neck and tried to focus on the numbers that lit up one by one, signaling their ascent.

As the lift came to a halt, Seifer exited and took the lead down the narrow hallway. The similarity of the situation to other nights when he'd brought home one night stands didn't escape him, the surreal comparison leading him to snort in amusement at the absurdity of his mind.

Sliding his keys into the lock on his front door, he entered. "This is me."

The atmosphere inside his apartment was entirely different from the rest of the building, the place not rundown or shabby but kept in good condition. It had taken a while, but he'd managed to clean
it up nicely. His living room held an en suite kitchen at one end and at the other end a work table that was covered in various weapon parts and accessories. It made the room smell of oil and metal, smells Seifer had always had a soft spot for.

A large couch was placed in the middle of the room. It was well-worn, but that just made it all the more comfortable. He didn't have space for a dining table, so the couch and adjacent coffee table worked as both a place of relaxation and a place for eating. Having used the table as a substitute for his work table on more than one occasion, it had ended up covered in various large stains. The far wall was covered with bookcases, the shelves littered with some of the strange objects he'd picked up on his travels as well as countless books.

There weren't any windows in the living room, a fact Seifer had never really grown used to but had learned to accept nonetheless because of the saved gil. Even though he had worked nonstop for the last couple of years, he still had trouble making ends meet and there was no way he could afford anything bigger.

Walking to the kitchen counter, he put down his keys before stealing a quick glance at Squall. "Make yourself comfortable," he said as he turned around and disappeared into the bedroom.

Standing by his bed, he rifled through his pockets and emptied their contents on the bedside table. Eyeing the Avalanche he had bought earlier that evening, he grimaced as he remembered Calder still waiting for him at the club. Grabbing his cell, he continued into the bathroom and sent the man a short message calling off their night out. He knew the message wasn't going to work wonders as far as placating the guy went, the words 'not coming' its sole content. Running a wet hand through his locks, he dismissed the thought and steeled himself for whatever the night might throw his way instead. Exiting the bathroom, he headed back to the living room. Stopping to stand in the doorway to take stock of the situation, his eyes were immediately drawn to Squall.

Squall was standing by his work desk, the man's fingers ghosting the wooden table and eyes brushing along the many pieces spread out in disarray. He seemed lost in thought, a slight frown in place as he chewed on his bottom lip absentmindedly.

Watching from his position at the other end of the room, a small smile tugged at Seifer's lips. Squall really hadn't changed much, still immediately drawn to anything to do with weapons. Brought back to countless afternoons spent in the brunet's company, the two of them looking through old Weapons Monthly magazines during their breaks, Seifer remembered the glint in the younger man's eyes whenever he had boasted about a new upgrade he'd gotten for Hyperion.

"Hey..." he said softly, wanting Squall's attention.

Startled from his inner musings, Squall turned away from the desk and faced the blond, an eyebrow rising at the slight smile on Seifer lips and the mussed state of usually slicked back hair. He would sooner have expected the blond to reappear with Hyperion in hand or to order him away from the desk. Blinking a few times to reassess the situation, he slowly allowed himself to relax as his former rival remained by the door, the man's stance much less forbidding than moments before.

Gaze trailing back to the diverse weapon parts and sketches that had caught his attention before, he picked up a peculiar item he couldn't quite place and turned it in his hands to examine it. He couldn't remember the blond ever busying himself with weapon parts before and these most definitely didn't belong to a gunblade.

"What's all this for?" he asked reverently, genuine interest in his voice.

"Just trying out some modifications," Seifer replied as he walked farther into the room. Remaining close to the kitchen, he continued, "Do you want something to drink?"
Not waiting for an answer, he walked over to a cupboard and grabbed a slender bottle of Galbadian Bluewhistle; his preferred brand of whiskey. "I haven't got much to chose from, but tell me what you want... I'm sure you could use something..." He drew out the last sentence as he glanced over his shoulder to regard Squall.

Placing the shiny piece of metal back on the desk, a morose expression graced Squall's features as Seifer's comment brought fresh memories rushing back to him. Forgetting all about the weapon parts and the questions they raised, he briefly fought for composure. He didn't want to think of Rinoa or her cutting words. He couldn't deal with that and face Seifer at the same time.

Running a hand through chocolate bangs, he scrunched his eyes closed in an attempt to focus on the present and let a tired sigh escape him as he failed to do so. A drink might not be such a bad idea. Familiar with the numbing quality of alcohol, he supposed the circumstances justified an exception to his usual dislike of having his mind clouded. With a nod in the direction of the bottle Seifer was holding, he moved to take a seat on the couch.

"That's fine."

Surprised at the strange quality to Squall's voice, the brunet sounding both tired and upset, Seifer couldn't help but turn around to watch the man. There was something unnerving about the way Squall moved. At the man's sullen expression, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the kitchen counter, the bottle of liquor forgotten for the time being. In all the years he'd known Squall he'd never seen the man behave in such a way, the brunet always reserved and composed, never one to let his feelings show. Something big must have happened between Squall and Rinoa at the club for Squall to act in such a way. Disliking that his one time rival was so strangely affected, Seifer wondered if there was some way he could help. Hyne knew he owed the man.

"I have something stronger if you want," he said, his gaze firm on Squall and his features serious. Moving his hands to rest on the kitchen counter, he continued, "Might be good for both of us."

Squall turned to look at Seifer in confusion. "What do you mean?" he asked warily.

Hesitating for a moment, Seifer didn't say anything, not sure whether he wanted to go through with the idea that had suddenly occurred to him or not. His original plan for the evening had been to lose himself to Avalanche; let his body experience nothing but bliss and relaxation. But sharing something like that with Squall would mean exposing himself and he already didn't like the cautious and skeptic qualities to Squall's reply.

Pushing away from the kitchen counter, he reminded himself that he really didn't care what Squall thought either way. Making his way into the bedroom, he walked over to where he had left the pills earlier. Grabbing the small plastic bag, he eyed the brightly colored pills inside and gave himself the briefest of moments to reconsider. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he walked straight back out of the bedroom and made his way over to the coffee table. Stopping across from where Squall was sitting on the couch, he dropped the plastic bag onto the table without further ado.

"Avalanche," he informed as he gestured at the vibrantly colored pills. "Do you know it?"

Studying Squall's face for a reaction, he was unable to suppress his growing annoyance when no expression appeared to give the man away. He had always hated not knowing what went on inside Squall's head.

The moment Seifer had made his offer, Squall had known the blond hadn't simply meant a stronger liquor. But drugs? Instantly reminded of the fact that he should never underestimate the
unpredictable man, he studied the bright pills in distrust. He'd never heard of Avalanche. Then again, he'd never taken any recreational drugs. For Seifer to suggest something along those lines, let alone reveal he owned a bag of the most likely illegal substance to a possible enemy, didn't make any sense. Feeling increasingly impatient eyes on him, he kept his expression unfazed as he looked up to regard the other.

"I don't, but I can make an educated guess," he said neutrally, breaking the silence.

Amused at Squall's reply, Seifer couldn't help himself. "Yeah?" he questioned teasingly, his green eyes dancing in mirth. "And what would that educated guess be then, Squally-boy?" he asked, his trademark smirk sliding into place. Sometimes riling up the brunette was just too easy and too much fun to let the opportunity pass by.

Fixing Seifer with a cold glare, Squall ignored the blond's question. Picking up the bag, he placed it in his palm and scrutinized the innocent looking pills inside.

"Drugs. What are you doing with these..." he trailed off and then suddenly his eyes widened in realization. "That man at the club. You got these from him, didn't you?"

Certain Squall's attention had been elsewhere at the time, Seifer was surprised to learn that Squall had watched him interact with his dealer. Eyes narrowing, not altogether endeared by Squall's astuteness, he bit out his retort. "What does it matter where I got them?"

Grabbing the plastic bag from Squall's hold, he turned around and walked back to the kitchen, his skin crawling at the sensation of being judged. "Nevermind. I'll pour you some of this instead," he said, slipping the bag of pills into a drawer in the kitchen. Taking hold of the bottle of liquor he'd left on the counter earlier, he wanted to dismiss the whole damned thing. Feeling resentful, he muttered out an irritated "Pussyheart" under his breath as he poured two glasses of the dark blue alcohol.

Thrown off by the abrupt change from teasing to affronted, Squall watched the drugs disappear into the drawer with a growing frown, wondering what he had said to earn such a strong reaction. But at the insult he could clearly make out, recognition struck him. This he knew. Challenges and bets had been their game. The blond had never taken no for an answer, but that had never really mattered, since Squall had never wanted to back down either. Every single time he had ended up in detention or suffered through tedious chores as punishment, it had begun with Seifer and a proposition spoken in challenge.

But, as his mind immediately pointed out, they weren't cadets anymore. To suddenly hear that hated yet familiar nickname again seemed entirely out of place given their circumstances. There was bad blood between them. For them to pretend like nothing had happened was impossible. For the blond to expect him to accept such a reckless offer was even more absurd.

Gaze dropping to the coffee table and fixing on the spot where the bag of pills had been sitting mere moments ago, Squall couldn't help but wonder how Seifer had gotten mixed up with such a thing. The man might be impulsive but he wasn't stupid, so there had to be something to it. Why else would a fighter, for whom health and strength were everything, take such risks?

Heading over to the couch, Seifer placed one of the two glasses he'd filled with the blue whiskey in front of the brunet. Taking a seat at the opposite end of the couch, he put his feet up on the coffee table and crossed his legs at his ankles. Disliking the feeling that was eating away at him, he frowned slightly. He felt the urge to explain himself, which irked him. He explained nothing to no one. And it wasn't like he gave a fuck about what Squall thought of him; in fact, he couldn't care less. They lived separate lives, would probably never see each other again. So what the hell did it
Yet he knew he was fighting a losing battle. Narrowing his eyes, he stared at the glass in his hand. "I don't do it often. But it... makes you feel good," he said, his voice low and pensive. Taking a sip of his drink, he paused briefly before speaking again. "Everyone needs that."

At the unprompted justification, something he couldn't remember Seifer doing even once in the past, Squall only felt further confusion. For all the things that had remained the same in the blond, there seemed to be just as many things that had changed and clashed with what he knew. Still not looking at the ex-knight, he reached over and took his drink in hand, his thoughts running a mile a minute. He doubted it was a trap. Ironically enough, the blond wouldn't have behaved so suspiciously if that had been the case. It seemed Seifer didn't want a confrontation, the lack of accusations and hostility proof enough. Then maybe the offer had been an attempt at some kind of truce. Maybe it had been for courage, to deal with the rest of the night.

To feel good. Staring at the blue liquid and sloshing it around in the glass, Squall contemplated the words. Could Seifer's intention be that simple? The man had never bothered with how he felt before. He would've dismissed the ridiculous idea without another thought, if it wasn't for the blond's uncharacteristic behavior that evening. Everyone needs that. Hyne, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt untroubled, at ease. Though he always felt in his element when out in the field, adrenaline guiding his moves, he knew that wasn't what Seifer had in mind. The only thing close to a drug he had ever experienced had been the Hero shots he'd taken near the end of the war, the clandestine item developed specifically for battle purposes had dragged him back onto his feet more times than was advisable. But temporarily feeling invincible, no pain able to reach him and senses sharpened into deadly precision, hadn't meant he had felt good. Far from it.

The night was starting to take its toll on him. The dark blue alcohol in his glass swirled thickly, its strong scent promising numbed thoughts and nerve ends, but not the oblivion he needed. Frowning at where his thoughts were taking him, his grip tightened against cool glass. He had no idea what kind of effect those pills had, but the contemplative tone to Seifer's voice kept echoing in his mind along with what had happened at the club, the prospect of temporary relief withering his apprehension away. He wouldn't ask, he decided. Not knowing in advance seemed better; made the leap all the easier.

Pushing up from the couch, he stalked towards the kitchen without a word. Face drawn taut in determination, ignoring all rational thought, he pulled open the exact drawer in which Seifer had flung the plastic bag and fished out a bright green pill. Unfaltering, he popped it into his mouth and washed the thing down with a royal swig of bitter alcohol.

Slowly, he set down his glass and placed both hands on the counter to steady himself. There was no point in backing down now, the deed done, yet he couldn't help but let out a shaky breath as disbelief started to register with him at his own actions. Face paler than ever and suppressing a shiver, he closed his eyes and willed his breathing to calm down.

Looking up to regard Seifer's dumbstruck expression, his eyebrows furrowed into a slight crease as he pondered the question he could no longer put off. Almost managing an indifferent tone of voice, he asked, "...What do these do?"

~ o ~
"...What do these do?"

Entirely unable to believe his own eyes, Seifer almost choked on his drink. There was no way in hell Squall had just taken Avalanche. No fucking way. On instinct, he shot up from the couch, too shocked to sit still. A few seconds ticked by before he was able to school his rather undignified expression.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath as a huge grin spread across his face, pure amusement shining in his eyes. Realizing the night had just become infinitely more interesting, he sent Hyne a private thanks.

Chuckling softly, he walked over to where Squall stood, the move earning him a warning glare. Without another word he brushed past the man, reached into the drawer without hesitation, and pulled out the bag. Taking hold of a brightly colored pill, he turned to face the brunet and placed the piece of promised bliss in his mouth, swallowing it dry. Distracted by thoughts of how Avalanche would affect the younger man, he grinned mischievously, the idea of the ice prince kicking back and being stripped of his tightly held self-restraint far too amusing.

Following Seifer's every move, Squall's body tensed up as his eyes flitted over the small blue tablet disappearing behind the blond's lips. Somehow it felt like the simple act sealed a deal he wasn't sure he wanted to make. Seifer's obvious amusement at his question contrasted a bit too strongly with the man's previous contemplative musing, raising the suspicion he had played right into the ex-knight's hands.

Keeping his narrowed gaze fixed on the blond, he remained motionless and awaited Seifer's next move. Frowning at still not having received an answer and being left in the dark, he could only hope it was a sense of victory over roping him into an illegal act that had Seifer sizing him up in amusement, rather than the consequences of said act.

"You might feel slightly hot," Seifer said, deciding he'd dragged out his answer long enough.

Walking closer, intending to tease the younger man, he stopped mere inches away, but forgot his purpose when his eyes caught on long brown locks resting against pale cheeks. As his gaze traveled to Squall's lips, followed by an instinctive move to meet turbulent gray-blues, it became painfully obvious just how much he wanted the guy.

The night definitely wasn't going to be the plain sailing he'd imagined just seconds ago. It would be a minefield. A booby trap at every corner, ready to land him on his ass. Even without Avalanche, he had felt tempted to try his luck, the thought of being castrated on the spot the only thing keeping him in place. He could only hope that staying at a decent distance would keep them both out of harm's way.

"You'll feel amazing, Squall," he said in a low voice.

Caught off guard by Seifer's close proximity and tone of voice, Squall's reaction came too slowly when he averted his eyes from the blond's intense gaze. As he moved to put some distance between them, his eyebrows scrunched in annoyance.
Watching the reaction unfold, Seifer wasn't surprised. It was the only response he should have expected. Even so, it reminded him of exactly who and what they were and just how little right he had to play any games with Squall. Inwardly cringing at how easily he had forgotten that painful detail, he schooled his expression.

"Those," he began as he tilted his head in the direction of the remaining pills, "will make you forget about everything."

Eyebrows rising slightly at the statement, Squall doubted the existence of a drug potent enough to make him "forget." Even deities burrowing into his brain, feeding off his memories, hadn't managed the task in the end. But, whatever the drug's effect, be it a temporary dulling of unwanted memories or simply a night of no longer caring about what he couldn't forget, he'd welcome the reprieve.

Leaning back against the kitchen counter, Seifer placed his hands on the cold surface. As he thought back on nights in the past where he'd been under the drug's influence, his eyes grew unfocused. "You'll feel nothing but ecstasy," he said distantly, lost to introspection. "It's perfect."

Pushing himself away from the counter, he walked over to the couch. There wasn't really any way he could explain to Squall what the drug did; no words could.

Perfect ecstasy. As Seifer described it with absolute conviction, Squall felt increasingly uncomfortable. It was too vague an explanation to form a clear idea of what to expect, but apparently it wasn't something he would have much control over. Realizing the possible embarrassing implications of experiencing something like that in the ex-knight's presence fueled his apprehension, his previous determination short-lived and draining from his face. His only consolation was that the blond had taken a pill as well.

Not moving from his spot, he absentmindedly examined the condensation that had formed on the cold stone of the counter where his hands had been resting just a moment before. Not one to go back on a decision, definitely not in front of Seifer, he tried to quell his unease. He'd just have to ride it out and hope the effect would be what he needed. Shifting his gaze from the counter top to the tall blond, he willed himself to stay calm.

"How long before it kicks in?" he asked, his voice deceivingly neutral. Knowing when to expect the drug to start working would at least give him something to go by.

"Usually about half an hour," Seifer answered as he sat down on the couch. "Sometimes, maybe more," he added, turning his head in Squall's direction.

With a slight nod, Squall fell silent once more, at a loss for what to do. Half an hour was both too fast and not nearly fast enough. He wanted to get some kind of handle on the situation and assess what Seifer wanted from it all, but at the same time he didn't want the chance to consider what possible disaster he'd gotten himself into.

As the silence stretched on, Seifer watched Squall and began registering all the little details about the brunet that had changed. A few scars he didn't recognize were visible along the man's arms, as was to be expected. It was unavoidable considering what Squall had been up to. Not many weeks went by without Seifer's students regaling each other with the latest story about the SeeD Commander.

At first Seifer had tried hard to ignore such stories, the reminders of their shared past too painful. But as time went by, the stories had begun to draw his attention, until one day he found himself listening for any news about the stoic man. The last he had heard was Squall single-handedly
taking down a giant cobra. Giant as in three fucking stories tall giant. He still didn't know how much to believe of the outrageous stories, but one thing was clear: Squall was still a SeeD and for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what brought a SeeD to Esthar, the place well enough protected by its own armed forces.

"What are you doing in Esthar?" he asked.

Gray-blue eyes grew distant in thought as Squall contemplated the question. Innocent as it seemed, revealing Esthar as his permanent place of residence was the kind of information he couldn't afford to place in the wrong hands. But here he was, at Seifer's apartment, the ex-knight having exposed his home to someone who could easily turn such knowledge against him.

"... I live here," he eventually replied, before walking up to the couch. Passing Seifer, he chose the spot furthest away from the blond and sat down. As he leaned back against soft cushioning, choppy bangs effectively obscured his eyes from view.

Irritated at Squall's answer, the statement not really explaining anything, just posing even more questions, Seifer's eyes narrowed slightly. "Aren't you still at B-Garden?"

"No... I moved here six months ago." Squall's answer came more reluctantly this time. "I still work for Garden."

Surprised at the information, Seifer barely acknowledged the brunet's words with a low hum. "Why Esthar?"

"That's none of your business," Squall deadpanned reflexively, cold dissuasion coming naturally as he drew a line for the blond not to cross. Within the short time it had taken Seifer to ask three simple questions, the blond had already managed to cut a bit too close to home. He wanted to put his sorceress out of his mind, not think back on when it had all started to go downhill.

Seifer's expression turned grim. Squall might never have been the most sociable of guys, but refusing to answer a simple question did nothing but rile Seifer up. "Yeah, whatever..." he let out resentfully, not masking his disdain for the brunet's words.

Tilting his head sideways to peer at the blond, Squall realized he was coming dangerously close to ruining the fragile balance that had kept things civil thus far.

"I just don't want to talk about it ..." he said, the attempt to convey his dislike of the topic in a less harsh manner dying on his lips as he angled his face away again.

Disliking the evasive dismissal just as much as the previous words, Seifer tried hard to keep his cool. He just couldn't understand what the hell Squall's problem was. It had been the brunet who had wanted to talk in the first place, only to prove just as reluctant and unwilling to say anything beyond the stunted sentences he had always been a master of.

"You know, if you want I can call you a cab. You might make it home before the effects set in," he spoke bitterly, before turning his head away from Squall, knowing that the urge to punch the brunet would only increase if he kept looking at the guy.

At the offer he knew wasn't meant as a friendly suggestion, Squall's stomach knotted in a mix of confusing emotions. As difficult as their encounter had been so far, he couldn't leave now. He couldn't go back to the penthouse, knowing he'd messed up his one chance to have his answers. All that awaited him there were empty rooms and dark thoughts trapped in the confines of his mind.

For once he felt certain that solitude wouldn't help him collect his poise and settle the growing pit
in his stomach. He couldn't be sure that the blond would still be there the following day and the thought that it would end this way was something he couldn't accept. After this night, there was no way he'd be able to put the ghosts of his past behind locks and bars a second time. They'd spill out into his thoughts and he'd dream again. He didn't want to leave. He had nowhere to go apart from an unwelcoming room rented for the night or a scarcely lit train platform with no trains arriving until morning.

"...I can't go home right now."

The statement escaped his lips reluctantly, a tentative voicing of something that had run its roots deeply and shouldn't have been voiced. Dark eyebrows drew together as he realized the strained quality to his own voice and just how detached he'd become from that one word. Home. He could no longer relate to it. It held no meaning anymore and he wondered when that had happened. He felt sure he'd understood it at some point or else he wouldn't be experiencing the sudden sense of loss.

Attention caught by the weird response, Seifer promptly turned his head back to study the younger man. He hadn't expected a comment like that. As his thoughts returned to the events that had taken place earlier that night, it became glaringly obvious that Rinoa and Squall were still a couple. Why else would Squall not want to return home, if not because of Rinoa's presence there?

Vaguely registering an unfamiliar pang of jealousy, he did his best to ignore it, fully aware of just how misplaced it was. Really, what business was it of his if they were together or not, or had relationship troubles for that matter? Yet his lips curled downwards in distaste on their own volition. Annoyed that he'd become stuck in the position of a fucking couple's therapist, he averted his gaze.

"...Ooookay," he spoke in derision, drawing out the word to underline his contempt.

Thoughts of a loss that had gone by unnoticed were abruptly cut short and stolen away, the single word uttered in plain loathing sending inexplicable pinpricks of hurt through Squall's chest. Turning to look at the blond, brow scrunched in confusion at the attitude Seifer was giving him, all that greeted him was a harsh stare directed at the far wall, far away from him, and the realization that he'd overstayed his welcome in yet another person's home.

He felt those roots dig a bit deeper, make it just a bit colder and yet all the easier to do as the blond had asked. He should've known that things would pan out this way; they always did. "This was a mistake," he said quietly as he pushed up from the couch, unable to keep the rejection he felt from lacing the statement spoken in parting.

The relief Seifer had felt at hearing Squall rise from the couch was short lived, the strange quality to the man's voice pulling him from his grim thoughts. When the dark of Squall's jeans entered his vision, the man clearly about to leave, he couldn't stop himself. Before he'd even registered what he was doing, the word "stay" had left his lips and his hand had traveled to Squall's thigh to try and prevent the man from leaving.

Everything had been so much easier when pissing Squall off to a degree where the guy would simply walk off meant nothing more than having to wait until the following day to pester the brunet all over again. If Squall left now, he would never see the guy again and despite the resentment he had felt only moments before, he wasn't ready for that.

Confused and effectively halted in his path, Squall stepped away from the touch against his leg and turned to face Seifer. Green eyes were fixed on him, the blond's expression unreadable and not giving away what had brought about the sudden change of heart. Though he didn't understand
Seifer's reason, he didn't need to, to understand the offer.

Stay.

Unable to completely shake his wariness after such complete aversion to his presence, he only allowed himself a cautious kind of relief. He knew he should probably leave, but he remained rooted in place by Seifer's unyielding gaze. With each second that ticked by, his resolve to leave weakened, the prospect of what waited for him outside Seifer's apartment discouraging him further.

There was a familiarity to the feel and scents of Seifer's apartment that compelled him to stay. It brought him back to days spent sparring, too long ago. It reminded him of borrowing oil to clean gunblade parts that didn't have a scratch on them yet and of even longer ago, when the two of them had escaped from the rest of their excursion group in Deling City to go check out the newest gunblade models in a local weapon shop.

Watching Seifer watching him, absorbing the strange atmosphere of the moment, he sat down on the coffee table, across from Seifer.

Struck by the surrealism of the moment, Seifer kept his eyes on Squall. After so long and everything that had happened between them, to have Squall in his apartment, sitting on his coffee table no less, seemed like the unlikeliest of encounters. He almost snorted at the notion, easily recalling the part of the evening that had been even more unlikely: Squall taking Avalanche. Feeling a smile threaten to break free, knowing he had been the one to lure the prim and proper ice prince into such an act, he instead remembered the reason he'd offered it in the first place: Rinoa.

Recalling the disdain he'd expressed only minutes earlier, behavior that had almost driven Squall away, he realized the drug was setting in. It always began that way. He'd lose track of his thoughts and his moods would change only to mellow out and make him unable to hold on to anything unpleasant. He still hadn't moved his eyes from Squall, his gaze unwavering as he kept studying the brunet.

But then his eyes strayed, more intrigued by the longer brown locks that framed Squall's face. Somehow he had never imagined the guy actually changing, his mind having frozen the brunet into boyish youth. All the subtle changes he hadn't had time to spot back at the club now became evident: the hardened lines to Squall's face, the more self-assured set to gray-blue eyes, the way Squall held himself. If anything, maturity made the man even more irresistible. There was nothing better than bringing a guy to bed who had the strength to challenge him, being on top all the sweeter when he didn't have to care about being too rough. Starting to feel hot, his train of thought not helping things, he ran a finger under the collar of his shirt.

Watching as long fingers tampered with black fabric, the sight painting a phantom tightness around his own neck, Squall kept his hands from wandering and mimicking the slight motion. Instead he dropped them to the coffee table, his palms pressing flat against the surface. Slowly he slid them back across stained wood, his fingers spread wide to better feel the rich texture.

Tracing the grains and indentations along the surface of the table with careful fingertips, he tipped his head to the side, his eyes following the path he was drawing on the wood with a vague sense of fascination. The coffee table at the penthouse held no such ridges, bumps, or stains, its lines all glass and metal. Not everything in the penthouse was like that, sleek and without texture, but somehow it was all empty anyway. None of it carried any real meaning to him. He wondered if maybe Rinoa had sensed it too, the creeping feel of walls closing in, the lack of air. Somehow he knew she wouldn't return there, not after tonight, not after everything that had happened between them.
Reminded of the events at the club, his thoughts jumped back to the whirling torrent of anger and hurt Rinoa had assaulted him with mere hours ago and her declaration that he was no longer needed. Now, though, he felt like he was standing in the eye of the storm, no longer swept along in its lashing winds, merely an onlooker of events that no longer seemed to matter.

If anything, he felt strangely relieved. He wouldn't have to face those dark, hazel eyes anymore, their gaze solemn and dissatisfied as they searched for something that wasn't there. Even though he knew she wouldn't ever be at the penthouse again, the thought didn't upset him nearly as much as it should. His apprehension at having to return to that emptiness was fading already. He couldn't really hold on to the distant echo of void rooms and bare walls when everything about Seifer's apartment wasn't empty.

His hand paused at a smoother patch of wood, where a stain of oil had soaked into the wood, his sensitive fingers curling and uncurling against the warm surface of the table. Or was it his hands that were warm? Dismissing the stray thought, he tore his gaze away from the particularly large and elaborately shaped stain and tilted his head to the side, before training unreadable gray-blue eyes on the blond sitting in front of him. Hands resting against tarnished wood, he could now feel tangible heat spreading throughout his fingers, up his arms and flooding his body; like roots sucking up warm, warm water.

"I think I'm starting to feel hot," he stated plainly as he brought up a hand to press against flushed cheeks, the heat beginning to swell into pleasant waves, fast and hot, coursing through him. Seifer had mentioned this, he suddenly remembered, which meant the Avalanche was starting to set in. But the realization failed to impress anything more than a slight jolt of apprehension, the moment quickly washed away again with another wave of heat.

Seifer didn't need to hear Squall's words to understand that the man was affected by Avalanche, the way the brunet's hand was pressed to a flushed cheek much more telling. He knew exactly what Squall was experiencing, how everything suddenly caused unfamiliar tingles to run along your skin and set your every nerve on fire. He knew how everything that usually appeared mundane suddenly became the most fascinating thing in the world, but most of all, he knew how even the slightest of touches could feel madly arousing.

Unable to stop his eyes from continuing a trail down the brunet's chest, he didn't even try to fight the urge. Any previous concerns slowly disappeared to the back of his mind. He couldn't hold on to them, their mere memories dissipating into thin mist, leaving nothing but the thought that he really needed to see Squall, just see the man and nothing else. As his eyes moved back to regard gray-blues, he distantly realized his thoughts were leading him astray. The sight was too much and Squall was right there. All he had to do was lean forward. He could almost imagine Squall's reluctant lips against his own and feel the press of Squall's chest against his hands as he forced the smaller man onto the coffee table.

Possessing just enough sense to realize his mind was treading dangerous ground, he reluctantly closed his eyes in an effort to put an end to his straying thoughts, but the seductive imagery of the man before him wouldn't disappear. As a familiar throb settled in his groin, he leaned his head back to rest softly against the couch, a small crease of pleasure forming on his brow.

Slumped into a position of complete relaxation, he spread his legs farther apart and moved his hands to lie at his sides on the couch. With the image of Squall still clear in his mind, he let out an almost inaudible moan as he focused on the feel of the fabric of his pants moving against his sensitive skin. At the satisfying friction, his body froze up, his grip tightening against the couch.

Taking a deep breath, he willed his less than pure thoughts to go away and slowly opened his eyes.
to look at Squall through heavy lidded eyes, his fingers still tingling from their innocent press against the fabric of the couch. It was hard to suppress the urges the sight in front of him inspired. He wanted to touch Squall badly, but he knew he had to restrain himself. Mustering every last ounce of self-control, he pushed his desire aside. He could do this; he could let Squall enjoy Avalanche.

Returning the blond's gaze in curiosity, Squall let his hand drop back onto the table's surface and released a deep breath. Seifer's relaxed moves and the subtle twitches to the man's expression told him the blond was experiencing the same waves of heat he was. The waves were becoming increasingly hot, burning his cheeks a darkening red hue, rolling through him faster and faster.

Placing steadying hands on the table, he languidly started to stretch his neck and limbs, working the kinks out of rigid muscles and shedding the tension that had crept into his body during the day. It helped channel some of the heat, tempering it. With every soothing rush of warmth and pleasantly aching stretch, he felt a bit lighter, a little more unburdened. A look of contentment began taking over his flushed features as he arched his back slightly to flex his spine and shoulders.

Watching as the brunet's hand dropped back to the table, Seifer felt calmness replace his earlier desire. As Squall started to loosen up and relax, no strained atmosphere or harsh words between them, he couldn't help but feel strangely satisfied, and a lazy smile emerged on his lips. Just watching Squall unwind was enough for him, his indecent thoughts receding to the back of his mind.

When the last vestiges of tired stiffness had flowed from his body, Squall leaned his head backwards and stared at the ceiling unblinkingly for a while. He couldn't identify the feeling that grew in the pit of his stomach. The sound of his heartbeat was thundering in his ears. The heat was becoming too much, the room too cramped when his mind felt unbridled, free like wide grasslands stretching out endlessly. The odd sensation swelled until it filled him completely, until he felt like he would burst if he didn't move and breathe.

Tilting his head to scan the room around him, his brow furrowed slightly at not finding a single window when he desperately needed air. Without warning, he pushed up from the coffee table and walked towards the door Seifer had disappeared behind when they had first arrived at the apartment. There had to be a window somewhere.

Observing the brunet's movement, Seifer arched an eyebrow in curiosity, puzzled at why Squall was heading into his bedroom. Getting up from the couch, he followed the man.

Once inside the bedroom, Seifer stopped in his tracks as his eyes traveled to the brunet. Squall hadn't noticed his presence yet; he just stood by the window, leaning out into the chill night air, a fresh breeze playing with dark strands of hair. The brunet's whole body was set aglow with electric blue light emanating from the street lighting and buildings outside. Watching as Squall closed his eyes and took a deep breath, Seifer felt himself relax. A small smile grew on his lips; this was what he had wanted when he had suggested Avalanche.

Unaware of the blond's gaze on him, Squall focused on the play of the wind caressing his face. The chill of the autumn air had taken the edge off the stifling heat, his mind now wandering out into the wide vastness of a hazy, starless sky. Only on the 9th floor, the window didn't reach high enough to oversee the vast expanse of the city, taller buildings blocking the horizon. The view differed greatly from the one at the penthouse, not towering from above but looking up from beneath, amidst an ocean of lights and neon flickering.

It strangely reminded him of the deep sea research center, where mere glass had separated him from dark blue waters, dotted with luminescent schools of fish and electric bright jelly fish drifting
by. For a moment the surreal images overlapped, but a distant honk of a car broke the illusion. A smile tugged at his lips at the thought of a moon jelly swimming past Seifer's window when he remembered the blond's dislike of the creatures ever since the boy had stepped on one at the orphanage. Softly shaking his head at the memory, he let his gaze roam the surrounding buildings.

A few shadows traveled past dimly lit windows in the distance, but most apartments of the neighboring buildings were cast in darkness. Leaning out a bit farther to better feel the currents of wind, he soaked in the peace of the night, drawing it in with every breath. The remote sounds of city nightlife had melted together in a soothing background lull, calming the hammer of his heart and slowing his breathing. Oddly connected to what he saw, smelled, and heard, he didn't feel the sense of isolation and loneliness he usually experienced when watching over the vast metropolis. All he felt was calm.

Still watching from his position by the door, Seifer took a step farther into the room. As another gust of wind took hold of Squall's hair, he imagined the breeze rushing against his own skin and shivered in satisfaction. Overheating was one of the primary side effects of Avalanche, but it was a small price to pay for the escape the drug presented. Thoughts of standing under the cold spray of his shower, every cool droplet of liquid dousing the hot fire playing beneath his skin, made his whole body tingle in remembered pleasure.

"I sometimes take a cold shower when the heat becomes too much," he spoke softly, breaking the silence.

At the low timbre sounding from behind him, starting him from his thoughts, Squall glanced over his shoulder. Gaze landing on the blond, he slowly turned around to fully face the man, a small smile gracing his lips.

"I think I like it better this way," he answered quietly, a breathy quality to his voice. "The wind feels nice."

All shields seemed to have vanished from gray-blue eyes as Seifer kept watching the brunet. The uncertain edge to Squall's behavior had finally lifted and with it some of the man's tightly held control and restraint, the slight upwards curl to pale lips betraying as much.

"Well, then you should enjoy it," Seifer said warmly as he walked over to the bed, not wanting to disturb Squall. He would let Squall enjoy the moment. Breaking eye contact, he lowered himself onto the soft white sheets and stretched out on his back. Locking his hands behind his head, he gazed up at the ceiling, complete relaxation spreading throughout his body.

Pulled from his fascination with the city, Squall watched as Seifer made himself comfortable on the bed. Taking in the blond's relaxed position, the man completely at ease in his presence, he felt content. As his eyes traveled the profile of his one-time rival, he allowed himself to indulge in a detailed study of familiar features and lingered on the slanted scar he'd cut there himself. He could still clearly remember how easily his gunblade had slit open skin, bright red blooming on the blond's forehead in a mirror image of his own wound. He didn't regret it, nor did he regret the moment of inattentiveness that had cost him his own scar. When everything else about his sparring partner had become mere memories, at least the scar had still been tangible and real.

Gaze moving back to take in a very real Seifer reclined on a bed in an apartment that clearly had been the blond's for a while, Squall wondered how long the man had lived there to imprint such a distinct feel onto the place, how long the man had been practically right under his nose.

"Have you been here all this time?"
Listening to the softly spoken question, Seifer thought back to his first months in Esthar. As images formed in his mind, he was unable to hold onto them, the brief glimpses into the past disappearing just as quickly as they came into existence.

"Almost," he said before moving his eyes away from Squall to rest on the ceiling. "It seemed like a good place to go."

Squall wasn't sure what to make of the brief reply. He hadn't come to Esthar because it had "seemed like a good place," but out of necessity. He'd never taken a liking to the large city, never lingered, and wondered why Seifer had. But no elaboration followed, the blond drifting off again. Frowning at his inability to keep the conversation going, Seifer clearly more interested in silent relaxation, Squall quietly hoisted himself onto the windowsill and watched with mild interest as the blond started to fiddle with his collar again.

Seifer was beginning to overheat badly, his skin feeling as if it was on fire. The room felt increasingly stifling, the air almost suffocating. He could no longer bear it, his fingers tugging at his collar reflexively. As he moved to sit up on the bed, his hands worked to undo the buttons of his shirt, leaving smooth fabric to pool at his sides. Instantly rewarded with cool air sliding against his hot skin, he returned to a pose of relaxation, his eyes closing to better focus on the sensation. Running a hand through his hair, he inhaled deeply and let his mind drift away with the evening breeze.

Frown deepening a little when the short bout of activity died down again, the blond not saying a word nor looking his way, Squall almost let a sigh escape. If anything, it seemed like Seifer was perfectly content to leave him to his own devices, intent on moving as little as possible. Briefly, he entertained the thought of roughly shaking the man into action. He wanted to do something, anything, but he couldn't bring himself to disturb the blond, not when he seemed so utterly at peace.

Fingers fidgeting with a loose thread sticking out of the hem of his T-shirt, he let his gaze travel the room in an absentminded study, but the room held little that could hold his interest for long and eventually his eyes gravitated back to silent figure at the centre of it all.

Vaguely annoyed at Seifer's inactivity, he closed his eyes in an attempt to reclaim the soothing calm he'd experienced just moments before, but all he could hear was the loud contrast between Seifer's slow breathing and the quickening drum of his own heartbeat. That feeling of unbridled energy, ready to break free, started to swell again and coiled wildly within the constraints of heated skin and itching muscles.

He couldn't sit still any longer. Sliding down from the windowsill, his feet failed to carry him away, solid walls keeping him in check. No amount of aimless pacing managed to soothe his mounting agitation, his mouth becoming drier and his pulse more rampant with every step. Eyes darting to the blond, he was greeted by a picture of perfect, oblivious calm. Forgetting his decision not to disturb Seifer, he walked up to the bed and looked down at the dozing man in exasperation.

"How can you lie still like that?"

Opening his eyes and turning to lie on his side to better study the brunet, Seifer was surprised to find Squall standing right next to the bed. Knowing all too well what was causing Squall to act the way he was, he couldn't suppress his mirth and smirked at the brunet's predicament. He'd had times like that whilst on Avalanche as well; times where he'd been full of excess energy and the drive to just do something.

"Feeling restless there, Squall?" he teased.
Fixed with an expectant gaze in reply, no answer given, Seifer realized he had to help the other man understand what was happening. It had come as no surprise that Squall didn't know what Avalanche was; he couldn't really imagine the man having had any experience with drugs.

"Just focus on what you're feeling," he said in an effort to explain, hoping it would help ease Squall's restlessness, just like the feel of the duvet beneath him and the flow of the autumn wind against his skin was all that filled his own mind. All other thoughts simply drifted away.

Turning to lie on his back once more, he sank further into the bed and languidly made himself comfortable. With one hand resting on his stomach, just above the waistline of his pants, he enjoyed the warm press it exerted on his skin. A low rumbling sound of pleasure left him as he moved his other hand to rest at the back of his neck. Closing his eyes, he forgot all about time and place.

At the completely useless advice, the blond entirely unbothered, a frustrated sigh spilled from Squall's lips. Sitting himself down on the bed, on the side nearest to the open window and flowing air, he fist white cotton sheets in an attempt to distract himself from the prickling itch that crawled through each of his fingers and infected his entire body. He couldn't focus on it. If he did, it would burn him to a cinder. Eyes glazing over at the effort it took him to dam in the assault of raw sensations, he pushed his next words past reluctant lips. "... It's not that easy."

Not understanding the vague, panic-edged words, Seifer immediately pushed himself up into a sitting position and moved closer to Squall, the man's tone of voice pulling his mind straight out of relaxation and into worry.

"Hey..." he said softly, wanting to calm the brunet. Placing a hand at the man's wrist to get his attention and to show his sincerity, he spoke his next words carefully. "Take a deep breath."

The touch against his wrist was too sudden, Squall's skin and nerves tingling hot at the simple contact. His entire mind singled in on the feeling, his gaze coming back into focus as he found himself staring into concerned eyes. Doing as instructed, he inhaled and exhaled deeply a few times, but the air between them was too thick to fill his lungs. Green eyes monopolized his line of sight, their poison spreading fast and rushing through his veins, heightening his awareness of Seifer.

Releasing a shaky breath, he let himself recline into the soft pillows lined up by the headboard, hands still grabbing on to the white fabric by his sides. Eyes turbulent, he looked at Seifer in unrest.

"It's not helping," he said quietly, his voice strained. "... I feel so..."

Unable to put words to what exactly it was he was feeling, he fell silent. Scrunching his eyes closed, he hoped to drown out at least one of his senses.

Concern increasing further, Seifer moved to rest on his knees next to Squall and leaned in to better study the man's expression.

"You feel so what?" he asked as he placed a hand on the bed for support, next to one of Squall's shoulders. Watching as the rise and fall of the brunet's chest only seemed to quicken, shallow breaths coming in hard and fast, he knew he had to do something.

"Look at me," he demanded, not liking Squall's reaction one bit. "Focus," he added firmly, bringing his right hand up to rest on the brunet's shoulder in a steadying hold, wanting to root him in reality.
The large hand squeezing his shoulder sent a pleasant shiver through Squall's body, the sensation fusing dangerously with the feel of Seifer's warm breath caressing his face. All he could focus on was how close the blond was, the man's presence overwhelming and impossible to escape. Turning his face away from the other, needing to put some distance between them, he whispered almost pleadingly, "You're too close."

The relief he felt as the grip on his shoulder loosened was immediately dispelled as Seifer's hand traveled along his chest to rest at his waist instead. Jaws clenching as the touch seared a path against his skin, he couldn't fight the charge of excitement that coursed through him.

"Tell me what's wrong, Squall."

At the gentle prompt, Squall forgot why he had looked away in the first place and found himself drowning in green eyes again. Swallowing thickly, he hesitantly moved his fingers to brush past the hand that was pressed to his side. "Everything... is so intense."

Unable to suppress the massive grin that spread on his lips, Seifer let out a low chuckle, understanding finally dawning. It was all too easy to imagine the dispassionate man habitually suppressing any sensual stimuli; of course Squall would be the only guy to be confused by pleasure.

"It's okay..." he spoke reassuringly, "That's what the pills are supposed to do."

It was in that moment that the reality of their situation struck him. He had Squall lying in his bed, right in front of him. Not a fantasy but oh so real. He itched to touch the brunet; to let his hands roam the body he had fantasized about so many times. He couldn't stop his hand from venturing under Squall's shirt, his fingers spreading against the man's soft skin and already tingling from the simple contact.

When Seifer's hand began caressing his oversensitive skin, a soft moan left Squall's parted lips. Unprepared for such a move, he was lost to the blond's gentle touches, his stomach flexing beneath the man's fingers. Brow creasing in pleasure, perplexing arousal spread out from everywhere Seifer's touch met his skin. "Hn... This... is supposed to happen?" he managed uncertainly, disbelief coloring his words.

Humming lowly in response, Seifer moved his hand farther up Squall's chest, exposing pale skin in the process. At the sight of the man's stomach tensing in response to his touches, his eyes darted back to the brunet's face. Every little sign and twitch that betrayed Squall was slowly succumbing to pleasure sent rushes of blood straight to his groin. He needed to feel more of Squall against him. Forcing his knee in between the man's thighs, he pressed closer until he was covering the man, the gratifying friction causing him to let out a low moan.

Startled by the sudden weight pinning him to the bed and the heat emanating from the blond's body, Squall began squirming halfheartedly and placed his hands against Seifer's chest in an attempt to create some distance. "What are you... doing..." he uttered in between pants, the feel of the blond's body pressing into his own making it impossible to string together a decent sentence.

Seifer didn't register Squall's weak signs of protest for long moments, entirely too caught up in the feel of having the smaller man pressed against him. Quickly catching Squall's lower arms, he pressed them into the bedding, forcibly stilling the man's moves; he wasn't about to give up their close contact.

Locking his gaze with Squall's, he lowered himself to be fully molded against the man. As he inched closer, he stole a glimpse of pale lips in anticipation of what he was about to do. At the
slight twitch to fine eyebrows, the move betraying Squall's confusion, what was left of his patience abandoned him. The last he saw before pressing his lips to Squall's was the slight widening of gray-blues.

Even as Seifer's mouth descended on his, Squall's mind lagged behind. Lying paralyzed under the effect of the blond's kiss, the act not yet registering as such, his body's reaction came long before any understanding did. Half-formed thoughts of resistance bled from him as hot lips pressed against his own, nipping and coaxing his mouth open with ease. The fading spice to Seifer's strong cologne was invading his senses, the man's warm weight crowding him, but most of all it was the throaty rumble of a moan that lit a fuse deep within him, the sound vibrating through Seifer's chest and spilling into their kiss.

Distantly he realized it shouldn't be acceptable for the blond to touch him in such a way, but he couldn't help himself from reciprocating Seifer's slow paced kiss, each nip and press of moist lips drawing a clumsy countermove from him in return. Revulsion simply failed to form in his mind when all he could feel was arousal, slowly pulling him under.

As he continued kissing Squall, Seifer moved his hands from their constraining hold on the man's slim arms to roam the body beneath him instead. He had imagined touching the brunet so many times, but nothing came close to the reality of having the man pressed against him, willing.

Withdrawning his hips slightly, he paused for a fraction of a second before grinding himself against Squall. At the breathless moan that left the brunet's lips in response, he eagerly repeated the move.

Soon feeling frustrated at the barrier of clothing still between them, he broke their kiss and leaned back to quickly get rid of their shirts. Finding no resistance to what he was doing, he immediately lowered himself to recapture the brunet's lips.

Mimicking the blond's touches, Squall returned the kiss and tentatively brought up his hands to rest at Seifer's sides, registering how ribs expanded with every breath, how well trained obliques and lower back muscles contracted and relaxed as Seifer resumed his rough grinds.

Everything about the body on top of him was unmistakably male. In spite of the lack of stubble, he could clearly feel the roughness of Seifer's skin against his own as he was kissed forcefully. The warm musk of the blond's scent was heavy, more real and intoxicating than lavender perfume would ever be. The hard bulge of Seifer's arousal rubbed against him just right. Unaccustomed to such mind numbing onslaught, his lips slackened to give way to a deep groan.

As large hands roamed his body, their caress just as greedy as the blond's thrusts, Squall sank deeper and deeper, under a thick haze consisting solely of purposeful movement and the burning ache that drove it. On their own accord, his hips arched up from the bed to meet the steadily escalating rhythm of Seifer's grinds.

Returning the blond's skillful play of lips and tongue required a more conscious effort, his mouth stilling in brief surprise each time Seifer swirled his tongue in an interesting new way: along his palate, against the back of his tongue, underneath it, just below the curve of his bottom lip. The slow, hard suck enveloping the tip of his tongue sent aching need straight to his groin, his eyes rolling back in pleasure. He'd never been touched like that before, had never let anyone touch him like that before.

The way hitches of breath left Squall's lips and spilled into their kiss was making Seifer unbearably hard. The slight flush staining high cheekbones and the way gray-blue eyes looked at him when they weren't closed in pleasure didn't help. Groaning, he sped up his moves, his thrusts growing more impatient by the second.
The incessant stimulation quickly became too much for Squall to handle, his body shivering uncontrollably beneath the blond. Swept up by Seifer's intensity, forceful grinding racing him towards his end, he was mounting higher and higher and dangling off a cliff all at the same time, only a free fall away from what he craved. *Push me*, he felt more than thought, driving short nails deeper into Seifer's shoulders, his arousal throbbing achingly against the coarse material of dark jeans. Turning his head sideways to break away from the blond's hungry mouth, he bit down on his bottom lip harshly, his flushed features starting to contort in ecstasy.

Catching on too late, Seifer slowed down his thrusts to draw out Squall's orgasm. Increasing the pressure of his hips, he let his mouth trail down the taut muscles of the man's neck, slowly sucking, licking, and kissing his way down pale skin. As Squall's hands grabbed hold of his back firmly, seeking better purchase, he tightened his own hold and let out a deep groan when Squall eagerly rolled his hips against him.

The white-edged burn of ecstasy shocked through Squall violently, blurring his vision and drawing a muffled cry from his lips. After convulsing a few times beneath Seifer's hard body in orgasm, he went limp in the man's hold, his arms dropping to the bedcovers and his lips parting to take in a deep, tremulous breath.

Unable to resist the urge, Seifer leant down to place a soft kiss on Squall's lips. Seeing Squall lose himself in such a way left him incredibly turned on. He couldn't wait to have the guy naked beneath him. Pushing back, eager for more, he moved his hands to work on Squall's belt, his eyes unable to break away from the look of post-orgasmic bliss on the brunet's features.

Squall merely regarded Seifer absentmindedly and remained idle against the white sheets, still lost to the afterglow of his climax. Heart hammering in his chest, heavy satisfaction weighed down his limbs, but he'd never felt lighter. Unfamiliar warmth washed over him as he followed Seifer's slow movements and allowed the tugging at his clothes.

Once Seifer had successfully removed Squall's belt, he quickly loosened the man's jeans and pulled them down along with Squall's boxers, only halting when he reached black combat boots. Moments later everything was lying scattered on the bedroom floor, completely forgotten as his eyes traveled Squall's naked body.

The sight was without doubt the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. All lean muscle and pale skin, the come still clinging to dark curls and Squall's soft length only added to the perfection. Sliding his hands up lean things, about to pull the brunet closer, he heard Squall call out his name, the utterance soft and short, demanding his attention.

Successfully luring jade eyes into meeting his gaze, Squall felt a pleasant buzz of warmth spread throughout him at the sight of the fire within their depths, burning for *him*. He didn't want to let go of that warmth yet, needing to feel more of it. *Wanted and wanting*. It left his chest aching, an almost painful need driving his stomach in knots and his hands to Seifer's chest. Eyes warm, he pulled the blond down for a kiss, lips and fingers seeking to close all distance remaining between them.

Seifer's jaw slackened in surprise as Squall drew him closer, the brunet's soft lips coaxing his own into returning the kiss. His mind stilled for long moments, buzzing from the intimate contact. Placing a hand against Squall's neck, sliding it upwards slowly, he moved his thumb to caress the younger man's cheek. Minutes passed before he finally broke away to gaze deeply into gray-blues, idly moving his hand from Squall's cheek to the man's side instead.

Squall didn't shy away from the blond's close scrutiny. Without disdain or hatred polluting green eyes, he *liked* the way Seifer was looking at him. He felt relief at being *seen* again, instead of just
registering as another enemy on the blond's hit list, but more so, he felt relief at no longer seeing demons in Seifer's gaze. As gentle hands stroked his sensitive skin, their calloused touch almost ticklish against his ribs, the profound belief that things would be all right caused a small smile to tug at the corners of his lips.

The rare smile that greeted Seifer rooted him in place. A bittersweet feeling stirred in him at the sight, almost threatening to free the memories that had been temporarily dulled and forgotten, but the tightness in his chest soon passed and a mirroring smile emerged on his lips instead. Indulging in the unexpected moment of tranquility, he committed the image to memory.

Pushing away slightly, he scanned the bed for Squall's shirt. Taking hold of it, he used it to clean up the sticky mess still clinging to pale skin. Squall didn't protest the move, merely peered up at him from beneath drooping eyelids as he finished the task and moved his hands to work on his own pants. With his fly soon undone, he pushed his hands beneath the soft material of his boxers and took hold of his cock.

When it finally sank in what Seifer was doing, Squall started from his daze, his eyes widening slightly as his gaze fell to the blond's large erection. The surface of his calm cracking, excitement welling up from beneath, he instantly remembered the hot press of Seifer's body, a thrilling visual layer now added to what he'd previously only felt.

At the sight of Seifer handling himself, seated between his legs, his cheeks flushed a deep red. Entranced by rippling muscles and heavy breaths, a searing gaze underlining it all, the mere thought of pushing Seifer over the edge was enough to rekindle his own arousal.

Giving in to the pleasure his hand was causing, Seifer closed his eyes, but in the end it wasn't enough: it wasn't Squall's touch. Removing his pants, he dropped them to the floor along with his shoes before looking back up at Squall, his gaze immediately drawn to the man's renewed erection. Seeing the evidence of the brunet's arousal, he hooked his hands under Squall's legs and forcefully pulled the man's ass to his groin.

Unprepared for the rushed movement that forced him onto Seifer's lap, Squall jolted apprehensively at the feel of the blond's cock sliding between the cleft of his buttocks. Only just introduced to the almost intimidating sight of the naked blond, the smooth heat of Seifer's length settling against him in such an intimate place caused his pulse to erupt in fast beats, both in surprise and uncertain anticipation. Eyes closing, he bit down on his lower lip to keep from making a sound, not sure whether he should betray such a touch felt good.

Without warning Seifer moved his hand to close around Squall's cock and set a slow pace as he began stroking the man. Placing his other hand firmly at the base, he trailed his fingers down to cup the man's balls and began massaging them as he kept up his slow rhythmic pumping. When pale lips parted and dark eyebrows drew together in pleasure, Squall's breathing quickly becoming labored, he slid his left hand down to tease the sensitive skin below.

As Squall grew harder in his hold, he licked his lips and moved back a little before bending down to take the tip of the brunet's cock into his mouth. Swirling his tongue around the rim of the sensitive head, he savored the taste. At the gasp that left the brunet in response, he looked up just in time to see gray-blue eyes snapping open in surprise. Keeping his gaze locked with Squall's, he closed his lips firmly around the man's hot shaft before taking in more of the man's length.

The feel of warm lips wrapped around him tightly instantly chased away any remaining coherence from Squall's thoughts, the notion that Seifer should not have his mouth anywhere near his crotch vanishing as the slippery movement and slightly rough texture of the blond's tongue wrung a muffled cry from his throat.
Smirking in satisfaction at the reaction, Seifer distanced himself, the move leaving Squall's cock to slap wetly against his stomach. Enjoying the sight, he had to resist his urge to give Squall a full-on blow job.

"Hold on," he said, moving from his spot between Squall's legs to get out a bottle of lube from the left bedside table. Back in place within seconds, he took hold of the brunet's cock once more and pushed slender legs farther apart.

The sudden drizzle of a cold substance against his crack was the only warning Squall received before warm fingers smeared the lubricant against his entrance. When a single digit started to nudge past the clamping ring of muscle, he couldn't restrain the strangled sound erupting from his lips, his breath hitching in discomfort at the probing finger.

"Squall," Seifer intoned, his voice firm as he tried to draw the brunet's attention. When their eyes met, he tightened his grip around Squall's cock and slowed down his pumping to draw out each pleasurable tug. "Relax."

"It'll feel good," he continued, eager to coax the man into surrendering to his touch. "I promise."

Finding reassurance in the unwavering quality to Seifer's voice, Squall's apprehension at the invading touch slowly faded, the continued petting of his arousal managing to distract him from the finger that forced itself into his body. Seifer hadn't lied to him; everything the man had done so far had felt amazing. Certain that the blond wouldn't disappoint, desperately wanting to experience the full extent of his touch, Squall drew a tremulous breath and gave a small nod.

Smirking, Seifer sent a sly wink and continued to prepare the brunet until the man was panting heavily beneath his touch. Adding another finger, he waited for the man's tight hole to adapt before stretching it further. Turned on by the sight of the brunet's hips tentatively moving into his touch, he closed his eyes and let out a deep groan. Releasing his hold on Squall's erection, he moved his hand to coat his own arousal in slick lube instead.

When the touch hungry fingers roving Squall's body suddenly retracted, a low sound of protest escaped him. Cracking open heavy eyelids to see what had made the blond stop, he took in the sight of Seifer lost to pleasuring himself, before his eyes fell to the man's straining erection. Realization dawning on him all at once, his pulse soared with arousal and trepidation as he tried to imagine what it would feel like to have something that large breach him.

Seifer had to stifle a groan at the sight that greeted him when he opened his eyes. Squall was staring at his erection with rapt attention. With a low growl he hooked his hands beneath Squall's knees and pushed the man's legs upwards. Using his weight to press into the smaller man, he nudged his erection against the brunet's entrance, eager to feel the man's tight heat surround him.

Covering Squall's lips with his own, he transferred all the lust that had built up inside him into their kiss and increased the pressure of his cock against the man's entrance. When he felt Squall lose himself to the act as well, he ended their kiss and moved his head back to leave an inch of tension filled air between them. Seeing nothing but desire mirrored in gray-blues, Squall's gaze urging him on, he forced himself inside.

For a mind choking second, the searing heat that spread throughout his body at being split by the large blond was all that existed to Squall. Momentarily forgetting how to breathe, he pressed his head back into the white pillow, his lips parting in a soundless cry. What should have hurt him was instead the most intense feeling he'd ever experienced, neither registering as pain nor pleasure, just pure adrenaline twisting his mind inside out.
Dropping his head to hang next to Squall's, nestling it against brown locks, Seifer's mind went blank. He could only feel and remain stunned in place at being exactly where he had wanted to be for long hours, his aching need to be inside the brunet finally fulfilled.

Feeling Squall's legs wrap around him and the man's lips pressing to his neck in encouragement, Seifer knew it'd only take a firm thrust or two to send himself straight into the waves of ecstasy. Wanting to savor his climax after the long build up and worried about coming too soon, he fought hard to remain still. But when Squall moved to take in more of him, obviously not prepared to wait for him to regain his control, he lost what little restraint he had left and forced himself in all the way to the hilt. Expression freezing in rough satisfaction, he let out a loud groan and immediately settled into long, forceful thrusts. With each plunge he increased his pace, soon succumbing to grunts and curses, entirely lost to self-gratification.

Startled by the sudden roughness to Seifer's thrusts, Squall tried to channel the incapacitating lust that spiked through him each time the blond almost brushed against him just right before sliding out again. Train of thought upended, his body winding taut at the indescribable feel of Seifer moving deep within him, he was only granted short moments to adapt to the sensation of being stretched beyond capacity and the harsh plunge of Seifer's cock, before the blond started to cramp up against him, angular features screwing up in an expression of both ache and bliss. Realizing what was happening as he felt Seifer's length twitch inside of him, the man's movements slowly stilling, he remained unmoving, both stunned and painfully aroused.

Hearing nothing but his own breaths, Seifer's mind slowly began clearing, but as another warm pulse traveled along his cock, he was drawn to the slick pressure enveloping him. Dropping his head to rest against cool sheets, he let out a low groan, his lips impacting with soft skin and the familiar scent of Squall joining on his inhale. Wanting to regain their earlier connection, he began nibbling on the soft skin of Squall's neck.

The slow path of agonizingly soft kisses pressed against his neck did nothing to abate the heavy throbbing that had settled in Squall's groin. Having Seifer buried within him, unmoving yet so unbearably close to that aching bundle of nerves craving so badly to be touched, was enough to make him lose his mind. He couldn't keep still.

Circling his arms around the blond's sides, hands wandering to memorize the outline of broad shoulders, he drew himself flush against Seifer's chest. Strangely pleased at the low hum of approval this earned him, he let Seifer capture his lips in a kiss. A torturously languid kiss, unhurried and not nearly enough to abate the fire in his blood. Tightening his hold around Seifer's back, he parted his lips in an instinctive need to deepen their kiss.

As their tongues twined and stroked, Seifer brought up a hand to weave through dark bangs. Shifting his position slightly, he relished the heated moan that left Squall at his accidental move inside the man. He'd never been more thankful for managing to stay hard when hands started to roam his back, hungrily drawing him closer. Resisting their pull, he moved back slightly, wanting to see Squall. Greeted by the sight of dark eyebrows scrunching together in a small frown, the man obviously confused by his distancing move, he felt the urge to tease the man.

Lips sliding into a playful half-smirk, he slowly pulled out of Squall, but just as he was about to slide out entirely, he sneaked his hand behind Squall's left leg and placed a steady grip at the crook of the man's knee. Pressing his lower arm against the back of a pale thigh, he forced the brunet's leg down against the man's side. With Squall bared and angled just right for deeper penetration, he pushed back in. Watching as Squall's head fell back into the soft pillow and gray-blue eyes disappeared behind heavy lids, he eagerly repeated the move, his smirk growing.
Squall's mind buckled as Seifer pushed into him, the teasing slide out and forceful thrust back in repeating in a slow cycle, filling him to the brink and chasing the breath from his lungs. Infinitely grateful for the friction raking against him, inside of him, however brief or slow, he was utterly consumed by it. His hands, no longer able to stay locked around Seifer in a tight embrace, traveled to settle against the blond's arms instead, his fingers flexing to greedily grope tanned skin and firm muscle in a mindless want for more.

When Seifer finally settled into a steady rhythm, teasing movement changing into deep thrusts, Squall let out a deep groan, his hips moving on their own accord to encourage the increased pace. Excitement overriding all thought, his hands clenching and unclenching, his body arched to derive as much pleasure as possible from Seifer's. Held into position and pressed into the bedding by solid weight and strength, he had trouble angling himself right. His insides were twisting with searing pleasure, but it wasn't enough. A thin sheen of perspiration settled against his skin, his breathing increasingly labored. Opening his eyes, he sent the clearest order he'd ever given: more.

Instantly understanding what Squall wanted, Seifer angled himself better and leaned farther back to gain more force behind his thrusts, his eyes darkening in lust at the sight of the naked brunet writhing beneath him.

"Squall..." he started, but quickly faltered, reduced to letting out nothing but guttural groans as he increased his speed to try and sate the man. Hooking both of his arms beneath Squall's knees to lift the brunet's hips from the bed, he robbed Squall of any freedom of movement he might have had left and began slamming himself into the younger man relentlessly.

"Fuck," he cursed, the feel of driving Squall so hard causing his fingers to dig deeply into pale skin, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh and the rhythmic creak of the bed beneath them reverberating loudly in the room. Leaning back just a bit farther, he finally managed to get the last purchase necessary in order to plunge into the brunet exactly how they both wanted it. A string made of curses, Squall's name, and deep groans left his lips as his thrusts grew almost feverish, his expression set into a frown of bliss.

Unable to meet such frenzied thrusts with his own, Squall instead arched into the merciless pistoning of strong hips to allow for deeper penetration, his flushed lips parting to moan in wordless pleas for more. Without anything to hold on to as Seifer slammed into him violently, he was being pushed into the bedding ruthlessly and slid back and forth across white sheets in time with Seifer's frantically paced thrusts.

Left no choice in the matter, with Seifer dominating their fevered coupling completely, spearing him relentlessly, he all too soon shuddered in orgasmic abandon beneath the blond, his features contorting in absolute bliss as he cried out Seifer's name.

Watching as hot release landed in white ribbons across Squall's stomach and feeling the man's channel tighten convulsively around his cock, Seifer let out a low groan. With a quick move he forced himself as far into the smaller man as possible, before he reluctantly settled into languid thrusts, allowing Squall to savor his climax. Panting heavily, he leaned down to be closer to the brunet, his lips eagerly finding Squall's to initiate a slow kiss.

Dark strands of hair hopelessly mussed and flushed features glowing with sexual satisfaction, Squall merely returned Seifer's kiss as he brought up his arms to drape around the blond's neck, slender fingers playing with Seifer's fine, golden hair. He'd never felt this sated before, his body manipulated expertly by the blond and glowing in residual ecstasy. It was the kind of simplicity that made all else seem unimportant.

After long minutes filled with nothing but slow kisses, Seifer slid out of Squall unhurriedly and
pushed up onto his knees. Without hesitation, he grabbed hold of Squall's previously forgotten shirt and used it to clean them both. Needing to resume their activities, still not sated himself, he moved from between Squall's legs to kneel at the man's side instead.

"Turn around," he ordered, eager to let his eyes feast on the man's backside and take Squall from behind.

At the command spoken in a low voice, Squall felt a shiver run up his spine, more from the thrill such a command implied than any real arousal. Ignoring the first and most crucial warning that had been hammered into his mind since the day he had started his training as a cadet, he turned to lie on his stomach and bared his back in submission. It was easier than it should have been for a seasoned fighter, but all he felt was excitement as he imagined Seifer's gaze raking his backside, green eyes exploring where skillful touch would surely follow.

Eyes trailing along the form of the slender man laid out before him, Seifer enjoyed the sight of well-trained calves and thighs leading to firm ass cheeks. He couldn't help the brief thought that at some point, something he had done must have been right, because how else had he ended up with the sweetest reward of them all: the ice prince of Balamb Garden lying naked before him, ready in wait. Following the curve of Squall's spine, he paused at the shallow dimples at the man's lower back before letting his gaze travel further along naked skin. When his eyes reached Squall's upper back his whole body tensed up; a scar was covering the man's right shoulder blade, spreading far across the brunet's back.

Unsettled at the sight, he subconsciously moved his fingers to trail lightly against the uneven skin, unable to shake the unease growing inside him. He didn't like the thought of Squall having faced such danger without having been there to protect him. Not realizing that such a notion was entirely absurd considering Squall's line of work and their completely separate lives, he merely felt the strong urge to keep the younger man safe.

Determined to make Squall forget all about pain and dispel everything but intense pleasure from the man's mind, he slid his hand down Squall's back and over the man's buttocks, before slowly guiding the man's legs apart. With the tip of his right index finger, he traced the top of Squall's crack and started a downward trail, ending it in slow strokes around his anus. Stopping for a moment to put some lube on his finger, he smirked at the vague arch to Squall's hips; the brunet clearly wanted him to move things along.

Slowly spreading the cold gel against heated skin, he took his time with playful discovery, guiding Squall into unfulfilled expectation, before finally, slowly, sliding the finger in all the way.

Soft moans drew his eyes to where Squall's head was resting on a pillow, the man's eyes closed and eyebrows creased in pleasure. Sliding his finger in and out, teasing the brunet with the smaller size, only a taste of what was to come, he spread the man's ass cheeks, his cock growing rigid at the sight. It took all his willpower to continue his slow seduction instead of just plunging into that warm, slick heat.

Leaning down to place a kiss against the still healing scar tissue between protruding shoulder blades, he inched his finger back out, aiming to heighten Squall's need even further by denying the man anything but the slight pressure of his finger remaining just outside where he knew Squall wanted it.

With playful kisses and bites, he made his way up Squall's neck until his face was buried in a sea of brown. Taking hold of his cock, he guided himself into position and pressed his head against Squall's opening. Forcing himself inside, he felt much less resistance than earlier, the brunet's body accepting him much more readily, taking his whole length in one go.
Grabbing hold of slim wrists, forcing Squall's hands into the bedding in a possessive move, he indulged in the added body contact and settled into a slow rhythm of sliding in and out of the brunet, dragging out each intimate thrust.

Squall relished the feeling of Seifer taking pleasure in his body, every deep thrust conveying the claim the blond had laid on him. He had quickly learned that for someone usually so impatient, Seifer could move at a maddeningly slow pace, both in the skillful preparation of his prey as in his move for the kill. Long moments of nothing but silence and the phantom feel of a searing gaze had already reduced him to a mess of eager anticipation by the time large hands had moved to spread his legs apart. Finally feeling Seifer's length sliding in and out of him, the blond languid and sensual in his every move, a deep groan grew in his chest as he bit down on the pillow beneath him.

It was torturous and perfect at the same time, but he was willing to risk the loss of Seifer pressed close against his back, nuzzling his neck and hair, if he could get fevered thrusts and mindless grappling in exchange. With a forceful arch of his hips he drove Seifer deeper, his muscles and lower back straining at moving back against such a heavy weight pushing him down.

Instantly rewarded when Seifer fell in with his pace, he couldn't keep back a sharp breath and moan, the sounds muffled by the pillow below. Needing more breathing room, more air, he quickly wriggled a hand free from Seifer's strong grasp and knocked the fluffy pillow away, only to immediately move his hand back in place. He liked the possessive hold on his wrist, his body aching for the blond to be equally dominating in his thrusts. The slight increase in speed wasn't enough. His breath was growing labored with exertion as he pushed up against the blond in growing impatience.

"Faster," he managed breathlessly, unable to conjure up enough strength to take what he wanted, but desperate in his need.

At the order, Seifer grabbed hold of Squall's hips roughly and forced the man up with him on the bed. Having Squall on his knees in front of him, he drove into the man without restraint. But even when the brunet's whole body rocked with each of his harsh thrusts, he could still feel the man trying to impale himself, clearly wanting more. Not letting go of Squall's waist, he picked up his speed, determined to take Squall so hard that the man wouldn't be able to feel anything but his cock.

Thrust upon thrust, flesh upon flesh, he lost himself entirely to the act. Pounding away and forcing himself in deep, nothing existed but his frantic rhythm against the younger man. Squall could no longer keep up with him, the man's earlier impatient moves completely gone. There was no resistance to his rough and uncontrolled thrusts, only uninhibited sounds of pleasure merging with the fast paced creaks of the bed and his own low grunts. Using his thumbs to draw reddened cheeks apart, he groaned at the sight of his cock plunging into the brunet's ass.

As ecstasy started to radiate out from their connection, Seifer clenched his jaws and scrunched his eyes closed. Head arched backwards, he let out a deep groan as he felt the first pulse of his climax run through him, his hold on Squall's waist turning almost bruising in its intensity and his vision darkening.

Feeling Seifer climax inside him, jerking in release, a shuddering breath left Squall's lips as all movement stopped, right when he was getting exactly what he wanted. Distantly he understood that the blond's orgasm meant he'd have to wait, but impatience rendered him incapable of such a feat. Robbed of any tolerance he might have had left, he kept himself pressed close to the blond's groin, unwilling to give up the connection and feel Seifer slide out of him. His erection painfully
hard, his ass throbbing and sensitive, he couldn't help from rolling his hips back.

Stifling a frustrated groan, he moved up to lean against Seifer and craned his neck back, forcing his lips against the blond's in a messy kiss. With an edge of desperation, he devoured Seifer's mouth in a hopelessly inadequate attempt to vent the fire racing through his lower body, his breath landing heavy against slick lips. When strong arms snaked around his waist, holding him close, he lost all sense of restraint. Greedily, he brought his hands back to grasp Seifer's hips, fingers digging harshly into toned muscle as he gave in to the powerful urge to move.

Squall's eager moves told Seifer everything he needed to know. Wanting to continue as well, but already growing soft inside Squall, he broke their kiss and pulled out. Collapsing onto his side, his body exhausted, he couldn't help but run his eyes over the brunet kneeling next to him. The sight of Squall naked and aroused, clearly wanting more and wanting it now made him smirk in amusement. He couldn't wait to fuck Squall senseless all over again, but for the moment he'd have to content himself with just playing with the brunet.

Gaze traveling upwards along the blond's reposed body and landing on a devilish smirk, Squall forgot to voice his frustration. Seifer knew what he wanted, but remained still, watching him in amusement. Bathed in blue light, soft shades outlining well defined muscle, the blond was masculinity personified, but it wasn't envy that stirred in him. Instead a much headier emotion took over. He would take matters into his own hands; he would take what he wanted from Seifer.

Moving in over his ex-rival and taking firm hold of his shoulders, he forcefully pushed the larger man onto his back, excitement shooting through him at what he was doing. Not waiting around for the blond to either protest or accommodate him, he straddled the man's strong hips in one fluid motion, his hands moving down to press against Seifer's chest. As he slid his crack along the blond's soft length, sensitive muscles clenching at the slight touch, his own chest heaved with tight breaths.

Angling his groin, his back tensing into a taut arch, he tried to create as much friction as possible. With hungry moves he grew uncoordinated in his lust and writhed against Seifer's body, experimenting with what touch felt the most gratifying- muscled thighs, the feel of their balls touching, the smooth and sticky skin of Seifer's length against his own hardness.

Entirely turned on by the way Squall moved against him, Seifer grabbed hold of the man's buttocks and kneaded them firmly before spreading them apart. Still not hard enough to fuck Squall again, he started to pull at the man's hips until Squall got his intention and scooted closer. Guiding the man into position, he only stopped when Squall's arousal was right in front of him.

Angling his head upwards, he gave the straining erection a teasing lick. At the slight swelling of Squall's cock, the tip turning a deep red, he felt his own length twitch in response. Bringing his right hand up to cup the man's balls, he took the head of the brunet's hard cock into his mouth and sealed his lips around the flushed skin. Assaulted by the pure smell of Squall's manhood and the lingering taste of his come, a deep rumble reverberated in his chest, the scent and taste a massive turn on.

Sneaking his fingers further back to tease the sensitive area around Squall's entrance, he began sucking off the brunet eagerly. Pushing a finger inside, he felt Squall's cock twitch in his mouth and salty precome leak from the man's tip. The natural lubricant of his earlier come and whatever remnants of lube that still coated the inside of Squall quickly covered his finger and made pleasing the brunet all the easier. Sliding in another digit, he began finger fucking the brunet without restraint, aiming his thrusts to hit the man's prostate.

Unable to keep himself upright through the pleasurable assault without some form of purchase,
Squall placed steadying hands against the wall to keep from collapsing on top of the blond. He couldn't fight the slight tremors rippling through his thighs and legs, his arousal soaring as Seifer made it impossible for him to choose between rolling his hips back or forwards. Glancing down to take in what he hadn't been able to appreciate before, his chest and groin tightened as he watched his length slide in and out of Seifer's mouth, the blond's cheeks drawn concave with each firm suck. An almost inaudible groan left him at the sight, his eyes narrowing with heavy desire; he was entirely unable to tear away from the arousing display.

Even in this position, one that should have left him in control of the blond reclined beneath him, Seifer manipulated the situation with dangerous ease. Squall hardly cared as skillful fingers stabbed into him, not as thick and deep as the blond's cock, but purposeful and precise and curling at just the right angle. The combined stimulation was more than his aching body could handle, his climax burning a violent path throughout his lower body and pulsing into Seifer's mouth with a jerking roll of his hips. The visual of the slight bob to Seifer's throat as the man swallowed his release was quickly replaced with searing white, his eyes scrunching closed in ecstasy and his sensitive length reveling in the slick tongue that swirled around him languidly.

As the final wave of his orgasm receded, the last of his strength left him, lazy satisfaction spreading throughout limbs that could no longer support him. Breathing labored, he only barely managed to move down Seifer's chest, before his legs buckled under his own weight and he crumpled against the blond inelegantly. Tugging his arm free from between the close press of their bodies, he let his head sag against Seifer's warm chest and closed his eyes in contentment.

Sweaty skin stuck together at every single point of contact, Seifer took a deep breath as he moved his arms to hold on to the brunet resting on top of him. Guiding a hand into messy brown locks, stroking the back of the man's neck and head, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the moment. As a soft breath of air ghosted across his chest, he tightened his hold on the younger man and began caressing the brunet's back idly.

He could easily have fallen asleep like that, with the smaller man's form curled up all around him, if it hadn't been for the renewed throb between his legs. Even as he enjoyed their shared intimacy, his need to press inside Squall soon won out and made him roll them over on the bed. Moving in to kiss Squall, he enjoyed the soft presses and intimate licks.

Spreading Squall's legs, he settled between them, before locating the bottle of lube from earlier and coating his erection. Without warning, he forced himself inside and leaned down against Squall, wanting to feel as much of the brunet as possible. Recapturing soft lips, he languidly thrust in and out of the man, the experience far removed from the mindless fucks he was used to.

Heavy eyelids drooping as he lay perfectly sated, too spent to meet Seifer's moves with more than the occasional slow push of his hips, Squall drew his arms around the blond in a loose embrace and curled his legs around the man's waist once more. Without lust clouding his mind, he simply enjoyed Seifer's unhurried thrusts for the closeness that the act brought them. He was perfectly happy to let Seifer weave them together tightly, his consciousness drifting on the warmth of Seifer's body slowly melting into his.

Seifer felt everything as he kept sliding in and out of Squall: the soft press of the man's lips against his own, the hitching breaths intermingling with their kisses, the slick heat around his cock, and the warmth of any part of them that touched; it all merged into perfect bliss.

When his climax finally hit him, it was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. His whole body was tingling, every single part of him buzzing in ecstasy. Nothing else existed-nothing but himself and the man in his arms. Tilting his head to press lightly against Squall's, their scars
aligning perfectly, he closed his eyes.

As he came down slowly, he took a deep breath and exhaled, his breath spilling across Squall's parted lips. He didn't want it to end. He didn't want to move or break their connection, but debilitating tiredness was beginning to spread throughout every part of his body. Catching himself as he almost drifted off, he inhaled deeply once more and finally resigned himself to slide out of Squall. Landing heavily on the bed next to the slim man, he moved to rest on his side.

Even with exhaustion dulling his eyes, he still felt the need to be close. Reaching over and placing his arm across Squall's stomach, he took hold of the man's waist and motioned for the brunet to move onto his side and face him. When Squall complied, Seifer contentedly drew him close, the smaller man's arm winding around him tightly in return. Keeping his gaze trained on the pale brunet, gray-blue eyes already closed in the beginnings of sleep, his lips curled upwards at the unguarded display.

Still not ready to succumb to the tiredness overwhelming him, he blinked a few times in quick succession to keep sleep from pulling his eyes closed, but in the end fatigue got the better of him, his eyes remaining shut. Lost to the pleasant imagery weaving through his fading thoughts, his breath evened out as he was lured further and further into enticing dreams, alongside the brunet in his hold.

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The heavy scent of old sweat settling against skin punctured the perfect darkness that was Squall's shelter. It wandered into his dreamless sleep undetected, a vague presence, prickling and familiar, but not enough to distract him from his mental inertia. Wrapped in indifference, he simply drifted on the sound of a steady, slow drum echoing beneath his ear, each beat weaving into his mind soothingly, for what seemed like an eternity.

Unfamiliar. The vague notion materialized unannounced, consciousness prodding at his brain, but he didn't care about "unfamiliar" when there was also warmth. Burying his head a little deeper into the new sensation joining his disassembled sensory awareness, he hid from encroaching thought. For long moments nothing else existed. Sweat, a heartbeat—he realized—and warmth. Not an extension of his own body. He couldn't feel his own body.

Wrapping himself around the external source of comfort, not with arms but with an increasingly hollow kind of hunger, Squall kept quiet. For long moments he didn't stir, afraid that movement would break the spell. Eyelids twitched against his will. A nervous chill crawled through his veins and sent slight tremors through numb limbs, desensitized extremities suddenly registering as part of his body again. Trembling fingers. An arm he couldn't move. His legs were heavy, phantom bugs itching between muscle and bone. Cataloging each unpleasant sensation with detachment, he reluctantly remembered himself as boundaries formed and enclosed him, placing shape and skin between him and the body he was pressed close to.

A burning exhale of air escaped him as his heart jolted into a fast, erratic pace, hammering against his ribs. His mind was pulled tightly into his throbbing skull, every nerve end shocking awake. Distant discomfort became real, unavoidable, as he abruptly jerked from his semi-wakeful state. His eyes immediately blinked in protest as he opened them, the world a blur of blue shapes and lights moving too fast. He quickly closed them again as he greedily sucked in deep breaths, the excess oxygen making him lightheaded and doing nothing to alleviate the pins and needles that erupted throughout his body.

The form beneath him remained still, unaffected and constant. Slowly he flexed his fingers in a searching move, the feel of warm skin filtering through and offering a source of distraction from his discomfort. He wasn't alone. Slowing his breathing and isolating the strong heartbeat beneath him as a point of focus, he waited until the worst passed, the slight tremor that had taken hold of him receding. He still felt boneless, his skin covered in cold sweat and his pulse restless, but he no longer felt like he'd been dropped into a lifeless body coaxed back from death.

With small testing moves he tried to chase the residual numbness from his muscles, fingers and toes first. Feeling a warm weight tilt against his head in response, steady breaths ghosting his face, he cautiously cracked open one eye, then the other. Grateful for the soft blue glow that set the room alight instead of the blaring light from mere moments ago, he stared at a muscular chest, and beyond that, a wall.

He'd never woken up like this before, his left arm draped across a firm stomach and his head tucked safely under someone's chin. A strong arm was cradling him close, a large hand pressing against his lower back. It was a ridiculous position to wake up in, but the thought failed to alarm him when a single name drifted to the forefront of his mind.

Seifer.
Eyes traveling up to take in angular features and rebellious strands of gold, he was greeted with the deceivingly serene sight of the blond fast asleep. The man's mouth was slack with sleep, his expression utterly unguarded, compelling Squall to watch, spellbound, as he relaxed against the slow rise and fall of Seifer's chest. Somehow he felt relieved at finding himself in the exact same position he'd fallen asleep in. With the blond pressed close and still there, he didn't stop to ponder the strange sentiment, satisfied enough with studying the sleeping man's peaceful expression for long minutes.

It felt strange, as if he was trespassing, witnessing something that wasn't meant for him. It wasn't that he'd never seen the blond asleep before—Seifer and he had bunked together a rare few times as cadets, shared a tent or room on training camps—but the last time he could recall Seifer letting his guard down around him like this was at the orphanage when Matron had allowed them a room separate from all the younger boys. Seifer had blown a fuse at having to put up with bawling, bedwetting toddlers at night and had enlisted Squall in the cause for their own bedroom whether he had wanted to join or not.

Feeling a painful tug in his chest at the remembered loneliness, all the other children their age already long gone to new homes except for the two of them, unwanted, Squall scrunched his eyes closed and burrowed his face against the blond's chest. Inhaling a scent he knew well from spars and fights long ago, he held his breath until lack of oxygen sent his head buzzing, hoping to chase away stray thoughts. *What are you doing?* The sound of Seifer's voice, much younger and hiding surprise behind haughty annoyance, echoed through his mind as he remembered how the boy had walked in on him pressing his face into a pillow much the same way.

Just like he had then, Squall refused to look up, to breathe, but the firm grip that had yanked him up didn't come this time. Losing against the burning sensation in his lungs, he succumbed and took in deep gulps of air, his lips ghosting warm skin. Opening his eyes to regard the sleeping blond, his chest felt more restricted with every breath. He wasn't a child anymore; he didn't ever want to feel that pathetic again. He didn't need anyone, but he still couldn't help himself from looking at Seifer the way he had back then. He had trusted Seifer then, if only by merit of the blond's stubborn refusals to leave him alone. It had been the only constant in his young life.

He wanted it back. He wanted the constant of Seifer's presence back.

At the thought, a shiver traveled along his naked back, the sheen of perspiration that clung to his skin causing him to feel the cold of a passing draft all the better. The heavy and sweet tang that had settled against the back of his tongue was quickly becoming unpleasant. Swallowing thickly, his mouth too dry to dispel the lingering sweetness, he ignored his body's continued signals that something was wrong. He didn't want to focus on the thoughts starting to stir in his mind and instead kept staring at the taller man beneath him.

Slowly he slid the hand that was resting against Seifer's stomach upwards, only by a careful inch, wanting to coax some kind of reaction out of the blond without actually waking him, but no reaction followed. Increasingly restless, he propped himself up and inched closer to the blond's face, watching how his breath blew soft tendrils of hair back, how lips twitched slightly in response.

*What are you doing?*

A frown tugged at his brow when he hesitated, unsure whether or not to close the distance and feel the warmth of those lips again. He'd wake Seifer, but he couldn't break his gaze away from slack lips all the same. The chill of the breeze stinging his back contrasted too highly with the heat of skin pressing against his front. *Moving* skin and muscle, hot and slick and *deep*. The feel was
imprinted onto his body, inadvertently drawing his attention to how every inch of them was pressed together intimately.

Swallowing thickly once again, this time not because of the sweet tang invading his mouth, he dipped down and placed a ghost of a kiss against unresponsive lips, the simple contact kindling a need for so much more than just touch, but he couldn't reclaim the rightness he had felt earlier that night. Fingers itching and his heart tight in his chest, he knew anything more would wake Seifer, an increasingly disquieting thought. What if the blond woke and it still felt... wrong?

The realization that Seifer easily could have left while he was sleeping, but hadn't, no longer made him feel relief when the thought emerged that maybe the blond had fallen asleep before he'd had a chance to. Squall couldn't recall falling asleep himself. He only remembered the paralyzing exhaustion that had taken hold of him. All too easily he had assumed Seifer had chosen to stay, a thought that left him feeling colder and colder by the second.

He couldn't bring himself to stay in Seifer's bed a moment longer, unable to shake his growing apprehension. Pushing away from the sleeping form, he carefully slipped out of the man's hold and forced himself into an upright position in spite of the sudden rush of dizziness the move earned him. Head reeling and jaws locked in nausea, he swung his feet over the bed slowly, his hands gripping the edge of the bed tightly. At the slow dip of the mattress, the blond behind him moving and brushing an arm against his lower back, he fled from the bed.

Uncoordinated steps carrying him to the window, he clumsily steadied himself against the sill and wrenched his eyes closed. His premature escape from the bed had sent the room spinning wildly, his stomach turning as up became down and vertigo screwed with his sense of balance. Barely able to keep himself standing, he slowly leaned down to rest his arms and head against the cool window sill, his whole body slumping forward as he waited for the world to come to a still.

As the floor stopped moving beneath his feet, his disorientation ebbing away into faint lightheadedness, his mind was drawn to other sources of discomfort. The lack of Seifer's heat gave the chill night air free reign to seep into his muscles, goose bumps lining his naked form as the wind chased all warmth from his body. Only sparing a moment's thought to the astoundingly different feel of the soft breeze against his skin to earlier that night, its touch no longer soothing or refreshing, the dull ache that radiated through his lower back when he tried to straighten himself demanded his attention next. It wasn't a sharp pain, but it was unpleasant enough to keep him bent over against the window sill, frozen in place at the painful throb each move caused him.

Shifting an arm from its steadying position to assess the damage, he touched his lower back testingly, kneading tender muscles with slow moves. Carefully he brought tentative fingers farther down, brushing against sore flesh and dry crust caked against his inner thighs. Unable to suppress a soft hiss, he quickly retracted the exploring touch, his arm falling limp to his side. Motionless, he repressed the urge to curl in on himself and instead let the night steal whatever body heat he had left. The cold didn't register anymore when he finally pushed himself upright long moments later, his aching muscles complaining at the movement.

He didn't want to look back yet, anxiety stirring at the mere thought, so he stared out of the window. It was still dark, but the street below was already coming to life, the occasional pedestrian and car passing by signaling dawn was on its way. With a deep sigh he closed his eyes to a view that no longer captivated him, the connection he had felt to the outside world lost. Shutting out the dark sky and stark buildings in front of him along with the room behind him, Squall breathed in and out deeply to calm himself, but the scent of sex still clung to the air, to his own skin, drowning out the smells of the waking city that floated into the bedroom.
Opening his eyes, his heart thundering in his chest, he closed the window and cut off the flow of cold air. The room was plunged into sudden silence, the sounds of the metropolis loud in his mind now that he could no longer hear them. Involuntarily, his gaze fell to the reflection of light against glass, the mirror image showing the room and the naked blond behind him. Unable to deny the situation any longer at the onset of damning clarity, he slowly turned around.

Seifer lay sprawled on his back, his arm stretched out to where Squall had moved from the bed. Any sheets that could have covered the blond's naked form were lying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the bed, dirtied testimony to what they had done. The bottle of lube and his t-shirt were lying on the bedside table, the rest of his clothing strewn randomly on the floor along with Seifer's. Taken off eagerly, he remembered. Watching the scene from a distance, no longer a part of it, unable to return to it no matter how badly he wanted to, dread seized him.

They would never be able to take this back. He'd never have Seifer back, not after this. Even if it was something he had resigned himself to long ago, he wouldn't be able to accept it anymore. The moment Seifer woke up and asked him to make himself scarce would be the moment he'd crack. He knew he had to leave before that happened.

Needing to move and get dressed, he slowly inched toward what he thought to be his discarded underwear. Ignoring the harsh sting that accompanied his every step, his ass getting sorer with the minute, he fought down the coiling mess of emotions that was burning its way up to his throat. Grateful that the blond wasn't awake to witness the state he was in, he bent down to pick up his black boxer briefs, only to immediately drop them to the floor again, the thing covered in dried come. His own, his memory provided with glorious detail. Recoiling from the images that were far too vivid, he forced his mind back on track. Get dressed. Get out. A brief glance in the direction of his t-shirt was enough to remind him that the piece of clothing was just as stained, if not more so.

Freezing in place at the sudden sound of the bed creaking, his eyes immediately darted to the heavy blond who was shifting slightly and moving his outstretched arm to rest on his stomach. Feeling increasingly exposed, he couldn't bear to remain naked in Seifer's presence and willed himself to keep moving. With all else ruined, pants would have to suffice. Fingers incapable of the finer motor skills required to buckle up a belt, he quickly stopped trying, glad enough to have managed the one button and zipper of his jeans. Taking in the discouraging sight of heavy boots and the long shoe laces they sported, he figured if he was going to leave shirtless, then shoeless to top it off didn't matter much.

The pins and needles returning to his arms told him he was probably breathing too fast again, his mouth and throat uncomfortably dry. The longer he stayed upright, the dizzier he felt. If he didn't leave now, Seifer would find him passed out on his floor come morning. Without another look back, he carefully padded across the room towards the door and stepped into the living area, slumping back against the door the moment he closed it behind him.

The sudden warm air enveloping him stung his eyes and sent an involuntary shiver along chilled flesh. His lips and mouth were getting drier with each ragged inhale and his tongue felt much as if it'd been replaced with a piece of cardboard. Thirst temporarily overruling everything else, he pushed away from the door and made for the kitchen sink. Addled depth perception toying with his line of sight, the water tap slunk away from his reaching hand whilst the wall behind it crept impossibly forward, his fingers closing around thin air.

Cursing inwardly, he stilled his moves momentarily and blinked until the sink and tap fell into their proper places. Trying again after a deep breath, this time advancing his hand more steadily, numb fingers found the tap and twisted it open. Careful not to aggravate his dizziness any further, he bent over slowly and drank with greedy gulps, the feel of water sliding down his parched throat.
soothing, but soon forming an unpleasant and cold weight in his stomach. With an unsteady hand he wiped at his mouth, before turning off the water again. Carefully, he turned around and steadied himself against the sink, his eyes scrunched closed.

He wouldn't get far like this. He could hardly walk straight, let alone drive a car. His entire body ached, his vision and sense of balance impaired. He wasn't even wearing shoes. Sick amusement built within his chest at the absurdity of his situation, at how utterly weak and pathetic he was, but it never manifested, his face turning expressionless when he opened his eyes and his gaze landed on the small bag of pills still lying on the kitchen counter.

Thoughts frozen, he stood still for long minutes. It wasn't that he'd forgotten. It just hadn't seemed important, other things having demanded his attention before. Suspicion threatened to unbalance what remained of his composure. Images of Seifer holding him close, the feel of the man's every single touch committed to memory, clashed with the dawning realization that none of it had been real, the evidence sitting in plain sight. But knowing it was nothing but chemicals causing the sharp jolt of pain he felt, didn't help to stop him from feeling it all the same. Fingers clenching into fists, he tried to quell the panic surging through him. Maybe he was just being paranoid; he'd heard drugs could have that effect. Seifer wouldn't. He would never—

Seifer would never hold you like that.

The truth hit him like a brick wall. Refusing to acknowledge the hurt he knew wasn't his, he forced his mind into a blank. He just had to wait until the drug had run its course, then it would be over. Reaching into his pockets, he took a moment to will the tremble of his fingers away before fishing out his cell phone and flipping it open to check the time. 7:23 am. He couldn't recall when exactly he'd taken the Avalanche, his sense of time jumbled, but it should have been a few hours already.

Pocketing his cell phone, he stayed where he was, the edge of the sink pressing uncomfortably into his lower back. Sitting down or making himself more comfortable would end in him falling asleep, moving around too much and exerting himself in passing out; two outcomes he had to avoid. He couldn't be here when Seifer woke up. The moment he felt confident enough he could walk without getting dizzy or nauseated, he'd grab his stuff and go. So he waited.

The fridge was humming quietly in the background as the seconds ticked by, the occasional muted noise coming from different parts of the building the only other sound interrupting the otherwise complete silence. Alone with his thoughts, his gaze strayed to the bedroom door. At first he just watched while listening out for any sign of the man on the other side. The image of the blond's features relaxed in sleep came to mind easily, but tanned skin and well defined muscle materialized before his mind's eye just as effortlessly. His thoughts traveling lower on their own accord, to shapely cut hips and a straining erection; dread struck him the moment he caught himself.

With a rough move he quickly regretted, he turned around and grabbed the faucet, the metal cold in his tight grip and the clatter of running water loud in his ears. White flecks swarmed around the edge of his vision as he leaned over and splashed water in his face to stun himself out of his train of thought. I let Seifer—Another splash of cold water immediately followed, his bangs sopping wet and clinging to his face, but to no avail. No matter how sober he'd get, no matter the fact he'd soon feel revulsion instead of arousal, it wouldn't change a thing about what had already happened. What he had let happen.

His cell's ringtone snapped him from his daze, the sound piercing and demanding, but he didn't move to pick up. He already knew who it was, the insistent ringing accompanied by the sudden reappearance of his sorceress' aura, circling just outside his own, refusing to come any closer. The moment she knew he was aware of her, she almost felt brittle as she sought him out more fiercely,
the echoing pinpricks of hurt intensifying with each second he left the ringtone unanswered.

He couldn't pick up. Not now. Wiping his hands dry on his pants, he took out his cell phone and placed it on the kitchen counter. Taking a step back, he locked his eyes on the buzzing piece of plastic, but the ringtone simply died and he found himself alone again, no longer able to feel her. A short beep signaled he'd received a new voice mail, silence returning to the room.

Heart beating fast, he glanced at the bedroom door, but he couldn't hear any movement on the other side. At least the call hadn't woken the blond. Gaze moving back to his cell phone, he hesitated, afraid to hear what Rinoa had left to say after everything that had happened at the club. Most likely arrangements for the breaking of their bond, the last thing he wanted to face right now. He wasn't foolish enough to hope that maybe she had reconsidered, but he couldn't bear hearing out the final verdict either.

It was all happening too fast. He couldn't believe how horribly wrong things had gone in the span of a single night. Feeling thick emotion settle at the back of his throat, he smothered the useless feeling and reached for his phone. The sooner he got it over with, the better. Flipping his cell phone open, he navigated through the menu and brought it to his ear, bracing himself for whatever message Rinoa had left.

As the voice mail started playing, Rinoa's voice was hoarse and quivering, making it obvious she had been crying.

"...Squall... You... I-I always thought you weren't capable of... of feeling like that. That it wasn't my fault. That something... your childhood maybe... had caused you to be the way you are... But now... I know I've been horrible, but... You're too cruel... At least I had the decency to cloud our bond, so you wouldn't have to... have to know... Would you believe me if I said I never cared about anybody but you? ... I guess you wouldn't... You're breaking my heart, Squall. I love you. So much. Why... Wh-who did..."

A long pause filled with nothing but sobs disrupted the message, before she managed to collect herself again and continued, the fake accepting tone forcing her voice to the point of almost breaking.

"...I guess we're really over then, huh? Let's meet... the day after tomorrow, 9 am, Odine's lab..."

After only a small moment of hesitance, the line went dead.

For a while Squall just stood there, phone still pressed to his ear. He had stopped taking in anything Rinoa was saying the moment she mentioned she at least had clouded their bond. The brief tug of anger he had felt at what Rinoa considered "decent" had instantly been replaced with overwhelming humiliation, the realization that she had witnessed what he had been reduced to at Seifer's hands making him almost physically ill. Intentional or not, she had felt the most intimate, most wretched experience he'd ever had, stealing from him the only comfort he had left in the process: denial.

But the tone to Rinoa's voice echoed through his mind, making it impossible to feel true anger. He never could whenever she cried because of him. All he felt was defeat at the final blow to whatever was left of their relationship and he'd been the one to deliver it. Bringing his phone down, only to confirm the replay option, he forced himself to listen to the message in its entirety, needing to hear everything no matter how condemning. He could only cringe at hearing her first words again, now realizing Rinoa didn't know whatever she thought he'd felt hadn't been real. But before he could draw any relief from hearing someone else state that he shouldn't be capable of such feelings, confirming the Avalanche was just toying with his emotions, the rest of Rinoa's message registered
And that's when everything became clear, painfully so. The rift between them had always been there, but he only recognized it now for the first time. The distance he'd never be able to cross with her, yet so easily had forgotten about with another. Who didn't matter. Even if what he'd experienced was only an abomination of what Rinoa likened to love; if what he'd felt under the influence of Avalanche was anything near what she wanted from him, what she felt for him, then there was no way for him to return such feelings. Suddenly the dissatisfaction he'd always detected in those hazel eyes meant something, his affection for Rinoa a far cry from what the drug had made him do with Seifer. He hadn't understood before, such a hopeless greed for another person, consuming and burning and vulnerable all at once. It wasn't something he wanted to understand.

Clutching the cell phone in his grasp, it all became too much. His world caved in under the weight of truths upended and the hurt he'd inflicted on Rinoa, resonating deeply with his own desperation for someone he couldn't have. Real or fake ceased to exist as a torrent of emotion broke through the dam he had carefully constructed, the harsh thud of his phone impacting against a wall registering before the urge to throw the thing away could. His heart thundered loudly in his ears as sheer willpower was the only thing keeping him from going back to the bedroom and seeking oblivion in Seifer's touch. One pill was all that stood between misery and bliss. Eyes landing on the next best thing, the blue whisky he barely had had a taste of before, he took the bottle in hand and opted for the lesser evil.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Thursday, 16th of October, 10:44 am]

Seifer tossed and turned in an outward reflection of the disturbing dreams that filled his mind. Fighting three imaginary Bombs that were repeatedly throwing Meltdowns his way back at the Fire Cavern, barely fourteen years old, he yelled for Fujin to hurry the hell up and cast Cure and Esuna on him. As another Meltdown set in, he groaned and brought up his hands to clutch at his head, clenching his eyes shut in an effort to shield himself from the pain.

Noticing the tangy sweet taste that clung to the back of his mouth, he reopened his eyes to take in his surroundings. Lava no longer hissed all around him, the stifling heat of the humid cave gone. Instead he was greeted by pleasant warmth and sunlight spilling in through the window. Another stab of pain shot through him, causing him to bring up a hand to knead at his furrowed brow, his eyes shutting again in reflex. The taste in his mouth told him he'd been playing with Avalanche again.

Unable to focus because of his piercing headache, he only managed to collect his thoughts long enough to realize he'd been a complete idiot; he'd left his Antidotes in his pickup truck. Groaning, he searched his mind for an Esuna before he belatedly realized he didn't have any. He hadn't bothered to draw any for ages, the process too troublesome compared to the ease of just carrying some Antidotes around.

Slowly, the pain settled down to a more manageable level. Feeling confident he could deal with the added sensory input, he reopened his eyes, his gaze landing on the closed window. Taking in the temperature of the room, he guessed the day was well on its way to noon.

An image of taking a guy roughly from behind suddenly flashed before his eyes, bringing with it disturbing clarity.

Remembering the identity of said man, a man he realized had been in his arms mere hours earlier, his eyes went wide. In a quick move, he sat up in his bed, his eyes darting around the room and
spotting pieces of the brunet's clothing strewn haphazardly on the floor. Wincing in pain, he cursed
the reckless move. He knew better than to move like that after a night of Avalanche. With a
grimace he tried to ignore the pain that pulsated relentlessly against the inside of his skull.

Forcing down the urge to vomit, he focused all his thought on slowing down his breathing. Cautionedly, almost in slow motion, he leaned forward whilst keeping his eyes closed, one of his
hands pulling firmly at his hair in an effort to ease the pain. As it subsided slightly, he let out a soft
sigh. Once more, he attempted to open his eyes, this time able to take in the world around him
without another onset of mind rendering pain. As his eyes traveled back to where Squall's shirt was
lying on the bedside table, he slowly prepared himself for the memories to reform in his mind.
Running a thumb absentmindedly against his lower lip, he could almost feel Squall's lips still
pressed to his own; he could almost hear the man's breathless pleas for more.

Even with his headache stealing most of his attention, an insistent throb settled heavily between his
legs. Fisting the sheets his temper rapidly reached the levels of a scalding boil. His whole body
tensed up. He felt like breaking something. Hitting something. Destroying something. He couldn't
believe what a fucking idiot he had been. *Fucking imbecile.* What the fuck had he thought would
happen, offering Squall Avalanche like that? Ridiculous. *Fuck.*

It had been amazing.

Annoyed, he ignored the thought and tried to make his way to the side of the bed. As his headache
soared to dangerous levels, he had to still all movement. Drawing in rushed breaths, he squeezed
his eyes shut. He had fucking seduced *Squall* of all people. Unable to believe it, he grabbed hold of
the bedding with crushing force. If that wasn't the biggest fuck up of all time, then he didn't know
what was.

"Fuck," he cursed again, this time out loud as his resentment for himself reached new heights. But
then a fine thread of embarrassment began pulling at the farther reaches of his mind. More intimate
memories of the night began replaying in his mind, images of him just holding and kissing Squall.
Being sickeningly tender. He couldn't help but feel a strange disconnect to the memories.
Well there goes any pride I had left. He snorted out loud at the bitter thought. He couldn't believe
he had acted like such a... *pussy,* for lack of a better word. At least if he had seduced Squall and
given the guy the fuck of his life without having acted like he'd left his goddamn balls somewhere
maybe he could have stayed proud. Or somewhat at least. But he'd ended up fucking Squall as if he
was the guy's *lover* or something stupid like that.

Groaning loudly, he knew without a shadow of a doubt he'd never be able to face Squall again.
Hopefully he wouldn't have to. Even with Squall's clothes strewn all around the room, he
stubbornly held on to the unlikely hope that the man had left, not wanting to linger. Maybe Squall
had grabbed one of his shirts in trade for the cum-crusted one. Grimacing once more, he decided to
push all disturbing thoughts to the back of his mind until he'd dealt with his roaring headache.

Tiredly, he stood up from the bed, a heavy weight settling in his chest. Deciding not to think of last
night was one thing, actually managing the feat another. Calm focus eluded him, his mind jumping
from thought to thought. He couldn't help but wonder if he would ever see Squall again. Not that
he really wanted to, not after what had happened between them.

As if on cue, another memory surfaced to embarrass him even further. Shaking his head softly in
disbelief, just as quickly regretting the move, he couldn't believe he had come so quickly after
entering Squall. Nothing like that had ever happened before. *Never.* Not even when strung out on
Avalanche or fucked up beyond any semblance of cognition from drinking too much alcohol, nor
when he'd first had sex. *Especially not then.* He cringed in chagrin. Of course something like that
had to happen to him; Hyne and his buddies were probably laughing their asses off.

Finally able to string the way too lucid memories together into one coherent night spent with Squall in his bed, he narrowed his eyes. He still couldn't believe what they'd done; what Squall had let him do. How he'd fucked the guy like it was the last thing he'd ever do. The one guy he was more indebted to than anyone else and the one that made him feel the most regret over a past he couldn't change.

"Fucking drugs," he muttered under his breath as he slowly worked his way over to the dresser and got out a pair of baggy dark green trousers, once more trying hard to push the disturbing thoughts away. He needed painkillers and water. Only after that would he attempt to pay his pickup truck an overdue visit. Those antidotes would work wonders. Kneading at his forehead once more, he finally managed to empty his mind, outright refusing to pay his rampant thoughts any more attention.

Entering the living room, his eyes travelled around the room unhurriedly. Vaguely noticing Squall lying sprawled out on his couch, he ignored the sight. Head feeling much as if a Blobra had taken up residence inside it, he turned his back to the man and headed for the kitchen. He figured the brunet could just stay passed out on the couch as he determined how the hell to disappear off the face of the planet. But first thing first, he needed relief.

Opening a cupboard above the kitchen counter, he got out a glass. Greedily, he downed most of the water he'd poured into it before he pulled open a drawer and located the painkillers. As his headache gave his brain another tight squeeze, he couldn't suppress a deep scowl and quickly swallowed two tablets along with the rest of the water. Exhaling slowly, he closed his eyes and waited.

Remaining still for long moments, he kept trying to ignore the other presence in the room. He wasn't ready to deal with what had happened the night before. But as his headache slowly subsided and his mind cleared little by little, he could no longer suppress his morbid curiosity and turned to regard the brunet.

Squall was lying on his couch, half dressed. The unbidden image of what lay beneath coarse fabric easily popped into Seifer's mind as he took in the sight of the man's dark grey jeans riding dangerously low, leaving the top of the man's crack exposed. With a narrowing of his eyes, he forced his thoughts back on track and instead took in the way Squall was draped across the cushioning of his couch rather inelegantly, the man's back turned to the room. Eyes trailing to the bottle of liquor that lay empty on its side on the coffee table, he realized the phrase "passed out cold" would probably be a more accurate description.

Narrowing his eyes further, half in distaste and half in confusion, he couldn't really believe the sight. Surely the ice prince of Balamb Garden hadn't downed a bottle of liquor? Scowl intensifying, he walked over to the coffee table to further inspect the odd scene.

Taking the discarded bottle in hand, he looked at it in contemplation. He knew he couldn't really blame Squall for having sought escape in alcohol, well in the knowledge he wasn't one to judge. He just hadn't expected such a thing from the normally above and beyond self-composed and in-control brunet.

Eyes traveling back to the man lying uncomfortably on his couch, he couldn't figure out what to do. He wasn't sure what to expect of the man lying dead to the world. The only thing he was fairly certain of was that Squall would probably be down for the count for at least several more hours and was going to wake up with aching joints, freezing to his bones, if he didn't move him into the bedroom. Watching the brunet warily, he noticed that the man's features were tensed up in an
expression of distress. In fact Squall's whole body seemed to be twisted into an unnatural position.

"Fuck," he cursed under his breath, knowing there was no way he could get out of relocating Squall, his conscience not letting him. Moving to sit down on the coffee table, facing Squall, he leaned in over the man. At the heavy smell of stale alcohol that greeted him, his nostrils flared in distaste.

Watching the man for long moments, he realized that at least there was one potential benefit to Squall's presence. Surely the commander would have Esunas on him, the man way too anal-retentive to not be fully stocked up on everything. The only unknown was whether or not Squall would be able to junction in such a state. Seifer had never been able to himself when drunk; not after the war, at least. But surely the wonder child of para-magic would be able to pull something like that off.

"Squall," he demanded harshly, eager to get rid of his headache.

Not budging at all at the blond's command, Squall huddled his arms a bit closer to himself, fine eyebrows and pale lips only twitching ever so slightly at the sound of Seifer's voice.

Realizing it'd take a bit more force to get through to the brunet, Seifer got up to study the man a bit more closely. He didn't really want to be rough with the guy, certain the massive hangover and the come down from Avalanche would be nasty enough on its own, but he didn't have much choice. Grabbing Squall's chin roughly, he angled it in his direction.

"Squall," he repeated loudly, his attention fixed on the man's eyes.

Grey-blue eyes finally fluttered open reluctantly, the brunet's clouded gaze not entirely rooted in reality as he peered at his assailant in temporary confusion. Blinking a few times, he finally brought up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, frowning deeply whilst groaning in displeasure at the rather rough wake up call.

Without wasting a second, Seifer got straight to the point. "Junction," he demanded harshly whilst retracting his hand from Squall's chin.

Slowly moving to rest on his back, Squall draped a hand across his eyes to block out any visual input, his features even paler than usual as he swallowed thickly before even attempting an answer.

"...Can't," was all he managed, his voice gravelly.

Rubbing his eyes in exhaustion, Seifer let out a deep sigh. They'd both just have to survive with massive headaches until he got the Antidotes then. Not that getting the Antidotes would make things much better. If anything, they'd just clear the way for a whole other kind of headache, the prospect of actually dealing with what had happened not the least bit appealing. Not wanting to linger on such thoughts, he decided to let auto pilot work its magic and forget about everything for the time being.

"Come on, Squall," he said as he bent down to take hold of the brunet. Sneaking an arm under the smaller man, he pulled the brunet up from the couch and steadied him. "Let's get you to bed."

Far too incapacitated to protest the sudden relocation, Squall let himself be hauled off the couch and guided in the direction of the bedroom, most of his weight supported by the taller blond.

Having helped the younger man into bed, Seifer headed back into the kitchen to get some water and painkillers. As he walked through the door leading to the living room, his eyes came to rest on a discarded cell phone lying on the floor. Squall's, no doubt. Vaguely wondering how it had ended
up on the floor, he picked up the phone and placed it on the kitchen counter, before he set about getting out the pills and pouring a glass of water.

When he returned to the bedroom short moments later, he sat down next to where he had helped Squall into the bed.

"Drink this," he said as he held out the large glass of water. Wearing a prominent scowl, he couldn't help but feel concerned for the younger man. He hated seeing Squall in such a condition. Especially knowing he was the cause. He had really fucked up for Squall to seek refuge in alcohol. Unable to believe for even a moment that it was a regular occurrence for the strong-willed SeeD, he felt his resentment for himself grow.

Awkwardly propped up in Seifer's bed, Squall slowly took the glass out of the blond's hand with trembling hands, the cool water almost sloshing over the edge as he sloppily took a sip. Brows drawing together in a frown at his appalling eye-hand coordination, he didn't look Seifer's way as he barely managed to set the glass down on the bedside table, his eyes unusually dull and weary. But when a hand cradling precious aspirin entered his peripheral vision, he gratefully took the pills and brought them to his mouth, swallowing them dry.

Seifer tensed up as he watched Squall. It was easy to tell that the brunet was uncomfortable in his presence. Not that he could blame the guy.

"Get some sleep," he said in a tired voice, sensing he needed to give the man some space. As his eyes landed on pale lips, a flash of holding Squall close and kissing him formed in his mind. Bringing his eyes back up to peer at grey-blues, he fought to suppress similar thoughts and instead got up from the bed to turn and walk away.

Leaving the room, closing the door softly in his wake, he realized the distraction caused by the younger man's presence had temporarily managed to trump his headache, but it was still there, at the back of his mind, demanding his attention. He really needed those Antidotes. Heading to pick up his jacket lying at the end of the kitchen counter, his eyes were instead drawn to the cell phone he had found on the floor earlier. Stopping in his tracks, curiosity growing, the same question as before arose in his thoughts. There must have been a good reason for Squall's phone to have ended up where it had. Maybe it had been thrown? Or maybe it had just been dropped accidentally by a drunken Squall.

Torn, he walked over to where the phone was lying and took it into his hand. Turning it over a couple of times, he regarded it in thought. Eyes flitting back to the door leading to the bedroom, he could easily conjure up the image of Squall lying passed out on his bed. It would only take a couple of minutes for him to look through the phone. It wasn't like anyone would ever know. But it would be wrong. And if Squall ever did find out, he'd be a dead man.

He flipped the phone open regardless, revealing an electric blue display. As he stared at the device he knew he should stop himself, but it was far too tempting. There was no way Squall would ever find out. More likely, he'd be able to find out why the phone had been discarded so thoughtlessly in the first place.

Easily navigating the standard phone layout, Seifer quickly located Squall's messaging inbox, no longer hampered by his easily persuaded conscience. Hyne knew he had broken much worse rules in the past, so why develop any qualms about it now? Skimming through the list of messages, he frowned. All of the most recent texts were from Rinoa, the majority of the brunet's entire inbox swamped with messages from the girl.

He could only reach the conclusion that he'd been right in his original assumption. Rinoa and
Squall were still a couple, regardless of what he had witnessed at the club. Annoyed at the stab of hurt the thought caused, he immediately suppressed it, very well in the knowledge that he had absolutely no reason for feeling that way. He had been the one to use Squall, not the other way around. And so what if Rinoa and Squall were still a couple? What difference did it make? Headache back full force, he had to press his eyes firmly shut as he tried to calm his breathing.

*What the fuck have I done?*

Stilling his mind, he focused on the task at hand instead of his renewed headache and zeroed in on his original purpose. Opening the first message Rinoa had sent the previous day, he couldn't help but snort.

- **Message from Rinoa / 14:43 pm / You're late. Where are you?** -

How lovely. Just one message and already he knew much more about Squall and Rinoa's relationship than he cared to. There was no mistaking the abrupt "You're late" as anything other than one of Rinoa's more disgruntled jabs. Idly wondering just how Squall would react to such a message, vaguely amused at the scowl he could imagine as the only real response, he navigated to the next message.

- **Message from Rinoa / 16:12 pm / You know how much I hate going in alone. I needed you to be here, Squall.** -

His expression changed to one of confusion as he wondered where Rinoa had needed Squall to be. Quickly opening the next message, sent roughly an hour later, he skimmed over the words.

- **Message from Rinoa / 17:32 pm / Don't bother. I'm going out for dinner with a friend.** -

At the message that hadn't even been meant for him, his anger stirred, the words reminding him of one of the reasons why he'd never enjoyed female companionship much in the first place. All that passive aggressive shit didn't make the loose sloppy fuck worth the time or the effort. Why the hell would Squall stand for something like that?

- **Message from Rinoa / 22:57 pm / So now you care? How convenient. Don't wait up.** -

Squall *cared*? After that? Surely he had read that wrong. Unable to believe the words displayed on the screen, he could feel nothing but bafflement. He couldn't fathom *any* other response to Rinoa's earlier messages than Squall ignoring them. Frown deepening, he had to know just what Squall had written to inspire such a reply from Rinoa.

- **Message to Rinoa / 16:49 pm / My meeting took longer than I thought. I'll try and be home before six. Sorry.** -

He reread the message a couple of times, unable to connect the word "sorry" with Squall at all. Not only was he certain the word didn't exist in the man's vocabulary, he also couldn't believe Squall had actually used it to apologize after the snappy and blaming messages Rinoa had sent him. Feeling his esteem for his one-time rival falter, put off by the man's behavior, he continued on to the next message.

- **Message to Rinoa / 22:53 pm / When will you be home? It's getting late.** -

Ah, so that was what Squall "caring" had meant. Not really what he would have classified as caring, but he guessed it worked as far as the brunet went. Narrowing his eyes, he felt annoyed at Squall seemingly tolerating Rinoa's behavior. The man he remembered from his past would never have allowed anyone to treat him in such a way, the rival from his teenage years much too prideful
and strong-willed; not pussy-whipped. Squall sounded almost like a scorned housewife. Either the
guy had changed radically or Seifer had interpreted things the wrong way. He was seriously hoping
for the latter. Sighing, he navigated back to Rinoa's messages and quickly found the one that
followed the last one he'd read.

- Message from Rinoa / 12:36 am / I'm not feeling good. Come pick me up. -

All that resounded in his mind was a great, big "seriously?" He couldn't believe the audacity of the
girl. Even more unbelievable was the fact that he knew Squall had done just as she'd asked. He
couldn't comprehend it. It was just too farfetched for his brain to wrap itself around the idea that
Squall had changed that much. Groaning, he couldn't believe he'd become part of this mess.

- Message from Rinoa / 12:53 am / I'm at some club. Somewhere in the Tiamat District. Hurry. -

He had to roll his eyes. Priceless. Rinoa had been high maintenance even back when he'd shared a
summer fling with her, but it had never been that bad.

With no more messages from her in the inbox, he returned to read the rest of Squall's messages.

- Message to Rinoa / 12:38 am / Where are you? -

Still unable to believe Squall had just followed her order to come pick her up without any
complaint, he shook his head. Why had Squall bothered? She was a spoiled little daddy's girl. If she
was grown up enough to go out and get fuck-faced, then surely she could deal with the
consequences herself without needing the damned SeeD Commander to come rescue her.

- Message to Rinoa / 12:45 am / You have to tell me where you are. Are you alright? Do I need to

bring the pills? -

Confused, he had to reread the message a couple of times. Maybe he had been misunderstanding
things. But... Rinoa had been at the club and it had been obvious she had been drunk. Why was
Squall mentioning pills?

- Message to Rinoa / 12:55 am / What club? Is everything okay? -

Rereading the message one last time, knowing it was the last one, he sighed, no closer to knowing
what had happened while he'd been fast asleep in the bedroom. He could only assume Squall had
called Rinoa after that last message and had gotten the name of the club from her. It wasn't hard to
figure out that she had been the one at the other end of the line when Squall had dismissed him
back at the club.

Just about to return the phone to the counter, navigating back out through the menus, he spotted the
icon for voice mails on the blue display. Not expecting to find anything, he straightened up and
mentally prepared himself to leave the apartment and head out to get the Antidotes, when he
spotted a voice mail registered as received just that morning. Frowning, he thought he might as
well give it a listen, already in way over his head in knowledge he wasn't supposed to have. Fingers
momentarily stilling, he realized he might just have hit the jackpot: it looked like the message had
already been listened to. Pressing the button to access the message, he brought the cell to his ear.

As he listened to Rinoa's message, he was stunned into place. Standing stock still for long
moments after it had finished, he couldn't even begin to comprehend what he'd just heard.

And then it hit home.

Placing the cell on the kitchen counter, he walked to sit on his couch, his green eyes empty and
I love you, he heard Rinoa's voice repeat in his mind, the pain in her voice cutting right through to the bone. She'd felt it. She'd felt what had happened. Witnessed it.

His eyes jumped to the closed door leading to the bedroom where Squall was lying unconscious. Dread began to worm its way through him. Squall had emptied the bottle because he'd hurt Rinoa. It was that simple. And that horrible. Squall really cared for her. That was why he had acted the way he had. Squall really had changed. For her.

I fucked up.

Cursing inwardly at what a giant piece of shit he'd been, he could almost feel the pain he imagined Squall to have felt as the words 'you're too cruel' played back in his mind. He'd never meant for things to go that way. He'd never meant to hurt Squall. Or Rinoa. He'd only meant to ease Squall's mind for a short while. Not sexually assault the guy. He couldn't believe Rinoa had felt what had happened through the bond she shared with Squall.

Not knowing what to do, he ran an unsteady hand through his hair and sat still for long moments. New ideas slowly began taking form at the back of his mind, his thoughts starting to clear. He knew how to make things better. He could make things right. Determination taking over, he rose from the couch and headed for the bedroom. Hesitantly, he pushed open the door and glanced inside, relieved to find Squall still lying on the bed fast asleep.

As he walked farther into the room, his eyes were involuntarily drawn to the unruly mop of dark bangs splayed messily against a white pillow. Tearing his gaze away, he got out a piece of paper from one of the drawers and quickly scribbled down a short note in case the younger man were to wake up while he was out. "I'll be back soon," was all it said.

Placing the note next to the sleeping brunet on the bed, he stopped in his tracks to regard the man once more. He knew what he was planning to do wasn't going to be easy; he didn't look forward to it one bit. He could only hope it would help Squall. That was all he cared about. Hyne knew he had caused the man nothing but trouble throughout their lives. He couldn't undo what had happened, but if there was any way he could help fix the mess he'd created, then he'd do just that.

Closing the bedroom door softly as he left the room, he walked over to the kitchen counter and slid Squall's cell phone into one of his pockets. With a deep sigh, he exited his apartment and set a fast pace as he walked in the direction of his car.
Collision Course

[Seifer Almasy's Vehicle, Thursday, 16th of October, 11:46 am]

As soon as Seifer sat down in the driver's seat of his thirteen-year-old dark green Toquino Renegade pickup truck, shielded from the cold outside, he leaned over to unlatch the glove box. It sprang open with a quick snap and with his headache spurring him into urgency, he reached inside to search through his small stash of assorted healing items. Grabbing the vial he needed, he twisted off the tiny cork and greedily downed the luminous liquid inside, numbness soon soothing his headache. For long moments he sat in silence, a hand kneading at his forehead even after his eyes had finally cleared and the Antidote had done its work. When he finally released a deep breath and took in his surroundings again, the air inside the car had gone damp, a thin layer of condensation clinging to the chilled windows.

Looking out at the people walking down the street, watching as they drew their clothes closer in an effort to keep the brisk autumn cool at bay, he tried to ward off straying thoughts and stay focused on the task at hand. He was going to take responsibility for his actions.

Slumped against the driver's seat, he arched his head back to try and ease away some of his frustration. He needed to be calm for what he was going to do—not worked up. Even though his plan wasn't all that great and could easily backfire, he remained firm in his decision, unwilling to back down.

Squall's cell phone weighed heavily in his pocket, impossible to ignore, so with a deep, steeling breath he retrieved the device and flipped it open. For long moments he stared at the blue display before finally venturing on to the list of contacts, locating the one he needed. Pausing once more, he eyed the name in apprehension, but bit the bullet with a simple press to a button.

He could no longer reconsider, there was no going back. Bracing himself, he waited for his call to be answered.

"...Squall..." he heard Rinoa answer weakly, sounding slightly surprised, as if she hadn't expected Squall to call.

Listening to the soft voice, a voice that had always sought his affection and had soothed him before the war, Seifer's reluctance grew at what he was about to do. There was no way the conversation was going to go well. He was going to hurt her regardless of how the call unfolded. Reminding himself of what he'd witnessed back at the club, of how she had slapped Squall, only to leave the man alone at the club, he knew that what had happened had at least to some extent been her own fault. But it hadn't been Squall's, and she needed to understand that. Determined, he kept his voice low as he spoke his first words. "Rinoa... I need you to listen to me."

"Who is this?" she immediately asked, her voice apprehensive.

Uncertain of how to answer her, not wanting to give his identity away, Seifer paused to collect his thoughts. He hadn't really thought things through, just rushed ahead as usual without much consideration for the specifics.

"I'm a friend of Squall's," he finally answered, hoping his reply would satisfy her curiosity for the time being. "I was there last night... at the club." The last word was spoken in clear implication; he wanted Rinoa to realize her own part in what had happened.
A couple of moments trailed by as the girl remained silent. When her words finally came, they were laced with suspicion. "Squall doesn't have any friends in Esthar."

Realizing he should have expected such an answer, Seifer felt annoyance simmer just beneath the surface. For her to presume such a thing rubbed him entirely the wrong way. "He does," he stated firmly.

Not wanting to protract the whole ordeal any longer than absolutely necessary, he got to the point. "I offered him Avalanche to help him forget." Even thought he tried hard to mask it, he couldn't keep the regret out of his voice. "He never meant to hurt you."

After a stretch of silence, a short choked laugh resounded at the other end of the connection. "...I can't believe this." Rinoa said, letting out another chuckle, this time more dark and disbelieving than before. "He was with you last night, wasn't he?"

Eyes narrowing at the girl's darkly amused response, Seifer couldn't believe her laughter. What the hell was she laughing at? That he was calling her? That Squall had been with a guy? As his annoyance reached new heights, he could no longer contain his barely restrained anger. "What the fuck is so funny about this?" he snapped, his left hand clenching tightly against the cold leather of the steering wheel.

Fighting hard to reel back his anger, he took a deep breath. This isn't how it's supposed to go.

"...Seifer?" His name was spoken in utter disbelief, an immediate end coming to Rinoa's awkward laugh.

Going from fuming to dumbstruck all within the fraction of a second, Seifer lost his train of thought.

Fuck. Definitely not how it's supposed to go. Back up. Get the message across and get out.

Through sheer force of will he managed to persuade himself that his identity was irrelevant in this. All that mattered was that she understood. "The message you left him... it devastated him. I can't believe you thought he would do something like that to you on purpose."

Rinoa's words came quickly this time. "What the hell is this? How..." she demanded, sounding totally perplexed, her voice heavy with denial. "You? ...With you?"

Feeling his anger rise once more at her unbelieving words, he had to remind himself that he was doing it all for Squall's sake; not hers. "Rinoa, calm down," he said, trying his best to calm himself as well. "That's what I'm trying to say... it wasn't him... it wasn't me... it was the drugs." Needing to make her understand, he continued on. "Don't blame Squall."

"The drugs?" she echoed incredulously, before continuing in a distraught voice. "...Why are you telling me these things? How long has this been going on?"

"Only last night... Rinoa, listen... there's nothing going on between us, it was a freak accident. I'm telling you..." he said, quickly trailing off as he worked hard to restrain himself and keep his composure. But as he remembered some of the words she had spoken, some of the words she had left for Squall to hear in a voice message, he could no longer hold himself back. "Squall doesn't deserve the accusations you threw at him. He would never hurt you like that. Believe me, he cares. He's in a fucking state right now because of you."

"So tell me, Seifer. Why do you suddenly care? Since when have you ever worried about Squall or me? What gives you the right to talk to me like this! ... If it was just the drugs like you said, then
leave him the hell alone! He's had more than enough of your twisted games!"

Dangerously close to snapping, Seifer pulled aggressively at the steering wheel, the quick move forcing him forwards in the driver's seat.

"You're right, Rinoa. I don't have the right," he snarled, his voice seething. "But what the fuck? My twisted games?" he spat angrily, before forcing himself to take a deep breath. He couldn't believe her audacity. This wasn't about him; this was about them. "I will leave him alone," he forced out through his teeth, speaking the words he thought she needed to hear to feel less threatened by the situation. He needed her to calm down and focus on what he was saying.

"You're not listening to me Rinoa. I'm trying to help you guys here. Do you really think he would have told you any of this on his own?" he asked, knowing full well Squall would never do such a thing. She had to know that too. She had to understand he was doing this for them, that he was trying to help them salvage what the hell it was they had left. He couldn't be the last straw, he just couldn't be the one to mess up Squall's life again. "And I always cared about Squall," he added in a low voice.

An incredulous snort was instantly followed by sharp words. "You have a strange way of expressing you care. He might not have told anyone back at Balamb Garden, but I know what you did. You are twisted."

Rendered speechless, Seifer could do nothing but hold onto the steering wheel. She knew...

Squall had told her.

Closing his eyes, images of how he'd tortured the younger man at D-District played before his mind's eye, refusing to leave him alone. He felt nothing but shame and regret at those dark memories, his whole body numb to anything but the hurt that ran through him. He hadn't meant to. It... She...

After letting the accusation sink in for a moment, Rinoa continued, reining in her voice. "...As for your attempt to help... In the end... it doesn't really matter how he feels about you. What matters is what he doesn't feel for me... Seifer, if you really do care... I don't know what you think happened last night, but I know what I felt. You've always underestimated the impact you have on Squall."

He didn't hear her words at first, too preoccupied with the memories she had caused to resurface. When her words finally did register, he was left with nothing but confusion.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked after a pregnant pause, incomprehension clear in his voice.

Rinoa sighed in exasperation, before her voice took on a warning tone. "It means that Squall isn't as strong as he seems, especially when it comes to you. Your actions have consequences. They don't just roll off his back like it's nothing, no matter how composed he might pretend to be... You can't toy with him like this... I don't know what is worse. How you treated him during the war or this... You have no idea of the damage you are capable of."

Left mostly baffled by her words, Seifer was having a hard time keeping up, until some of what she was saying sank in. He couldn't believe she had just compared the events of the previous night to what had happened during the war. Mind reeling, he lashed out. "Why is this about me all of a sudden?" he demanded in a mixture of anger and distress. "I know my actions have consequences."

He took a moment to calm himself. "I know it's my fault. I know I fucked up, okay? Again," he
said in annoyance. Realizing he had to get the conversation back on track, he continued on. "But clearly what you said affected him. I just wanted you to know it wasn't him. It wasn't his fault. That's all. So yes, if you want to be angry at someone, then fine, let it be me."

"...How noble of you," Rinoa said, no humor in her voice. "...I would be lying if I said I wasn't angry, but mostly... I'm frustrated... and hurt... You don't know what it's like. To want someone so badly, but never really being able to have them. And then for him to... with you... I just can't—"

Not sure he'd heard her right, his brown scrunched up in disbelief. Had Rinoa just said she'd never had Squall? That didn't make any sense. If the rumors he'd heard from Raijin and Fujin were anything to go by, then she and Squall had been together for over two years. Squall had changed for her. What had happened between himself and Squall was absolutely nothing in comparison. Her words were absurd, nonsensical even.

There was a moment of brief pause before Rinoa spoke again, her voice coming out dangerously tremulous. "...He brings out the worst in me. I've also done things I'm not proud of... It's because he's so oblivious... and so cold..." she trailed off, her quivering breath and sniffs on the other end of the line signaling her mounting distress.

Not liking Rinoa's growing disquiet, Seifer felt increasingly uneasy. "Will you stop making it sound like Squall actually wanted what happened between us to happen? Do you even know what Avalanche does?" he asked, incredulous at her words. "What happened wasn't any more his choice than a drug making him feel things he normally wouldn't."

"...Actually, I do know, Seifer. I'm no longer the naive girl you used to know," she bit out resentfully. "And don't talk to me as if I don't know Squall. I am the one who shares a bond with him... I'm not saying he wanted what happened, but it's not as meaningless as you think it is either." A long pause stretched on, before she finally concluded in a tired voice, "Goodbye Seifer."

At the soft click that signaled Rinoa had hung up on him, he brought down Squall's cell phone to stare at it for long minutes.

Uncertain his effort had actually made any difference, he couldn't help but feel annoyance towards the girl. Rinoa hadn't seemed to take any of what he'd said to heart, only lashed out in return. And when she hadn't lashed out, her words had been downright confusing. He didn't know what to make of the call. Sighing heavily, unable to curb the regret that welled up inside him, he wished he was the one lying passed out in drunken sedation.

It seemed the only instances he would ever feel remorse were in relation to Squall. He should have known better than to offer Squall Avalanche. He should have known that he wouldn't be able to control himself. Slamming his hand hard against the inside of his car, flesh making harsh impact with the rough plastic, he couldn't believe how much he had managed to fuck up in the space of a day.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Thursday, 16th of October, 12:09 pm]

Having already stalled in the living room for over five minutes, not really knowing how to approach the situation, Seifer ran a nervous hand through his hair. If he thought what he'd just done had been hard, then he knew what was still to come would be much, much worse. Filled with nothing but dread at the prospect, he eyed the phone that had spurred him down the treacherous path in the first place. He'd left the device lying on the kitchen counter for Squall to find on his own, well in the knowledge that handing it to the guy would only add more flames to the already
roaring stake he'd lit underneath himself.

With his elbows leaning on the hard surface of his kitchen counter, he began tapping his fingers restlessly against the dark stone. He'd certainly solved the mystery of why Squall had suddenly found a strong appreciation for Galbadian Bluewhistle, but the knowledge only made him want to face the man even less. Sighing, he turned around to glare at the empty bottle that lay discarded on the coffee table as if it was to blame for his impossible situation. Squall was going to be livid with him; he'd be lucky to survive the day. Secretly thanking Hyne that the man hadn't brought his gunblade along, his relief was shortlived as the mental image of his own gunblade lying hidden beneath his bed came to mind. He could only hope Squall hadn't realized where he kept Kronos, even if the spot was pathetically predictable.

What it came down to was the fact that he owed Squall the truth, nothing less. No more avoidance, no more lies. He would own up to what he'd done, just as he'd apologized for the war. It wasn't like there was any way he could get around it. If he didn't tell Squall what he'd done, the man would just find out from Rinoa anyway, and then he really would be dead.

Running his fingers through his short locks for the umpteenth time, he pushed away from the kitchen counter and headed for the bedroom. He couldn't stall any longer.

Inside the small room, his eyes were immediately drawn to Squall, the man lying in almost the exact same position as when he'd left. It was surreal to see the brunet like that. He'd never bothered to study the man's features relaxed in sleep before, had never seen Squall so unguarded. But before he could finish the thought a new memory emerged, one of Squall smiling and looking content. Dismissing the imagery and the bitter taste it left in his mouth, he walked closer to the bed and grabbed the note he'd left there earlier. Crumpling the small piece of paper into a tight ball, he pocketed it in silence. His expression was entirely blank as he brought up a hand to massage one of his tense shoulders. Walking over to the bed, he lowered himself to sit down on the edge, the mattress shifting slightly under his weight.

Squall was lying on his stomach, cradling the pillow bunched up beneath his head, the lower half of his face mostly hidden from view by a high riding duvet. Hesitantly, Seifer pulled down the white fabric to uncover the rest of the man's face and left his hand to rest on top of the thin sheet. He really wasn't ready for this. He didn't want to be the one to return Squall to a world where the man's girlfriend had just left him for sleeping with his one-time rival. It took all his willpower to remain firm in his decision.

"Come on, Sleeping Beauty... time to wake up," he said in a low voice as he moved the hand resting on Squall's shoulder to try and stir the man awake. A displeased groan was all he received in reply.

Stubbornly keeping his eyes closed, eyebrows knitting together in a frown, Squall tried to will Seifer away. It felt like only a few minutes had passed since he'd laid his head to rest on the blond's pillow. His exhaustion exacerbated by the alcohol and chemicals still polluting his system, all he wanted was to be pulled under again by the deep sleep of recovery and keep all else at bay for just a little while longer, but Seifer's presence made the feat increasingly difficult.

"Come on Squall," Seifer said in a low voice as he tried to coax the brunet to wake. "I got you an antidote."

Realizing Seifer wasn't going to leave him alone, Squall unfurled his arm from underneath the pillow and turned to lie on his back in resignation. Instantly reminded of why moving was a bad idea, the glare he had intended to fix the blond with fell short as the room started to spin, his eyes
unable to focus properly. The acrid taste of liquor mixed in with other fainter flavors he didn't want to label caused nausea to work its way up from his stomach to the back of his throat.

Holding out the vial containing the bright yellow liquid, pretty certain the item would gain him Squall's full attention, Seifer kept his eyes firm on the younger man. "Here," he said, waiting for the brunet to take it.

Squall immediately recognized the vial for the godsend that it was. Forgetting his desire for the blond to leave, he slowly worked himself into a sitting position and took the curative item from Seifer's hand, careful to avoid any accidental touch. Unsteady hands fumbled with the cork, before he downed the tingling cold liquid in one big gulp. Dropping the hand holding the small flask to his side, he slumped back into the pillows and closed his eyes in relief, the antidote already starting its work.

He was well accustomed to the feel of the cold liquid suddenly burning unbearably hot for the span of a few seconds as his body absorbed it at an unnatural pace, the healing agents of the item accelerated by magic. It soothed his unsettled stomach and licked its way through his veins, negating all harmful substances lingering in his blood. By the time the burn subsided, all that was left were sore muscles and an aching back, but it was enough. He could think again, his head clear and his body back under his control. Opening his eyes, he placed the empty vial on the bedside table without trouble, his fingers no longer trembling.

Turning to regard Seifer expressionlessly, his eyes no longer clouded, clarity of mind nearly cost him his composure as the sight of the blond brought unwanted images to the forefront of his mind. Bitter humiliation struck him as he realized Seifer had now seen him in every demeaning situation, ranging from pathetically weak and shoved against a harsh prison wall to passed out drunk on the man's couch and dependant on his help. And that wasn't even the worst of it.

Uncomfortable under the brunet's penetrating gaze, Seifer looked away. He wasn't normally one to avoid confrontation nor one to feel repentant, which left him without any behavioral patterns to fall back on. With his lower arms resting against his thighs, he began rubbing his fingers against his knees distractedly. In a subconscious move, he angled himself away from Squall slightly. Going over a host of different options of how to approach the situation, each one as unpleasant as the next, he decided to state his aim and persuade Squall to hear him out.

"We need to talk," he said, his eyes falling to the floor, his every move underlined by his increasing apprehension. "...I'm going to say some things that you aren't going to like to hear... but hear me out, okay."

Not saying anything in reply, Squall willed himself to wait for Seifer to continue, fighting his overwhelming need to run. It was an instinct he knew well from his childhood, one that had driven his feet until he hadn't known where he'd been anymore; one that had led him to fall asleep at the foot of a rock face, miles away from the orphanage, at the other side of the bay.

He had learned to face his difficulties since then, so he stayed in place as he tried to ignore Seifer's strange body language and the unusual warning that unpleasant conversation would ensue. Seifer's preferred way of breaking the news had always been blunt and unapologetic, never... this. It couldn't mean anything good.

At the lack of reply, Seifer decided he might as well speak the words no-holds-barred and get it over with as quickly as possible. "I spoke to Rinoa," he began, thinking Squall would view that as the worst of it. "I heard the message she left on your phone and it angered me that she'd think you'd do something like that on purpose." His words were measured, yet clearly conveyed how strongly he felt about what he'd done.
Seifer's words weren't quite sinking in. Dumbstruck, Squall stared at the blond, completely unprepared for the implications of the man's statement. He had expected Seifer to request he disappear not only from the blond's apartment but also his life, effective immediately from the moment he was able to. His mind was still torn over whether or not he would comply, when the altogether different words filtered through. I spoke to Rinoa.

Obviously contemplating how to proceed, Seifer sighed heavily before he spoke again. "I know," he said, his voice easily conveying just how badly he felt about what he'd done. He knew it was inexcusable, that he really shouldn't have done it. But knowing that didn't change it one bit. Bringing a hand up to his forehead, he pushed his long fingers into his golden hair and pulled at the short locks in visible frustration.

"I shouldn't have looked through your phone. But it was there on the floor. And you'd downed a bottle of alcohol. When have you ever run away from anything before? ...I had to know."

Eyes narrowing dangerously and white fists clenching against the bedding, Squall remained silent as Seifer continued his unwise confession. He ignored the sting of shame he felt when the blond cited his reason for such unwarranted meddling. The fact that his privacy had been violated in even more ways than he'd initially thought tipped the precarious balance in favor of quickly mounting anger. It was an easy emotion to embrace, blinding all other thought and burning its way to the surface.

Thankful Squall hadn't throttled him yet, Seifer realized he was almost there. There really wasn't much more to say. He just had to make sure Squall knew why he'd done what he had and that he felt guilty for it all.

"She knows it's my fault," he spoke lowly, his voice conveying his regret. "I should've known better than to let you have Avalanche," he continued, pausing ever so briefly. "I thought I'd be able to control myself..." But he hadn't been. The temptation had been far too great and now Squall was paying for it. Again.

Understanding dawned that Seifer must have said all of these things to Rinoa as well, and it took Squall great effort not to act. He had at least wanted to try and talk to her himself when he was ready, to determine what she knew and never mention what she didn't. The drugs, the fact that Seifer was the one he'd been with, he'd hoped to conceal it. Even if she knew he'd been with a man, a nameless man existing in her thoughts was far less damning than the knowledge that their sick triangle was now complete, that he'd let the ex-boyfriend who threw her at Adel's feet fuck him. Never before had he felt so blinded by rage.

Seifer knew it was time to get out. It didn't bode well that Squall hadn't said or done anything for long moments. He could only imagine the man's anger rising with each passing second; the silence was stifling.

"I... I have to go soon. Feel free to stay however long you want," he said as he got up from his place at the edge of the bed without even looking in Squall's direction.

"I won't be around much. You'll mostly have the place to yourself," he added as he turned around, the need to get out of there overriding all other thought.

But without warning, before he could even take a step away from the bed, he was tackled to the floor, his head thudding harshly against unforgiving wood. He was only given a split second to stare into seething grey orbs before Squall's fist connected with his face, the man channeling all of his rage into the punch.
"Who the hell do you think you are," Squall hissed in anger, grey-blue eyes spitting fire as he stared down at the blond.

Barely able to control the urge to punch Seifer again, his muscles tensing in the effort to restrain himself, Squall pushed off the floor, his every move rigid as he walked to the blond's dresser. He was beyond the point of taking in anything Seifer had to say and couldn't stand watching the man's face another second, lest he do something he'd come to regret. Seifer's turned back had been enough to dye his vision red. He wasn't sure what else might elicit such violence from him.

Setting himself the task of getting clean and dressed, more for distraction than anything else, he yanked drawers open without asking for permission. Pain instantly radiated out from his knuckles, but he paid it no heed as he started to rustle through the dresser's content with rough movements. Focusing solely on locating a suitable change of clothing, he retrieved black boxers and a black shirt without much consideration for size and shape, not even bothering with pants. If the boxers already looked like they'd fit him as shorts, any pants Seifer owned would be ridiculously oversized. Shoving the drawer closed, he disappeared into the bathroom and without another glance in the direction of the blond, he slammed the door shut.

Unable to pay much attention to anything but the intense pain shooting out from where Squall had hit him and where his head had impacted with the floor, Seifer remained still, completely unmoving for long moments. Slowly bringing up a hand to tentatively touch his throbbing cheek, he tried to open his mouth slightly, the pain increasing exponentially as he did. He couldn't open his mouth much more than an inch. Realizing his lower jaw was most likely broken, he brought himself into a sitting position.

He'd never seen Squall so worked up, never witnessed the man lose his temper like that. Who knew that after all those years of trying to break through to the brunet, make him lose control, the result would be altogether unappealing.

Not wanting to linger for a repeat performance or for the brunet to decide that it was altogether alright to rid the planet of his existence, he pushed up from the floor. He would cure the injury once he was well out of the building, not now. The sheer urgency of the moment became clear to him as his eyes traveled to the bathroom door; there was no telling when the SeeD Commander would return. Kicking himself back into action, he hurriedly grabbed his gunblade from underneath the bed and with Kronos in hand, he left the apartment.

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Waiting Game

[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Thursday, 16th of October, 12:20 pm]

Squall's pulse rushed loudly in his ears as he stood in the dark, his injured fist clenching tightly around the hastily procured change of clothes. The room had no window; only a thin beam of faint light filtered through the crack beneath the bathroom door, but he didn't move to switch on the light. The darkness, along with the feel of cold tiles beneath his feet, helped distract him and take the edge of his anger, if only barely.

At the sound of movement in the other room, he stiffened, but all he could hear were muted noises, not the heavy footfalls he'd expected, hurrying towards him. Vaguely disappointed that Seifer wasn't following after him to return the favor and give him the more justified excuse of self-defense to vent his anger, he stopped listening out for indications of what the blond was doing. He had walked away, he reminded himself. He was in control. After a few calming breaths to refocus on the task he had set himself, needing to work towards a goal, he felt along the wall to locate the switch and blinked briefly as a cold halogen light flickered on.

The bathroom was small, the shower stall barely fitting in next to the sink and toilet. The edge of the sink was littered with shaving utilities, cologne, and other toiletries, the power cord of a hair trimmer dangling haphazardly to the floor. Irked by the sight, he ignored how the plug of the cord hung an inch away from a puddle of water splashed across the tiled floor and moved to place Seifer's shirt and boxers on the towel rack.

Opening the small cabinet beneath the sink to look for a towel, he felt strangely self-conscious about using things that weren't his. Seifer's things. It wasn't like he had much choice, but even this kind of dependence irritated him and fueled the simmer of his anger with the blond. After everything, he wasn't even granted the meager comfort of cleaning last night's evidence off his body in the comfort of familiar surroundings.

Frowning, he quickly straightened with a towel in hand and shut the cabinet more harshly than necessary, the brisk move instantly punished by a painful throb radiating through his backside. The towel fell to the floor as he gripped the edge of the sink with a low groan. Blind rage had dulled the pain before, but now it was starting to become impossible to ignore not because he couldn't handle the pain in itself, but because of what it meant. Jaws clenching, he wrenched his eyes closed, the urge to hit something rising as he registered everything that felt wrong in sick detail; from his sore ass to the throb of bruised skin along his neck and collarbones.

Grateful he hadn't inadvertently looked in the mirror yet, he kept his eyes closed as he sought out his ice goddess and pulled her into junction without warning, unable to muster much gentleness. Icy disapproval pricked at his mind, sharp and accusatory, but Shiva didn't deny him. Gracefully, she wove and tightened herself around the part of his consciousness that was reserved just for her with the kind of tender care that seemed to mock his loss of temper. A soothing chill swept through him, briefly relaying both her curiosity at the injuries she found on him and concern at his unusual distress, before she settled quietly in wait of his commands.

Bringing up a hand to pinch at the bridge of his nose, increasingly irritated with himself, he took a moment to organize his thoughts. About to extend an apology for junctioning her so abruptly and for such reasons, the thought was cut short by a soft nudge to his mind, telling him easily enough she had taken no offense. Quickly, he located a simple Cure spell and guided it through their junction. The bright glow of magic enveloped him and burned through his eyelids, the rapid
healing bringing instant relief as it dispelled all soreness from his body.

Releasing a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, Squall straightened when the spell had run its course and opened his eyes to stare into the mirror. Silver eyes looked back at him, iridescent and flowing like mercury, before a gentle trickle of ice tickled the inside of his skull at his unvoiced gratitude. The unnatural silver bled from his eyes, the slight frost clinging to his breaths and the edges of the mirror fading as he unjunctioned her.

Alone with his thoughts once more, feeling calmer than before, he studied his reflection. His hair was a mess, the dark circles under his eyes testimony to his lack of sleep, but all things considered he looked like his usual self. As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Taking in the lack of expression on his face, the sight entirely disproportionate to everything that had happened, he pushed away from the sink and his reflection in distaste. This was why people called him cold, but it was the way things had always worked for him; suppress or succumb, never a middle ground between the two extremes, and he refused to succumb.

Peeling off his jeans, the fabric stiff and uncomfortable at the crotch, he dropped the garment to the floor and stepped into shower stall. Twisting open the tap, he didn't cower from the brief spray of cold water as he waited for the heater to kick in and send hot water drumming down on his shoulders and back. Resolutely, he bit back feelings of shame and grabbed the shower gel, lathering a generous amount on his skin. He hesitated only briefly before he steeled himself and reached between his legs to scrub away the last traces of Seifer left on his body.

Moving methodically, he finished in quick minutes and stepped out of the shower. He toweled himself dry, put on a large t-shirt and boxers, and unavoidably ran out of things to demand his attention. For a while, he found himself staring at the bathroom door. As unappealing as the prospect of going out and facing Seifer was, he knew he couldn't stay in the bathroom indefinitely. Remembering why he'd left in the first place, he felt his composure waver.

Rinoa knew everything. Everything. Humiliation and anger mixing dangerously, he took a few deep breaths and reminded himself he shared in the blame. He had taken that pill. He was the one who hadn't even tried to resist, his behavior far from passive. Until last night, he would never even have believed himself capable of such things, drugs or no drugs. It seemed like Seifer always managed to bring out the worst in him; his judgment was never as poor as when around the aggravating blond. Blaming Seifer for Rinoa finding out was hypocritical when he shouldn't have let it happen in the first place. But looking through his cell phone... that was a different matter altogether.

Not enough to warrant breaking someone's jaw, his conscience supplied unhelpfully. He could still feel bone crack underneath his fist, see the surprise in green eyes before they briefly wrenched closed in pain. He hadn't felt a shred of satisfaction at the act. Attacking Seifer with the intent to injure left a bitter taste, and again he found himself wondering why Seifer hadn't chased after him to deal out some punches of his own.

Not much of what the blond had done and said since the previous night made sense. Confident Seifer hadn't been out for revenge, he had let his guard down. Even now, he had difficulty interpreting Seifer's offer of Avalanche and everything that had happened after as some strange form of payback, which begged the question why it had happened at all. His best bet, the only one he could wrap his head around, was the drugs having had some unexpected effect, the pills maybe of inferior quality or containing the wrong chemicals.

As things were, nothing had changed about his initial reason for following after Seifer. Things were still as unresolved as the evening before, if not more so. Confrontation was the only real
option. He would ask about the Avalanche and more importantly, the war. He would not let memories of what had happened the previous night get in the way of getting the answers he needed. If anything, Seifer's continued lack of hostility meant it wasn't too late.

Decision made, he pushed open the door and stepped into an empty bedroom, no trace of the blond. He continued into the living area, his mind running a mile a minute, but when he was greeted with nothing but another empty room, he stopped in his tracks in disbelief. He couldn't have been in the bathroom for more than fifteen minutes, but in that time Seifer had apparently left the apartment.

Stunned out of his momentum and resolve, he quickly suppressed the irrational jolt of alarm he felt at the thought that he'd missed his chance and Seifer was now long gone. The living room and bedroom were as he'd last seen them, no signs of someone rushing to pack travel essentials. Besides, Seifer could easily have done so while he was out for the count. No. Seifer simply hadn't wanted to deal with the aftermath of his confession and had bailed the moment Squall turned his back, probably expecting him to take the hint and leave.

Cowardice wasn't a trait he usually associated with Seifer, but there it was. Squall would have much preferred for the blond to throttle him in a head-on collision; fists over words he could deal with easy enough. At least an honest fight was better than nothing, better than just running off. Renewed anger curled his hands into fists.

"The basic principle of hit 'n run, Squall. That's all there's to it."

The words of wisdom Irvine had imparted to him with an easy grin some time ago, concerning the man's strategy with women, surfaced in his thoughts uninvited, causing him to freeze in place at his twisted mind. Frustration mounting, he ran a hand through his bangs and pulled at the roots to snap himself out of his train of thought. Dropping his hand, he forcefully willed his composure to return and considered his next move, the answer coming to him easily.

He would wait, either until Seifer came back or until he needed to think out a new course of action. If the blond expected him gone upon his return, he'd do just the opposite. He would not back off; he'd get what he had come for.

Looking around, he decided to deal with his clothes before anything else. He'd have to leave the apartment at some point, and he'd rather do so in his own clothing than in borrowed oversized items of Seifer's; the boxers he was wearing were already sagging uncomfortably low against his hips. He hadn't spotted a washing machine anywhere, but maybe Seifer had some detergent he could use for a hand-wash. He doubted he'd be able to use a washing machine without ruining his clothes anyway.

But nowhere, not in a single cupboard, could he locate any detergent. He considered the possibility of the apartment building having a communal laundry room, but there was no way he would go and find out wearing what little he had on. Frowning at the vicious circle, his mood not improving one bit at the realization that he'd have to ask for Seifer's help, he pushed the issue from his mind and resigned himself to the black shirt and boxers for the time being. If push came to shove, he'd just have to leave as he had intended to do the night before: shirtless and commando in stained jeans. He had faced worse.

Nausea no longer twisting his gut, the next thing that needed attending to was his empty stomach. In his search for detergent, he'd found all the cupboards fully stocked, so Seifer would hardly notice if he helped himself to something. Unlike the penthouse cupboards, he didn't have to bypass stacks of high sucrose foods to find what he needed. Apart from a ridiculous selection of different coffees and cans of dog food, Rinoa never foresaw much more than her next sugar craving when out for groceries. Seifer's kitchen told a different story; the discovery of raw meat and vegetables in
the fridge implied the man actually cooked. Frowning at the weird visual that put into his mind, he closed the fridge and pushed himself up onto the kitchen counter, armed with an apple, some cheese, and a few slices of bread.

As he took a bite of the apple, his gaze fell to his cell phone sitting on the other end of the kitchen counter, not far from the small bag of Avalanche. Eyes darkening at the sight, he looked away again.

There was no way to determine exactly what Seifer had looked through, no point in it either, and he didn't want to see Rinoa's name listed at the top of his contact list, heading every text message in his inbox. He didn't want to hear her crying voice as she failed to ask why he had hurt her in such a way. Saturday at 9 am. That was when he would deal with his sorceress. Not today.

Working through his meal on auto-pilot, his mind wandered back to the other person he had to deal with. Today. Apprehension tied a knot in his stomach, but he ignored it and instead studied the room more closely than he had the night before, more comfortable to do so without the blond's presence. Gaze drawn first by the work desk, the same thoughts emerged as before. Seifer hadn't really answered his question about the weapon parts, but he suspected it was work related, the detailed sketches too precise to just be a hobby. He remembered the sloppy and crumpled state of the class notes Seifer used to shove carelessly into the drawer of his standard Garden issue desk before dumping a big stack of Weapon Monthly's on top instead.

The bookshelves had been a surprise at first, but upon seeing most books were related to weapon materials and the fabrication of weapons, he realized he was probably right in his guess. Some of the strange artifacts displayed he could associate with a certain region or culture, some he couldn't, but their presence most likely meant Seifer traveled a good deal. Many times he had tried to imagine what kind of life the blond was living, and the realization that for the past half year he'd been only a short drive away from this place was surreal.

Sitting in Seifer's apartment, looking around, he was struck by the normalcy of it all. Not even a flashy trench coat on the hanger by the door. But somehow it was still Seifer: the practicality and optimal use of the space, the organized chaos of the work desk, the scent of metal and oil, even the stains on the coffee table. Now that he had seen it, he could not imagine any other setting, the image of Seifer leaning back in the worn couch materializing easily.

Eyes growing unfocused, he distantly regarded the couch, his mind quickly providing an overlapping view and reminding him of how they had sat there last night. How the blond had slumped back in relaxation, legs slightly spread and green eyes on him. At the time he hadn't thought anything of the situation, but now the scene screamed something of a sexual nature.

As he realized what he was thinking about, what he definitely should not be thinking about, he was appalled at where his mind had led him. The Avalanche was one hundred percent out of his system, so disgust the logical emotion he should feel. But it didn't come. Humiliation, anger, regret, self-loathing, yes, but not disgust. Afraid to probe his impressions of the previous night, he tentatively let himself recall some of it, but quickly stopped at the remembered feel of Seifer moving inside him.

Sobriety hadn't done a damn thing to change his recollection of the experience, the memory of being touched and taken by Seifer still... good. It had felt good and the thought caused the blood to drain from his face. He knew it was unrealistic to expect he'd suddenly remember pain or revulsion. He knew a repeat experience would most likely be horrible and nothing at all like the night before, but even so, he now had these memories of fake intimacy, of Seifer, that he didn't want. It complicated things in ways he wasn't prepared for. It meddled with the important
memories, the real ones, the issues he had to address.

The Seifer he remembered from his childhood and cadet years had been arrogant and challenging, never considerate. The Seifer he remembered from the war hadn't been gentle but ruthless. Until he had his answers, the only touch he should remember was the point of Hyperion pressed to his chest. Anything else would distract him from his purpose. Clenching his fists against the cool stone of the counter, his half eaten apple falling out of his hand, he tried to close the sluice gate of his memories, an impossible thing to do.

This wasn't what was supposed to happen.

"It's okay... That's what the pills are supposed to do."

Eyes darkening in anger, he felt sick to his stomach. Seifer had known. He had known. But it didn't make any sense. Seifer couldn't have known. Seifer wouldn't have offered the pill if he knew what it would lead to. He must have misunderstood; misinterpreted... It had to be the pills. Yet the way Seifer had been so confident and had immediately followed it with...

He couldn't tell the difference anymore, his memory playing tricks on his mind. Anger shifting back and forth between self-directed and accusatory, his resentment at Seifer for leaving mounted to new heights.

A loud knock came from the front door, before someone pushed down the handle in an effort to open the door. The sound startled Squall out of his internal turmoil, his eyes staring at the door before narrowing. Frustrated with himself, Seifer, and the situation in general—finding himself in the blond's apartment wearing only boxers and a t-shirt when someone was at the door—he moved off the kitchen counter and contemplated what to do.

The knock sounded again, a bit louder this time. "I know you're in there, so just open up already. Arc said you weren't due in for another hour." The voice was sulky, the elevated pitch easily giving away details about the person on the other side of the door: a young male just reaching adolescence.

Already the unexpected visitor grated at his nerves, the boy not showing any indication of leaving. Resigning himself to deal with the situation, he walked to the front door with brisk footsteps and opened the door with a glare that warned the noisy teenager to proceed with caution.

At the other side of the entrance a lanky boy stood stunned into place. He didn't look to be more than fourteen years old, yet his height didn't match his young features, already at least a head taller than other boys of a similar age. His clothes were colorful; the shirt a bright yellow, pants blue and shoes red. Curious brown eyes peered at him, short fluffy dark bangs framing the boy's face.

"Who—where's Seifer?" the boy asked, confusion clear on his face, but the brown eyes regarding him in suspicion were not innocent by any stretch of the imagination.

"He's not in," Squall deadpanned in response as he scrutinized the gangly kid standing in the hallway, looking much as if a rainbow had vomited all over his outfit. Harmless appearance notwithstanding, the kid's attitude reeked of Seifer's influence. He hadn't even managed to finish the thought yet, when it was instantly confirmed by the boy pushing his way inside and ignoring his obvious irritation at the intrusion.

"Typical," the boy started talking to himself, his gaze searching Seifer's apartment in a way that told Squall the kid was familiar with the place. "Gets home yesterday and just ignores me." The boy walked over to the work desk and picked up a couple of items one by one to inspect them more
closely, clearly unbothered by Squall's presence. "Didn't even meet up with Calder last night like he said he would." A few of the items made it into the boy's pocket.

Leaning against the doorway and not saying a word, Squall followed the boy's moves around the room, his eyes narrowing at the kid's abysmal attitude. Seifer's influence indeed. Briefly, he entertained the thought that maybe he should stop the boy from taking Seifer's things, but in the end decided it wasn't his problem if the blond liked to befriend a thieving teenager, as long as the kid left once he got what he wanted.

"Well, it's been real," the boy said as he turned to face Squall, an impish smirk on his face and colorful pockets bulging.

Hardly perturbed by the grin painted on boyish features, he merely met the kid with an unimpressed look. Without another word, mischievous expression still in place, the boy walked out of the apartment and left the front door open behind him in an unmistakable display of rebellion.

Staring at the open doorway, Squall frowned at the strange feeling of déjà vu. It had been a long while since he'd been given such lip and attitude by a kid, the cadets at Balamb Garden mostly smart enough to address him with proper respect when face to face. It hadn't had anything to do with perceived incapability concerning his rank either, as was the case with most adult's reactions to him. The kid simply didn't seem to like him and he wasn't sure whether to find that annoying or strangely refreshing.

Shaking the useless thoughts, he contemplated what the boy had said instead. The sulky complaint when the kid had been knocking at the door told him Seifer would be going in for work in an hour or so, which meant he wasn't returning any time soon. It also meant the blond indeed had fled the apartment in order to avoid him. The thought fueled his anger and stubborn decision to stay like nothing else. Moving to close the front door, he prepared himself for long hours of waiting until Seifer returned.

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[Alcauld Gardens, Thursday, 16th of October, 12:42 pm]

Eyes distant, Seifer sat in his car in silence. He heard nothing; saw nothing as he ran a finger across his cheek where Squall's fist had connected with his jaw less than half an hour earlier. The sensation in the area was still strange, slightly different to normal, phantom numbness following the slow move of his finger. He easily recalled how his teeth had been misaligned earlier, forced out of place by the brutal impact. Even the slightest movement of his jaws had made him want to punch something, just for the temporary distraction. The moment he'd been inside his car, he'd healed the injury. As always, the use of magic had caused a dull ache to cloud his thoughts, yet it was nothing compared to the excruciating pain it had replaced.

Functioning on autopilot, he'd made it to Alcauld Gardens at record speed, his mind preoccupied with replaying those last seconds spent in Squall's presence over and over again. He'd already been parked in front of the park for several minutes when he had finally noticed where his subconscious had taken him. He hadn't been surprised; it was where he usually went for a time out and to contemplate. The manmade haven was one of the few places in Esthar where everything wasn't just electric blue and silver. The walkways were still made out of the same translucent azure material that made up most other roads in the large capital, but the large gardens were filled with trees, plants, and fields of grass that stretched out into the distance.

Yet he didn't take in any of it. All he could see was the burning anger in gray-blues, eyes that were usually steely, reluctant or cold, sometimes narrowed in anger, but never blinded by fury.
He knew he had deserved it. That and more. It was what should have happened when he had first laid eyes on Squall back at the club. He'd had it coming for a long time.

He'd waited for someone to come for him after the war. He had assumed plenty would want to see him hang for his crimes, but no-one had ever come. He'd never hidden or tried to run, nor had he ever pretended to be someone else. If anyone had wanted to find him, then they easily could have. He sighed and fisted his left hand against his leg. Such thoughts were useless. He'd always sworn he'd take whatever punishment came his way; nothing had happened to change that resolution.

Yet he had run. He'd left his apartment in such a hurry he couldn't readily claim it being for any other reason than just getting the hell out of there. Thinking back on Squall's stark movements as the brunet had retreated to the bathroom, he could only try and excuse his own disappearance as a way of doing Squall a favor. The brunet obviously hadn't wanted to be in his company anymore. But he couldn't ignore the truth of the matter. When it came down to it, he had wanted only to avoid witnessing more of that unadulterated anger, that barely concealed hatred. Self-preservation had seized him in the end. It seemed when confronted like that, he wasn't able to take his punishment in the graceful manner he'd always imagined. Clenching his jaws, he pushed away the thoughts in an effort to empty his mind.

A flash of kiss-swollen lips turned upwards at the corners in a small smile and gray-blue eyes filled with rare tranquility made his chest constrict with a need to reclaim those moments. Clenching his hands once more, he felt anger at himself for even thinking of Squall like that. He just couldn't. He hadn't earned those memories. They weren't his.

Opening the door, he stepped outside and slammed it shut behind him. He needed fresh air. In long strides he entered the park, not taking in any of the greenery surrounding him nor noting where he was going. He continued forward aimlessly, focused on nothing but getting away from memories best left alone.

For a long time he carried on down one path and then the next. Passing people, mere shapes and obstacles in his peripheral vision, he kept going until he had been walking on green grass for several minutes, the city noises slowly receding into the background.

If only he'd been on time. If only he'd been at Pulse when he had planned on being there. Why did fate have to continuously deal him such a shitty hand? Just when he thought he had turned his life around, just when he had resigned himself to the fact that he'd never be the hero or great fighter he'd always dreamed of, he had been pulled straight back into the past and placed face to face with the one person who could undo it all.

He'd wanted to give Squall whatever he had wanted from him, but instead he'd returned to old patterns and had taken offense when Squall hadn't treated him exactly how he had wanted him to. He had reverted to the immature bully of his teenage years within the blink of an eye, easily forgetting that he owed the brunet everything. That he lived because the man had spared his life. And how had he repaid him? By seducing him and fulfilling one of his own fantasies without any care for what Squall wanted. Whatever he did, his egomania would always be at the center of it. Everybody had to bow down to the great Seifer Almasy. In the end, he hadn't learned a thing. He was still the same prideful, self-centered bastard he'd always been.

Running a hand through his hair, another side of him, a part of him that had thus far remained silent, chimed in. Squall had been the one to suggest they talk then speak no more than a few words and refuse to talk about even the most mundane of things. Squall had also been the one to decide to accept the Avalanche; no one had forced the brunet to do anything. And yes, what had happened might have screwed up Squall's relationship with Rinoa, but maybe what they had going
hadn't been all roses to begin with. Seifer couldn't have known Rinoa would find out. He couldn't have known the brunet would take the drug or would even respond to any of his advances. Why had Squall reacted like that? Had it purely been the drug's effects? Could Avalanche make you feel pleasure from something that disgusted you?

Confused, Seifer stopped in his tracks. Maybe Squall hadn't been completely averse to what had happened, but it had still been wrong on so many levels. In the end, he couldn't really blame anyone but himself. He'd known what the drug did and had still offered it to the brunet. He'd known he wouldn't be able to control himself. He'd known something was still going on between Squall and Rinoa.

Mind coming full circle, with no clearer idea of what to do, he sighed in resignation. He'd have to leave soon. Arc was expecting him at two and if he didn't want to be late, he'd have to start finding his way back to his car. Taking in his surroundings, he scanned the environment for a landmark that would lead him back to the parking lot.

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[Arc Balios' Weapon Shop, Thursday, 16th of October, 8:13 pm]

Cursing, Seifer eyed the bright piece of heated metal in annoyance. About to snap, he strode over to the slack tub and forced the hot piece into the cold water, fed up with his inability to produce anything worthwhile. He'd already managed to get several slight burns and one very sore finger. Ignoring the piece he had been working on, he ran a gloved hand through his hair in frustration, not caring about traces of soot clinging to blond strands.

At least Arc wasn't there to witness his blunders anymore. When the older man had been working by his side earlier, it hadn't taken long for the man to pick up on his restless frame of mind. He had sensed appraising eyes following his every move. Within half an hour of arriving at the workshop, he had managed to spill oil on a blueprint, start work on a wrong weapon and bend the handle of a dagger into entirely the wrong shape. Things hadn't really picked up since then either. In fact, he was rather certain he'd managed to set Arc back at least a couple of days without producing anything substantial in return. And just as he thought he'd finally undone the mess he'd made of the dagger, he'd made another fucking blunder and accidentally used the wrong punch, effectively ruining the design that had been part of the order.

Grimacing, he took off his work gloves and placed them on one of the messy surfaces. He'd had enough. He would come in early and try to fix his mistakes tomorrow. All day, his mind had sorted through memories of the previous night, leaving him unable to focus on what he was supposed to. His frustration escalating steadily throughout the day, he could only think of one place to go. He needed to exercise and focus on nothing but his blade.

Closing up the work shop, he made sure everything was where it should be and switched off the light as he walked through the door at the far end of the room, leading to Arc's attached residence. Walking through the small utility room, he entered the kitchen. At the old wooden table propped up right next to a wall, Arc was eating his dinner whilst making notes on some schematics.

"Hey," Seifer greeted, his eyes meeting Arc's briefly, "I'm heading off."

The old man didn't say anything in reply, just kept studying the blond, his lined face locked in contemplation. After deliberating with himself for short seconds, he nodded in the direction of the two pots still placed on top of the stove and then to the seat across from him at the table.

Relaxing somewhat from his tense pose, Seifer walked over to a cupboard and got out a plate
before helping himself to some of the leftovers. Sitting down at the table, he eyed the food for a long while before tucking in.

"This is the Valkyrie blaster edge I wanted you to do the finishing touches on. The buyer will be picking it up Tuesday afternoon. I've already finished the basics, but I need you to make sure it lives up to these specifications and looks exactly like this," the old man said as he pushed the schematics across the table for the blond to take a look at.

Turning the piece of paper around to study as he worked his way through his meal, Seifer didn't notice the old man's attention still on him. Halfway through, he nodded before swallowing. "Sure," he said as he noted the things he'd need to stay on top of. "Should be doable."

"Good," Arc remarked as he leaned back against the wall.

Looking up from the schematics, Seifer finally became aware of the other's gaze still upon him and met it with narrowed eyes, instantly annoyed at the close scrutiny.

The old man moved the technical drawing back to rest next to his empty plate without moving his eyes from Seifer's. "What's up, son?"

Green eyes narrowing further, Seifer averted his gaze as he focused on an old cut in the table, his brow scrunching up as he pondered the man's question. He didn't know what to tell Arc, nor could he promise everything would go back to normal anytime soon.

"Nothing," he said as he brought another spoonful of rice and sauce to his lips, chewing slowly on the bits of mixed in meat. He knew he couldn't fool Arc, but he also knew the man wouldn't pry. Having denied the man a proper answer, he quickly finished his meal, wanting to get out of there.

"I'll be here early tomorrow," he said as he got up from the table and placed his plate in the sink. Arc hummed from behind him in acknowledgement.

Not saying anything further, he moved to the entryway of the small house and exited into the brisk evening air. Making it to his pick up in quick strides, he got in the driver's seat and switched on the engine without any additional thought to the strained atmosphere he'd left behind. His mind was already preoccupied with the same thoughts that had plagued him the entire day.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled up in front of the SCTA, his frustration at the last twenty-four hours not abated in the slightest. As he got out of the car, he slammed the door shut, before walking over to the entrance of the training academy. He wasn't really in the mood to bump into any of his students or deal with any of the other teachers, but he needed the distraction of losing himself to physical exertion badly.

Inside, the foyer was almost empty, only a few students and Madden present in the room. Inwardly relieved he didn't recognize any of the students, he walked up to the reception and nodded at Madden. Continuing through the left hallway, he headed to men's changing rooms, quickly making his way past wooden benches and rows of lockers when he entered. At the other end of the large room, he pushed open another door labeled with an "Instructors Only" sign.

Stopping in front of a dark blue locker with his surname displayed on it, Seifer punched in his key code and waited for the sound of the hydraulic lock releasing. Quickly, he grabbed one of his uniforms and walked over to the changing area of the room.

Suited up with Kronos in hand, he stood leaning against the doorframe of the gunblade training room short minutes later. Healey's class was already well under way. Some of the students had
noticed Seifer and whispers quickly made their way through the room like ripples, curious eyes shifting his way in a predictable pattern. Remaining silent, he didn't meet any of their gazes, instead kept his eyes trained on the couple sparring in the middle of the room, the two boys receiving running feedback from the substitute instructor.

Noticing the growing inattentiveness of his students, Healey turned around and upon spotting Seifer sent the man a curt nod before turning back around without as much as a word. They'd never gotten along well, their ways of teaching differing vastly and clashing whenever one had to take over from the other. Where Seifer seemed to be a proponent of tough love, Healey found the best results came from support and praise. He believed pointing out students' mistakes only disheartened them and made them lose confidence.

Watching for a long while as the lesson unfolded, Seifer noticed things weren't looking quite as bleak as he'd originally imagined. When the students were told to pair up and practice the techniques Healey had gone over at the beginning of the lesson, he was even halfway impressed. Of course, the students would have performed even better if he had taught them the moves himself, but for a mediocre gunblader teaching them, the results weren't half bad. If only the man would stop teaching them useless parries that looked good in theory but would never be anywhere near useful in the real world, then maybe they would get somewhere. That and actually grow some balls and tell the students when they fucked up. Moves that seemed like innocent mistakes in class could easily lead to death in the field.

Engrossed in scrutinizing his student's techniques, he almost didn't notice when another person stopped to lean against the door frame right next to him. Turning his head slightly in the direction of the other man, he wasn't surprised to see Calder at his side. Nodding in greeting, he returned his gaze to his favorite students, taking enjoyment in watching their confident moves. Vaguely wondering if any of the instructors back at Garden had ever watched himself and Squall spar and derived any satisfaction from such a sight, his eyes became distant.

"I knew you'd be here," Calder said in a low voice.

Seifer hummed in response, his eyes returning to the pair of fighters that were concentrated solely on each other. "Sorry about last night," he said as he pushed away from the door frame and turned to walk down the empty hallway, fully expecting Calder to follow him.

Even though he'd only been in Seifer's presence for less than a minute, Calder knew something was up, the reserved look to green eyes quickly clueing him in. "You'd better be," he spoke, attempting to make light of the situation, but he was no less concerned when the blond's eyes only narrowed further in thought. He looked the blond over more carefully. "What happened?" he asked as his brow scrunched up in disquiet.

"It doesn't matter," the blond said, dismissing Calder's inquiry. "You ready to spar?" he asked instead, his eyes moving to regard the simplistic gunblade held in the man's hand.

"Sure," Calder replied, his concern not diminishing at the way green eyes seemed to be avoiding him and eyed his blade almost vacantly. This was a new side to Seifer; one he'd never encountered before. The blond was always armed with a cocky or flirty remark, never silent or evasive.

"It's good to see you," Calder added, attempting to ease the tension that had settled between them, but was left puzzled when green eyes didn't seem to respond to his words.

Walking ahead, Seifer led them to the main training hall. He didn't know what to say, only knew he had to fight and focus on sparring and nothing else. He needed to be rid of the images that kept plaguing his mind. When the two of them finally reached an unused spot in the large training hall,
he distanced himself and as soon as he was far enough away to gain enough force behind his attack, he lunged at Calder.

Their spar went by as usual with Seifer quickly gaining the upper hand. He was used to holding back just to prolong their fight. No one at the SCTA came close to his level. Calder was actually one of the better gunbladers there, but the man's skill was still a far cry from what he had been used to with Squall. The man's stamina, on the other hand, he couldn't complain about. They could go on for what felt like forever and even if he was left wanting on the fighting side, he'd always get a good workout.

Sweating profusely, hours later, he placed his uniform on one of the lower shelves of his locker. With a grimace, he grabbed hold of his clothes from earlier and put them on. He didn't like sweating them up, but he didn't have any other choice; bringing a towel had been the last thing on his mind when he'd left his apartment earlier that day.

After their spar, Calder had invited him to spend the night at the guy's place. He'd immediately refused, not needing any time to consider it. One way or another, he had to face everything that had happened. With a short shove to the door of his locker, he waited for it to lock up before leaving the instructors' changing room.

When he spotted Calder's gym bag and clothes strewn over one of the benches, he inadvertently cast a glance over his shoulder in the direction of the communal showers. Usually the two of them would walk out together, but he didn't have the patience to wait for Calder to finish up. Picking up his stride, without another look back, he left the changing rooms and with the barest of nods in Madden's direction as he passed the reception desk, he exited the SCTA.

Once inside his car, cold lingered around him, the last rays of sunlight lost beneath the stretch of the horizon hours ago. Placing his keys in the ignition, he hesitated as the image of gray-blue eyes glaring at him in unbridled fury appeared once more. The all too vivid memory had formed in his mind countless times already that day, and it seemed it wouldn't leave him alone. He couldn't help but wonder if a repeat would be likely in the near future, though his logic told him Squall would have left. There was no reason for Squall to stay. If Squall had wanted to cause him more harm, then the guy would have done so when he'd had the chance. With that in mind, he turned on the ignition and pulled out of the parking lot.

Temporarily distracted by traffic, he had a brief moment of respite before his thoughts once more drifted back to the brunet. Even if he never wanted to see Squall again, the thought also left him feeling strangely hollow. Cursing inwardly at himself for the unwanted sentiment, he frowned and tried to renew his focus on the electric lights whizzing by, but it was useless, his thoughts stuck in a vicious circle.

Though he'd never told the guy as much or let it show, he'd always enjoyed Squall's company—even if the guy could be a pissy anal bastard at times. The years he'd spent training with Squall, the two of them locked in constant rivalry, had by far been the best. But life had changed. He'd failed to become a SeeD even though he had felt he'd been on the right track and that he'd deserved a place in their ranks. But no one else had agreed. That was what had caused his first misstep of many. His first step away from Garden and Squall. Now they were mere strangers.

No. Squall wouldn't stay.

When he pulled in across from his apartment building, he remained sitting in the darkness of his car for long minutes. He knew the reality of returning home wasn't going to be pleasant. The thought of Squall being there, waiting for him left him with a feeling of dread, but the thought of his apartment being empty was just as unwelcome. Coming to the conclusion that he'd just have to
deal with it either way, he got out of the driver's seat and made his way to his apartment.

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Squall was bored out of his mind. Time seemed to crawl by even slower when he checked his cell phone every other minute, so he had stopped looking at it a while back. Keeping to the living room, his phone abandoned on the kitchen counter and no daylight to indicate how much time was passing, he had decided not knowing exactly how long Seifer was making him wait would help keep his frustration in check. That had been the theory at least.

Within a couple of hours he had exhausted every possible source of entertainment in Seifer's apartment. Feeling increasingly stifled in the small space, he had paced around to try and calm himself and when that hadn't worked, he tried to fall asleep on the couch in an attempt to escape his own mind and get some much needed rest. But relaxing proved impossible, the lingering presence of Seifer in the room enough to keep him from falling asleep, no matter how tired he was.

In a final desperate act to break the monotony of waiting for Seifer to return, he had started to skim through some of the man's books. Those on gunblades hadn't held his interest for long, nothing new in their pages for him to learn. Books on crafts such as forging or inlay techniques were fascinating in ways, but too technical for a leisurely read-through, so they'd quickly found their way back onto the shelves.

A book titled *Ballistics and the Art of Designing Projectile Weaponry* now rested in his lap, his fingers absentmindedly flipping the pages every few seconds. It lay open on a section concerning crossbows, but he had stopped taking anything in since the moment his eyes caught sight of a picture of the outdated pinwheel model a few chapters earlier. Little was needed to veer his thoughts down unwanted paths.

Boomerangs with propulsion mechanics, like the pinwheel, were fairly easy to handle and had been the best choice for Rinoa during the war, the girl inexperienced in battle and not especially strong, but having decent enough aim to compensate for what she lacked in training. Now the weapon, along with newer upgraded versions, lay in a box at the bottom of a closet. Towards the conclusion of the war she had relied more and more on her newfound sorceress powers and her boomerangs became unnecessary. After the war she kept up her training regime for a short while, but in the end admitted she only did so because of Squall, because of what he would think. When he reassured her it didn't matter, she had quit.

Brought up with such principles as respect for your weapon, the sight of that cardboard box always stirred contradicting feelings in him. On one hand it relieved him that Rinoa was no longer involved in life-threatening situations, warranting the use of weapons; on the other hand it only served to emphasize how different their lives had become. They had been the closest during wartime, a somewhat disturbing thought.

Flipping over another page, his eyes fell to a sketch of a pistol crossbow, but he couldn't focus on it. His thoughts no longer adhered to his attempts to keep them in check after hours of boredom and lingered on his sorceress, when suddenly faint footsteps sounded from beyond the front door. They drew nearer, grew louder and stopped only for a slight moment, before he heard the sound of a key turning in the lock behind him.

Stiffening instantly, all thoughts of Rinoa effectively interrupted, he stilled his hands against the pages of the book. It took all his willpower not to turn around and watch Seifer enter the apartment. His pulse quickened as his body tensed instinctively in response to a situation that could easily turn
Making his way to the kitchen counter, Seifer suppressed any outward reaction. Even before he opened the door to the apartment, he knew Squall was there. The light had been on, but more so, he’d felt it. Uncertain of what to expect, he schooled his expression. He would let Squall take the lead. If Squall wanted to beat him up, he'd take the beating. If Squall wanted to talk, he'd talk. Whatever the brunet wanted from him, he'd do his best to comply.

Placing Kronos on the kitchen counter, Seifer paused momentarily. Squall hadn't moved from his position on the couch. When Seifer turned around to face the brunet, he froze into place, one of his eyebrows quirking upwards. Squall was wearing nothing but a pair of too large boxers and a T-shirt Seifer easily recognized as his own.

"You're still here," he said after a moment, his voice weary. Squall was watching him closely through narrowed eyes, but it was hard to take the half-dressed man seriously, even when everything about that moment in time screamed severity.

"I thought I was free to stay," Squall stated dryly, straining to keep the resentment from seeping into his voice. Hours of waiting hadn't tempered his anger, and upon seeing Seifer's face, the blond looking as if he got tired just at the sight of him, he decided to call Seifer out on his cowardice. "You were quick to leave earlier."

"I had somewhere I needed to be," Seifer immediately said. Realizing just how untrue those words were and how he had pretty much bolted from the apartment earlier that day, he brought up a hand to rake through his hair and averted his eyes.

"Not for another hour," Squall answered succinctly, irked by the blatant lie and even more so by Seifer's uncharacteristic refusal to meet his gaze. He needed the man to acknowledge the situation, to acknowledge him, instead of just standing there. Accusation crept into his voice. "Seems like running away has become second nature to you since the war."

At the cold statement, Seifer stood stunned, feeling as if someone had him in a chokehold. He had no idea what Squall thought of him after the war, nor had he ever wanted to find out, but the realization that Squall saw him as nothing but a coward made a heavy weight settle in his chest. Attempting to focus on anything but the harsh words, he replayed Squall's other statement in his mind instead.

"How—" he started, but faltered, his brows knitting together

"You had a visitor," Squall dismissed the unfinished question. Thrown off by Seifer's subdued behavior, his anger started to deflate, making it increasingly hard to maintain a cold tone of voice. "Now would be a good time to explain yourself."

Seifer's eyes rose to meet Squall's at the firm demand. "I already told you what there is to know."

At the solemn look to green eyes, Squall realized Seifer actually believed what he was saying, that there was nothing left to discuss. Abandoning his confrontational attitude, in spite of what years of experience with the blond had taught him, he reined in the bite to his words.

"...You haven't told me a thing. In the end I'm always left to guess after your reasons."

Seifer let out a huff. "That's rich, Squall... real rich, coming from you." He narrowed his eyes in scrutiny. "But okay... if that's how you want to play it, ask me whatever it is you want to know."

His words grew harsher by the second, twisted into a challenge at the end.
"Don't turn this into some game," Squall warned, too tired to comply with Seifer's terms. "... I don't understand you or the things you do."

The dangerous glint to jade eyes instantly disappeared at the softly spoken words. "That makes two of us," Seifer supplied under his breath before sighing and taking off his coat. Already exhausted from a long day and still reeking from his workout at the SCTA, he was reluctant to continue the conversation. "Look, Squall, I—" he started, turning to look at Squall. "Do you mind if I take a shower before we continue this?"

Squall took in the blond's appearance. Seifer's tired expression more so than his sweaty appearance caused him to softly shake his head, signaling he didn't mind. He had gotten Seifer to meet him halfway, or to at least acknowledge his presence, but already he felt like he'd had to battle for the small concession. A moment of reprieve didn't seem like a bad idea.

Silently, he watched as Seifer turned around and disappeared into the bedroom without another word, the blond apparently needing the time-out just as much as he did.

Inside the bathroom, Seifer quickly disrobed and got under the hot spray of water, the brunet waiting for him in his living room distracting him from the simple task of scrubbing himself down. He still couldn't believe Squall had stayed. Even though he felt dread at their conversation to come, some of the emptiness he'd felt when walking down the hall to his apartment had disappeared. This was his chance to make up for some of his wrongs. It was obvious Squall wanted something from him, answers by the sound of it, and those he could give.

Switching off the flow of water, he began to towel himself dry in quick abrasive moves. He felt urgency spurring him on, as if a moment spent lingering would suddenly make Squall disappear. The fear was absurd; Squall had stayed in his apartment all day and wasn't exactly dressed to leave, but he hurried all the same.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, he began rifling through the drawers in his bedroom. Exchanging the damp towel for a pair of loose fitting boxers, he searched for a shirt next, when an idea occurred to him. Mind stuck on the playful train of thought, he picked out a large white cotton tee, donned it and left the bedroom.

"Thought I'd even out the battlefield," he commented with a lopsided smirk, enjoying the slight rise to fine eyebrows as Squall watched his approach from the couch.

As Seifer sat down next to him, Squall struggled to keep surprise from showing on his face. He'd been trying to steel himself for serious conversation, but the sight of the underdressed blond managed to undo the entire effort, the change from solemn to playful too abrupt to process.

Realizing he'd been silent for too long, he willed himself to stop feeling self-conscious and resolutely stomped out his sudden discomfort at only wearing boxers and a shirt. It had never mattered before, and it shouldn't matter now.

"You don't have a washing machine, not even any detergent," he explained, fixign the blond with a halfhearted glare and growing even more unimpressed when the blonde just grinned at him.

"I'll do it tomorrow. Need to clean those sheets as well," Seifer said, not giving much thought to where those traitorous words would lead both of their minds.

Acutely aware of the fact that both of them were thinking about exactly the same thing, a mix of embarrassment and heat caused an uncomfortable jolt in the pit of Squall's stomach. He sincerely hoped that Seifer's continued silence meant the inappropriateness of such a remark had caught up
with the blond. If they were going to have a proper conversation, he could do without unwanted images of Seifer surfacing in his mind. Fighting to keep his features neutral, he stared straight ahead. He didn't care to know the kind of expression the blond had when thinking of them in bed.

The minutes dragged on as Seifer waited for Squall to say something. His hand traveled idly to scratch at his neck. He didn't know what Squall wanted. He knew Squall wanted answers, but not to which questions. He'd already told Squall everything there was to know about what he'd done that morning, so it couldn't be that. Unless Squall wanted him to elaborate.

Or it could be about the war. Frowning at the mere thought, he tried to ignore the notion altogether. He wouldn't know where to begin if that was the case.

When neither of them spoke up, Squall quickly grew frustrated with Seifer's return to his atypically passive behavior. The blond obviously wasn't going to start talking any time soon, effectively ruining his hope that maybe he'd be spared the trouble of finding something to say first. He was neither adept at starting personal conversations nor very used to the act, especially with so much at stake.

He had been mistaken when he had thought himself capable of bringing up Seifer's offer of Avalanche, his reaction to the blond's earlier words having made that painfully clear, which left asking about the war. But the questions he wanted to ask were too blunt and didn't exactly qualify as "breaking the ice". He'd never bothered with such pretenses before, but something about the atmosphere seemed dangerously fragile. Not wanting to risk Seifer getting fed up with the suffocating silence that had settled between them, he resorted to the next best thing he could think of.

"... What is it that you do in Esthar?" he asked awkwardly, discomfort written all over his features at having to instigate the exchange, "You modify weapon parts for a living?"

"Seriously Squall? That's what you want to talk about?" When Squall fixed him with a glare in return, Seifer just sighed and shrugged, deciding to humor the man.

"Fine," he said, stalling as he considered how much to share. "Like I told you, I'm not really here much. I survive on the Gil I get from collecting materials, so I'm out of town quite often. Apart from that, I spend most of my time learning how to make weapons at a local weaponsmith and when I'm not doing that, I'm most likely at the Tiamat SCTA."

Features thoughtful and eyes vacant, Squall forgot about his unease as he took in the information. He wasn't surprised to hear Seifer hadn't been idle. For as long as he could remember, the blond always had several projects going on at the same time, ranging from part-time jobs to more illicit pastimes. The short explanation sparked an entire array of new questions as he wondered about what kind of materials the blond gathered and for whom, about what had brought the man to pick up manufacturing weapons instead of the more obvious mercenary profession.

Connecting the mention of the SCTA with the blond's sweaty appearance upon returning, he concluded the place had to be where Seifer preferred to train. No matter how unlikely it was for them to ever test their skills in a friendly fight again, he felt strangely relieved that the only real sparring partner he'd ever had still trained and was in excellent shape by the looks of things.

Eyeing the gunblade on the kitchen counter, a model he didn't recognize, the next question that formed in his mind seemed to take precedence over all the others. "Where's Hyperion?"

"At the academy," Seifer replied indifferently. "I keep all my old models there."
"Why?"

"I'm more there than here," was the simple reply. "And the brats seem to love using them for practice."

Staring at Seifer, Squall's eyebrows rose slightly at the answer. "You let brats handle Hyperion," he stated dryly, as if trying out how that bit of sacrilege tasted on his tongue. Unable to come to a satisfactory conclusion, his eyes suddenly narrowed in recollection.

"Your earlier visitor was some brat," he informed, his tone of voice betraying just exactly what he thought of said brat.

After a moment of thought, Seifer grinned knowingly and chuckled. "I should've known Nolan would drop by." The boy always did when Seifer returned after a long trip out, eager to get his hands on any spare materials. Remembering Squall's insinuation that he wasn't showing his blade the proper amount of respect, he frowned. "And come off it Squall. I don't let anyone touch the beauty lying up there. But Hyperion... Hyperion is history."

The sudden sting caused by the finality of Seifer's statement pulled Squall straight out of his train of thought. Falling silent, a hollow feeling settled in his chest. He had stuck with his two gunblades: Lionheart for when he needed an edge, and Revolver when he wanted to lose himself in training. Both held sentimental value, in spite of the blood he'd shed wielding them. Maybe because of the blood he'd shed wielding them. They had faced the things he had, had locked in battle against Hyperion and had helped him survive through it all. The thought of retiring either blade had never crossed his mind.

"…History," he echoed faintly, the weight of their history bleeding into the softly spoken word. The implications seemed obvious enough. Seifer had moved on and he... The fact that he was still sitting on that couch after everything that had happened clearly meant he hadn't.

It didn't take Seifer long to catch on to what Squall meant by the remark. Squall meant the war, them; everything that had happened between them. It was history, and history he would rather forget.

The air turned thick and oppressive, almost suffocating, as his memories resurfaced. He was ashamed of what he'd done. Squall's earlier accusation repeated loudly in his mind. "I didn't run," he said in a low voice. He knew he most likely wouldn't be able to change Squall's mind, but he had to try and make the man understand.

He hated that Squall viewed him as a coward. He hadn't left to avoid punishment for what he'd done or because he had been afraid of facing anyone. After time compression he'd been dead to the world for almost a month. Raijin and Fujin had taken care of him during that time and when he'd finally come to, it hadn't been in a prison or with anyone demanding retribution. Going back to face the people he hurt during the war seemed pointless by then. They'd be much better off never seeing him again.

"What choice was left for me?" he asked after a pregnant pause, not really expecting an answer. "I knew my days at Garden were over the minute I left for Timber... The teachers hated me. The students hated me. I failed three times."

His expression turned troubled, his eyebrows scrunching together in thought. He hadn't meant to expose himself that much. Resigning himself to just tell Squall whatever felt right and then let the man be the judge, he continued. "What was I supposed to do, Squall? ...After you defeated her... was I supposed to come back? To the place she nearly had me destroy?"
Surprised at the offered words, Squall shook his head after a moment of contemplation. It was a weak excuse, sounding almost as if the blond wanted to invoke pity, which couldn't be right. Squall didn't do pity, not for himself, not for anyone else. There was only responsibility and the choice to take it or not. Regarding Seifer with serious eyes, a slight frown in place, he voiced his thoughts.

"You did run away... Not from some life you didn't want or a place that wouldn't welcome you back... You ran from the people you owed an explanation."

"Who'd listen to what I had to say? No one did before the war... why would they care after?" Seifer asked, an edge of bitterness creeping into his voice at Squall still stating he had run.

"That's it? Nobody ever cared, so that excuses you?" Squall replied grimly, instinctively reacting to the resentment lacing Seifer's words. "To this day I don't know what possessed you to do what you did... Why you..."

Trailing off, he had a difficult time keeping his neutral mask in place. Nobody had cared about him either, back then, but he hadn't run off after a sorceress, hadn't killed indiscriminately or raided villages in retaliation. Or tortured.

Jaws clenching, he abruptly turned his gaze away from the ex-knight and nearly stared a hole into the coffee table as he tried to shake the memory of green eyes staring at him with acidic loathing, shattering pain tearing through him as the blond's hand rose in signal.

It wasn't until that first jolt of electricity that he had realized Seifer would kill him when ordered to. Disbelief had quickly been followed by an intense feeling of betrayal that was disproportionate considering they hadn't even been friends. He'd never cared about what anyone thought of him before, but the unadulterated hatred he had seen in Seifer's eyes had hurt, the moment frozen in his memory with sharp clarity.

Realizing this wasn't as much about what he had or hadn't done as much as Squall's need to understand, Seifer briefly closed his eyes. Maybe on some level that was part of why he hadn't returned. Apart from an apology, he didn't have anything to offer. He couldn't explain it, he couldn't justify it, it was just the way things had happened.

"The answer you're looking for isn't that simple. And no, it didn't excuse me. I know nothing ever could," he said, his words slow and measured.

Hearing the defeat in Seifer's voice, Squall turned his gaze back to the blond. As he studied the ex-knight's face, everything about the blond too disparate from his memories of the war, Squall remembered the strange apology and equally somber expression Seifer had worn the evening before. Though it all basically amounted to an admission of guilt, the way Seifer was behaving told him there had to be more to it. As he had feared.

Eyes taking on an unwavering edge, he banned the possible implications from his mind and focused on getting the truth, however ugly. "Nothing about the war was simple. A lot of things weren't as they seemed," he stated firmly. "I don't want easy answers. I want to understand."

Seifer didn't move his gaze to meet Squall's. Instead he leaned forward and with his elbows resting on his knees, he wove his fingers through his hair. He didn't want to return to those memories. Not fully. Even blurry flashes of what he'd done made his stomach roll.

Remembering that first moment when he'd encountered Ultimecia back in Timber, he felt bile rise at the back of his throat. If only he hadn't gone. But by then he'd realized Garden was no longer the
place for him, and confident in his knowledge that Squall and the two other rookie SeeDs assigned to Rinoa's mission wouldn't succeed, he decided the least he could do when starting out his new life was to help his ex-fling and outshine his old rival. The irony of pushing Rinoa into the hands of a sadistic sorceress and Squall saving her wasn't lost on him. But those were just a few of the many memories that haunted him.

Brown lifeless eyes stared back at him as he watched blood trickle from the still fresh wound—a perfect gash he had cut deep into the cadet's throat. He'd recognized the boy and knew he'd been recognized too. They'd sparring a couple of times at a gunblade training camp a few of years back.

More images of unmoving bodies followed, all slain down in the name of his mistress. He'd always been quick about it, unless she had demanded... more. Assaulted by the familiar waves of emotions that surfaced whenever he lingered too long the past, his body grew heavy. He closed his eyes. "I—" he started, but he couldn't continue when the image of charred corpses thrown onto piles formed behind closed lids. The putrid stench of rotting flesh mixed in with the sweet smell of burned skin was still too clear. It made him want to stop breathing just to escape it.

"I just—" he tried, but the words still wouldn't come. Everything ached. Everything was wrong, and it would never be anything but. The only way he had managed to get through so far was by ignoring the past. "I can't," he said simply, the words barely audible.

Squall didn't dare disrupt the blond's internal struggle, his own disquiet mounting at seeing Seifer's entire body slumped forward, turning in on itself in an unmistakably defensive move. Green eyes wrenched closed one second and stared at nothing with a haunted gaze the next, the man's white-knuckled grip on blond hair tightening. He'd seen a lot of things during his time as commander and he knew what trauma looked like, what it felt like. In that moment he knew his doubts had been right, and the realization chilled him to the bone.

He didn't understand how, though. Matron had been possessed, an entirely different and unrecognizable persona, but Seifer had been himself. Or at least that was how it had seemed at first. The blond had known who he was fighting, had recognized each of them, but that hadn't stopped him. Ultimecia had done something else to Seifer, Squall realized. Confronted with the blond's naked distress, he was afraid to hear exactly what.

Tempering the memories that were still too raw, Seifer let out a heavy sigh. He knew Squall deserved some kind of explanation, yet he never expected the man to need it. Squall's behavior made a lot more sense now. That's what Squall had wanted back when they'd first met: the answer to why his sparring partner and rival throughout his teens had turned into a monster. Steeling himself, Seifer forced his next word past reluctant lips. "Okay."

Sitting entirely still with his eyes closed, he fought the urge to get the hell out of there. He'd never spoken to anyone about what had happened during the war, not even Raijin and Fujin. After the war, after he'd come to, they'd simply avoided the topic. They had acted like nothing had happened and had continued on with a clear focus on the future instead. On a rare occasion they had spoken of people they'd known before the war and even then Raijin and Fujin had been careful with which names to mention. Whenever an unfortunate one slipped by, they had looked almost apologetic.

He hadn't told Calder either. Nor Arc. Not a single person. He knew he wouldn't have been able to start over if he had, and since no one had wanted him dead or thrown into jail, he'd decided to make the most of his life. He couldn't have done that with the overwhelming burden of his past weighing down his every step. Squall would be the first one he'd tell. After tonight he'd leave it all behind again.

"I'm not proud of what I did," he said, wanting to make that perfectly clear from the start. Whatever
Squall would make of his words, he didn't want him to think he looked back on any of it fondly.

"At the time it seemed like the obvious thing to do... I felt important, respected... understood. She wanted me as her knight. Wanted me. No one had ever wanted me before. And Garden... Garden was no longer an option."

Taking a moment to collect his thoughts, he paused. He didn't like admitting that his base need to be wanted and needed had been at the root of it all. That and his vanity.

"I knew everyone would envy me. The valiant knight, Seifer Almasy." He snorted at the irony of those words. "She never told me what her plan was. Not in the beginning at least. I just followed her blindly, tried to prove my worth."

There was another long pause as he searched for words to explain things he had only considered before and never spoken out loud.

"We were brought up to fight anyone for the right amount of money. Doing it for power and fame didn't seem that much different. But it was weird fighting you and the others. Something didn't feel right, but at the time it seemed inconsequential."

At the beginning he really hadn't noticed anything different. It was only gradually that he became aware some of his thoughts weren't truly his. He didn't know how to describe it. Because it all came from within his own mind, he had just slowly accepted that maybe he did like forcing information out of people and that maybe he did hate Garden and SeeD. After all, he'd never fit in, so growing resentment would only be natural. And he had always liked to show he was the one in control, so what did a little pain matter?

It had started out like that—small changes that had seemed plausible, merely new facets to his personality that he hadn't really liked as much as accepted. He didn't know how to explain it to Squall though. Words were failing him, and it didn't help that a large part of him wanted to let it all remain unsaid in the first place.

"It's hard to distinguish my own thoughts from hers. My own memory. My own will," he spoke in a low voice, finally finding some words. He wasn't sure they were the right ones or if they got what he felt and remembered across, but they were the only ones he could speak.

He'd been surprised one day when he'd felt the inexplicable urge to just have his mistress right then and there. Sexual urges had never been part of his life back then. After his failed experiences with Fujin and Rinoa he had simply sublimated any sexual frustration into sparring with Squall. In the beginning he had been conscious of it; his shift from needing sexual release to taking it out on his rival. But in the end he'd stopped feeling that initial need to vent and had started to only feel the need to spar.

Yet he hadn't questioned the urge when it had reappeared, he had only been surprised at the newfound lust. And it only made sense when his mistress eagerly gave in to him. After all, who else would she want?

He hung his head lower. He didn't want to tell these things to Squall, yet knew he had to if he was to make him understand. "She made me find pleasure in the most disgusting things. It was like I was reduced to primal urges. Anger, greed, lust, envy, pride... Whenever her influence receded, my body would be drained and I'd feel sick. I didn't want to keep on going. I just wanted it all to go away. I couldn't stand the thought that she'd come back for more."

That was how he'd finally realized something was wrong and that some of the things he'd noticed
changing hadn't been entirely himself. He didn't know what had caused it or why it had happened, but in the span of a minute, total clarity had taken hold of him, the veil of his mistress' influence lifting. In that moment he had understood everything; how all he had done was sick and disgusting and how he had never wanted any of it. But it hadn't lasted long, nor the rare moments of lucidity that had followed. Everything had just become more and more off.

He moved his fingers to knead at his forehead in an effort to forestall the headache that was building there. As his thoughts and memories led him back to when he'd chained Squall to the prison wall, to when he'd been in charge of torturing the man, his features tightened.

"When you... at D-District..." he started, his voice low and strained. "Her disdain for you consumed me." She had hated Squall. Truly and utterly and without restraint. The first moment of clarity after he'd put Squall through pure cruelty, he no longer doubted something was wrong. Regardless of having ended up on different sides of the war, torturing one of the few people he ever cared about told him his mind wasn't right.

"When you were on that cross... it felt amazing. It was like before, only better. I had absolute power over you. Even though you had everything I'd ever wanted. Everything I'd worked for. It didn't matter. Only I did." Even speaking the words felt traitorous and repulsive. He hated what he'd done, yet he could never forget it. He could never erase those memories.

"I tried to end it after that."

That had been his solution in the end, when everything had become too painful. He tried twice, but his mistress had caught on and had no longer allowed him the periods without her influence. He didn't know why she'd ever allowed those moments in the first place. To show him her power? To show how little control he had? Or just to make him suffer? Whatever the reason, it was obviously no longer worth the risk of losing her lapdog.

"Her bond was too strong. Raijin and Fujin saw it in me. They tried to help."

But by then it was too late. Speaking the words of his mistress, he'd driven them away. It was a wonder they had come back for him in the end; his sorry ass hadn't been worth saving. It took months to even start questioning that belief, to get his life back on track.

"When you defeated her, it hurt like nothing else. It tore my mind apart." His words were laced with remembered pain as he leaned to rest against the couch, his closed eyes facing the ceiling as he tilted his head back. "It's a wonder Raijin and Fujin got to me in time. I still can't remember the first month after time compression."

Not a single memory existed between the end of the war and the moment Fujin had materialized before his eyes as a blur of silver, red, and blue, slowly coming into focus. Her expression changed from stark to relieved as she shouted out Raijin's name and hovered over him all at once. After that, it had taken him almost three weeks to do any normal physical activities or hold Hyperion properly again; weeks that had been filled with reliving memories of what he'd done.

"For a long time I wished you'd killed me in one of our battles. At least then it would have been over."

He hadn't felt like he had deserved to go on, but in the end his survival instincts had kicked in, and he'd started to focus on the simple day-to-day tasks and on getting back into shape. With Ultimacia no longer there to use him, he wouldn't take the coward's way out.

As silence settled between them, he hoped Squall wouldn't ask any questions or want him to
elaborate. There wasn't anything left to say, and he didn't want to return to those thoughts any longer. When time stretched on and no questions came, he slowly allowed some of the tension that had built up in his muscles and expression to flow from him, reassured that the conversation was drawing to its close.

Having remained silent throughout Seifer's explanation, Squall sat frozen in place. His mind reeled with taking in the magnitude of what he had just been told. But it was Seifer's last words that had his heart in his throat, tight and painful, as their meaning sank in.

*I wished you'd killed me.* With his gaze glued to Seifer, realization crashed down on him. Images of past fights appeared before his mind's eye. *Hyne, I could have.* All those times after D-District when he had faced the blond with nothing but resentment and dutiful resolve... He had resigned himself to the possibility of having to kill the knight.

He wished he could say Seifer was still alive because he had made the choice deliberately, but he knew that wasn't true. It was sheer luck that he had been able to keep the frenzied ex-knight at bay without needing to inflict lethal injuries. If the others hadn't been there to back him up, he knew he wouldn't have hesitated to resort to more ruthless tactics. If anyone, it was Rinoa that had continued believing in Seifer, right until the end. It was only afterwards, when she had learned of some of the things Seifer had done, that her opinion had started to waver. Ironically enough, that's when his own doubts had started to surface.

He had been so blind.

Too many times he'd been only a heartbeat away from taking Seifer's life, too many last second dodges and parries keeping Lionheart from lodging into the blond's chest. And those were just the times when he had been the one fighting Seifer, other opponents and perils not included. For a moment the unlikely odds of having Seifer alive and sitting next to him choked the air from his lungs, but his relief was quickly replaced with guilt.

All this time he hadn't known what to think, whether he should hate Seifer or himself. He'd hoped his suspicions had been wrong, that he had just been seeing ghosts. He had theorized that maybe he had erroneously read some kind of mutual understanding and tentative companionship where there had been none, distorting his memories of the blond.

However irrational, being the betrayer was the heavier burden. Seifer hating him and fighting him, that he could learn to come to terms with. Having turned his back on Seifer when the blond needed help the most... He couldn't stomach such a thing.

"...I'm sorry..."

"Don't," Seifer said firmly upon hearing the apology. The instant dissuasion was born out of pure reflex, the thought that Squall didn't have *anything* to apologize for as far as they were concerned deeply ingrained in his mind.

"Just don't," he repeated with more force, finally opening his eyes to glare at the ceiling. He *hated* the upset quality in Squall's voice and he *hated* that Squall *dared* to apologize to him. *He* was always the one that screwed up Squall's life, not the other way around. He did *nothing* but fuck everything up.

"I *hate* that I keep doing this," he said as he pushed himself up from the couch, his jaws clenching. He needed to get out of there and away from Squall. He couldn't take it if he had to listen to Squall speak another word that wasn't blaming or loathing; he deserved nothing else.
Squall remained absolutely still, his gaze locked on Seifer. The blond's eyes looked like those of a caged animal, searching the room for an escape. Swallowing thickly, he choked on the words lying on his tongue. All he could come up with were words of apology, but none of them mattered, none of them could change a thing.

Troubled beyond words, Seifer headed for the bedroom without as much as a glance in Squall's direction. Getting into a pair of worn dark jeans at record speed, he reemerged moments later, fully dressed.

"I-I need to go..." he said, still unable to meet Squall's gaze as he grabbed his jacket and gunblade. He had to get away.

Unwilling to let Seifer go, Squall rose from the couch reflexively to follow after the blond. But after just one step he came to a stop again, rooted in place by the absolute revulsion and distress on Seifer's face as the man seemed near frantic in his need to be anywhere but near him. That expression told him everything he needed to know. That face was the true extent and nature of his mistakes.

Watching Seifer cross the room in the direction of the front door, he failed to find the words that would make the blond stay. His shoulders slumped, his brow furrowing in sorrow as he realized that this was it. No second chances. Only this feeling of helplessness and regret.

"...Seifer."

The name slipped past his lips almost soundlessly. The blond simply continued on in his determined stride without even the briefest of looks in his direction, either too caught up in his thoughts or ignoring him intentionally. The closing of a door had never sounded so final as it did then.

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Squall stared at the front door.

After barely half an hour in his presence, Seifer had left again. Thirty minutes was all the blond had been able to endure. Now that he had a deeper understanding of why the blond had been behaving so strangely around him, so uncharacteristically subdued, he could no longer muster any anger at Seifer's choice to run away.

His eyes remained fixed on the front door while his mind replayed Seifer's words over and over. He couldn't organize the chaos of his thoughts. Instead small revelations came to him one at a time as everything sank in slowly, unforgivingly.

*It's hard to distinguish my own thoughts from hers. My own memory. My own will.*

Mind-control. That's what everything Seifer had said boiled down to. That's what Ultimecia had done to him, and it was far worse than possession. From what Matron had told him, the experience had left her with little more than vast blackouts, the time that had been stripped away from her the only cost. She had once admitted that years of fearing the arrival of Ultimecia and the race against time to make the necessary preparations had weighed more heavily on her and her marriage than those three months of possession had.

The same had been true for Rinoa. He could recall her wide, hazel eyes, filled with unshed tears, her arms trembling while refusing to relinquish their hold on him as they sat silently on the bridge of the Ragnarok. They had watched the last dying twitches of the Lunar Cry as it poured down to the surface of the blue planet below, the unnatural and eerie glow of the red moon setting the entire cabin alight, but Rinoa hadn't been able to remember her own part in what had happened—how she had freed Adel and sent the sorceress' broken tomb back down to the planet with that stream of monsters. His fists tightened at the realization that Seifer hadn't been so lucky, that Seifer had been forced to *live* through everything Ultimecia had used him for.

Not knowing was a blessing. He knew that for certain now. Even though both Matron and Rinoa felt guilt over not having enough strength to fight off Ultimecia's intrusion, they would never be burdened by things they couldn't remember doing. Not truly. No one would think to blame them. No one had caused Matron unnecessary stress by filling her in on the more gruesome details of the things Ultimecia had used her for.

No. What Ultimecia had chosen to do to Seifer was much worse. She had kept her knight consciously aware of everything she made him do, while maintaining just enough of the blond's behavioral patterns to prevent anyone from helping him, at least at first. By the time Seifer had seemingly lost his mind at Lunatic Pandora, too much death had been caused by his hands for anyone to *want* to see his madness as a symptom of something more.

No, that wasn't true.

*Raijin and Fujin saw it in me. They tried to help.*

They were the only ones. He had scoffed at such blind loyalty at first and had labeled the tendency of the bizarre duo to jump off after the blond no matter how high the bridge or how deep the fall as stupidity. It was only later he had come to realize that Raijin and Fujin had known damned well
what they were doing, more so than anyone else. Now he couldn't be more grateful for that "blind" loyalty. It had saved Seifer's life.

All he had done was push Seifer closer to the ledge. Defeat the sorceress. Defeat the knight. That was all he had seen. That's how much their shared childhood and years of sparring and rivalry had been worth in the end.

_Her disdain for you consumed me. I tried to end it after that._

That meant Seifer hadn't _wanted_ to torture him, right? That the hatred shining darkly in those green eyes hadn't been Seif—

_End it._

Starting from his misplaced relief as the true meaning of those words sank in, their _only_ meaning, Squall slumped back down on the couch. He couldn't imagine it, couldn't wrap his head around a statement that was _wrong_ in so many ways. Someone as headstrong and fearless as Seifer wouldn't just _opt out_. For him to have considered such measures... _No_, to have _attempted_ such measures... Hyne, he didn't know why the attempt had failed, all that mattered was that it _had_.

His heart tight in his chest, Squall felt sick at how those words had actually briefly caused him to feel relief. In light of everything Seifer had told him, D-District was nothing in comparison. Even if Seifer hadn't hated him at the time, he sure had done enough to earn the man's hatred afterwards. Seifer had needed his help, and he had tried to _kill_ the blond instead. If he had expected revenge before, then now he was even more confused as to why Seifer hadn't taken the opportunity to settle the score between them.

Remembering how he had broken Seifer's jaw earlier that day, a thought occurred to him. _He_ was the violent one, not Seifer. The assumption that the blond would want revenge in the form of violence was based on how the blond had behaved towards him during the war. When finally face to face, though, Seifer hadn't shown the slightest inclination toward violence. His own contemplations of revenge had been very real however. If Seifer had shown the slightest bit of satisfaction at what had happened during the war...

_He_ was the violent one.

Anything Seifer had done, he had done unwillingly. The same didn't apply to his own actions during the war. Ordered to assassinate a sorceress without any reason as to _why_, he had simply obeyed, unconcerned with the moral implications. At the time he hadn't _known_ this particular sorceress was bad news; he had been told so in very little words and it had been enough to agree to assassination. He would have murdered his Matron at seventeen, unknowingly and uncaring. Always questioning the reasons and the whys, truly thinking for himself—that had been Seifer's strong suit. Not his. He had simply complied with what orders or circumstances had demanded from him.

He had killed Galbadian soldiers unflinchingly. He couldn't really remember which one had been the first, because the act had seemed inconsequential. A man's death had seemed _inconsequential_, and to this day he couldn't say his mindset had changed much when an enemy stood between him and his mission's objective. Detachment. Cold, calculated detachment. Even his eventual resignation to fight and possibly kill Seifer had come with a disturbing lack of hesitance.

He couldn't help but think that if their roles had been reversed, the end result would have been vastly different. Seifer wouldn't have followed the senseless orders he had. The blond would have gotten to the bottom of things, on his own if necessary, just like he had set course for the Dollet
communication tower and went to Timber on his own, damned the consequences. If SeeD hadn't ordered retreat but had seized that tower, if Vinzer had been eliminated before he could install Ultimecia at the head of the Galbadian government undemocratically, then the war might have gone drastically differently with a lot less casualties.

Behind Seifer's authority issues lay a sharper mind and keener instincts than anyone had ever given the blond credit for. He, on the other hand, had learned how to fight dirty the hard way, how to think outside the box and question everything at all times. These were things that came naturally to Seifer.

That's why Ultimecia had chosen Seifer, he realized. To use the man's abilities to her advantage, before they would be used against her.

He couldn't process any of it any longer. The implications of everything Seifer had told him were too far-reaching, shedding an entirely new light on the war and his own role in it. He wished that he hadn't asked, that he had never called out after Seifer on the streets. Knowing the truth was useless when there was nothing he could do to change things. All it had amounted to was tearing open old wounds and forcing Seifer to recount memories better left forgotten.

He couldn't stay at Seifer's apartment. The blond had left for the very obvious reason of escaping his presence, and somehow he knew the man wouldn't return as long as he was still there. It wasn't his place to impose on Seifer's home any longer than he already had, on the man's new life. Their dealings with one another would end here; it was the least he could do.

Slowly Squall stirred from where he was standing by the couch, feeling numb and cold. Remembering his state of undress, he moved his eyes from the front door and started to take in his surroundings again. If he was to leave, he'd need some clothing. A simple problem with a simple solution, hardly worth the fuss he'd been making over it earlier that day. At night there wouldn't be many people around to witness his disheveled appearance anyway.

Walking into the bedroom, he gathered his soiled items and got dressed. The borrowed boxers found their way into the bathroom's laundry basket; the borrowed shirt Seifer would just have to miss. Grabbing his cell phone and patting his pockets to make sure his keys were still there, he came to a halt at the front door, hesitating. He felt as if he was fleeing a crime scene.

What was done was done, he reminded himself. No point in looking back and lingering when all that was left of their brief reunion were rumpled sheets and an empty bottle of Galbadian Bluewhistle. All he had to do was close the door behind him and leave.

Easy enough.

Willing himself into action, he stepped outside. As he walked down the hallway and called up the elevator, he quickly stomped out the absurd and pointless thought that now he'd have to sit by Seifer's door when waiting for the man to return. Mouth dry, he crossed the dilapidated looking entrance hall. Within moments, he was standing outside, the chill autumn wind blowing his bangs into his eyes.

Shrugging his arms closer to his body in an effort to keep warm, he walked down the narrow street. There was no point in memorizing the street sign or the address, but he did so anyway. The little piece of information was the only comfort he had as he put more and more distance between himself and Seifer's home.

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The underground parking lot was cast in a dim light, the soft hum of the overhead lamps the only discernible sound. Staring at the empty parking space next to his, Rinoa's license plate number labeling it as hers, Squall reminded himself that he had counted on her absence. The plan was to go in while she was away, get what he needed and leave.

Keys in one hand, Rinoa's purse gripped tightly in the other, he crossed the low ceiled space towards the elevators. Briefly he wondered where she had gone, who she was staying with or whether she was alone, only to immediately frown at his pointless thoughts. Rinoa had plenty of friends in Esthar; she wouldn't be alone if she didn't want to be.

He wondered if Seifer had any places to go to this late at night, when home wasn't an option.

Trying to keep his thoughts from coming, Squall focused on the pull of gravity at the pit of his stomach as the elevator jolted into motion and ascended to the penthouse. No barking followed in greeting as he approached the front door, no sound of paws skidding through the entrance hall towards the stranger on the other side. Apparently Rinoa had taken Angelo with her, which meant she wasn't planning on returning any time soon. He would hurry anyway.

As he unlocked the door and entered, Squall couldn't shake his discomfort at returning there. He felt as if he was stepping into one of Ellone's dreams of the past. One day had changed and ruined so much more than any period of time away on missions ever had. His eyes wandered to the little side table by the door, to where no note would be waiting for him this time around, telling him where Rinoa had gone and for how long. Tearing his gaze away, he made his way up the stairs.

For a little while he stood in the doorway of Rinoa's bedroom without entering. Clothes lay in a messy heap on the bed, no doubt from when she had packed some of her things. Walking over to the vanity table, he was relieved to see that she had taken several of her magic inhibitors. He placed the purse that had been sitting in the backseat of his car on the table and got out the twin bracelets he had tossed in the handbag in his haste. They were the inhibitors that seemed to work best for Rinoa; he hoped she would be fine without them. Placing them in clear sight, along with the pills, he quickly left the room that smelled of a mix of her perfumes, smelled like her.

Briskly he made his way to the guest room and closed the door behind him, drinking in the welcoming neutrality of the room. Ignoring the urge to lean against those bland walls and not stir for long minutes, he instead reached for his small duffel bag under the bed. He had brought it with him when he had arrived a few days earlier, but there wasn't much in it, barely two changes of clothing.

Not wasting any time, he filled a second, larger duffel bag with the least offending items he could find in the walk-in closet, not too bothered in his selection when his preferred gear was in his quarters back at Garden anyway. Making quick work of gathering what little possessions he had at the penthouse, he retrieved his uniform, workbag and gunblade cases. Within ten minutes, he was back in the entrance hall.

There was nothing left for him there, no reason to stay. He had switched the lights off, was ready to leave, but as he reached for the doorknob, his hand hesitated and moved for the key in his pocket instead. Slowly he unfurled his fingers, the contour of the key pressed harshly into his palm. He stared at the small piece of metal, realization striking him unexpectedly: attachment, where he thought there hadn't been any.

Not all of it had been bad. He might never have enjoyed his time in Esthar much, and might never
have felt like he belonged there, but it was where Rinoa was. Where she had always been, waiting for him. Her presence had provided him with anchorage whenever he had needed it; she had given him a place of normalcy he could always return to. Even when things had been at their bleakest between them, she had been there for him.

Brow furrowing, Squall slowly placed the key onto the side table with far less resolve than he would have preferred. He wouldn't come back; the key would tell her as much. The last thing he wanted was to chase her from the home she had made for herself. Keeping that thought firm in his mind, he hoisted his bags onto his shoulders, picked up his two gunblade cases, and left for a second time that evening.

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[Calder Madar's Apartment, Vascarroon Building, Friday, 17th of October, 2:27 am]

Torn from his sleep by the loud rapping on his front door, Calder eased himself out of bed. It wasn't hard to imagine who would be visiting at the late hour; he only knew one person capable of showing such disrespect for other people's sleeping habits. Wondering why Seifer would be at his door after the man had declined his earlier offer of spending the night together, he forced himself awake.

As the knocking resumed, he picked up his pace and opened the door. The artificial light of the hallway cast sharp shadows along the blond's face, Seifer's stark expression far removed from the smirks and grins Calder was used to.

Standing back, he waited for the blond to come inside. He couldn't remember the last time Seifer had dropped by unexpectedly for anything but a quick bout of sex. When Seifer didn't enter, the blond's expression void of any emotion, Calder couldn't help but feel concerned. He was almost startled when Seifer finally spoke.

"Can I crash here?" Seifer asked, his eyes traveling to meet Calder's.

"Sure." When Calder closed the door behind them, darkness filled the room. Watching as Seifer continued into the living room, neither of them said anything.

Shrugging off his jacket, Seifer wasn't sure how to approach the situation. He knew Calder was expecting him to say or do something, yet the man remained silent. Pushing away from where he'd stillled, he headed for the man's bedroom, wanting to avoid conversation for the time being.

He'd spent the better part of an hour just sitting in his pickup without any clear idea of what to do. He didn't want to return to his apartment to deal with Squall. Reliving memories of the war had drained him. Nothing good had come from it either; instead of making things better, he had upset Squall. He didn't want anyone to pity him—hearing Squall apologize had been more than he could handle. He'd had to get the hell out of there after that.

Walking to the left side of the bed, he undid his boots and let his pants drop to the floor. He would go to bed and sleep; forget about everything else.

Calder watched the blond get ready for bed, uncertain whether he should say something to try and figure out the reason behind Seifer's behavior. When the blond got into bed without another word and turned his back to him, he had his answer.

His eyes traveled the body he knew so well. He'd missed Seifer. He always did when the blond left for his trips out of Esthar. He'd been eager for a night of fun with Seifer back in town and couldn't
help but wonder what had gone wrong. Had something happened while Seifer's had been away? It seemed unlikely; Seifer had sounded fine when they'd talked on the phone. Maybe there'd been a problem at Arc's?

With a frown he got into bed as well. Returning to his earlier position, the comfortable warmth of the covers welcomed him, but more than anything he felt the dip in the mattress and the silent presence at the other side of his bed. He turned and regarded Seifer's back. He hadn't expected any surprises to surface after this long. Resisting the urge to move closer and steal some of Seifer's body heat, he turned back around and closed his eyes.

Once Calder's movement settled down at the other side of the bed, Seifer eased his grip on the duvet. On top of everything else, he didn't have the patience to deal with Calder. It was hard enough having to share a bed, but he knew he'd never have heard the end of it if he'd gone for the couch. At least this way Calder seemed to accept his behavior.

He tried to empty his mind. He wanted to sleep and not think; he'd already spent all day doing nothing but brooding and he hated brooding, but image after image from his past kept surfacing in his mind. Memories from the war and the last twenty-four hours blended together. None of them lingered long enough for him to fully consider, just long enough to leave behind a bitter taste.

But then one image froze. A chill crawled up his spine as he stared straight into the eyes of his mistress. Her poisonous gaze wouldn't leave him alone. She was beckoning him... laughing as she seduced him, the mockery in her tone only thinly veiled. She made him feel like he owned the world, like he could control everyone.

The quiet creak of a door resounded in the darkness. A different darkness. Seifer no longer felt the mattress beneath him as he walked further into the house, following the sound. His gaze landed on small fingers curling around the edge of a wooden door. Frightened eyes peeked at him from behind it, immediately followed by the sound of light footsteps quickly padding away. With a soft press he pushed the door open fully. Warm rays of afternoon sunshine fell in through the cracks between the wooden planks that made up the walls, casting the room in a soft glow. A tiny girl stood in one of the corners of the room, her form trembling as her gaze darted to the weapon in his hand. At the sight of its sharpened edge, her eyes widened, and tears gathered in them.

Bringing his index finger to his lips, Seifer indicated for her to stay quiet and sent her a warm smile. Carefully, he placed his blade against one of the walls and watched as the girl stopped trembling. Not saying anything, he walked closer until he was just across from her, his smile never faltering. Easing down onto one knee, he reached out and tucked a stray brown lock behind one of her ears. Placing his finger against her lips briefly, he widened his smile.

"You're a good girl," he whispered, softly placing a hand against one of her arms. "Doing what your parents told you to: staying quiet."

"You need to keep that up."

After a brief moment of contemplation, she gave a small nod. He patted her arm gently.

"Come on, I'll get you out of here," he added and moved his hand to take hold of her smaller one, getting back onto his feet.

Slowly, they made their way to where Hyperion was resting against the wall. Grabbing hold of the blade, he looked at the girl and gave her hand a soft squeeze. A small smile appeared on her lips. Neither of them said anything as they walked out of the house.
Stepping onto the porch, he felt her small hand loosen up in his hold to break away; she'd spotted her parents. He tightened his grip.

Nothing but darkness greeted him after that.

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[Calder Madar's Apartment, Vascaroon Building, Friday, 17th of October, 6:15 am]

Loud beeps broke the silence, forcing Seifer to open his eyes. Groaning at the sound pulling him from his dreamless sleep, he felt the warmth pressed close disappear. As he rolled onto his side, he caught a glimpse of Calder leaving the room for a morning shower. Kneading his forehead, the hour far too early for any semblance of coherent though, he sighed and turned to lie on his back once more.

When he tried to move again, his limbs felt too heavy and refused his commands. Unable to break through the debilitating lethargy, he grimaced and closed his eyes. This was why he avoided thinking back on the war.

The image of the curly-haired girl smiling at him caused the chasm within him to open wide. Thoughts of her would consume him if he lingered on them for too long. They had in the past. Sorting through other memories of the war instead, he didn't notice when Calder returned to the room.

At the sight that greeted him, Calder frowned. Usually Seifer was dead to the world at that hour of the morning, but instead, jade eyes were locked on the ceiling. Calder ran a hand through his hair. He'd never experienced Seifer brooding before. Somehow he knew forcing the issue would only get him on the blond's bad side though. Resigning himself to remain quiet, he got dressed instead.

"I'm off," he announced, waiting in place. Not even a twitch to Seifer's expression betrayed the blond had heard him. As he left, he stopped briefly in the doorway to glance over his shoulder. "We're still on for later, right?"

"Yeah," Seifer replied gruffly as he moved into a sitting position, his eyes traveling to the window. With a brief nod, Calder left the room.

Watching the darkness outside, Seifer felt somewhat relieved that in spite of everything that had happened, nothing had really changed. He'd spar with Calder that evening, as was their habit whenever he wasn't out on one of his trips. Knowing the rest of his day would be entirely like usual helped put things into perspective. The comfort was short-lived though, as he wondered what Squall was up to, whether the brunet was still at his apartment.

Pushing out of bed, he walked over to one of the windows. Scanning the lights of the nearby buildings from the higher vantage of Calder's apartment, the image of Squall speeding along the streets of Esthar somewhere came to mind. As his chest constricted, he looked away again. He doubted Squall was still at his apartment, but if the man by some off-chance needed somewhere to stay, then he'd let him, as promised. He wouldn't return to find out.

He turned to look at the bedside clock. 6:43 am. He hadn't gotten much sleep, yet he knew he wouldn't be able to dose off a second time. He'd also promised Arc he'd be in early to make up for the mess he'd made of things the day before. Heading for the shower, he banned all thoughts of Squall from his mind and focused on the day ahead of him.

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[Room 226, Skyway Inn, Chimera District, Friday, 17th of October, 4:12 pm]

Squall had given up on falling asleep ages ago. He'd gotten only a few hours of sleep since Wednesday and the fatigue was starting to settle bone deep. He'd gone without rest for far longer periods under much more straining circumstances, yet he felt more tired than ever as he looked out of the window of his small hotel room.

He no longer knew how long he'd been leaning against the back of the tatty armchair, his gaze averted from the alarm clock. He had set it on the off chance that he would actually fall asleep at some point during the evening and be late for the appointment with Rinoa come morning. As he had pressed the buttons, a sudden thought had stilled his hands. He could simply not show up. For a brief moment he had considered the cowardly idea, before his fingers had started moving again, sealing his wake up call to a morning he wished didn't have to come.

He didn't know what to expect, how it would happen. Maybe he didn't even need to be there for Rinoa to break the bond and the request for his presence was some strange kind of courtesy. Most people seemed to value breaking things off face to face, but he found such a preference strange. When someone left, it hurt either way, but having to watch them walk away seemed unnecessarily painful.

He'd rather keep the memory of her smiling face untainted, her hazel eyes lighting up in wonder and gentle exploration as she had placed cool hands on either side of his head, the first touches of her mind so incredibly soft against his. Like ink dripping into water, her thoughts had gently curled and laughed and reveled, before smoothly sinking into him and infusing him with a pleasant presence. One moment he'd been alone in the world; the next her voice had wordlessly whispered to him from within, her lips curved into a smile as she had given him a promise of forever.

Would it feel like the reverse of that? A slow untangling of thoughts and soft whispers, a gentle pull away and then nothing? No forever after, no longer a knight. It would be strangely ironic, for it to be that simple. He knew better than to expect something more dramatic than that when the returning pattern of his life seemed to be that people walked out of it with astounding ease.

He wished he could be angry with her, but knew that would be unfair. She had tried harder than he ever had, had invested all of herself into making things work, while most of the time he hadn't even been able to hug her without being halfhearted and uncomfortable. Even he knew that was supposed to be elementary relationship basics.

Even though his memory was somewhat muddled and that early Thursday morning at Seifer's place only came back to him in fragments, he could still remember the moment of realization clearly. He didn't understand love. Rinoa loved him. He had thought he returned those feelings, but in the end it seemed he was only capable of some semblance of intimacy when drugged out of his mind. He was even more dysfunctional than he had originally thought and to refuse to let go of his bond with Rinoa would be beyond selfish. He had no right to tie her to someone like him.

He could no longer maintain that their failed relationship was unrelated to their bond as knight and sorceress, that those were two separate things and that the end of one didn't necessarily have to mean the end of the other. Prolonging their bond had hurt Rinoa. There was nothing platonic about it; it was invasive and personal and probably the closest he'd ever get to someone knowing about the skeletons he kept hidden in his closet, the kind of things he imagined only lovers knew.
As much as he hated the drug induced moment of insight where irrational and painful longing had made him reach for the bottle, he now at least had an inkling of why Rinoa couldn't stand to feel his mind and thoughts any longer. She must have realized a long time before he had that this kind of unbalanced relationship wouldn't last.

He would miss her. Maybe not for the right reasons and maybe not as much as he should, but enough to dread the next day. His life had had a certain sense of stability with Rinoa in it; he had never truly been alone. With her gone, he wondered how easily he would be able to settle back into the kind of life he had led before the war.

If he could at all.

Brow furrowing at the unwelcome thought, he told himself he hadn't become that weak. It might take some getting used to, but he had done it before. He would manage again. That's what it always boiled down to in the end anyway: self-reliance. Never place any expectations or hope in anyone other than yourself. Silently, he swore that this would be the last time he'd have to learn that lesson. Whether the fault lay with others or more likely, himself, he was done with coming back for more.

With a sigh, he tore his gaze from the view he had stopped taking in a long time ago and rubbed his right temple where a dull headache was starting to build. He really needed some sleep, but his thoughts wouldn't give him any reprieve. Moving to sit in the armchair, he leaned back and tried to think about the practical side of things instead.

Arrangements would have to be made. First, there was the penthouse to think of. Whether Rinoa would like to keep it or move somewhere else, he would offer his support. It would give him peace of mind to know Rinoa wasn't wanting for anything. He wouldn't leave her without any other option than to return to her father in Deling City without a Gil to her name. General Caraway might never have approved of him much, but the man would never be able to accuse him of abandoning his daughter. His pride wouldn't allow it, nor his sense of responsibility. He'd always be there if she needed his help.

He also needed to inform Balamb Garden that he would be moving back, single quarters. The prospect of having to break the news to Quistis wasn't a pleasant one. The woman seemed to feel entitled to know about what was going on in his life and was far more stubborn about the matter than the rest of his friends. The moment she found out about any of this she'd have an apoplectic fit, one he didn't want to witness. He could only hope the others would take it in stride and refrain from prying. Loire would find out soon enough from Odine, since the doctor operated under strict observation of the president and always updated the meddling man on Rinoa's condition after her appointments.

Mood darkening at the thought of all the unwanted opinions and good advice he'd have to put up with, Squall decided that contacting Garden could wait. He didn't put it beyond his friends to rally together and come to Esthar for moral support, so he'd just tell them once he arrived back at Garden, not a moment earlier. For all they knew he was enjoying his leave and he preferred to keep it that way.

Letting his head drop backwards, his eyes trailing to the ceiling, he thought about moving back to Balamb. During his leaves, he would be able to resume his daily schedule of training. Zell could teach him hand-to-hand combat techniques on a more regular basis. His visits to the presidential palace would be reduced to a minimum. He'd live by the ocean again.

He tried to draw consolation from those thoughts, but knew that no matter where he lived, there would still be unpleasant reminders everywhere. He'd still have to return to Esthar for work, especially now that the talks concerning Esthar Garden had started, and every single time his
thoughts would wander to the two people who would be so close by yet out of reach.

Garden was even more riddled with memories. There was the table in the cafeteria that had been his and Rinoa's spot, the bench at the main entrance where she always used to wait for him to come back from missions, all the little corners and hallways where she had stolen a quick kiss. There was the clearing in the training centre where he and Seifer used to spar, the tree at the quad that had several deep cuts carved into its bark by Hyperion, the slight dent where Seifer had slammed him into the metal door of one of Kadowaki's medicine cabinets.

All the traces Seifer had left behind, they had already been bothering him since the war, but until now his feelings had been mixed whenever his eyes fell on something familiar and a memory surfaced. He had quickly dismissed each one of them with an upset thought to the blond bastard who managed to mess with his head even when he wasn't around. He had been too angry and confused to admit to himself that he missed those times that would never come back.

After what had happened the past few days, that would be different. He knew the truth now, wasn't angry anymore, but it wouldn't stop the questions. Now more than ever he'd just be plagued by all the "what if's" instead: a worthless trade.

There were so many instances, so many junctures where he could have interfered, had he been more observant. He'd always known that Seifer hated any and all authority figures at Garden, bumping heads with them on a daily basis. He hadn't known, though, how out of place Seifer had felt at Garden, how the blond had planned to never come back the moment he had set out for Timber. Ultimecia had had nothing to do with that choice.

He wondered when such thoughts and plans had started to take root in the arrogant leader of the DC, who lived to perpetually annoy his instructors and strut the hallways of Garden like he owned them. When had Seifer given up on becoming a SeeD? Thinking back, he knew it had been naïve of him to think that the blond would simply try the SeeD exam a fourth time.

That time, just after the exam, he had simply stood by as Quistis and Xu had lashed out at Seifer and condemned the choices the blond had made as team captain. He hadn't spoken up in Seifer's defense, hadn't voiced his thoughts or admitted how it had seemed unfair that Seifer needed to take the blame for something he had been guilty of as well.

It hadn't been the blond's supposed authority over him, that had made him agree so easily to checking out the communication tower. He had simply been tired of remaining idle while battle was going on elsewhere and hadn't needed to think twice before following the blond. In retrospect, Seifer had made the right call; that order of retreat should never have come.

He could have appealed to Quistis; as smitten as she had been with him at the time, he could have convinced her to put in a good word for Seifer. He could have spoken up himself. Even if the ultimate choice hadn't been up to Cid, but more likely NORG's Garden Faculty, it still might have bought Seifer another chance; could have delayed the blond's plans to leave and make for Timber.

Timber, where everything had gone to hell. Any point after that would already have been too late; Ultimecia had already sunk her claws into her knight at that point. But even late rescue would have been better than none at all. So many times when he could have dragged Seifer away from the battle field, with force if necessary, back to Garden, but instead he had raised Lionheart.

For the first time he felt like he could understand what had driven Ellone to do something as irresponsible and reckless as sending them into memories of the past, without any regard to their lack of consent or whether it was safe. He understood, now that he had that same unbearable wish to do things over. Even if he could only change one thing, it would be enough; he would make sure
Ultimecia would never take Seifer.

He tried to imagine it: a life where Seifer had never left Garden and had become a SeeD instead of a knight. The scenario had been so easy to envision once, when they hadn't known anything of war and spent their days trying to outdo one another. Getting missions and gaining rank would simply have been a new way of continuing their rivalry.

Stillling mid-thought as he realized the pointlessness of his thoughts, Squall wanted to snort at himself, but no sound came. He knew there was no changing the past, yet he couldn't stop thinking about it, about that now lost future of rivalry, something that had seemed like an absolute certainty during his cadet years.

Nearly three years had passed since those days, his life far different from anything he had ever expected. He wondered what his seventeen-year-old self would have to say about his current predicament. He probably wouldn't be very impressed with his distress over a girl and even less so with him obsessing over Seifer.

Sighing, tired of the vicious circle his thoughts were trapped in, he pushed up from the armchair and glanced at the alarm clock. 4:48 pm. A little over sixteen hours left. With every hour that passed by, he felt his restlessness grow. This was one countdown he wasn't ready for, and he wished he could summon the indifference his younger self had warded off the world with—a shrug of the shoulders and a noncommittal "Whatever."

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[Darroze Building, Elvoret District, Friday, 17th of October, 4:48 pm]

Squall's thoughts were restless, had been so ever since last night. Observing silently from a distance, just outside of his awareness, Rinoa didn't draw near. She didn't need to in order to feel him, which was all she wanted. Only a distant hum of his distraught state of mind filtered through; it hadn't stopped since yesterday, telling her he hadn't had any sleep since then either.

She ran her fingers through Angelo's fur, petting the dozing dog with slow strokes as they sat together on the fluffy carpet of the guest room her friend, Cecilia, was letting her use. Slumped against the foot end of the bed, head tilted back listlessly, she allowed herself these last few hours to drink in the presence of her unaware knight. She needed it, even if it wasn't exactly the most healthy thing to do. Cecilia had tried to coax her out of the small room with bribes of treating her to her favorite restaurant or catching a movie, but nothing could have tempted her away from the last glimpses of Squall's mind.

Part of her wanted to feel his distress, wanted the reassurance that this was hurting him too, but she knew she was only fooling herself. It was probably not even her he was thinking about.

Another part of her wanted to rush to his side and say she hadn't meant any of it, that she wouldn't let him go. She knew he would forgive her if she did. He was too loyal for his own good.

Every hour that dragged on, every twitch of unrest that reached her through their bond made it increasingly difficult to remain idle. She hated this waiting. When Odine had told her he couldn't see them until Saturday, she hadn't protested, deep down hoping that Squall would try and change her mind before then, plead with her.

He hadn't.

He hadn't even answered her phone call that Thursday morning. She'd felt his mounting distress
and had started to worry, in spite of everything he had put her through, everything he had forced her
to feel. She had called out to him then, only to feel a jolt of panic as he recoiled from her. The
outburst of uncontrolled emotion that had followed the voice mail she'd left him had nearly floored
her as she slumped to her knees and sobbed uncontrollably with the weight of their combined
distress.

His emotions had rolled through her with force, too many to be able to label them all, but she had
understood the underlying current of it all. Shattering realization. She knew then that there was no
turning back. There was no point in trying to save something, when neither of them believed in it
anymore. She had mourned with him for their end, for what they couldn't ever have. And then
there had been nothingness, a big void as if Squall's turmoil had suddenly been snuffed out. She
had fallen asleep not much later, exhausted.

The next day, not too long after Seifer's phone call, there had been a short but potent bout of rage,
stunning her from her own anger with the ex-knight. She could only really ascribe such blind fury
to the blond's handiwork, the timing too conspicuous for it not to be related to the fact that Seifer
had just phoned her. Another, obvious implication was that Squall had still been with Seifer at the
time, that he had spent the night with the blond. To conclude that the choking hurt she had felt the
night previous had also been because of Seifer wasn't that farfetched an assumption.

She had almost reached out to Squall then, had almost called to ask what the bastard blond had
done to him.

It was also then that she had realized something else, that Squall hadn't learned to block his
emotions from their bond as skillfully as she had. Maybe he had only ever needed to shield minor
thoughts or slight inner turmoil from her. Maybe it was only now that the wall he had carefully
constructed around himself was starting to crumble, or maybe it was the Avalanche like Seifer had
said. She couldn't tell for sure, but she knew cutting their bond was more necessary now than ever.
She would go mad if she had to go through another night like Wednesday. She wasn't sure she'd be
able to keep from ripping the inhibitors from her wrists and retrieve her knight a second time.

She didn't know what was more painful, the inescapable fact that Squall had slept with the ex-
knight or the depth of the emotions Seifer invoked in him. To realize that his feelings for her paled
in comparison, that they had never even been profound enough to cause more than a ripple in the
surface of the bond they shared... She had always known this but to have the harsh truth presented
to her like this was more than she could handle. It was cruel. His elation, his arousal, his
unconditional trust, his absolute surrender. She had finally felt exactly what she had craved for so
long, but none of it had been for her. She wondered what Seifer had done, what was so different
about him for Squall to fall like that.

She didn't want to think back to her very first time, an experience shared with the blond boy, but
she did. She found nothing there that shed any light on what had happened, any reason for Squall to
prefer someone like Seifer over her, except perhaps the realization that Seifer wasn't straight,
confirming her longstanding suspicions. Sex with Seifer had been awkward and the way he had
stopped halfway through hurtful, the blond making some excuse neither of them had believed. At
least Squall had responded to her touch, his body's reactions honest enough for her not to have been
worried about his actual preferences.

But she hadn't been able to get Squall to accept those touches, to accept such intimacy. Not like
Seifer had. Apparently patience and love didn't pay off in the end, but drugs and forcefulness did.
Should she have been more demanding, less accommodating? She was afraid to find out what
Squall really liked in bed, for him to have responded so strongly to Seifer, a man who had tortured
him. If the blond hadn't lied over the phone, then why had Squall taken Avalanche? In the ex-
knight's presence?

She grit her teeth at the turn her thoughts had taken, at just how messed up everything had become. She was comparing them and was trying to figure out where she fit in it all, how she compared to them. There had to be some explanation, a reason why she had such unlucky and self-destructive taste in men, why it could never be her.

Jaws clenching as she tried not to cry again, she resisted the urge to blindly throw anything she could get her hands on out of frustration and vandalize the room that wasn't hers. Instead she took a deep, shuddering breath and pushed up from the floor. She needed some distraction after all.

"Come on, Angelo. Let's go for a walk."

Perking to attention at those words and the familiar dog leash that appeared from one of the drawers, Angelo enthusiastically shot up from her spot on the carpet and moved to wait by the door.

"You need some air too, huh?" she asked, smiling weakly as she fastened the leash to Angelo's collar. She hoped a walk in the city would at least keep her mind from wandering to her two exes together in bed. There was something strangely therapeutic about drifting through an uncaring crowd, one large avenue after the other, just one among the masses, just one of many problems. Nobody would turn in wonder at the sight of a silently crying girl and her dog. She needed that kind of numbness if she wanted to feel Squall without actually thinking about him. It had worked in the past, maybe it would now too.

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[Odine's Laboratory, Chimera District, Saturday, 18th of October, 8:47 am]

As he pulled into the parking lot, Squall tensed in the driver's seat the moment he spotted Rinoa. Amidst the morning bustle of scientists and assistants arriving for work and moving from building to building, she was impossible to miss seated to the side of the entrance steps, her arms folded around her knees. Nobody seemed to notice her, huddling from the cold, but he couldn't tear his gaze away. The wind was wildly tossing her long raven hair, obscuring her expression from sight.

As he maneuvered his car into the nearest parking space, he tried to will himself to calm down. This close, she would be able to pick up on everything. If they were going to do this, he needed to keep strong. One moment of wavering, of weakness, and he would only make things harder on both of them. He knew her compassionate nature would cause her to hesitate the moment she noticed anything less than resigned determination in him, just as he would hesitate the moment she expressed any form of doubt. He couldn't allow that. It was this weakness that had kept them tied together this long.

Killing the engine of his car, he took a moment to relax his expression and posture before getting out. He felt like running, every fiber of his being opposed to what he was about to do, but he simply closed the door and crossed the parking lot. Rinoa had already spotted him and rose to her feet, otherwise motionless. Looking into solemn hazel eyes, he felt like he was walking towards the edge of a cliff, the inevitable fall one of his own making.

Rinoa seemed so fragile in that moment, her eyes glistening and blinking against what were maybe tears or maybe just the sharp wind. The slight redness to her cheeks and the way her coat and scarf were pulled up high around her neck told him she had been waiting outside for a while.

"You should have waited inside," he said as he arrived at the steps.
Meeting Squall's gaze, Rinoa would have smiled at those words if it weren't for the circumstances that had brought them there in the first place. He was the picture of composure, his voice even and noncommittal, but she could feel the stir of restlessness underneath it all. For him to tightly keep his guard even then was both typical and infinitely sad.

"And risk you heading into Odine's office, before we have a chance to talk?" she said softly, only managing the slight teasing tone to her voice out of habit. She had immediately noticed the dark smudges under gray-blue eyes, confirming her suspicion that he had hardly had any sleep, but she refrained from comment.

"Come on," she said, taking him by the arm and ignoring the slight frown that appeared on Squall's face. "There won't be any people in the garden right now."

"Odine will——"

"Odine will be busy setting up his gear and machines. He won't mind us coming in a little late." She knew Squall didn't ever appreciate being whisked off to a secluded place for private conversation, but some things were more important than him feeling uncomfortable.

Met only with determination in Rinoa's eyes, Squall yielded. He had known a talk would be unavoidable the moment he had spotted her waiting on those steps. He was fairly sure he wouldn't want to talk about anything she had to say, didn't see the point of these face to face conventions where people bared their hearts to each other one last time.

He let himself be led down the little path all the same, the arm hooked around his and the close press of Rinoa's body strangely comforting in that it let him know she at least didn't hate him for what had happened. And though he dreaded the conversation to come, he welcomed the resulting delay.

Glancing sideways, Rinoa briefly met Squall's even gaze before quickly looking away again. She could feel his apprehension more clearly now, the unusual sensation chiseling away at her own courage and her resolve to get answers out of him. She wasn't sure if she even wanted to know.

Spotting a bench to the side of the garden, she softly tugged his arm. "Let's sit down over there."

Maybe the words she wanted to say would come more easily if they didn't have to look each other in the eye; some much needed distance as they sat side by side and tried to voice things that left them too exposed.

A small nod was all she received in reply. When they reached the bench, she untangled their arms and sat down, waiting as Squall reluctantly followed suit. Silence stretched between them, and she knew Squall wouldn't be the one to break it. She tried to arrange her thoughts, organize the questions that weighed heavily on her mind. If this was to go right, she would need to keep accusation and hurt from bleeding into her voice.

Had she been braver, she would have lifted the shield she had placed in between their consciousnesses, allowing them to convey in thought what they couldn't put into words. But that would mean setting herself up for more heartache than she could stand, so she resigned herself to stunted replies and awkward misunderstandings.

"I'm ashamed of how I behaved at the club," she started, deciding that was as good a topic to begin with as any. Squall needed to know this wasn't going to be about her blaming him. "I was drunk and upset. I didn't mean to tell you like that."

Hearing the unexpected apology, Squall didn't immediately reply. He didn't care anymore how he
had been told he was no longer needed. There was no good way to break news like that, and the outcome would have been the same in the end. Besides, he was guilty of much more shameful behavior than her.

"It doesn't matter," he said evenly, dismissing the unnecessary apology.

"It does to me," came the quiet reply. When only silence followed those words, Squall glanced sideways. Rinoa's fingers were fidgeting nervously before she pinned her hands between her knees, a thoughtful look to her eyes. He braced himself for what she was about to say.

"Seifer said he was there, at the club," Rinoa started hesitantly, an instant surge of unguarded emotion reaching her through the bond, before Squall promptly quelled it. She could practically feel how all the blood had dropped from his face, but no response came.

"...He said he was your friend, but he probably just didn't want to tell me—" he was seeing you. "...his name."

Comfort zone instantly breached at the mention of Seifer, Squall struggled to remain in place when he wanted nothing more than to walk away from the turn the conversation was taking. He knew that to some extent Rinoa deserved answers, but Seifer had already run his mouth to her, and he was afraid to ask just what she had been able to discern from the bond. He didn't know what was left to say, why she had to bring it up.

Seeing and feeling Squall's inner turmoil, his features darkening as he kept silent, Rinoa was at a loss as to how to proceed. She needed to understand what was going on between him and Seifer.

Seifer had said it was just the one time, but the blond could easily have lied. She didn't know what to believe when she couldn't even figure out why Seifer had called her in the first place. His explanation had made no sense; a torturer didn't care about his victim, didn't plead with such sense of urgency. It had been strange and unlike anything she had come to expect of the blond, yet she had trouble interpreting it as him trying to rub salt in her wounds.

When it became obvious Squall wasn't going to say anything anytime soon, Rinoa decided to forego subtlety. "Did Seifer tell me the truth?"

Squall's frown grew at the blunt question. He didn't want to think about Seifer at all. It was irrelevant to the matter at hand, had nothing to do with their bond, yet Rinoa wouldn't let the issue go.

"He had no reason to lie," he answered truthfully, hoping that confirming what Seifer had told her would be the end of it.

Rinoa needed a moment to process the curt statement and its underlying implications. It meant Squall trusted Seifer to have told her the truth. Though, recalling the very hard to ignore flare of anger she had felt through the bond right after the blond's call, she guessed it was probably something more along the lines of Squall not appreciating Seifer telling her the truth.

Or maybe Squall simply didn't have a clue about the absurd things Seifer had said. She had a hard time imagining any scenario where Squall would willingly do... what Seifer had claimed. "So..." she ventured, her voice reined in carefully not to betray how the words hurt her, "you accepted Avalanche from him." If she got even the slightest inkling that the drugs had been forced on him, then Seifer would be in for a world of pain.

"Was that a statement, or a question?" Squall asked coldly.
Rinoa knew those words hadn't been meant as an invitation for her to clarify herself. If it wasn't for the mounting distress she could feel brewing beneath each tersely spoken syllable, the sharp rebuttal would have rendered her speechless. Already she had managed to put him on the defensive.

"This is Seifer we are talking about," she said, struggling to keep her voice even and the disbelief from her face. "Last thing I remember, the two of you were trying to kill each other. This is not norm—" The mix of anger and sorrow that struck her from Squall's side of the bond caused her to freeze in astonishment, the words dying on her lips mid-sentence at the realization that his anger was directed at her.

The sharp gasp of surprise cutting short what Rinoa had been about to say, followed by the release of a deep trembling breath, told Squall he needed to get a grip, fast. Unclenching his fingers and forcibly relaxing the rigid set to his shoulders, he repeated to himself that she didn't know what she was talking about, that none of this was her fault. Opening his eyes as he took a calming breath, he turned to look next to him, instantly regretful at the sight of Rinoa's shocked expression, her eyes moist with unshed tears.

"...Rinoa."

As the wave of emotions receded, Rinoa tried to process what had just happened. "I-I don't understand," she finally said weakly, meeting Squall's gaze. "...I don't understand any of it."

Why was he always so weak to her distress? Watching Rinoa's pleading eyes, the confusion clear on her face, Squall averted his gaze with a deepening frown. What Seifer had told him had been told in confidence, he knew that, but right now Rinoa still believed Seifer was a war criminal and had most likely come to the conclusion that her knight was fucked up enough to sleep with one.

"Ultimecia used him," he finally said quietly, hoping Seifer wouldn't fault him for telling Rinoa. "He didn't want to be her knight anymore than you wanted to free Adel." She didn't need to know, however, that he had only learned this after the Avalanche and the sex.

"...How can you be sure?" came the uncertain reply, Rinoa's doubt clear in her voice.

"It doesn't matter how I know," he said firmly, dissuading any further questions. "I'm done talking about this."

Swallowing any further words, Rinoa fell silent. It wasn't exactly easy reconciling Squall's stunted explanation, if it could even be considered that, with her own experiences of the war. Watching Seifer turn against them, against her, had been awful. The blond boy she had had a hopelessly naive crush on that one summer, had stood before her a knight, demented and unfeeling as he had thrown her to Adel's feet.

He had hurt Squall even worse than he had her, yet here Squall was, saying with such profound belief that it hadn't been Seifer's fault. She knew Squall wasn't the type to easily be lured into believing lies like that; if anything, the war and his time as commander had made him into an excellent judge of character.

He believed this, and more importantly, it mattered to him a great deal. She knew for certain now that the turmoil she had felt from him the past few days had indeed been because of Seifer.

She didn't know what to make of it. Even if it was true, could she ever be magnanimous enough to set aside the memory of days of torture? What kind of switch had Squall flipped in his head so that sleeping with Seifer became acceptable? She had seen some of his nightmares, had seen what Seifer had done to him. Either he had a ridiculous capacity for forgiveness or he cared more for
Seifer than he had ever let on.

As far as she knew, all they had been before the war were sparring partners, rivals with a sense of mutual understanding at best. She had seen this grow into mutual resentment and even loathing during the war. None of it made sense.

When Rinoa didn't say anything for long moments, Squall allowed himself to relax a little. Hopefully his firm dissuasion had steered things back on track, whatever that was, and away from the unpleasant topic that was Seifer. He needed his composure more than anything; the only thing he was willing to discuss was their relationship, their bond.

"Are you two—"

"No," he interrupted the sudden question, nipping it in the bud. Looking sideways at Rinoa's frowning face, he could see the word "but" form on her lips and he immediately reiterated. "No. Either you find something else to talk about or we go inside."

Stiffening at his own words, he fixed his gaze in front of him. He hadn't meant to speak so callously, didn't have any desire to go inside at all, but his patience was starting to run thin, making him more harsh with Rinoa than he wanted to be.

As Rinoa looked at Squall's solemn expression, the toll the conversation was taking on him bled into her and wore her down just as much as it did him. The taut thrum of off-key emotions and bitter thoughts ran wildly just beyond her side of the bond; somehow she knew she would only have to extend her finger and dip it through that deceivingly calm surface to make him snap, to invite all of that hurt onto herself.

Her expression softened, her heart tight in her chest as she let go of the question she had wanted to ask. Squall probably wouldn't even be able to explain it, confused as he seemed. Maybe he and Seifer were involved now; most likely they weren't. Maybe their brief encounter had been enough to discover entire new ways of hurting each other, and that was all it would ever be. Maybe Squall would be able to tell her about these things some day.

She didn't want to go inside yet as Squall had suggested, so she sidled a bit closer to him instead and lowered her head onto his shoulder, uncaring of what he'd think of the gesture. They'd have their whole lives to be apart, so for just a little while longer she would be selfish.

As Rinoa settled against him, her head resting against the crook of his neck, Squall briefly closed his eyes at the unexpected gesture. In that moment their impending separation felt more real and a much heavier burden than ever, and he could only hope that when everything was said and done they would still be able to sit with each other like this. Neither of them said a word as he placed an arm around her trembling shoulders.

They sat there for a while, neither of them willing to end their silent goodbye. It was easier to be more honest with his feelings when sharing them in silence, when he wasn't being pressed for answers or provoked into speaking. Telling her he'd miss her would seem hollow somehow, a waste of pointless words. This moment of drinking in each other's presence one last time felt infinitely more meaningful.

He didn't move away his arm when she finally started to calm down, the quiet sobs and soft tremble of her smaller frame coming to a still. A last deep inhale of breath tickled his neck before she slipped out of his hold, his arm falling idle to his side as she wiped at his neckline with her sleeve, muttering a soft "sorry" for the wet mess of tears she'd left there.
As he watched her try and collect herself, her hands moving to wipe at wet cheeks, he felt his protective urges stirring and remembered the decision he had made the day before. He knew it wouldn't go far as to make her feel better, but at least she'd know she wouldn't have to worry about things like rent. "The apartment is yours if you still want it," he said, meeting her gaze. "If not, I'll pay for a new place."

Rinoa blinked in surprise, distracted from the many thoughts running through her mind. Hyne, he was serious. Taking in the earnest look to gray-blue eyes, she wondered if she should have seen this coming. It wasn't exactly something she had expected or would ever have asked for.

"There's no need for you to do this," she said, shaking her head softly in disbelief, unable to help the slight upward tug to her lips. Only Squall would be so stubbornly dependable. "I don't plan on being a burden to you."

"You're not a burden," came his instant reply, said with a frown and such gravity that Rinoa's lips curved upwards a little more.

"And you're too loyal for your own good," she replied wistfully, knowing his offer was inspired by genuine concern, not pity or guilt.

She looked around her then, world and time falling back into place around them. She didn't know how long they'd been sitting there, but Odine had probably already finished his preparations. Her heart sank, but she knew she couldn't delay any further. She had asked all she dared; had committed his scent, warmth, and feel to memory. She was as ready as she'd ever be.

Seeing Rinoa's expression take on an edge of determination, Squall resigned himself to what would come next. She stood up and wordlessly waited for him to follow. The moment he did, her gaze moved away from him and settled on the path in front of her. They walked back to the entrance without meeting each other's gaze in silent agreement that they would need the detachment from then on.

After the morning rush of staff members arriving for work, the parking lot and entrance were quiet when they returned. Inside, the hallways were empty apart from the occasional assistant running an errand, the only sound the distant hum of machines behind closed doors.

As they entered the lift that would bring them to Odine's private lab, Squall started to feel the same discomfort he always did when visiting the "Laboratory." If not for Rinoa, he would avoid coming here like the plague.

The lift whizzed by different floors, the enclosing field of energy allowing brief glimpses into long, brightly illuminated hallways and the odd engineering level, dark and filled with machinery. Usually, Rinoa would already have snuck a hand around his. He'd always figured it had been an unconscious gesture on her part caused by unease. A sorceress and a SeeD Commander didn't have anything to fear from the likes of Odine, but that didn't make a routine check up with the man pleasant. So for the duration of every one of those lift rides, he had held her hand.

But her hand never came. She stood at an appropriate distance, her arms held idly by her side as she kept her eyes on the floors flashing by.

The lift slowly came to a halt at their destination, and as Rinoa walked out in front of him, Squall wondered just how many of those little, stolen touches she had managed to desensitize him to over the years. How many of those brief moments would he only notice once they were gone?

Walking into the large room that made up the main part of Odine's personal lab, Rinoa could hear
the man rummaging around somewhere in the back, beyond another set of doors. "He's in the back," she said, turning around to find Squall watching her distantly. As their gazes met, he seemed to start from his position just outside the lift. A small frown immediately found its way onto his brow, as he walked past her and made for the doors in the back.

She curbed the urge to ask if he was alright, the question pointless when he hadn't ever answered it truthfully in the past. And she'd really rather not have to hear him say he was "fine" just then.

Following after him, they walked into the back room, where Odine had apparently been setting up twice the amount of monitors and machinery she was used to. Even with her bangles on she could feel a strange pressure shrouding her, like static messing with her magic. If she took them off, she was certain she'd be able to see the magic seals Odine had set up across the room; maybe even disable them.

Looking at Squall, the strangely inward look to his eyes told her he had noticed as well and was mentally checking the limits of the magical restriction. Reminded of how he hated not being in control, she hoped he was prepared for the inevitable lack of control in what they were about to do.

"Why the anti-magic field?" Squall asked evenly, directing his question to a large piece of machinery in the far corner of the room. He watched as Odine's head popped up from behind it, before the scientist stood up completely, a far too eager expression appearing on the man's face.

"Ah, zere you are!" Odine exclaimed, rounding the machine he'd been working on. "Perfect. Vonderful! I hav almost finished adjusting ze equipment." With those words, he picked up a strange device and hurried over to a small monitor, immediately fiddling with buttons and settings. Squall had a suspicion the man's tendency to never answer his questions right away was a deliberate one. It grated on his nerves.

"Why the anti-magic field?" he repeated, his voice slightly less even. "Is it necessary?" It wasn't a very potent interference, not nearly as unyielding as some of the ones he'd experienced during his missions. Shiva would be able to push through it with some effort.

"Ah yes, ze zeals," Odine said with a slight nod. Keeping his eyes on the monitor as he tampered with it, his hand waved briefly to the room around him. "Zis room will have to do. I did not have enough time to zeal a space as large as ze examination room."

Finishing the monitor's adjustments and moving on to another, he continued his explanation. "Ze zeals are a precaution; as strong as I could make zem wizout hindering ze bond and Miss Heartilly's ability to lift it." Turning around after calibrating another set of machines, he met Squall's gaze unfazed, his voice conveying he hadn't missed the tone to Squall's repeated question.

"Zey are necessary as ve do not know how Miss Heartilly vill be affected by zis." Odine's expression didn't hide his excitement as he added in afterthought, "...nor how it vill affect you, Commander."

Starting into action again at his own words, he began double-checking the adjustments he'd just made. "To collect data on such a rare phenomenon iz unprecedented! It iz a vonderful opportunity to learn more about ze nature of ze bond."

Walking past them, out of the door, his enthusiastic prattling grew faint as he started to rummage through papers in the other room. "...It iz a peculiar thing, zis bond. Not unlike a junction, but not quite ze same—"

Mood turning darker with every word that left Odine's mouth, Squall started to tune him out. He
was only one breath away from walking out of the laboratory, his jaws clenched in frustration. 

"We need him, Squall." Rinoa's voice pulled him out of his irritation, his gaze drawn to her resigned expression. "It's the only safe way to do this."

"I know," he agreed grudgingly. They couldn't risk a lapse in Rinoa's condition, and Odine was the only one with the means to intervene if anything went wrong.

Following Rinoa's gaze around the room, studying the machines lined up along the walls and the two chairs placed opposite each other in the middle, he couldn't help but note the vastly different setting from when they had bonded. It had been just the two of them, outside on a windy day and without machines or doctors breathing down their necks. It had happened without premeditation, had grown between them almost organically, but would die in this gray lab room. It set his hairs on end.

When their gazes met, Rinoa knew they were thinking the same thing. To have things end like this was the last thing either of them would ever have expected. She could feel Squall's growing agitation, his discomfort with the laboratory and Odine worse than she had anticipated. With a soft sigh she moved to one of the chairs to sit down.

For her, doing it in this location was necessary, precautions aside. To have a third party nearby would force her to keep strong and keep on track, the unwelcoming atmosphere of the lab carrying the feel of finality she needed not to waver. Like rain accompanying a funeral, it suited the gravity of what needed to be done.

One arm cradling folders and documents, Odine walked back into the room and spotted Rinoa already in place. Casting a pointed look at Squall, he wordlessly urged the commander to sit down as well. "Ve shall soon commence ze zeparation."

At the unspoken order, Squall narrowed his eyes, but when Rinoa's pleading gaze met his, her head shaking slightly to deter him from what he was thinking of, he suppressed his urge to provide the doctor with his blunt opinion. Sitting down on the metal chair across from her, his unease grew tenfold as Odine rolled two identical machines into the room and placed one by each of their sides. Another larger machine was maneuvered into place by Rinoa's side, one she was clearly used to, as she strapped her hand into it with practiced ease.

It pained him to see Rinoa like that, reduced to nothing but a science experiment. It reminded him of how she'd been locked up amidst machinery, her body lifeless in the cryostasis chamber at the Sorceress' Memorial. Seeing how used to this kind of procedure she was, he wished he could take her away from it all, just like he had back then. To think most of the equipment was probably for Odine's sake, not hers, only fueled his frustration.

After one last, pleased look at his equipment, Odine took post next to the largest monitor. "Zat concludes all of ze preparations," he said, before eyeing them eagerly.

"Everything iz set up. Additional zealing and emergency procedures are on stand-by." Directing his words to Rinoa next, he continued in a deceivingly courteous tone of voice, "You may begin, Miss Heartilly."

Nodding almost indiscernibly, Rinoa took a moment to collect her courage, unable to suppress a sliver of panic as the point of no return presented itself. There was no manual for what she was about to do, no documents or accounts from history on how to break a sorceress' bond. She would have to do it on instinct, just like when she had bonded them. The fact that Squall wasn't the least bit calm wasn't helping matters.
Swallowing thickly, she brushed softly against his mind, careful not to intrude. "You're too worked up," she said, her voice coming out thinly as her usual tact with words failed her. It was impossible to tiptoe around their feelings and keep focused on the task at hand at the same time. "Try and empty your mind."

When dark eyebrows furrowed in response, Squall obviously trying to do what she had asked, she could feel his thoughts go strangely rigid, as if forced into restraints. It wasn't exactly what she'd call emptying one's mind, but she'd have to make do.

"I-I'll try and do it quickly," she reassured, hoping she would be able to follow up on her promise.

No answer came, not even a nod. Squall just kept in place, his entire posture tense and his face expressionless apart from a slight frown. She knew he was focusing on what she had asked of him, yet she wished he wouldn't listen so easily, that he would somehow slip and inadvertently show how much this was killing him.

Shaking the bitter thought, she slowly started to weaken her mental shields in some places and strengthen them in others. It would be easier if they didn't have to feel each other's pain on top of their own, despite her irrational thoughts only seconds earlier.

Squall sucked in a slow, deep breath as he felt Rinoa begin to stir just outside his reach. He couldn't tear his gaze away from her expression of painful concentration, her eyes closing as she moved her mind against his. It felt surreal that they were really doing this. He was unable to do anything but watch as she started to gently push and test his barriers, her lashes trembling against her cheeks and a small crease appearing between her eyebrows.

"Ready?" came her breathless whisper.

Incapable of voicing his consent without the words sounding weak, he tried to open his mind further instead, immediately feeling exposed because of it. Rinoa understood, though, and slowly slipped shallow tendrils of her mind into his. He wished he didn't have to notice the purposeful, methodical way her touch moved through him, so different from the comforting caresses and soft inquiries he was used to. He couldn't sense her emotions and knew it was because she wouldn't let him.

She dove deeper then and swarmed out within the shell of his being, careful to shield herself from him as she gently recoiled from the accidental touches his mind reached out with. He couldn't control any of it. His hands clenched around the armrests of his chair at the strange sensation of having an absence of Rinoa moving around within his head. This wasn't how it had been before.

This was wrong.

Suddenly, the absence tugged sharply at something rooted deep within, causing him to grit his teeth. Given no time to process what had just happened, his eyes snapped shut and his breath froze as another tug came, harsher this time. The last coherent thought forming in his mind was the realization that this was it, before blinding white pain shot through him and crippled his mind.

Careful, as gently as she could, Rinoa pulled a fourth time at the knot that lay at the base of their bond, the core root where she had first settled into Squall's mind. Finally, it loosened and a void blossomed within her, painless but gaping wide. The distant echoes of brief shock were the last thing she could feel from her knight, before those disappeared as well. They sank away into the void, as if swallowed up by deep murky waters.

Opening her eyes, desperately needing to see he was still there before continuing, she had to blink
to clear her vision. She couldn't tell when she had started to cry.

A lump grew in her throat as she watched those stark, pale features, crinkled into a faint grimace. It was the only outward sign that he was even feeling anything, his reactions disappointingly subdued when she couldn't stop from trembling herself, the void within her tearing wider and wider.

"Ze process isn't complete yet, miss Hear—"

Snapping her head to the side, narrowing her eyes, she wordlessly conveyed her need for the doctor to shut up. Just in time she pulled back her magic from flowing out to Odine, the sudden beeping from one of the machines and the painful grate of the seals against her mind stunning her out of her urge to lash out.

Reeling herself in, she took a deep breath and refocused her attention on Squall. Exhaling slowly, she closed her eyes once more and resumed the gentle pull at the complicated weave of their bond.

Just a little bit more, she whispered into Squall's mind, apologetically, even though she knew he couldn't hear her anymore.

At the returned tugging, moving faster and faster, Squall's mind was turned into an open, raw wound. Every nerve in his brain, every thread linking him to Rinoa was snapped loose, too sudden for each new loss to register with him separately. What once had been a taut connection, strongly tying them together, was now an untethered rope, whipping mercilessly in the wind. Increasingly disoriented, he could only watch as the cut link frayed into a thousand different strands, each one lacerating more deeply than the last.

A jolt of worry ran through him then; not his own and not coming from the absence moving within him either. Cold and soothing, it helplessly drifted through his mind, distraught as it followed the trail of damage.

Shiva.

Upon his recognition, she surged towards him, so worried, so concerned. He couldn't tell what was happening anymore, couldn't collect his thoughts when next thing he knew he was drowning, a hook digging deeply into his flesh but the line cut. Thrown back into the water, thrown away and drowning.

He fled into Shiva's arms, her ice wrapping around him tightly and securely. Yes, they would escape together. Please.

Upon junctioning the whipping instantly stopped, every raw and loose end forcibly frozen into place. Slowly remembering who he was and who the absence had been, he uncurled the painful white-knuckled grip he had on metal armrests. Taking a few seconds to assess that he was still sitting upright, in his chair, breathing, he realized that Rinoa was gone.

Gone.

Trying to snap him from his shock, Shiva was urging him to move, to flee to a safe place where she would fix him. He wanted to tell her that he wasn't broken, but pain throbbed unrelentingly against the inside of his skull, a cold sweat breaking out on his skin.

"Squall?" Rinoa's voice; soft, shaky. He realized his eyes were still closed. The understanding that he couldn't let Odine and Rinoa see he had junctioned followed soon after. He needed to leave.

"I'm fine," he managed, surprising himself as he managed to push up from the chair. He opened his
eyes to a wall full of machines. Somewhere to his right, Odine was hurrying from one piece of
equipment to the next, all the while giving a running commentary. "Vonderful! If I am right in
interpreting ze readings, my zesis iz correct. A bond iz indeed a form of junctioning! Ah, ze
implications! Zis opens up entirely new avenues for my research!"

If it hadn't been for the pain pounding away at the back of his eyes, he would've snapped at the
doctor. Moving slowly, he hoped to disguise how the room seemed to be swaying and messed with
his sense of balance, how the floor suddenly pulled away an inch beneath each of his footsteps.

"—uall..." The hum of machines grew louder and more aggravating with each passing second,
almost drowning out Rinoa's words. "Squall."

Stopping in his tracks toward the door, he let his eyes travel along the floor, to where Rinoa was
still sitting on one of the chairs. Remembering to hide the silver glow to his eyes that would betray
his junction with Shiva, he kept his eyes lowered, his gaze stopping its ascent and lingering where
Rinoa's quivering hands were resting on her knees.

"...You're leaving already?" Her voice sounded thick with the effort of fighting back tears; almost
too faint against the backdrop of heartless machinery and the fanatical doctor's monologue. Her
trembling hands started to move from their perch, as if they were going to reach out to him.
Quickly, he reaffixed his gaze on the exit, needing to escape.

"At least let Odine check if you're—"

"He has all the readings he needs," Squall immediately replied, his words reverberating
unpleasantly inside his head. Everything sounded like an echo, distant yet sharp at the same time,
making it near impossible for him to think straight.

"Zere are plenty of tests zat could add to our understanding of zis phenomenon, Commander,"
Odine immediately cut in, before reeling in the eagerness to his voice somewhat. "...to better
determine treatment, should ze necessity occur."

"No," Squall bit out, immediately regretting the volume of his voice and the accompanying shake
of his head. As the ice in his mind shifted slightly, its grasp on the pieces of the broken bond
slipping for a fraction of a second, bile rose at the back of his throat. He could sense Shiva's panic.
He needed to get out of there. If he stayed much longer, they would notice.

"I'm going."

Willing his legs to cooperate, he walked to the door, ignoring how shards of the bond were
pressing into his mind and cutting his ice goddess. They could handle pain. He knew how to force
himself into motion, into battle, even when his body had already been pushed beyond its limits
several injuries earlier; he'd learned that a lifetime ago.

"Would you wait, please?" A hint of anger filled Rinoa's weak voice.

"A follow up of your condition iz highly recommended," Odine immediately added, walking up
behind him. A paper bag was pressed into his hands. "Zese pills vork to help combat ze symptoms
of abrupt unjunctioning of an unfit host viz a GF. I prescribed zem years ago, ven I vas vorking viz
para-magic research."

"Symptoms? What symptoms?" he heard Rinoa ask in worry. As her raised voice slit through his
skull, he clenched his hand around paper bag, crumpling it in his grip. Every second of delay was
one too many.
Odine continued his explanation, ignoring Rinoa's questions. "Considering ze nature of ze sorceress bond I hav just uncovered, zese symptoms may arise. Zey also may not." The doctor's white lab coat moved out of Squall's peripheral vision, the man's footsteps leading back to a few machines by the far wall. "I advise you keep ze pills viz you and zat you contact ze laboratory every twenty four hours."

Squall couldn't care less about Odine's concern, but the non-committal "whatever" he was about to speak died on his lips as Shiva started to flicker within him, everything in his mind starting to dislogde into a crippling cycle of lashing and freezing.

"Squall, promise me you'll do this," Rinoa said softly, pressing him. "...and call me too, once a day."

Managing a nod, following it with a clipped "fine," he walked out of the room and into the elevator. He could hear Rinoa call out to him, but her words didn't register anymore. All he heard was the rush of his pulse in his ears, fast and erratic. The distance he crossed, the slight raise of a trembling arm to push the call button, the few steps that moved him into the elevator; each and every motion was steered by Shiva's urgency, her ice sliding through his veins and muscles, willing him to move and flee.

As floors whizzed by, his eyes could no longer follow such fast movement, the blaring overhead light of the lift burning into his retinas. His thoughts disintegrated, his entire world shrinking and sharpening into the sole sensory input of pain. He was still walking, cold wind now moving abrasively against his clammy skin. Shiva seemed to be falling away, her concern growing dim and distant, or maybe it was himself that was being pulled under? Darkness enveloped him as a door slammed closed, his body obeying someone else's orders. The last things he felt before conscious thought eluded him altogether was the rumble of a car engine and the aching realization that he had lost something for ever.

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"Cut the onions already," Seifer said, noticing the chopping board he'd gotten out for Nolan earlier remained untouched. Grumbling under his breath, he sent the boy a firm look.

From atop the kitchen counter, Nolan returned the blond's gaze, his legs swinging back and forth idly. "No way, you're the freeloader. You do it."

Seifer raised an eyebrow. "And you're not?"

"No, I'm Family. It's different," Nolan shrugged halfheartedly.

Repressing a snort, Seifer placed a dirty knife in the sink, adding it to the steadily increasing pile of cooking utensils he'd already abandoned. "So all those times you happened to pop by at Arc's or my place around dinnertime?"

"I was bored." Nolan's eyes fell to where Seifer was chopping mushrooms.

"But you weren't freeloading?" Seifer quirked his eyebrow farther.

A smirk appeared on Nolan's lips. "Definitely not."

Huffing, Seifer shook his head slightly. "And the materials that keep disappearing—I guess that's because you've been bored as well?" It hadn't taken long for him to make the connection between his disappearing materials and the longfingered brat.

"You said I could have them," Nolan supplied, referring to the first time he'd gotten his hands on some materials Seifer had brought back. The idea of making little trinkets—weapon accessories—had fascinated him, and when the opportunity presented itself he'd been unable to pass up. Seifer had relented in no time. "You would have given them to me anyway."

Seifer knew Nolan was right; that's why he hadn't said anything in the first place. It didn't mean Nolan got out of chopping onions though. Placing some onions on the chopping board, he pushed it closer to the boy.

"Get to work," he ordered, watching Nolan closely.

Rolling his eyes, Nolan jumped off the counter and began slicing the onions.

"What're you two talking about?" Calder asked as he entered the kitchen, looking from Nolan to Seifer.

"Pumpkin here tried to get out of onion duty," Seifer said, emphasizing "pumpkin" with faux affection. He smirked broadly when the boy's jaws clenched.

"You're a dick, you know that?" Nolan said, his fingers tightening their hold on the chopping knife in his hand.

Calder sent Nolan a pointed look. "Language," he warned. The way his brother spoke when he wasn't around Seifer was bad enough, but when the two of them were together any sophistication to Nolan's language went straight out the window.
"And you're a straight up Prince Charming, right?" Seifer retorted, holding Nolan's gaze, smirking openly.

Catching on to Seifer's intent, Nolan rolled his eyes and turned around to focus on his task instead.

"I see you guys missed each other," Calder commented from the sidelines, walking over to the sink.

"Like I'd miss this prick," Nolan muttered under his breath.

About to retort that Nolan had been quick to drop by his place after his return to Esthar, Seifer instead grabbed some more mushrooms and placed them on the chopping board in front of him. Mentioning Nolan's visit could easily lead to Nolan bringing up Squall—something he could do without.

"So, when's Trevor's brother doing the tryouts for Garden?" Calder asked as he started to clean the dirty pile of kitchen utensils that had amassed in the sink.

"Sometime next month," Nolan answered, not looking up from the chopping board.

"Did they tell him what kind of tests he had to do?" Calder asked. No one really knew much about the mercenary training schools. Beyond SeeDs being elite fighters, weapon specialists with extensive knowledge on para-magic, everything concerning Garden was wrapped in mystique. Even the entry requirements beyond the age limit were unknown. He'd never met anyone that had gotten as far as tryouts until now.

"No, they only gave him a time and place to show up at," Nolan answered blandly, taking his time with slicing the onions in his own disorganized way.

Calder dried a pan in his hand, facing Nolan. "He must be excited."

"He can't talk about anything else; it's annoying as hell." Nolan replied, using a bit more force as he cut into another onion. Trevor and his brother Conner had already talked his ears off about it—Calder didn't need to start as well.

"I'm sure you would've been the same," Calder said, knowing how badly Nolan wanted to be a SeeD. Ever since his kid brother heard about the mercenaries and witnessed one of them in action using para-magic, the boy didn't speak about anything but Garden this, Garden that; Squall Leonhart this, the commander's latest mission that. Nothing else filled his brother's mind.

"If Garden had known about Esthar when I was young enough to join, then they would've begged me to join, not the other way around," Nolan pointed out with a raise of his eyebrows, ignoring Seifer's snort. "They would have put me on missions with the Commander himself the moment I graduated."

Calder smiled softly at his brother's hero worship. Everything always came back to the man in charge of the SeeDs, to the mysterious commander without a face to go with the name. Sometimes he wondered if it was all just a big sham; a big publicity stunt to get boys like Nolan to sign up and try out for Garden with the promise that they too could become a hero some day. At the stretching silence, he turned to look at his brother and at the pensive expression that greeted him, he stilled his cleaning.

"I heard he got injured during his last mission." A crease appeared between Nolan's brows.

"The one with the big snake?" Calder asked, having already heard the story a million times over.
"I heard it managed to get its fangs into him good and throw him high up into the air." Nolan's gaze grew increasingly unfocused.

Calder almost snorted at the look, realizing the account only made Nolan admire the man more, the grim reality of battle more tangible with the added details.

"Man, I would've loved to see the fight," Nolan said, snapping back to reality from the battlefield where he'd just watched a hardened warrior take down a dangerous monster. "You know, I took down a Mesmerize last week," he added, unable to help himself from showing off even when he knew his brother would have a heart attack at his words.

"You did what?" Calder demanded, immediately lowering the plate he'd just grabbed back into the sink. He'd never liked Nolan's decision to become a fighter in the first place and had advised their parents against it when his brother had first talked about it. He knew he was a hypocrite, having chosen that line of work himself, but he couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to his brother. And Nolan was different from him, always had been. He was reckless. Calder knew right away that the boy wouldn't stick to his schedule at the SCTA, that something like this would happen.

"Yeah, Trevor and I went out to the plains and killed one. It was awesome," Nolan said with a big smile and a puffed out chest.

Seifer was grinning too, thinking back on how he and Squall had snuck off to fight their first real T-Rexaur. The thrill of fighting something that didn't just freeze and dematerialize if they got badly injured like the fake ones at Garden had lured them outside. He knew neither of them had ever regretted the instance nor the ones that followed. He could still recall the rush he'd felt when the large creature finally hit the ground; how the earth vibrated and dust was thrown up in a large circle around the creature.

"Well shit, kiddo, color me impressed," he said, glad to see Nolan showing some of the guts the little brat always bragged about.

"Don't encourage him," Calder admonished as he considered the proud look in his brother's eyes. He was still only coming to terms with Nolan learning how to fight. Imagining the boy out there, risking actual injury made him want to lock the boy up and throw away the key.

"He wants to learn how to fight—that's the way to do it," Seifer stated, a firm proponent of learning by doing. He'd tried persuading the board at the SCTA a couple of times already, but they would hear none of his suggestions of excursions. In their opinion, fighting monsters was the task of the elite forces within the Estharian army—not teenagers just learning the trade. In Seifer's opinion it wasn't anything a couple of Potions, Elixirs, and perhaps a Phoenix Down couldn't take care of.

Walking over to where Nolan had finished dicing the onions, Seifer grabbed the chopping board. "Bring back the horn next time," he said, planning on making Nolan a dagger out of it as a trophy.

"Sure," Nolan said, smiling broadly at the order. When Seifer walked away again, Nolan hoisted himself back onto the kitchen counter.

Watching the exchange with crossed arms, Calder sent them both a narrow-eyed glare.

"What?" Seifer asked, his smile waning as he met Calder's gaze. He knew Nolan was the guy's brother and all, but surely Calder could identify with the sweet satisfaction of having landed your first kill. "You remember what it was like."
"What was like?" Calder returned, his expression not easing in the slightest.

"Taking down your first monster," Seifer supplied as he turned to add some vegetables to a pan on top of the stove.

"I do," Calder said, pausing briefly as he recalled the way the Torama had collapsed, lifeless, in front of him, its blood permeating the desert sand as its magic slowly relinquished its hold on him. He had been told what magic would feel like and thought he'd been prepared for it, but the sting and burns had ensnared his mind; in the end his instructor had been the one to finish the creature off for him, a creature that had done nothing wrong, a creature they had hunted down.

"It was after I'd been accepted into my current unit. We went out on a training mission. We had supervisors, Seifer—we didn't just go out there and experiment with monsters that could possibly use magic against us—we didn't just go out there on our own."

Seifer shook his head in disbelief, his smile long gone. He couldn't believe Calder would give him this kind of crap. Fucking Estharians—don't know fuck all about the world. "You guys are too fucking sheltered," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You're saying you used to go off fighting monsters on your own?" Calder raised his eyebrows.

"All the time," Seifer replied without hesitation, the corner of his lips curving upwards. When he hadn't been sparring with Squall, he'd been out hunting monsters. Either that or they'd been out hunting monsters together. "It was great."

When he glanced in Nolan's direction, he saw his own passion mirrored in the boy's eyes. "I'll take you out to a good spot soon and we'll take down something bigger."

Before Calder could protest, Seifer held out a hand to silence the man and returned his attention to the meal he was preparing. "If you want to play mommy, you can join us, but we're doing this."

Sighing loudly, Calder walked over and gave Seifer a light whack to the head, only managing to earn himself a lopsided smirk for the effort. He always lost when Nolan and Seifer teamed up against him. And he had to concede that them going out with Nolan had some merit: at least Nolan would learn how to fight monsters and deal with magic attacks in a relatively safe way. He wasn't looking forward to it, but he'd deal.

Nolan and Seifer shared a triumphant look and Seifer began pondering where to take the boy. Nolan wondered just what Seifer considered "big."

Behind them, Calder groaned—he didn't know how he'd ended up surrounded by such reckless idiots.

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[Calder Madar's Apartment, Vascaroon Building, Sunday, 19th of October, 8:38 pm]

Apart from the bright colors that flickered across the TV screen, darkness filled the living room. Nolan was lounging comfortably in the armchair, his legs dangling over the armrest, while Seifer lay sprawled along the couch. Victim of his brother's and friend's self-indulgence, Calder was evicted to the far end of the couch as the three of them watched one of the many new movies filmed after the war.

Seifer shifted on the couch. He rarely watched movies, never really had time for them, nor the inclination. The poorly-acted instructional videos forced upon them at Garden had made him gag.
The low-budget movies back then had never appealed to him either. Laughable get-ups and cardboard sets just weren't worth his time. Not even the porn he confiscated as part of the DC had held his attention long; after a couple, he'd had his fill.

Refocusing on the film before him, he grabbed some popcorn. A flood of shitty movies like this one had been released after Adel's tomb fell from the sky and radio wave transmission became possible again. Old movie reels found new life beyond the local cinema theater and were broadcast along with new productions as more and more people got TVs in their homes. The Estharian government had even put up large screens all around the city to easily communicate with the public. When public announcements lacked, live news coverage appeared on the screens instead. At least at home Seifer could escape the medium. He didn't plan on buying a TV anytime soon.

"Moron," Nolan commented from his position in the armchair, talking to one of the people on the screen. "Even an idiot could see that coming a mile off," he added, shifting slightly in his seat.

The opening was too easy for Seifer to overlook. "Well observed." The glare sent his way was as predictable as the boy's retort.

"Fuck off."

Calder sighed and leaned forward in his seat. "Nolan," he said, his voice firm.

"What?" Nolan demanded in return. "Seifer swears ten times more than me." It wasn't a lie. If anything, the blond had taught him almost every swear word he knew.

Holding back a sigh, Calder pointed out the obvious. "He's not my brother."

Nolan returned his gaze to the TV. "Thank Hyne for that," he added under his breath.

Seifer chuckled lightly from his position on the couch. "Don't worry Sweet- pea, I know you love me."

"Whatever," Nolan said, looking briefly at Seifer as he said it, his eyes narrowed.

Reminded of Squall by the grumpy expression and annoyed dismissal, Seifer grinned. "Ah, sweet puberty," he said with mock delight.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Nolan demanded, his eyes immediately back on Seifer.

"Just congratulating you on reaching puberty," Seifer replied. "You're now officially an annoying teenager."

"Well congratulations on being an asshole," Nolan retorted, wishing imminent death upon the blond.

"Guys," Calder interjected. He'd listened to Seifer and Nolan bicker all day—there was only so much he could take.

Appearing as if the movie had recaptured his attention, Nolan instead contemplated how to get the blond back. As he tuned out the movie completely, the answer came to him easily. He knew what had happened the week before, how Seifer had been supposed to meet up with Calder but never showed. He also knew a man opened the door to Seifer's apartment the morning after, only half dressed. It reeked of one of Seifer's one night stands. "Hey Seif... Who was that guy at your apartment last Thursday?"
The casual way Nolan asked the question didn't fool Seifer. "None of your business, kiddo." Two could play at the game of nonchalance.

Narrowing his eyes, Nolan considered Seifer's tactic. Either the blond really didn't care about him bringing up the topic, or he'd hit the jackpot. Seifer only kept himself under enough control to appear unaffected when he truly had something to hide. Time to up the ante. But what would rile Seifer up the most: insulting the blond's choice in men or spilling Seifer's secret? Unable to choose, he decided to do both.

"Weren't you supposed to meet Calder last Wednesday eve?" he started out, keeping an innocent facade even though he knew the question was anything but. Yet it failed to illicit a reaction from the blond. *Interesting.*

"You know, it's kinda incriminating to have a half naked guy answer your door the morning after you're supposed to meet someone else," he said, foregoing subtlety.

That finally caught the blond's attention. Watching as Seifer moved from his slouched position to stare at him, Nolan had to suppress a grin.

"You might want to shut up right about now," Seifer supplied darkly. If the boy had any wits about him he would do just that.

"Why?" Nolan asked, a slight upwards tug at the corner of his lips giving away his true game. "Feeling cornered?"

Seifer all but growled. "Feeling just about ready to wring your neck."

Borderline managing to keep a straight face, Nolan pressed on. "Oh, so you did stand Calder up then?" he asked, not missing the way Seifer's jaw clenched. He knew he was almost there. The eruption would be spectacular. "For that arrogant ladyboy?" he added, the taste of revenge sweet on his tongue.

Clenching his fists, Seifer barely restrained the urge to deck Nolan. The little shit could be such an unbelievable pain in the ass. Not only did he now have to deal with explaining the whole thing to Calder, but Nolan had actually referred to Squall as a—

His fingers twitched, his mouth went dry—he saw his fist impacting with Nolan's stomach, the boy doubling over in pain—yet he hadn't moved an inch.

At the murderous expression on Seifer's face, Calder stood from the couch. He had to intervene. Either that or he'd end up with a severely injured or dead brother. But just before he figured out what to say, Nolan cut him off, the smirk on the boy's face warning him things were just about to get worse.

"I thought you liked guys, not femme-bo—" As he jumped out of his chair, Nolan forgot the rest of his sentence. Placing more space between himself and Seifer seemed vitally important the moment the blond rose from the couch. He'd expected things to turn physical—some horseplay—but the way Seifer looked at him didn't have much playfulness about it. Neither did the way the blond stalked closer.

"Okay, guys, relax," Calder said in a rush, moving closer.

Seifer caught the quick dart to Nolan's eyes that betrayed the boy's intention to make a break for it. By the time Nolan set off into a sprint, Seifer had already moved to intercept him and seized hold of the boy. Placing Nolan in a hammerlock, he made sure the boy couldn't move without inflicting
"First of all," he said in a low voice, his mouth placed behind Nolan's ear, "he's a friend." He applied a fraction more pressure, stopping when a slight crease appeared between Nolan's brows. "Second of all," he paused for emphasis, "no one talks about him like that. Got it?"

A couple of seconds passed before Nolan nodded. Feeling Seifer release his hold, he moved forward a step and took a deep breath. He didn't dare meet the blond's gaze.

Somewhat calmer, Seifer cursed inwardly as he moved towards the kitchen. "I'm going to get a drink." He didn't spare either of the Madar brothers another glance before leaving the room.

He placed the bottle of Penderyn on the counter harshly and got out two tumblers. Pouring himself a full glass of the golden whiskey, he immediately brought it to his lips. The first three swigs went down quickly. Telling Calder about Squall was unavoidable now. Even though they could both sleep with whoever they liked, standing Calder up had been another bad consequence of everything that happened that night. He probably should have come clean from the start. He just didn't want to talk about Squall or any of what had happened.

Empty glass in hand, Seifer gathered the second glass and the bottle in his other hand and returned to the living room. No background sound greeted him; the TV had been turned off. Calder looked over at him from where the man had resumed his seat at the end of the couch. He couldn't see Nolan.

"Don't tell me I actually managed to scare the little shit off." Seifer placed the glasses and whiskey on the coffee table.

Watching as Seifer sat down and put his feet up on the table, Calder raised an eyebrow. "You did put on quite a show."

"Hn." Seifer still mostly blamed Nolan. Granted, the boy didn't know how strongly he would react, but he'd been out of line nonetheless.

Pouring himself a glass of Penderyn, Calder leaned back in his seat. Seifer's expression was blank, but the blond had brought along a glass for him. Maybe he would finally find out what had happened. He hadn't seen Seifer much since the man turned up on his doorstep Thursday night. Apart from the time they'd spent together since their spar that very afternoon, he'd only seen Seifer in the mornings when he'd gotten out of bed and at those times the blond had been fast asleep. He'd vaguely registered the blond joining him in bed in the early hours of the morning, but they hadn't spoken then either. He assumed Seifer had spent his time at Arc's from the faint smell of soot clinging to the blond.

The atypical behavior he'd witnessed the last couple of days coincided suspiciously with what Nolan had divulged. The timing fit perfectly. Seifer must've met the guy Nolan had mentioned Wednesday night and brought him home, and that's when things had gone downhill. Seifer's mood was already off when he'd met the blond at the SCTA Thursday evening. Something else must have happened after their spar, something that caused the blond to come stay at his apartment. From what he could deduce, Seifer hadn't been back to his own apartment since.

Studying Seifer closely, he leaned over and filled up both their glasses. The blond remained silent, green eyes studying the golden liquid. Calder tapped his glass softly. "What happened?"

A slight crease took shape between Seifer's brow for a few seconds but quickly disappeared again.
"He used to be my sparring partner." Seifer knocked back another healthy swig of the whiskey. "He was at Pulse."

Calder's eyes rose from Seifer's drink at "sparring partner." He didn't know much about Seifer's past, only a few names of friends and sweethearts that were mentioned in passing. Seifer always avoided talking about his training, about where he came from. He figured if the past was a sore point for Seifer, then why delve into it. What mattered was the fun they had in each other's company.

"I offered him Avalanche."

Pulled from his thoughts, Calder recognized the true meaning behind the words. "You slept with him?"

The way green eyes stayed locked on the whiskey in his glass as he took another large gulp of the golden liquid was the only answer Calder needed.

"So?" Most guys would give their right arm for a night of Avalanche and sex with Seifer.

"He's not fucking gay. I gave him Avalanche and seduced him," Seifer bit out as he placed his empty glass firmly on the coffee table. He grabbed hold of the bottle of Penderyn and poured himself another glass. "He's too fucking sexy for his own good."

Silence fell as Calder watched Seifer sip on his drink with a grim expression. He didn't know what to make of Seifer's words. There'd been instances where he'd slept with someone he wouldn't have if it hadn't been for Avalanche. He'd done things that left him disgusted the morning after. But as far as changing your sexual orientation, he remained skeptical. "You're sure he's straight?"

A loud "yes" resounded in Seifer's mind. After he'd realized which way he swung himself, he toyed with the idea of Squall being gay and the guy wearing the clothes he had when they were younger just to entice him—to show him how fucking irresistible he was.

But he knew better than that. Squall just happened to have an unfortunate proclivity for dark leather and belts—a style that had the accidental side effect of turning the brunet into just about any gay guy's walking wet dream. He'd wager Squall was entirely clueless when it came to his effect on guys; he could easily imagine how Squall would react if he ever found out, how gloved fingers would reach to pinch the bridge of his nose in instant vexation.

The fact that Rinoa and Squall had been in a long term relationship was the main clue. And he had to admit, when he'd found out about them he hadn't been surprised by Squall's sexuality; what had surprised him had been the brunet entering a relationship in the first place. He'd always assumed Squall to be a frigid bastard incapable of getting intimate with anyone, male or female.

"I take that as a no," Calder supplied at the stretching silence.

"He's straight alright," Seifer replied grimly. "If it hadn't been for the drugs, he would never have let me touch him."

The amount of self-reproach behind Seifer's words temporarily stilled Calder's tongue. Why Seifer was taking it all upon himself eluded him. "Unless you forced the pill down his throat, this isn't your fault."

Seifer snorted in reply, before gulping down more of the whisky. At the end of the couch, Calder slouched back into a more comfortable position. A warm buzz from the alcohol was settling throughout him, adding to his confusion. He still had no clue why Seifer was staying with him.
"If he was so averse to your company, then why did he stay? I mean, he was still there when Nolan dropped by," he said, voicing the glaring flaw in what he'd been told so far.

Seifer narrowed his eyes and took another sip of whiskey. "We had unfinished business."

Shaking his head slightly at the blond's grim demeanor and evasive reply, Calder went on. "This guy..." he began, hinting at Seifer to give him a name so he wouldn't have to continue to refer to him as "the guy" or "he," but when the blond didn't catch on or plain stubbornly refused to humor him, he continued, "...he's the reason you're staying here?"

It was a while before Seifer relented to an answer, his words measured. "I told him he could stay at my apartment."

"Why?" Calder immediately asked. It didn't make sense for Seifer to make such an offer nor did it make sense for the guy to stay unless he wanted to stay.

"I made the fucking mess," Seifer let out hotly, unable to restrain himself. Trying to curb his emotions, he grit his teeth. "His girlfriend found out," he let out under his breath.

Everything suddenly fell into place for Calder. Seifer's behavior, what had happened, why Seifer was staying there. Seifer liked the guy and the guy had a girlfriend. It probably didn't help that Seifer'd had a taste of something he wanted more of, something that was off limits. Almost amused at the pure simplicity of it all, Calder just shook his head softly. Sometimes Seifer could be such a baby. He'd never witnessed it taken to such an extent before, but he'd certainly dealt with the man's more outward bouts of grumpiness at not getting his way. Feeling the urge to knock some sense into the man, he instead got up from the couch.

"You can stay as long as you want," he said, regarding the blond firmly. When fierce green eyes met his, he suppressed the urge to roll his own and instead turned and left the room. He knew the anger wasn't directed at him—that it was just an outward reflection of Seifer's inner turmoil. It meant the best thing to do was to just leave the blond alone.

As Calder left the room, Seifer emptied his fourth glass of whiskey. First Calder hadn't been able to get enough answers and then all of a sudden the brunet had just up and left, as if what he'd said had been stupid. Pouring another healthy helping of the Penderyn sloppily into his glass, he took another greedy gulp and relished the bitter sting that caressed the back of his throat. Calder could go fuck himself... along with his stupid questions.

In the end none of it mattered. He'd fucked up, again, yes, but it would all be over soon. In fact, it probably already was. Tomorrow, after he finished his work at the SCTA, he'd go home and see if Squall was still there. At the off-chance the brunet was, he'd just grab some stuff and return to Calder's. And if he wasn't, well, then that would be the end of it.

Placing his empty glass on the coffee table, he rose from the couch and headed for the bedroom as well. For now he'd keep the past out of his mind, something he'd become quite skilled at.

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[Zayin House, Chimera District, Monday, 20th of October, 11:54 pm]

Reminding himself that he'd just go in there, pack some stuff and assure Squall that he could stay there for as long as he wanted without any disturbances, Seifer straightened from his slouched position. As long as the brunet didn't push any of his buttons, they'd be fine.

Stepping into the hallway, he started the short trek to his apartment. He tried to empty his mind,
but the thoughts wouldn't disappear. As he slid his key into the lock of his front door, he stopped, his hand resting on the handle.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed the door open, standing absolutely still.

Only darkness greeted him.

_You'll never see Squall again._

He didn't enter.

Until that moment he'd been too busy ignoring everything to consider what would happen if Squall decided to leave. He'd thought he never wanted to see the brunet again plenty of times, but upon facing the prospect of never actually seeing him again and having no way of contacting him, he felt his chest tighten. His heart pounded against his chest.

Forcing himself to enter the apartment, he switched on the light. Upon seeing everything in its right place, he almost switched the light off again just to avoid the empty room.

Just a week ago he'd all but forgotten about Squall apart from when others would bring up the man's name. _Nothing_ had happened since then to change things. They weren't even _friends_.

His eyes traveled to the small plastic bag with brightly colored pills lying on the kitchen counter.

Slamming the door behind him, he strode over to the counter and grabbed hold of the bag only to throw it into one of the drawers. This wasn't _right_. He'd learnt how to deal with what life had thrown his way and had moved on, but _of course_ Squall had to mess with that. He shoved the drawer shut, but felt no calmer for the abuse.

Continuing into the bedroom, he only made it past the threshold before stopping abruptly into place—he didn't need to turn on the lights to know what would greet him: mussed sheets and an almost empty bottle of lube. Dried come.

Fisting his hands and clenching his jaw, he walked over to grab a pillow. Within seconds he was back in the living room. Switching off the lights, he made for the couch, not wanting to think _at all_ any longer. Yanking hold of a blanket, he flopped onto the couch and closed his eyes.

But all he could think of was Squall; all he could see were gray-blue eyes watching him in a way he'd never thought possible. All he could feel were the touch of cool fingers seeking him out and pulling him closer. Pulling him in for a kiss.
[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Tuesday, 21st of October, 8:43 am]

The hesitant knock at Seifer's front door didn't register at first. None of his muscles moved in reaction, his body remaining entirely lost to sleep. When the knock came again it had turned into urgent rapping, finally pulling him from his dreams.

With a groan, Seifer pushed off his blanket and stood up from the couch. Unable to open his eyes properly, he staggered blindly in the direction of the door and let out a curse when he accidentally stubbed his toe against the coffee table. Pushing open the door, he slumped against its frame and brought up a hand to his forehead in an attempt to massage the tiredness away.

Just outside in the hallway Rinoa stood wide-eyed, a slight blush creeping onto her cheeks at Seifer's unclothed form. The pair of boxers failed to hide that the blond had only just woken up, the tented fabric leaving little to the imagination. Keeping her gaze strictly on Seifer's face, she quickly molded her features back into a neutral expression.

"Good morning, Seifer," she said in a clipped voice. She almost hadn't managed to pull it off, her distrust with the man temporarily trumped by the sight in front of her. She hadn't expected Seifer to be so caught off guard, to look so tired.

"Rinoa...?" Valiantly trying to open his eyes, Seifer squinted as the bright light of the hallway flooded his vision.

Rinoa took advantage of Seifer's sleep addled state and briskly walked past him into the apartment without invitation. Her gaze lingered briefly on the couch where the blond had been sleeping, his clothes lying messily on the floor beside it. The small, windowless space didn't hold any trace of Squall's presence—neither of the brunet's gunblade cases were present, no leather jacket on the hanger by the door, not even a conspicuous second cup of coffee on the counter.

"...Is he here?" she asked faintly. She had searched all over Esthar for Squall, had considered even the unlikeliest places for him to go, Laguna's included. Desperate, she had told herself that Squall was probably with Seifer, that he simply wasn't picking up her phone calls because he was avoiding her. Squall had to be here.

"What...?" Seifer said, closing the door behind him as he turned around to watch Rinoa. When he finally realized who she was referring to, his eyebrows shot up.

"Squall?" he asked, nearly snorting at the girl's assumption. "I haven't seen him since Thursday."

Casting a distrustful look at the pillow and blanket lying on the couch, Rinoa ignored the man's sleep dazed statement and strode towards the only other door in the room. Hands clenching and features darkening, she was ready to give Squall a rough wake-up call as she flipped on the lights. How dare he make her worry like tha—

Staring into an empty bedroom, she walked farther inside, her eyebrows knitting together. The sheets were messy and obviously slept in, and a bottle of lube she wished she hadn't spotted pointed at other activities. Stopping in place, her hands clenched into fists as she realized what she had walked into; the place Squall and Seifer had—

Interrupting her train of thought and taking a moment to breathe, she forced herself to note that
there was no luggage here, no duffel bags or anything that indicated Squall's presence. A brief glance into the bathroom confirmed his absence.

Her gaze traveled back to the incriminating state of the bed. If Seifer hadn't seen Squall since Thursday, then he had moved on to new bed partners rather quickly. The unfairness of it all stung. Seifer had had Squall, completely and unconditionally, but apparently it hadn't meant a thing. Jealousy would have overwhelmed her then, if the sudden damning realization that Squall wasn't here, hadn't snapped her back into the present.

Hurrying back into the living area, she fixed Seifer and the couch with a narrow-eyed gaze. "Why are you sleeping on the couch?"

"That's not really any of your business," Seifer answered coldly, restraining himself from speaking the blunt words on his mind. Mentioning his own bed and Squall's come in one sentence probably wasn't a wise move.

Registering his state of undress, he ignored his visitor and headed for the bedroom. He didn't understand why Rinoa had come looking for Squall at his place—his apartment was the last place the brunet would be.

Dressed, he returned to the living room. Stopping to lean against the door frame, he crossed his arms. "What are you doing here?"

Moving her attention away from the rather plain looking apartment, Rinoa turned around to meet the blond's glare in kind. "Don't give me that look, Seifer. It's not as if I was dying to come and ask you," she bit back, wishing Seifer would skip the confrontational act for once. "... Do you know where he is?"

Seifer rolled his eyes. "I already told you. I haven't seen him since Thursday. And we didn't exactly part on friendly terms."

Looking at the blond warily for that last sentence, Rinoa was reminded of how distraught Squall's end of the bond had felt that night. With each new piece of the puzzle that fell into place, it seemed less and less likely that Seifer was lying to her. "I just thought you might know more. This was the last place I could think of..."

Suppressing a snort at Rinoa's statement, grimly amused by the fact that he wasn't alone in thinking as much, Seifer regarded her levelly. "Weren't you supposed to meet him?"

Rinoa narrowed her eyes at the statement. "We did meet," she confirmed, forcing herself to put aside her slighted feelings for Squall's sake. "But... he hasn't called since, even though he said he would." Her thoughts returned to the "symptoms" Odine had mentioned so indifferently. "I'm worried."

Having little patience for Rinoa's words and the way she was fussing over Squall, Seifer huffed. "He's a grown man, Rinoa. Give him some credit. He probably got called out for a mission," he said as he pushed away from the door to make his way to the kitchen. He couldn't believe he was getting dragged into this. The trifles of Mr. and Mrs. Leonhart, what a joke.

Temporarily stunned by Seifer's uncaring reply, Rinoa's eyes suddenly widened in understanding. "You don't know?"

"Seifer... We met to sever our bond as knight and sorceress. He was supposed to check in with both me and Odine every twenty four hours, but he hasn't. At first I thought he just needed time... but..."
he's not answering his phone. He's not at the apartment or at La—"

Catching herself just in time, the president's name died on her lips. She already had enough on her plate, without having to explain why Laguna's was a possible place for Squall to go. Certain that she had conveyed the reasons for her concern, she faced Seifer head-on. "I need to make sure he's okay."

His entire posture growing tense, Seifer stopped himself in the middle of pouring a bowl of cereal. He couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

When Ultimia and his own bond had been cut, he'd been in a bad state. Bad didn't even begin to cover it. He wouldn't have survived if it hadn't been for Raijin and Fujin. The thought that Squall was out there, alone, going through something similar made his blood run cold.

"I don't know where he'd go," he said, his voice tight at the realization. He didn't know Squall anymore. How was he supposed to find him, when he didn't even know where to search?

"When you saw him—how was he?" he asked, hoping his gut feeling was wrong. Maybe he was just getting worked up over nothing. Maybe it was different when the bond was broken with the consent of both parties. He wouldn't put it beyond Squall to just disappear as a way of dealing with a break-up.

"At the time he seemed better than I expected... considering the situation anyway... I was hurt at his lack of reaction." Berating herself, Rinoa paused to let out a humorless laugh. Because of her own pettiness, she had failed to look out for subtler indications of something being off. "The more I think about it... For over two years I was able to feel his state of mind through our bond. I've never learned to read him any other way."

Taking a deep breath to keep her voice from quivering, her gaze fell to the floor. She should have known better, shouldn't have let Squall's seemingly indifferent attitude get to her. He always acted indifferent. "His movements were a bit unsteady, but... it didn't seem that bad... He wouldn't look at me and only stayed long enough for Odine to give him his medication."

"Thank you, Seifer."

Not acknowledging Rinoa's words, Seifer closed the door behind them. Heading down the hallway, he didn't turn to check if she was following. He would much have preferred to do things on his own and wouldn't have thought twice about ditching her if he'd stood a chance of finding Squall on his own.
"My pickup's just down the road."

Getting out his cell phone, he dialed Arc's number, having to take care of work. "Hey, old man," he said when the line was finally picked up. "I'm not coming in today."

"And the blaster edge?" the smith asked.

Reminded of the job he still had to finish, Seifer hesitated. "Tomorrow... Tell the customer it'll be ready then."

"You better get in early then," Arc grumbled after a slight pause.

Annoyed at letting Arc down, Seifer's expression hardened. "Sure. See you tomorrow," he said, hanging up. Nothing he could do about it now. Returning his attention to Rinoa, he needed to get a handle on the situation. "Where have you looked?"

Starting from her surprise that Seifer had blown off work, Rinoa tore her gaze from the cell phone in the man's hand. "Well... There aren't that many places he could be, and I've checked those already. Aside from you, there isn't really anybody else in Esthar he might go to."

The only people Squall knew in Esthar were Laguna, Seifer, and herself. He'd never stayed long enough in the metropolis to start favoring certain places, so she had quickly exhausted the rather short list of possible hiding spots for the brunet.

"It does seem like he returned to our apartment at a certain point, but that might have been before we met. And he left his key behind, so he won't be returning... Also, his car isn't parked at Odine's lab anymore, so he did manage to go somewhere from there."

"How about Garden? Have you contacted them?"

Features darkening at recalling the rather unpleasant phone call, Rinoa nodded before answering, as both of them walked into the elevator. "They haven't heard from him..."

At least Quistis had been on another continent, well out of strangling range when she'd had to break the news; not only about the bond, but also about the fact that she'd broken up with Squall months ago. She had tried to be nonchalant when inquiring after Squall's whereabouts and knew that if it wasn't for Quistis' experience with Squall's tendency to avoid other people when brooding, the woman would already have dispatched a search party to Esthar. If they didn't find Squall soon, she would request the search party herself. But, as long as there was still a chance that Squall was just hiding out somewhere, she didn't want to bring the whole of Garden down on their heads.

"...Quistis is livid with me for not having told her about Squall and me."

Seifer had to fight hard to keep from voicing his own accusations. He couldn't believe she had let Squall leave straight after they'd broken their bond. Both she and Squall should have realized anything that dealt with the powers of a sorceress shouldn't be taken lightly.

"Where does he normally go when he's out?" he asked as they walked out the elevator. "Anywhere he likes to hang out? Relax? Work out?"

Rinoa shook her head and sighed. "I told you, I already considered the places he could be... He's only in Esthar for diplomatic meetings or when he's on leave, in between missions, and then he'd be with me. He always takes off after a couple of days again, so I don't think he has any of those places in Esthar."
Stopping abruptly in his tracks, Seifer ran a hand through his hair. If they didn't have a clue where to look, then where the hell were they going? They needed a hunch, a hint, something.

No ideas came. All his mind supplied was the image of Squall taking his frustration out on some monsters or losing himself to training, which implied an SCTA or a monster infested area outside the city. Something was wrong though; somehow he knew Squall wouldn't be at any of those places. But the SCTA...

Of course. Calder.

"I know someone who can help us."

Picking up his stride, he walked down the street with new found determination. Getting out his phone, he entered the man's phone number and brought the cell to his ear.

"Heya," a young voice answered at the other end of the line.

"Hand me Calder," Seifer instructed. He didn't have time to deal with Nolan.

"Seif," the boy greeted, sounding entirely unperturbed at the order. "What're you up to?"

"Nolan, get your brother on the line. Now." Seifer's voice brooked no argument.

"Why aren't you at Arc's?"

"Now."

"Okay, okay, relax..." the boy finally conceded before the line went quiet as the phone passed hands.

"Calder," the boy's older brother answered.

"Hey," Seifer said in greeting, his features relaxing somewhat. "Look, I need your help."

"Are you in trouble?"

"No, I'm fine," Seifer replied, wanting to get to the point. "I need your help locating someone."

"Sure," Calder said, accommodating as usual.

Relieved to have Calder's aid, Seifer put his cell phone in his other hand as he crossed the street outside his building. Considering what information they had that could be used to locate Squall, he briefly looked in Rinoa's direction. "We have a phone number and a license plate," he said, certain the girl would have at least as much. "Will that be enough?"

"It should be," Calder replied, before adding a reminder for the blond. "But you know it's my week off."

Seifer grimaced at the man's reply. "Will it be a problem?"

"No, it shouldn't be," Calder replied without hesitation. "I'm sure we can figure out some form of payment," he continued, his voice easily giving away exactly what kind of payment he would prefer.

A smirk appeared on Seifer's lips, the banter taking away some of the tension that had taken hold of him since Rinoa's arrival. "Get your mind out of the gutter."
"I thought you liked it there."

At the words, Seifer's smirk grew. "You're sidetracking."

"Perhaps," Calder admitted. "I'll be outside headquarters in fifteen minutes," he said, hanging up.

Closing his phone, Seifer got out his car keys. Moving into the driver's seat, he pushed open the passenger door and waited for Rinoa to get in.

Struggling to keep her expression neutral, Rinoa stared at Seifer for a few seconds; even the one side of the conversation she had just overheard was enough to raise an entire new array of questions and suspicions. Curbing the uncensored words lying on the tip of her tongue, she slipped into the passenger's seat. Seifer was already operating on a short fuse. She'd have to venture carefully.

The engine roared to life when Seifer put his key in the ignition. As he pulled out of the parking spot and headed in the direction of Calder's workplace, he felt somewhat relieved. At least they stood a chance of finding Squall now.

But the sentiment didn't last long, as the image of Squall lying passed out somewhere asserted itself. He couldn't believe Rinoa had let three whole days pass before getting to this point. Squall was a man of his word; the minute the guy hadn't phoned in as promised, she should have known something was off.

"So who is this Calder?" Rinoa asked, her eyes trained on the blond's face in scrutiny. It had been a man on the other end of the phone. A man who Seifer apparently knew well enough to ask for help and who needed to be told to get his mind out of the gutter.

Her thoughts involuntarily traveled back to the state of the blond's bed, and she had to make a conscious effort to keep a deepening frown from her face.

"He's my sparring partner."

"...I see... How exactly can he help us find Squall?" Rinoa asked as she turned her gaze away from the blond and moved to watch the street view.

Stopping at an intersection, Seifer briefly regarded the girl sitting in his passenger seat. "He works for the government. For one of their SWAT teams."

Rinoa hummed softly in understanding, before firing away her next question. "A gunblade sparring partner?"

Not understanding her interest in Calder and not really caring, Seifer brought his eyes back on the traffic and just let out a low hum in reply.

"That's nice," she commented neutrally, not letting what she thought of Seifer's apparent tendency to bed his sparring partners show on her face. Reminded of the few gunbladers they had tried to set Squall up with after the war, not a single one ever meeting the brunet's ridiculous standards, it somehow seemed unfair to her that Seifer had moved on when Squall hadn't been able to.

"...Squall never seemed to like sparring much after the war. He just trains on his own," she remarked offhandedly, peering sideways to gauge Seifer's reaction.

Seifer's expression grew solemn. He had been Squall's only real sparring partner before the war. It didn't take a genius to figure out the true meaning behind her words; yet another way he had
fucked up. *This*, finding Squall, was something he *had* to do right.

"We'll find him, Rinoa," he said as he briefly looked in her direction and held her gaze.

Rinoa wasn't sure what she had wanted to provoke with her remark, but the man's somber demeanor made her feel like it had been in poor taste. As she directed her gaze out of the window with a slight frown, she wondered about Seifer's perplexing concern, Squall's belief in the blond's innocence, and how things were never as they seemed.

Street after street whizzed by but Rinoa didn't pay attention, distracted from her plan to wheedle answers out of the unsuspecting blond. Maybe Seifer really was confident that they'd find Squall, but she wasn't so convinced herself. The longer she couldn't see for herself that he was safe and sound, the more she was plagued by worst case scenarios.

The fact that Odine had even bothered developing pills at all for his former test subjects meant the symptoms had to have been substantial, enough to form a hindrance to his research. She sincerely hoped a bond differed enough from a junction to spare Squall whatever it was those volunteer hosts had suffered through...

Hands fidgeting in her lap, she whispered softly, "I hope he's alright."

"Me too."

At the softly spoken admission, Rinoa returned her gaze to the blond, wishing she could see into his head.

Seifer wasn't anything like he'd been during the war. He seemed genuinely worried about Squall, had even ditched work and offered to help without a second thought, even though he and Squall had never been friends. They had slept together, Seifer's taste in bed partners unquestionably in men. Had it meant anything at all to Seifer or was Squall just one in a series of many? If he really cared about the brunet, then how could he do such a thing?

None of it added up and she couldn't suppress her burning questions any longer, *needing* to know whether Squall was being toyed with. "Are you gay?" she asked almost blandly, keeping her voice as non-confrontational as possible.

Glancing at Rinoa, Seifer frowned and tried to gauge her reasons for asking. He didn't like her prying, but at the same time he had nothing to hide; he would never be ashamed of his sexuality. "Yes," he replied curtly, staring straight ahead.

"And this Calder person?" Rinoa continued her questioning casually. If she had read things correctly, they were involved, but *how* was the question. Surely not even Seifer would be as insensitive as to ask a lover to help track down someone he'd been unfaithful with.

"We're not together if that's what you're asking," Seifer supplied before returning his gaze to Rinoa.

"Ah..." Rinoa muttered. No strings attached then. Of course Seifer would be the type to play around. She didn't have any foot to stand on to start judging him for that; even her urge to accuse the blond of having toyed around with Squall left a bitter taste.

She had purposefully kept the nature of their relationship ambiguous while she had gone out with other men. Not because she had really been interested in any of them, but because she'd wanted to provoke *some* kind of reaction in the cold brunet; shake up the unsatisfying status quo that had settled between them. It seemed whenever Squall was concerned, she would lapse into petty behavior, something she hated about herself.
But hypocrite or not, she couldn't help herself from wanting to look out for him, in spite of everything she was guilty of herself. Squall was too oblivious, too busy pretending that nothing got to him and that made Seifer a dangerous person for him to get involved with.

"What about Squall?" she asked, her gaze fixed on Seifer.

"What about him?" Seifer countered, steeling his expression. He wasn't going to show her just how much the night with Squall had affected him.

Considering for a moment whether she even wanted to hear the answer, Rinoa resolutely suppressed her feelings on the matter and finally spoke the question that had been bugging her ever since she had witnessed Seifer's uncharacteristic concern for Squall. "How do you feel about him?"

Not looking Rinoa's way, Seifer kept his eyes firmly on the road. "I already told you that I care about him. You know he's fucking sexy. You figure it out."

At the reply that was both evasive and blunt, Rinoa's composed façade finally crumbled. Seifer's reply basically meant he was interested in Squall and Hyne, going by what she had felt from Squall over the bond, the blond might very well get him too. Falling silent, she slumped back into the passenger seat.

She didn't want other people commenting that Squall was sexy. She didn't want to think about Squall with anybody other than herself, especially Seifer. Staring dead ahead, she tried to steer her thoughts back on track, to their search. It was more than unsettling to no longer feel Squall; the fact that he could be anywhere, in any kind of state, ate away at her. He could die and she wouldn't know.

The bond had always been the only thing to make Squall's long missions away bearable for her, his presence a constant in her mind and his whereabouts always a certainty. Without that, she would have gone mad with worry, much like she was now.

"How long were you together?"

Not having expected for Seifer to turn the tables on her, Rinoa hesitated. It was obvious that Seifer's interest in the topic was triggered only by his interest in Squall, and somehow it felt as if answering the blond's question would come down to confirming Squall was single and available.

"...Since shortly after the war, until about five months ago." Her voice came out thick and unsteady, her gaze still fixed on the passing streets.

Seifer tightened his grip on the steering wheel. From Rinoa's voice message, he'd been certain their break-up had been recent; that what he and Squall had done had been the last straw in an already strained relationship. "Why did you break up?"

Why... A question Rinoa had asked herself many times over. She knew why, but sometimes she wished they never had, times when an unsatisfying status quo seemed infinitely better than nothing at all. Squall would never have left her on his own accord. If she had wanted to, she could have held on to this unrequited love for the rest of their lives.

Knowing well enough that Seifer didn't have any patience for tears, she tilted her head farther towards the window when her eyes started to burn, her long hair keeping her features obscured.

"I couldn't bear it anymore... waiting for him to finally love me back," she answered quietly, deciding that skirting the issue was pointless this far into the conversation. "I was planning to break our bond back then as well, but I thought taking it in steps would be less painful... To be
honest, I wasn't ready yet to give up on him completely, so I kept him tied to me as my knight... even though I was the one to break up."

Naive mistake that had been; the only thing it had accomplished was to drag on a dysfunctional relationship for far longer than was healthy. "...Probably doesn't make much sense, huh," she spoke softly as a self-deprecating smile fell flat on her lips.

Frowning, Seifer realized he shouldn't have asked his questions. Even if the breakup had happened five months ago, it was obviously still fresh and painful to Rinoa. It all made sense; it explained why he'd gotten the impression he had. She was having trouble letting go and so was Squall.

"I'm sorry, Rinoa."

At the unexpected words, Rinoa glanced sideways to study Seifer.

The man sitting next to her had changed from the boy she used to date. Charming as he had been, attempts to talk about her feelings had consistently been met with an uncaring attitude and poorly hidden boredom. Not even when their summer together had come to a disappointing end had the blond bothered with expressing any form of "sorry." Sympathy was the last thing she had come to expect of Seifer.

Turning her gaze to watch the road in front of them, she quickly blinked her tears away. Strangely, an unsympathetic listener would have been the better option, forcing her to keep strong.

"We're almost there," Seifer said as he took a turn down Vana'diel Avenue. Spotting the police headquarters a few blocks down, he sped up.

How much could happen in three days? What state would a person be in, not drinking or eating for that long? What if they couldn't find him? What if no one did? Reaching the police headquarters, he swerved into the front drive.

Spotting Calder leaning against the hood of the man's black sedan, he pulled into the empty parking space next to it. He wasn't too keen on involving Calder, knowing he'd have to tell the man things he'd rather avoid, but it was his only option. Getting out of the car, he strode over to the man.

Pretending to straighten out her coat, Rinoa took a few deep breaths as she tried to shake the conversation with Seifer from her mind. Briefly, she let her gaze roam the sophisticated police building, a place she had never expected to visit, least of all for the reason she was now. The sight of it added an unsettling feel of gravity to the situation.

Starting into motion, she followed after Seifer to the man waiting ahead; Calder no doubt. The man was handsome, his attire casual and his short brown hair styled to stick out in all directions. His easy smile, tall build, and laid-back way of leaning against the hood of his car strangely reminded her of Irvine, minus the lewdness.

"Hey," Calder said as he held out his hand in greeting, his eyes warm and his pleasant smile never leaving his face as he looked at Rinoa.

Unable to muster a forced smile herself, Rinoa accepted the man's outstretched hand without a word, wishing they could skip on the niceties.

"Rinoa Heartilly," Seifer supplied from the sideline, his eyes trained on Calder. He wasn't keen on Rinoa and Calder meeting. He'd told Calder about Rinoa a while back; about his second failed experience with the opposite sex. The curious look Calder sent him left no room for doubt—Calder
remembered her name. Yielding to a small nod, the move almost imperceptible, he confirmed the man's suspicions.

"Pleased to meet you," Calder said warmly, returning his attention to Rinoa. "It's nice to finally meet someone from Seifer's past."

Seifer's eyes narrowed at the comment. "Calder," he warned, his voice hard. There wasn't time for pleasantries.

"Of course," Calder replied, sending Seifer a disarming smile before looking back to Rinoa, giving her a smile as well. "Let's go," he said, turning around to lead the way.

The odd exchange didn't escape Rinoa. Turning to cast Seifer a questioning look, the blond was already walking ahead of her, following after Calder. So much for his considerate mood.

Releasing a sigh, she quickly followed them across the parking lot, the two men walking side by side and clearly used to each other's company. Watching their backs as she trailed behind, she wondered just what Seifer had told Calder about her, the man obviously aware of who she was... There were plenty of things to be told about her that wouldn't go over too well with an Estharian, but the brunet seemed to treat her normally so far.

As they entered the large building, Calder glanced sideways at Seifer and finally asked what had been on his mind ever since he had received the blond's phone call. "Who are you looking for?"

Not wanting to get into the specifics, especially not in public, Seifer kept his answer short and dismissive. "A friend."

"Anyone I know?" Calder immediately asked, the smile from earlier vanishing.

"No."

Calder frowned as they walked farther into the large lobby. "It wouldn't happen to be your visitor, would it?" he asked, raising an eyebrow in curiosity as he looked at the blond.

Nodding, Seifer looked straight ahead, avoiding Calder's gaze. The slight concession should be enough to satisfy the man for the time being.

Upon reaching security, Calder gestured towards Rinoa and Seifer while addressing one of the guards. "These are my guests," he supplied before waiting for two guest passes to be issued, leaving him a moment to think. Looking to Rinoa first, then to Seifer, he wondered what the blond's ex was doing here and just how she fit into everything. The most incriminating evidence was her reappearance into Seifer's life only days after the blond's ex-sparring partner had found his way into Seifer's bed. Hoping he was wrong, he wondered if she was the wronged girlfriend.

The two security passes placed on the counter next to him pulled him from his thoughts. Handing them over, he turned and led Rinoa and Seifer farther into the building, past the weapons checkpoint. Soon, they were walking down an empty hallway. No one would overhear his questions here.

"When did he go missing?" he asked, his eyes traveling to regard Seifer. The blond looked to Rinoa for a reply.

Feeling the gazes of both men on her, Rinoa repeated what she had already told Seifer. "Squall was supposed to call me Saturday evening, but I haven't heard from him since that morning... at Odine's lab."
"Squall?" Calder asked, looking to the blond with an arched eyebrow. "That's quite an uncommon name," he added. Seifer met his gaze levelly.

"It is," the blond said, fed up with pretenses. Next to him Rinoa's eyes widened upon realizing her mistake.

"As in Squall Leonhart?" Calder asked, his jaw going slack at Seifer implication. "The SeeD Commander?"

Grimacing, Seifer turned around and continued down the hallway. He didn't know where they were going, but he wasn't going to waste any time on Calder having a stupid moment of being star-struck and realizing that, yes, it had been Squall Leonhart, the oh so great Commander of Balamb Garden, Seifer had fucked last week. He hated how everyone idolized the man. Squall was Squall and Hyne knew the man had as many flaws as anyone. Hell, the guy could barely talk let alone make a relationship work with a beautiful girl that worshipped him. Them knowing each other was not a big fucking deal.

"No wonder you wouldn't tell me his name."

The words made Seifer stop in his path and glance back at where Rinoa and Calder were trying to catch up with him. He had the distinct urge to punch the stupid guy's face in. Usually Calder was pretty perceptive, but the guy was fucking thick if he didn't realize that Rinoa was about to catch on any minute now and would figure out Calder knew everything as well. Things were strained enough as it was—he didn't need Rinoa to be reminded of him fucking Squall's brains out. Hell, he didn't need to be reminded of that.

The stupid smile that grew on Calder's lips as the man studied him only served to further anger him. This was not funny and it was not a game. Hardening his gaze, he hoped his intent would register with the man.

Not intimidated by the murderous look Seifer was sending his way, Calder walked past the blond. The thought that Seifer knew and had slept with the SeeD Commander was absurd. He couldn't wrap his head around it. Nor the fact that Nolan had actually met and seen the Seed Commander. Calder had so many questions he wanted to ask Seifer, but above it all, he remembered his brother's rather damning description of the famous Commander. "If Nolan knew—" he started, but Seifer abruptly cut him off.

"He won't," the blond said harshly. Calder nodded, but his smile didn't disappear.

Trailing behind the two men, feeling much like a third wheel, Rinoa frowned. She had stupidly blurted out Squall's name and now Calder knew; he wasn't going to let it go either by the sound of things. Already he was talking about this Nolan finding out as well. Why hadn't Seifer just stuck with denial? It seemed like he had been telling things about Squall that Calder only now knew to link to the name Leonhart. Going by Seifer's murderous glare, she dreaded to know just what.

She hoped that Calder could be trusted, but so far it didn't seem like he was even taking the situation seriously. The man wouldn't stop smiling in amusement, while Squall was Hyne knew where in need of help.

Calder turned to face Seifer and Rinoa as he opened a door to their left and waited for them to enter. Upon reaching him, the blond stopped right in front of him and looked at him intently, clearly warning him not to say anything further on the topic. Returning Seifer's gaze, trying to understand why the blond was behaving like a brute, the reason dawned on him.
He had been the one to act like an ass. Not only had he forgotten the gravity of the situation, he'd also forgotten his earlier hunch. Rinoa was the girlfriend. Growing serious upon realizing his blunder, he looked away from Seifer. There was no way he could apologize without further aggravating things. He could only do what he should have done from the beginning.

"What's his license plate and phone number?" he asked, moving to sit by a computer.

Taking the question as her cue, Rinoa cast Seifer a reproachful glare as she brushed past him to go stand next to Calder. There was only so much ignoring she could tolerate and she had the growing suspicion Seifer had only brought her along because of said license plate and phone number.

Retrieving a pen and small notebook from her bag, she scribbled down the requested information and carefully tore out the piece of paper before handing it to Calder. Fixing the man with a firm gaze, she asked straightforwardly, "How long will this take?" She wasn't in the mood for any more banter or games.

Surprised by the sudden severity to the girl's behavior, when she had mostly been subdued and hesitant so far, Calder realized his behavior definitely hadn't warmed her to him.

"I'll set the system up triangulating his position using his cell number first. That might take a minute or two. While that's going we can run the license plate through the system. It'll only show up if his car has been reported though. I'll also set up a city wide search, matching his license plate to any security camera in Esthar. That one could take a while." While he spoke, he busied himself with typing in the numbers, his eyes locked on the screen. Silence settled in the room as they waited for answers.

"There's nothing on the license plate," Calder said, breaking the silence as he turned to look at another screen displaying a map of Esthar. A large blue circle appeared and started flashing, before the screen zoomed in on the Chimera district. "It seems his cell is switched on. It should only be a minute and we'll have his location."

Seifer stared at the screen intently. His whole body was tense with worry, but at least now they had something to go on; they'd find Squall. Next to him Rinoa brought up shaky hands in front of her mouth, pressing them together tightly.

For a minute none of them said anything; they all just watched the screen.

"It's on Seagill Road. Looks like it's number 34," Calder said, already busy feeding the output coordinates through another program. "Hold on," he continued, waiting for the result. "Skyway Inn."

Behind him, Seifer turned abruptly and stormed out the door, not waiting for the others to follow. Calder jumped out of his chair and set off after the blond in an effort to catch up.

"I'll take you there," Calder yelled in Seifer's direction, the blond already a fair distance down the hallway. When he didn't receive an answer, he turned to Rinoa and waited for her to catch up. Sending her a weak smile in apology of Seifer's behavior, he hoped she'd forgive him for his own thoughtless behavior earlier as well.

Expression determined as she met Calder's gaze, Rinoa briefly grabbed his hand in a tight grip. "Thank you," she said in a warm voice, before she turned to look at the blond storming ahead of them. Frowning at Seifer's rashness, she shook her head slightly. "He's always been such a hothead. Let's go before he leaves without us."
With Seifer already far down the hallway, Rinoa broke into a jog with Calder following her lead. It wasn't until they exited the building that they were finally close to catching up with the determined blond. When Seifer was almost at his pickup truck, Calder set off into a sprint, putting himself in Seifer's path.

"Move," Seifer said harshly, pushing past Calder.

Grabbing the blond's arm firmly, Calder hissed out his own command. "In my car," he demanded harshly. When the blond just shrugged off his hold and continued once more, Calder yelled out in frustration. "Now."

Surprised, Seifer stopped and turned to look at Calder. That was a first. He couldn't remember Calder having ever raised his voice to him.

"You're in no condition to drive," Calder said more gently, pleading with the blond to listen.

About to turn around without a second thought to Calder's words, Seifer remembered the GPS in Calder's car. They'd get to Squall faster that way, and on some level he knew Calder was right. From the moment the address had appeared on the computer screen, he'd rushed ahead without any regard for his surroundings. With a slight nod, he turned and headed in the direction of the man's car.

Pressing the button on his key fob, Calder watched as Seifer got into the back seat. When Rinoa approached the car, he walked to the front passenger seat and held open the door for her.

Casting Calder a surprised look at handling Seifer like that, Rinoa wordlessly complied and moved to sit in the car. It might not be such a bad thing after all to have the guy around. Things might turn ugly, and Calder seemed decidedly more levelheaded than either herself or Seifer.

In the back of the car, Seifer watched the exchange with a growing frown; they didn't have time for this. They needed to find Squall. Nothing else mattered. And if Squall was just hiding out in a hotel, ignoring Rinoa, then he'd throttle the guy and throw him into the nearest wall before leaving again. Worse things had happened.

~ o ~
[Outside the Police Headquarters, Vana'diel Avenue, Sphinxara District, Tuesday, 21st of October, 10:17 am]

Switching on the engine of his car, Calder pulled out of the parking lot in front of the police headquarters. Next to him Rinoa looked distant, a frown on her brow. In the rear view mirror, he could see Seifer's grim and vacant expression.

"What are you expecting to find?" he asked, frowning. It had sounded like the commander had simply gone missing, but Rinoa and Seifer's expressions told a different story.

"We can't be sure, but... he might need help."

Calder pushed down harder on the gas pedal. "It shouldn't take long."

For the rest of the drive no one said a word. Calder didn't know what to say or do. He'd never expected to meet anyone from Seifer's past after so long, let alone be thrown head first into a hunt for the SeeD Commander—the blond's ex-sparring partner and latest one night stand. But the silence in the car was oppressive, not allowing any room for questions.

When the driveway of the target hotel finally came into view, he shook off the many questions milling through his head and pulled over. In the back of the car, Seifer shifted in his seat, but before he could tell the blond to wait up, the man was out of the car, rushing towards the cheap looking building.

With Seifer disappearing inside the hotel, about to cause Hyne knows what kind of havoc, Rinoa quickly got out of the car as well, striding after the blond. Entering the small foyer crammed with worn down furniture and carpets, she hastened her steps. This was exactly the kind of place Squall would pick for himself.

"What do you mean you haven't seen anyone like that?" Seifer growled at the old woman behind the reception desk. It wasn't hard to remember a guy like Squall. First of all, the man had a scar cut across his forehead, and second of all, he looked like a fucking dream compared to the rest of the lowlifes in there. He narrowed his eyes, his knuckles growing white as he clenched his fists. Squall was close by, most likely in pain, and he couldn't do a damned thing about it.

Upon seeing the impatient blond scaring the living daylight out of the reception lady, Rinoa painted a disarming smile on her face and pushed the man aside.

"Please excuse my friend, Miss. He has a bit of a... temper problem, but he means well," she said, keeping her voice light.

Noticing that the woman was casting Seifer a wary look, she continued politely, "We're looking for our friend, Elios Vargha. He should be staying here. He was supposed to meet us some time ago, but it seems he must have overslept. Could you please point us in the direction of his room?"

The reception lady gave a reluctant nod, her eyes glancing once more at the now quietly seething blond before turning to her computer. "Let me check the register for you." After a moment of searching, a relieved look crossed her expression. "That would be room 326, on the third floor."

Having all the information he needed, Seifer scanned the foyer for the nearest stairwell. There was no way he was going to wait for an elevator. Setting off into a jog, he hurried to the third floor. As
he ran up the stairs and down a narrow corridor, his eyes darted from door to door, his heart hammering in his chest. At the number "326" he stopped abruptly in place.

"Squall, open up!" he yelled, pounding his fists against the locked door. When no reply came, he cursed under his breath.

Running down the hallway, Rinoa stopped behind Seifer, her breath labored at having run two flights of stairs. "Would you wait for a second?" she huffed, before taking in the closed door separating them from the brunet. "Can't you bust the door open?"

Distancing himself from the door to gain momentum, Seifer threw himself against it full force. When it didn't budge, he tried again, repeating the move until the door finally gave way.

Inside, the small hotel room was cast in darkness, its heavy curtains closed and the air stale. The warm beam of light that fell in from the doorway revealed a bed, the sheets messy. Switching on the light, Seifer continued farther into the room.

A tatty armchair stood in the corner, some bags resting on top of it. Two gunblade cases were placed next to it, neatly aligned. He recognized one of the cases, knew the pattern of scratches on the worn black leather like the back of his hand. Revolver.

Heart beating faster, he took in the state of the rest of the room: a paper bag had fallen onto its side on top of a wooden dresser, revealing small pill jars inside. One jar lay abandoned on the floor.

Pushing open the only other door in the room, Seifer fumbled for the light switch. Cold light flooded the room, revealing white, tiled walls.

And Squall.

The brunet was slumped against the side of the bathtub, his head resting awkwardly against its edge, and his eyes wrenched shut in reaction to the sudden bright light.

In a split second Seifer was kneeling in front of Squall, his hand against the man's cheek. At the burning heat that met his touch, he grit his teeth.

"Squall," he demanded loudly, but only received a pained grimace in response. Gripping hold of Squall's arms tightly, he shook the man. But nothing happened—Squall's eyes remained shut, only a slight wince betraying the brunet had even felt the forceful grip.

A loud gasp left Rinoa as she halted in the bathroom doorway, her eyes falling to the limp form next to Seifer. Her world froze along with the breath in her lungs, before she registered the flushed color to Squall's skin and the rise and fall of his chest.

"Turn off the lights," Seifer bit out as he snuck an arm behind Squall's shoulders and another beneath the man's knees, hauling him up from the floor. Hot, damp skin and hair met his neck as the brunet's head tilted to rest against him. Tightening his grip, he clenched his jaws.

"Where do we take him? Odine's lab or a hospital?" he asked firmly, carrying the brunet into the other room.

Quickly switching off the light, Rinoa watched wordlessly as Seifer placed Squall on the bed. She had heard Seifer's question, but thoughts on what they should do failed to form. She could only see Squall's unmoving form as big tears rolled down her cheeks. She had done this to him.

"Rinoa, get Odine on the phone, now," Seifer ordered as he disappeared into the bathroom again,
whatever patience he'd mustered earlier long gone.

When Calder entered the dark room through the busted-in door, he found a crying Rinoa talking on her cell phone. He'd only lingered in the car for a couple of moments, but it had been long enough to seriously lag behind, the key he'd acquired to the commander's room sitting uselessly in his pocket.

Following Rinoa's gaze, his eyes landed on the unmoving form lying on the bed. The SeeD commander. He was much younger than Calder had imagined: their age. A slender brunet, shorter than himself. Nothing at all like what the stories had led him to believe. Returning his gaze to Rinoa, he watched the flow of unrestrained tears, the girl's cheeks already tinged red. The scene was unlike anything he'd imagined.

Inside the bathroom, Seifer was busy soaking some towels in cold water, his lips down-turned and his movements rushed by the need to be back by Squall's side. Turning off the tap, he hurried back into the bedroom and wrapped the fabric around Squall's wrists.

"... No, I'm okay. The seals and the amulet work fine... No. It's Squall... He's very sick..." Casting a brief glance at the brunet lying on the hotel bed, Rinoa felt new tears well up instantly at the sight. "He has a fever and isn't responding."

Frowning at what the doctor was saying, she moved to scan the dark room, her eyes finally settling on a brown bag. Walking to the dresser, she took the paper bag in hand and inspected the medication inside. "He didn't take any of it," she said softly. Listening intently to the man on the other end of the line, she fished out one of the plastic jars, carefully checking its labeling.

With a trembling hand she held out the medication to Seifer. "One pill every 12 hours. For when his fever gets too high," she repeated the doctor's words, her voice thick.

Taking the plastic container from Rinoa, Seifer got out a pill and fetched some water from the bathroom. Back by Squall's side, he lowered himself onto the edge of the bed and gently lifted Squall's head, placing a pillow beneath it.

"... I don't know when... No, we just got to him..." Rinoa said from behind him, continuing her conversation with the doctor.

"Come on, you gotta take this," he urged as he slipped the pill into Squall's mouth. Tilting the glass in his other hand, he poured some water in as well, hoping Squall's reflexes would kick in. When the brunet swallowed the pill without any problems, he allowed himself a deep breath.

"... I don't understand... But then why was he able to drive his car all the way here? ... He did, his car is parked right outside... Okay." Turning to face Seifer again, Rinoa issued Odine's next instruction. "Check his eyes."

Frowning, Seifer did as requested. Drawing up the brunet's eyelids, he froze into place at the sight that greeted him. Squall's eyes were shifting between gray-blue and a glowing silver, never remaining one color for long.

"It's his junction with Shiva—it's messed up," he said, transfixed.

Relaying the information to the doctor, Rinoa's eyes darkened, before she snapped sharply, "I don't care about your theories. I want to know if it's bad." Humming in understanding, the frown on her brow abated.

"He needs to unjunction now. The strain is too much."
Pushed into action by Rinoa's words, Seifer stood from the bed. "Calder," he ordered, not taking his eyes off Squall. "Hold him down."

Hesitating for only a moment, Calder hurried to the other side of the bed and pressed his hands against the commander's chest.

Leaning in over Squall, Seifer placed a hand at either side of Squall's head and aligned their eyes. "Relax, Squall," he said gently as he moved his thumb against the brunet's cheek. "Give her to me."

As he located the familiar bond between Guardian Force and master, he closed his eyes and focused all of his attention on drawing the icy goddess. Not only did he have to break the fluctuating junction, he also had to pry Shiva away from her favorite host.

The moment he managed to establish a magical connection, he opened his eyes to see tendrils of glowing magic materialize between them. Watching as the ethereal flow grew stronger, he increased his pull. Squall's eyes flew open in response, revealing intense silver irises regarding him in offense. Shiva seized firmer hold of the brunet's mind, not about to give Squall up.

Using everything he'd learned about magic at Garden, Seifer fought Shiva's resistance. He had never been good at communicating with Guardian Forces, so he tried his best to project the detrimental effect she was having on Squall. As she wavered in her resolve, the bond started to give way.

Breaking into a seizure, Squall convulsed violently beneath Seifer as the drawing process stretched on. The flowing magic flickered brighter than before, becoming almost blinding in its intensity. When the room was plunged back into darkness, the brunet went limp on the bed.

Instantly punished with a crippling headache, Seifer grasped at his forehead. Dry heaving, he rushed into the bathroom, the sound of retching soon following.

Taking a brief look at the man lying motionless beneath him, Calder pushed away from the bed. He wasn't sure what had just taken place, but he didn't like it one bit. Eyeing Rinoa carefully, he walked past her into the bathroom. He'd seen magic used a fair number of times, enough to know Seifer had drawn something. A something called "Shiva."

"What the hell just happened?" he demanded when his eyes fell on Seifer, the blond leaning over the sink.

Seifer didn't answer. Instead, he turned around and emptied his stomach into the toilet.

Expression stark, Calder narrowed his eyes. What he'd witnessed just moments before meant Seifer knew magic; it meant Seifer could *use* magic. And with Seifer's apparent connection to the SeeD commander, he would hazard a guess Seifer was connected to SeeD as well. Wanting some answers, he opened his mouth to speak, but was immediately cut short.

"Not now," Seifer said firmly, needing to see Squall.

Frowning, Calder remained in place. He hated being pushed to the sidelines like this, hated seeing Seifer in pain.

"*Move,*" Seifer ordered, not about to be slowed down by the man's misplaced concern.

Calder stared at the blond. "You'll tell me everything later?"

Gritting his teeth, Seifer yielded to a nod to get the man off his case. Immediately making it clear
that this would be his only concession, he pushed past Calder, but abruptly came to a halt inside the other room. On the bed, Rinoa was gently dabbing away beads of sweat clinging to Squall's flushed skin as she spoke with Odine on the phone. Beneath her touch, Squall lay entirely still. Feeling like an intruder, Seifer looked away, trying to ignore the jealousy the scene inspired. It was Rinoa's job to take care of Squall, not his.

"... So, that's all?" Rinoa asked, her movements stilling as her hand clenched around the damp towel in her grip. "Isn't there anything else we can do?" Face falling as the eccentric doctor replied, she slowly dropped the hand holding the cell phone to her lap.

Averting her gaze from Squall, Rinoa pushed up from the bed and turned to regard Seifer, the blond looking much worse for wear. "Are you feeling okay? Is Shiva giving you a hard time?"

Breaking Rinoa's gaze, Seifer ignored her questions and looked over to Squall instead. Apart from the brunet's damp hair and skin, it seemed as if the man was merely sleeping. "What did Odine say?"

Sighing at Seifer's single-minded behavior, Rinoa gave a defeated shrug. "... A lot of things," she answered faintly. "Junctioning Shiva at the moment of severing must have helped delaying... this..." she said softly, her gaze traveling to the brunet. "But the strain caused by breaking our bond... It takes a composed mind to control a junction. It must have backfired, for both of them... Shiva wouldn't harm Squall on purpose."

She rubbed at the tears staining her eyes and cheeks. "Why does he always need to put on a strong front? ... For Hyne's sake, he's probably been like this ever since—" Not finishing her sentence, her gaze dropped to the floor, her shoulders starting to shake with sobs.

"Will there be any permanent damage?" Seifer asked coldly, feeling little compassion for the girl when she was the one who had brought this upon Squall in the first place.

When Rinoa continued sobbing, making no sign of having heard the blond's question, Calder moved away from his position at the back of the room.

Eyes opening wide as she felt a steadying hand on her arm, Rinoa briefly allowed herself to draw comfort from Calder's touch. Reining in her tears, she realized she needed to be calm if she was going to be of any use. After a small smile sent Calder's way, she took a deep breath and met Seifer's gaze.

"...When we went to Odine for help, our main concern was—was keeping my powers dormant," she began, reluctant to explain how little they knew. "His field of expertise is sorceresses and paramagic. Not knights... What happens when they are cut off... Odine said he didn't know for sure. And now... with Shiva... We'll have to wait until Squall wakes up to be sure."

Turning his back to them, Seifer slammed his fist against the wall. Only a week ago Squall had been fine.

Standing perfectly still, Calder looked at Rinoa with wide eyes. "You're... a sorceress?"

About to ask Seifer whether he'd been like this after Ultimecia's death, Rinoa quickly swallowed the question. Cursing her big mouth and distracted state of mind, she knew it was too late to retract what she had said.

"Yes," she replied in a flat voice, keeping her eyes on the man who was regarding her in obvious shock, ready to pick up on any warning signs. She knew what Estharians thought of sorceresses,
"But... I thought they were extinct," Calder said with a frown. That's what he'd been taught at school. He'd seen pictures of Adel. Rinoa looked nothing like that vile creature. "*How?*

His blood pressure skyrocketing at Calder's interference—at choosing this moment to start his questions, Seifer turned around. "*No,*" he demanded. "*Not. Now.*"

"But—" Calder's words died on his tongue. He'd never seen Seifer so angry before. Glancing over at Rinoa, he couldn't reconcile what he knew about sorceresses with the harmless looking girl in front of him. She looked more wary of him than the other way around. He relaxed his posture. He'd have to trust Seifer—wait for his answers until the blond had calmed down.

"Okay," he relented, breaking the strained silence. "It can wait."

At Calder's words, Rinoa let her hands fall back to her sides, withdrawing the reflexive touch to her magic inhibitors.

"So, where do we go from here?" Calder asked, looking between the two.

"We take him to your apartment," Seifer said, nodding in Rinoa's direction.

She shook her head at the suggestion. "That's not a good idea." The bond was freshly cut, the wound still bleeding, and she was back on a daily dosage of meds to suppress her powers and volatile emotions until she adapted. She was far too unstable and didn't trust herself around Squall one bit. Even if she didn't lose it the way she had before coming to Esthar, she could still try to take him back in a moment of weakness, while he was unconscious and unwilling. The thought alone was enough to force herself to refuse.

"*What?*" Seifer demanded hotly, his eyes narrowed. "*Why?* You weren't there to take care of him in the first place, and now you can't even be bothered to do *this?*

At the accusation, Rinoa flinched. "*How*—*How was I supposed to know?* He couldn't leave the place quickly enough! He was gone in a split second... I *wanted* to help. I told him to call. I was so worried... I—He doesn't *want* my help!" Trembling, she looked at the blond with wide, red-rimmed eyes.

"You could have done *something,*" Seifer let out in a near growl. He couldn't believe her gall. "*What do you suggest then?* We just leave him here?"

"*Seifer,*" Calder reprimanded, unable to watch from the sidelines any longer. Walking over to stand behind Rinoa, he placed his hands on her shoulders and ignored the way Seifer's eyes narrowed further at the silent move of support.

Not having expected any sympathy from Calder after revealing she was a sorceress, Rinoa looked over her shoulder to meet the man's gaze. Her heart warmed to him, a stranger who could overlook everything he'd been told about sorceresses to come to her aid.

Shifting her gaze to study Seifer closely, she took in every little detail. Seifer's anger with her, along with the man's every action that day, was clearly sparked by a deep concern for Squall. It seemed he'd go to great lengths for the brunet. She had even heard him cry out Squall's name in distress, had seen the care with which he'd gathered the man in his arms.

The petty part of her protested against the idea that was starting to take root—the part of her that remembered the war and Seifer's role in it, the way the blond had stolen away her knight—but she
smothered those thoughts. She needed to focus on what was best for Squall.

Steeling herself, she stepped away from the safety of Calder's support, the man's hold on her shoulders immediately releasing. "Thank you," she said softly, regarding him with a small smile, "...but... would you give me and Seifer a moment to talk in private?"

Watching Rinoa carefully, Calder considered the sense in leaving the two alone. He had been far from impressed with the blond's attitude so far. "You sure?"

Rinoa nodded, feeling more grounded now that she knew what to do.

Casting Seifer one last look of warning, Calder sighed. "I'll be in the lobby, then."

The moment the man started towards the door, Seifer crossed his arms and turned his gaze to Rinoa.

Waiting until Calder was out of earshot, Rinoa gathered her courage and faced the blond. "It can't be me... He won't accept my help... But more importantly... I—I just can't, no matter how badly I want to. When I broke our bond, I cut him out of my life. I amputated a piece of me."

"He's right there. On that bed. But I can no longer feel him. He's... gone and it's driving me crazy. I'm not sure I'll be able to control myself. The seals and inhibitors Odine placed on me... They're untested. A calculated gamble. I don't think being close to Squall for longer periods of time is wise. I just... I don't want to hurt him again."

Pouring all of her resolve into the request, she asked softly, "Would you please take care of him? Until he's better?"

Seifer huffed. What Rinoa was suggesting was absurd; she'd lost her mind. If anything, Squall would sooner be driven to jump out of a window than recover while staying at his place.

"No," he replied firmly, not pondering her suggestion any further.

"No?" Rinoa shot back, meeting the blond head on. "Just like that, after you nearly ran off on your own to find him, you say no?" She wouldn't allow him to downplay just how worked up he'd been, let alone claim he was not involved in this.

"You're out of your mind if you think he'd get better from staying at my place."

"And what exactly makes you think it's a good idea to have him stay with me?" Rinoa plowed on, needing Seifer to see things from her point of view. "I'm the reason he's like this in the first place. Being around me will only make things worse when we both need the distance." Not wanting to linger on that painful truth, she pressed on.

"I can't send him back to Garden. He'll just walk all over them and refuse their help. You know how he is."

Loath to accept Rinoa's reasoning wasn't completely flawed, Seifer frowned. The girl had already proved exactly how lousyshe was at looking after Squall. He couldn't believe how easily he had jumped to the conclusion that she should be the one to take care of him. And Garden... He knew how Garden handled Squall. Or rather the other way around. Squall was an expert at tricking people into believing he was fine when he really wasn't. He'd watched the performance first hand many times.
Rinoa was right: both of those options sucked.

Turning to look at Squall, he caught himself actually considering Rinoa's suggestion. It wasn't that he didn't want to take care of Squall. If anything, he was reluctant to hand Squall over to anyone else.

But... he just couldn't. He wasn't going to force Squall to stay with him. He wasn't going to be a constant reminder of everything that had happened between them.

As he glanced over at Squall's unmoving form, a memory he'd buried deep in the recesses of his mind came back to him, the two images overlapping. His thoughts grew disconnected as he remembered the scene—Squall lying on a metal stretcher, the man's head lolling in time with the careless moves of the two Galbadian soldiers carrying him away.

Gray tones and static blurred out the memory, replacing it with security footage of Squall coming to in a prison cell; his own cue to get to work. As Squall fell to the floor, the cell starting into motion, haughty amusement had filled him. The sickly sweet anticipation of seeing the SeeD pinned to the wall in the torture chamber had come next.

Snapping back into the present, he turned away from the bed.

"No," he repeated, the fight from earlier gone from his voice. "I put him through hell."

Watching as Seifer fell silent, the blond staring off into nothing, Rinoa didn't need to ask what the man was talking about. "Maybe," she said, her voice contemplative as she studied him. Squall had never really talked about it, but she knew all the same how deeply D-District had affected him. "... Maybe, but that's in the past. Squall is right here, and he needs help now."

Seifer's expression didn't change, his eyes still averted. She hadn't expected this, this guilt eating away at the blond. Feeling an echoing twinge of her own guilty conscience, she moved to where Seifer was standing and lightly rested her hand on the blond's arm. "When you called... I said things I shouldn't have. You didn't want those things to happen; I know that now."

She'd done her own fair share of hurting Squall. Letting her hand fall back to her side, her eyes travelled to the unconscious brunet, taking in each slow rise and fall of his chest. "He knows too," she said simply. "And he needs your help. If you know what he's going through, what he needs, even by a little, then you should help him. He won't refuse if it's you."

Curbing the urge to snort at her words, Seifer stepped away from her. She knew nothing and neither did Squall. He might not like what he'd done, but that didn't change the fact that it had happened.

The whole conversation was starting to annoy him. It was dragging out when it had been a pointless discussion from the start. So what if Squall's options sucked? It didn't mean the man should stay with him, it just meant Squall was shit out of luck. He didn't have any special knowledge; he'd been out cold when Raijin and Fujin had looked after him.

And what had Rinoa claimed? He won't refuse if it's you. That was downright bullshit. Squall did whatever the hell he wanted, always had. The only difference was that he would make Squall's life a living hell if the man was being stupid, and that wasn't really the best road to recovery.

When no reply came, the blond keeping at a distance, Rinoa's patience ran thin. She knew the situation was far from ideal. She didn't want to entrust Squall to Seifer, but this wasn't about what either of them wanted. This was about what Squall needed. And if what he needed happened to be
someone equally pigheaded who would forcefully harass him into getting better, then she'd damn well get him that someone.

"I honestly don't care about your reasons why you won't do this. All I care about is him," she said, her voice dead-serious. "You owe Squall at least this much."

Seifer squared his jaw as he faced Rinoa. He knew he owed Squall. Hell, he wouldn't even know where to begin if he were to ever make up for the amount of shit he'd put the man through. How the hell could he?

He grit his teeth, not liking what she was asking of him one bit. Even if she was starting to make just a tiny bit of sense.

He knew he'd be able to see through Squall's bullshit. He also knew he'd be able to force the man into a speedy recovery. Squall's defiance and annoyance had never intimidated him. He didn't care what Squall would think of him; he only cared about Squall getting better. If the war hadn't happened, there'd be no doubt in his mind—he'd be the better option to take care of the man. But it had happened, and there was nothing they could do to change that. Squall shouldn't have to deal with him. It didn't matter if Squall had forgiven him or not.

A frown grew on his brow.

You didn't want those things to happen; I know that now. He knows too.

He sighed. Maybe he was the one with the problem—the one who needed to start looking past the war. For Squall's sake.

Squall had always been strong and able to deal with anything that came his way. If Rinoa was wrong and Squall couldn't stand his presence, they could always take it from there and find somewhere else for Squall.

And maybe this was his chance at redemption—a way to start making up for some of the things he'd done... Maybe Rinoa was right.

Suddenly determined at the unexpected turn of events, Seifer held Rinoa's gaze. "Okay," he said with an air of conviction, as if it had been his idea all along. "Go tell Calder to come up and carry Squall's stuff, and have him settle any bills." He moved his eyes to the unconscious brunet. "I'll be down with Squall in a minute."

Relieved at having convinced the stubborn blond, Rinoa gave a small nod in understanding and started into action. She wasn't going to risk stalling and give Seifer the opportunity to change his mind.

Briskly, she walked around the room and collected all of Squall's belongings, leaving only the two heavy gunblade cases behind.

Coming to a halt in the doorway, her eyes trailed back to the two men. Forcing a smile on her face, her eyes brimming with tears, she faltered for the slightest of moments before turning around and leaving them alone.

Already, Seifer's resolve wavered. Taking care of Squall would be weird. The entire situation was a mess. He scowled at Squall, but all resentment left him when he noticed new beads of sweat forming on the man's brow. Walking closer, he let his eyes roam the brunet's unmoving form.

Shiva still hadn't settled in his mind, the proximity to Squall causing her to stir and reach for the
man. Wondering what exactly it was about Squall's mind that had lured the ice goddess in so deeply, a faint smile tugged at his lips. Maybe Squall really was Shiva's lover after all.

"Let's get you out of here," he said, feeling the need to explain his actions to Squall even though the man was out cold. Lifting Squall up from the bed, he adjusted his hold so the man's face was resting against his neck. About to leave, he halted his steps when Calder entered the room.

"... I'll get the cases," Calder said, lingering by the doorway.

Seifer hummed in reply. "Thanks."

"No problem," Calder replied, getting Seifer's meaning. Breaking their gaze, he grabbed the gunblade cases and followed Seifer out of the room. As they made their way down to the foyer, he chanced a few glances at the unconscious man in Seifer's arm, but kept his questions to himself.

Outside, Seifer's eyes immediately traveled to where Rinoa was waiting by Calder's car. Her eyes didn't meet his; instead they were fixed on the man in his hold. His grasp on Squall tightened.

At the surreal sight of Squall looking so helpless, Rinoa's chest constricted. Squall had always remained unflinching through even the most severe of injuries, always quick to recover and return to the field. In the end she had managed to hurt Squall more than his job ever had.

"What should we do about his car?" Calder asked once they reached his own.

"I'll drive it," Seifer informed tersely as he opened a door to the back of Calder's car and made Squall comfortable on the leather seats. "You sit with him," he told Rinoa in a tone that brooked no argument, underlining his command with a jerk of his head.

Rinoa frowned but kept her mouth shut. She felt too drained to point out to Seifer that he was being an ass and didn't want to start an argument when she had already won the one that mattered anyway. Moving to sit in the backseat as ordered, she carefully guided Squall's head to rest in her lap.

"Do you have the keys?" Seifer asked, sticking his head into the car.

Fishing out the set of keys from her pocket, Rinoa handed them over. "You'll be all right?" she asked carefully.

"Yeah. Worry about him," Seifer dissuaded. Closing the door before she would hold them up any longer, he walked over to Squall's car.

Frowning at Seifer's retreating back, Calder forced himself into action. Inside the car, he stole a quick glance at Rinoa in the rear view mirror. The woman had her eyes glued on the commander, her expression strained. In front of them Seifer pulled out of the parking lot.

Tightening an arm around Squall's limp form, Rinoa brushed aside damp locks and dabbed at clammy skin with her sleeve. The streets whizzed by without either her or Calder saying a word, when an insistent ring tone shattered the silence in the car. Fumbling for her cell phone, she sighed as she spotted Laguna's name on the bright display.

She should have expected the man would call her again so soon. It wasn't long after Laguna had found out about Squall's leave in Esthar that the president had managed to wheedle a promise for dinner plans out of the reluctant brunet. Her inquiry over the phone earlier that morning, on whether Squall had already called him or stopped by, had clearly only spurred him on.
She hadn't meant to mislead Laguna, but there had been no other way to ask whether Squall had shown up at the palace without alarming him. The man would have raised all hell if he'd known the truth. The news she had to break to him now wasn't much better.

"Hello," she said, her voice faint.

"Rinoa," Laguna greeted fondly. "...I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time? It was just, ah, the dinner—I was hoping we could set a time."

Rinoa grimaced at the man's obvious eagerness. Whatever she told the man, she would only upset him.

"Perhaps, if you guys don't have any other plans, you could come by tonight? The chef, he—"

"I'm afraid... we won't be able to for a while," Rinoa interrupted before Laguna made her feel even more awful about what she had to say. "Look," she said softly, casting a glance in Calder's direction, "This isn't a good time to talk... I'll come by later today." She had to be careful with her words; Laguna and Squall's kinship was the last thing she could afford to blurt out unintentionally.

"What's the matter? Is everything okay?" came the rushed reply, the president clearly alarmed.

Acutely aware of Calder listening in on every word, her voice took on a more impatient tone as she spoke again. "I—Everything will be fine, but... We need to discuss this in person. I'll be there shortly, okay?"

Not waiting for Laguna to reply, she quickly hung up. Hopefully she'd have more courage when seeing the president in person. With a sigh, she put away her cell phone and returned her attention to the brunet in her arms, willing him to snap out of it and wake up. But Squall didn't stir, his fever continuing to burn against her hand.

Not bothering with even trying to understand the phone call he'd just overheard, Calder kept his focus on the road and followed the black car ahead. Minutes passed in silence, before he realized where Seifer was leading them. He frowned, unable to understand what the hell was going on. If Rinoa was Squall's girlfriend, then why were they taking the commander to Seifer's?

Turning down Windurst Road, they soon reached Seifer's building. Pulling over, Calder tried to find some words of reassurance or encouragement. When none came to mind, he got out of the car instead. Seifer was already making his way over.

Realizing the moment where she would have to say goodbye was approaching fast, Rinoa stayed in the backseat for just a little longer, wanting to delay the inevitable. She kept her gaze on Squall's face, his features deceivingly unguarded in unconsciousness, and gently let her hand follow the line of his jaw before settling against a flushed cheek; a touch she knew he would have pulled away from if he'd been awake.

Noticing the expression on Rinoa's face, Seifer remained at a distance. He hadn't missed the way she'd looked at Squall so many times that day; her eyes full of love and worry. She deserved the room and time she needed to say goodbye.

Not knowing what to do with himself, a feeling he was quickly getting used to, Calder stood by idly, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. The day was just one uncomfortable moment after the other.

Rinoa hesitated slightly, before she finally moved away from Squall's side and stepped out of the car. Not looking at the two men waiting around awkwardly, she averted her teary gaze to retrieve
her notebook and pen again, hastily scribbling something on the paper.

"This is my phone number. Keep me posted, okay?" she said, her voice hoarse from crying.

Taking the note, Seifer glanced at it. "You can come up if you want," he said, feeling obliged to make the offer.

"That's okay. I think it's for the best if I don't." Following Seifer's moves as he lifted Squall out of the car, Rinoa let her gaze fall to the unconscious brunet one final time, a sharp pain twisting through her chest, before she steeled herself.

"Goodbye, Seifer. Calder."

With those words, she turned around and walked away.

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[Outside Zayin House, Tiamat District, Tuesday, 21st of October, 11:57 am]

Gunblade cases in hand and bags slung over his shoulders, Calder pushed the trunk of his car shut. As he followed Seifer across the street, his eyes landed on the unconscious man in the blond's arms. Beneath plain black jeans, worn combat boots dangled against the blond's side. Apart from that one sign, the brunet looked like any other civilian.

As he crossed the run-down lobby, his attention was drawn by the weight in his hands. If the man in Seifer's arms was really the SeeD commander, then he was carrying legendary gunblades. He'd heard tales of the commander's weapon—that it left blue streaks of light in its wake when the man fought his opponents. Would he get to see it?

Following closely behind Seifer, he stepped into the lift. Neither of them said anything as the lift ascended. The blond adjusted his hold on the brunet, before green eyes fell to regard the man's face.

Watching Seifer lost to thought as he studied the man in his arms, Calder noticed the odd symmetry of the scars crossing the bridges of their noses. He'd always thought Seifer's scar to be peculiar, but he had never managed to get the back story, not even when the blond had been heavily incapacitated by drugs or alcohol.

Stepping into the narrow hallway when the elevator came to a halt, Calder kicked a newspaper to the side and walked to the blond's apartment.

"The key's in my left pocket," Seifer said, maneuvering Squall in his arms so Calder would have better access.

Unlocking the door, Calder let the blond enter first. He placed the gunblade cases on the kitchen counter, his gaze lingering on the black leather marred with numerous scratches, before dumping the bags hanging off his shoulders to the floor. Looking over to where Seifer was lowering Squall to the couch, he raised an eyebrow. "Shouldn't he be in bed?"

"Need to clean it first," Seifer grumbled as he propped Squall's head up on a small pillow. He pressed the back of his hand against Squall's cheeks. "Still burning up." Straightening, he made his way over to the kitchen.

Grabbing the jacket he'd slung over one of the gunblade cases, Calder walked to hang it at the back of the front door. Turning around, he watched idly as Seifer poured some water before gently coaxing the brunet into drinking it all. He'd never seen the blond act with such care.

"What happened to him?" he asked tentatively.

Seifer glanced up briefly from his task. "You heard Rinoa. They broke their bond."

Calder didn't know what that meant. He didn't know anything about knights or bonds.

"I have to go out," Seifer said upon seeing the frown on Calder's brow, wanting to break the man's train of thought. "I need you to look after him."

Not having expected this turn of events, Calder eyed the blond carefully. "Where are you going?"
"Shopping. I'll need more groceries so I can hole up in here for a while," Seifer said, his gaze dropping to look at Squall again. His fridge was almost empty and he needed to buy new sheets. There was no way he'd waste time at a laundromat when Squall needed to be comfortable in bed.

"I can do that."

"It'll be quicker if I do it," Seifer said, standing from the couch. He wouldn't be able to collect his thoughts long enough to make a shopping list. He'd just grab whatever came to mind at the shop.

"I'll phone you if anything changes," Calder reassured.

Seifer nodded before walking to the counter and grabbing his keys. "I'll be back soon."

Nodding as well, Calder watched the door close behind the blond.

Standing still, he eyed the man on the couch, able to make out the brunet's fast-paced breathing. Two drops of sweat merged and ran down the man's temple. He couldn't believe this was the man he'd heard so many stories about.

Walking to the sink, he grabbed a small hand towel from one of the cupboards and held it under the cold tap. He wrung the cloth out and sat down at the edge of the couch. Pressing the damp fabric to the brunet's forehead, he studied the man's effeminate features. He had to be younger than Seifer and himself. He looked barely eighteen with sparse stubble on his cheeks and smooth skin. His frame seemed too small to belong to a mercenary. The large scar that ran across the man's brow was the only thing that betrayed any sort of fighting as far as he could see. His eyes drifted to the cases on the counter.

The man on the couch couldn't be the commander. Garden would have known about the man's absence. They would have sent SeeDs to find him. Seifer and Rinoa had to be fooling him.

He frowned, pushing himself up from the couch. One quick look would be enough.

Carefully undoing the clasps on the more worn of the two cases, Calder's eyes darted to the man on the couch. It felt wrong to be doing this, but he needed some kind of grasp of what was going on. He lifted the lid.

It was a Revolver. An outdated cylinder model, lower-to-mid range and two handed. A lion head emblem dangled from a short chain attached to the grip. He scrunched his brow. This didn't look like the weapon of a legend. Closing the case, he continued on to the next. The case held fewer scratches, and the clasps were harder to undo. Blue light spilled onto his fingers as he lifted the lid.

Staring at the blade in front of him, his heartbeat picked up. His eyes darted to the man on the couch. He'd never seen a blade like this. Translucent and azure with a soft glow, the barrel shaped like a winged lion, cast in shiny silver. How could the brunet even lift the thing? It looked heavier than any blade he'd ever seen.

*He used to be my sparring partner.*

Seifer had always been an exceptional gunblader. Why hadn't he questioned it more? Someone that good couldn't have been privately trained like he'd always told himself.

Closing the lid and returning the cases to where he'd originally put them, Calder turned his back to the blades. What the hell had he become part of?

He'd better get some answers when the blond returned.
Remaining in place, he thought back to everything that had happened that morning, from when he'd received Seifer's phone call until they'd brought the brunet back to Seifer's apartment. And then he recalled their conversation Sunday evening.

His mind kept going in circles. There was no way he could make any sense of it. Seifer fancied the SeeD commander. Seifer had been the SeeD commander's sparring partner. Seifer's ex was a sorceress.

Needing something to do, he cleared away Seifer's breakfast from where it had been left untouched on the counter. When the bowl and spoon had been washed and returned to their proper places, he looked around the room.

Deciding some sandwiches might help break the tension upon Seifer's return, he got out the ingredients. Halfway through buttering up the bread, a short buzz sounded. Then another one. He looked to the brunet on the couch, but the sound came from a different direction. Walking to the end of the counter, his eyes fell to the coat hanging behind Seifer's door. The commander's coat. It sounded like the buzz of a muted ring tone.

Frowning, he considered if he should answer as he walked over and took the phone in his hands, but the name that lit up on the display instantly had him think better of the idea. Putting away the phone, he shook his head and huffed. He tried to convince himself that Loire was a common surname and that he hadn't just almost answered a call from the President.

What the hell had he gotten himself into?

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[Zayin House, Tiamat District, Tuesday, 21st of October, 1:09 pm]

It was moments like these Seifer hated: moments of waiting. Moments when he was forced into inertia because of the world around him. His posture was rigid as he waited for the elevator to slowly crawl to the ninth floor, jolting to a stop twice to accommodate other passengers. He'd left Squall in Calder's care less than an hour ago, but it felt like an eternity.

He'd checked his phone almost every other minute, but no one had called. He should have felt relaxed, but his nerves would hear none of it. At least once he returned he'd be able to stay at Squall's side for days if necessary.

When the elevator finally stopped at his floor, he squeezed his way through the still opening doors, his arms filled with plump grocery bags. Sidestepping the used bottles and other garbage that had been discarded on the floor, he rushed to his apartment. Fumbling with his keys, he struggled to get the right one without dropping anything.

Heading straight for the kitchen once inside, Seifer placed the shopping bags on the counter and looked in the direction of the couch. Squall was in exactly the same position as earlier.

Calder got up from where he'd been sitting at Seifer's work table at the other end of the room. "He's been like that since you left."

Seifer nodded. "Thanks." He started unloading the goods, only sparing the two sandwiches on the counter a brief glance before disregarding them. The sooner he did this, the sooner he could get Squall to bed.

"Need a hand with anything?" Calder asked, joining the blond in the kitchen.
Shaking his head, Seifer continued putting away the food, wishing he could just tell Calder to leave. He needed to be alone with Squall.

Calder watched the blond closely. The man looked preoccupied, but he couldn't stop himself from broaching the topic that had been on his mind all morning. "So... That's the great Squall Leonhart?"

Seifer's expression hardened. The phrasing of Calder's question stirred his temper, regardless of the answers he'd promised. Calder might not have meant any offense, but the way he'd used great and Squall's name in one sentence, with a slight hint of underlying disbelief... Seifer's hands clenched.

"I need to know what is going on here, what I've gotten involved in."

Seifer wordlessly put away some more food before stopping in place. He sighed. "I know." He turned around to face Calder. "But first, I have to take care of him," he added, nodding in Squall's direction.

"I can help."

"No." It was already bad enough he'd involved Calder as much as he had. "I need to be alone with him."

Calder frowned. "How come he's staying here?"

Seifer looked away, before grabbing some cans from one of the shopping bags. "It's the best option."

"If he's the SeeD Commander, then why not Garden?" Calder asked, his eyes involuntarily traveling to the gunblade case that held the azure blade.

"He's a stubborn fuck," Seifer said, looking at the unconscious brunet. "Garden doesn't know how to handle him."

Calder watched the blond carefully. "But you do?"

"I know him better than most." Even if years had separated them, he still knew how Squall worked. They'd spent so many hours together that they knew each other's ticks and tricks, every little habit and shortcoming.

Letting out a huff, Calder shook his head. "This is so surreal."

"I spent most of my time as a teenager pestering the guy," the blond admitted, a slight upwards curve appearing on his lips.

"Somehow that's easier to imagine," Calder commented, smiling as well. So this was why Seifer had never talked about his youth much. He'd never suspected the man capable of keeping such a huge secret. The blond bragging about it left and right seemed much more likely.

"Let me deal with him," Seifer said slowly. "And then come over for a drink later."

Considering Seifer's words, it was a moment before Calder relented. He supposed it would be easier over a drink or two, and Seifer was right, for now he was imposing. "All right. But even if he wakes up, I'm not letting you out of this."

Seifer chuckled softly at Calder's mock threat.

"And you owe me. Big time."
Nodding, Seifer smiled. "Got it."

"You better."

At the return of a relaxed atmosphere between them, Calder took a deep breath before walking over to his coat. As he shrugged it on, his eyes traveled to the brunet who still hadn't moved whatsoever.

"Call me if you need anything," he said as he walked over to grab one of the sandwiches he'd made earlier. "If I haven't heard from you by ten, bet your ass I'll be here."

Huffing, Seifer met Calder's gaze. "Make sure Nolan stays away."

"I'll think of something," Calder said even though he knew he'd have a hard time following up. He'd never been a great liar, and banning Nolan from Seifer's apartment was a surefire way of having the boy show up within the hour. He'd have to find some other excuse. Walking to the door, he rested his hand on the door knob. "I'll see you later," he said, taking one last look at Seifer as he opened the door.

"See you," Seifer repeated from behind Calder, watching as the man left. When the door closed, he returned his attention to Squall.

What a fucking mess.

He'd never looked after anyone before and now he had an unconscious Squall on his hands. He didn't know how to handle something like that; they'd have to take it one step at a time. At least Squall was here now, the frenzied search [for the man] over. He'd make sure Squall would be okay and get the man back on his feet as soon as possible. First, he needed to get the brunet comfortable in bed.

Walking into his bedroom with the last of the shopping, he dumped the bag on the rumpled bed. It still hadn't been cleaned since the night he'd spent with Squall, and without any time to take care of laundry, he'd bought clean sheets instead. Opening the window to let in some fresh air, he took a deep breath as it cut through the stale smell of the room.

Picking up the lube that had been left out in plain sight, he tossed it into the bedside drawer, before ridding the bed of the stained sheets. Dumping them in to the laundry basket, he slammed the lid shut.

When the bed was freshly made, he stared at it with crossed arms. What had happened was in the past. He had to let it go.

Letting out a huff, he returned to the living room. For a whole minute he remained in place before carefully hoisting Squall up into his arms. Bringing the man into the bedroom, he slowly lowered the brunet to the bed.

The man's forehead was still warm to the touch, and he gave no reaction at the contact. Seifer could feel moisture clinging to Squall's skin, just as he'd felt the dampness of his clothes when he'd carried the man. And Squall reeked.

The clothes would have to go. So would the smell. Squall was going to kill him for this.

Drawing up the white hem of Squall's shirt, Seifer slowly trailed the fabric upwards, his eyes drawn to the sight of firm abs and pecs before dipping down to the brunet's navel and the dark trail of curls leading to low cut jeans. His eyes jumped up to look at Squall's face, but the man's eyes remained shut. He hadn't moved an inch.
He'd hoped he would get through it without any straying thoughts, but he'd already been studying Squall far too closely. His gaze had lingered, just as he couldn't help the soft pressure of his fingers along Squall's skin as he removed the man's long sleeved shirt.

Bringing his hands lower, he unbuckled Squall's belt. He popped open the button of Squall's trousers next, but still no reaction.

Tugging at the zipper, Seifer stilled his movements. This was the point of no return. Any further and Squall definite would kill him if the man came to. And it didn't feel right to expose Squall like this—not when he knew how revolted Squall would be at the mere thought of Seifer ever seeing him naked again.

Curbing his thoughts, he undid the zipper the rest of the way and pulled down Squall's pants. He just needed to get it done. Unlacing the heavy combat boots, he let them drop to the floor along with the dark jeans, but as soon as they did, his eyes betrayed him. He catalogued every single dip, curve and hard edge to the man before him.

Stirring from his frozen pose, he got a bucket of warm water and some towels from the bathroom. Dipping one of the towels in the water and running it along Squall's chest, he watched as small beads of water formed trails against the man's skin and pooled between muscles. Drying the water off again, he continued the process until Squall's face and upper body were clean, careful to keep his thoughts empty. He halted for a moment before hooking his fingers underneath the waistband of Squall's boxers, the tight fabric not hiding much. Removing them, he raised an eyebrow at the bizarreness of what he was about to do. Washing down the rest of Squall quickly, he got the awkward task over with in record time.

Walking over to his dresser, he rifled through the drawers, searching for an old pair of boxers. They'd always been too tight and uncomfortable, making him a general pest to be around whenever he wore them. They weren't nearly as large as the ones he'd found Squall wearing upon his return to the apartment the previous Thursday. They'd suit the brunet perfectly.

Grabbing his favorite comfy shirt, the thing worn and the print faded, he returned to Squall's side and dressed the man. He had to grin when he was proved right; the pair of ball crushers fit perfectly. Satisfied he had done a decent job, he got Squall under the duvet and placed a soft pillow under brown locks.

He sat down at the edge of the bed. He'd never expected to be giving the brunet sponge baths, and in spite of getting to see Squall naked, he'd hated every moment of it. Squall had better wake up soon. Seeing the brunet this incapacitated was wrong on multiple levels, and it wasn't like he could take care of someone unconscious long term—no matter what he'd made plans for. Odine had to think Squall would come to soon. Otherwise the doctor would have ordered them to take Squall to a hospital or the lab.

Standing from the bed, he returned to the living room. Retrieving Squall's bags and gunblades, he placed them next to the window in the bedroom, in view of the bed. He leaned against the wall. Maybe a tiny part of him didn't look forward to Squall regaining consciousness, the part that didn't want to see Squall's dissatisfaction and contempt at having to stay with him.

He'd spent the better part of the day furious at Rinoa and worried about Squall, but now that Squall was safely within his reach, he felt angry at the brunet as well. What the hell had Squall been thinking, staying on his own after breaking the bond? The man must have expected there to be some risks; he couldn't have been as naive as to think he'd be perfectly fine. Seifer had told Squall just that Thursday how he'd been out of it for a month after his own bond had been torn. If only he'd known, then he could have bullied Squall into staying with him. Somehow. He could have kept
an eye on the man.

*It doesn't matter. He's here. He'll be fine.*

As he watched the slow rise and fall of Squall's chest, he wondered how things had been for himself when he'd been out of it after the war. He had no memories of it, and Fujin and Raijin had never told him. Hyne, if he had to look after Squall for a month, he'd probably end up finishing the scrawny bugger off himself. Arc would have his ass if he didn't come in to work for that long, and he was close to broke as it was; he didn't even dare think of the amount of ass kissing he'd have to do to make it through if Squall remained stubbornly oblivious for long. Hell, the Ice Prince was probably enjoying it—a trip away from the world, from people.

In the end, none of it mattered. They'd have to take it day by day, and however reluctant he was to do so, Seifer had to put his faith in Odine and the pills. Maybe the fact that the bond had been broken willingly made a difference.

Stepping closer to the bed, he placed the back of his hand against Squall's forehead, then his cheek. He sighed. He'd let Squall rest for now and return in a while to check on him again. For the time being, he should get some work done on his designs. Closing the door quietly, he ignored the urge to turn right back around. He'd have to wait.

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*[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Tuesday, 21st of October, 7:04 pm]*

Sitting at his work desk, Seifer glared at the paper in front of him. According to the protractor, he'd made a mistake along the way. The angle of the curved blades protruding from the blaster edge were too small to allow them to cut into a target easily. Releasing a low grumble, he resisted the urge to crumble up the piece of paper. He'd spent over two hours on the damned thing and couldn't just throw it away. His stomach joined in on the grumbling. Glancing at the time on his cell, he realized it was dinner time. He hadn't had more than a mouthful of cereal that day.

Standing up from his position by the work desk, he looked in the direction of the bedroom. He'd checked on Squall a couple of times already, but so far there hadn't been any change. He'd have to get some kind of sustenance into the guy. And the pills. Sighing at the prospect, dreading the mess he was bound to make, he walked to the bedroom door. He'd check on the guy one more time before getting the pills and food.

Squall still hadn't moved from his earlier position. Apart from the slight rise and fall of his chest beneath the duvet, there was no sign that the man was even alive.

The bed dipped slightly as Seifer sat down at the edge. Checking the brunet's temperature, he couldn't help but grimace at the heat still burning pale skin. His hands stilled in place. A twitch—Squall's eyebrows had twitched. It had been almost imperceptible, but the accompanying change in Squall's breathing told him he hadn't just imagined it.

Another move, this time under the duvet.

"Squall," Seifer said in a low voice as he placed his hand on Squall's arm and shook it slightly.

Immediately, Squall's body went rigid and the man's eyes flew open to stare at the ceiling with a wide-eyed gaze, his breathing coming in hard and fast.

It was a few seconds before Seifer reacted. Keeping his hand in place, still resting it on Squall's arm, he spoke softly. "Take it easy," he said, keeping his voice steady. "You're all right." He
watched the brunet cautiously. "You'll be all right."

Squall snapped his head in his direction. There was no recognition in the man's gaze, only a blankness that made chills run down Seifer's back. He didn't have a second to ponder what was happening when Squall launched out of the bed and backed away wildly towards the opposite side of the room. A loud thud filled the room when Squall impacted against the wall behind him. Gray-blue eyes darted around the room, until they finally fell upon Seifer again. The brunet looked almost blind as he stared in his direction, as if the man wasn't fully rooted in reality.

Standing slowly from the bed, Seifer raised his hands to show that he wasn't a threat, approaching the man much as he would a wild creature. "Easy," he said, dragging out the word.

Squall raised a hand to grasp at his forehead, his eyebrows scrunching up as if in pain. The brunet's other hand found the wall behind him in a steadying move. The man's breaths were ragged, still coming in far too rapidly.

Having seen enough, Seifer stilled his mind and slowed his breathing, before reaching out for the neglected bond in his mind for a second time that day. He heard a faint growl at the back of his mind as he coaxed Bahamut into junction, his muscles tensing with the fierce creature's strength.

Without wasting another moment, he cast Sleep on the brunet. As soon as the spell landed, he shunned the winged beast again, forcing him to the back of his mind. As blinding pain burst behind his eyes, he stumbled a step backwards, his eyes shutting in reflex. He hated using magic now.

When his vision returned, his eyes landed on Squall. The brunet was slumped against the wall at the other side of the room inelegantly, the man tense yet unmoving. He was still very much awake, but it looked like he was losing the fight. Squall's eyes were still directed at him, but they weren't as wide as before. There was a blink. Then another one.

Raising his hands once more, hoping Squall would still recognize the human gesture, Seifer closed the distance between them in slow, measured steps. As he lowered himself to kneel on the floor in front of the brunet, he kept his gaze unwavering. He placed a hand firmly against Squall's upper arm. When Squall's frown abated and gray-blue eyes slowly lost their wild glint, he took a deep breath.

Hooking his hands under the brunet's arms, he gently rose into a standing position and lifted Squall up with him. Taking all of the man's weight, feeling the brunet slump against him, he shuffled them back to the bed before laying Squall back down on the soft mattress. He gave the man a small smile when he saw gray-blue eyes still tracking his movements, and covered Squall with the duvet.

"Relax," he said softly, as he lowered himself to sit at the edge of the bed.

Watching as Squall's eyelids grew heavier and heavier, he didn't know what to make of what had just happened. Had he reacted like that after his bond with Ultimecia had been broken? He would kill Odine and Rinoa if it was permanent. He clenched his jaw as his eyes stayed locked with Squall's. He wanted to shake the man, to command him to snap out of it and recognize him.

Forcing the thought aside, he told himself to stay calm.

When gray-blue eyes fell shut, the man looking relaxed and undisturbed, Seifer waited in the quiet of the room, only leaving when he was absolutely certain Squall had fallen back to sleep.

As he stood in the other room, he wasn't sure what to do. Phoning Rinoa would be pointless; she wouldn't be any help, and she'd just freak out. He didn't have Odine's number, and even if he did,
the doctor had already offered his insight. If Squall was going to return to normal, he would need rest, time for his mind to heal.

Seifer glanced back in the direction of the doorway leading to the bedroom. He'd have to keep Squall sedated for a little while longer for the guy to get better without injuring himself, which meant he needed sedatives unless he wanted to walk around with a permanent headache from using magic. He got out his cell.

"Hey," Calder greeted after the second ring.

"I need you to come over," Seifer said, not wasting any time on greetings.

"What happened?"

"Just come over and bring some sedatives. I'll explain when you get here."

Calder hesitated. "Okay."

Seifer hung up. There wasn't anything else to say. As soon as Calder got there, he'd try and get some pills, food, and water in Squall. Hopefully the Sleep spell would still be somewhat in effect by then, but there wasn't any way to predict that with how resilient Squall was to spells and how crappy his own magic had become.

As he waited for Calder to turn up, Seifer ate the sandwich Calder had made him earlier. His appetite was still nonexistent, but he needed the energy. Not paying attention to what he was doing, mostly staring into space, he started when a knock sounded at his door.

Making it to the door in a couple of seconds, he pushed it open wide.

"I got the pills," Calder said, holding out a small package for Seifer.

Taking the box from Calder's hand, Seifer nodded and walked over to the kitchen. He got out a glass and filled it with water.

"So, what's up?" Calder asked from behind him.

Seifer didn't answer as he looked through the medicine Odine had prescribed Squall, getting out the right number of pills from each small container. With a cup of yogurt in one hand and the glass of water and pills in the other, he spared Calder a brief glance. "Wait here," he said, turning around and heading towards the bedroom. "I'll be back in a minute."

Inside the bedroom, he was relieved to find Squall still asleep. As he placed the things he'd brought with him on the bedside table, he kept an eye out for the slightest movement, ready to react if Squall had another abrupt awakening. When it didn't come, he gently sat down at the edge of the bed, his hands held out, ready to grab onto Squall at any sudden movement. He didn't want Squall to back up into a wall and get hurt a second time around.

"Squall," he said, hoping Squall would still be mostly out of it. Just a little bit of consciousness would do.

A sound of displeasure left Squall as the man's eyebrows furrowed. The man looked like he was in pain.

"Come on, Squall, you gotta wake up," Seifer said as he leaned in over Squall. Placing a hand on Squall's right shoulder, he gently shook it.
This time hazy gray-blues slowly opened to look at him. They still weren't rooted in reality. "You have to sit up," Seifer tried, hoping Squall could understand what he was saying.

Squall's eyebrows scrunched up even further, and the man moved a hand to rub at his right temple.

"I've got some pills for that," Seifer said, nodding at where Squall's hand was kneading. He had a good inkling he wasn't the only one with a headache. "But you need to sit up first, all right?" He moved back a bit to give the brunet some space, but instead of moving into a sitting position Squall brought his hands up to cover his ears and turned to lie on his side, leaving his back to Seifer.

Seifer frowned. Sound was causing Squall pain.

Staying silent, he placed a couple of pillows against the wall. With a soft back rest in place, he grabbed the brunet and dragged him into a sitting position. Slowly letting go, unsure if Squall would be able to stay upright on his own, he watched as the brunet slumped against the pillows. The position was slightly precarious for a moment before Squall settled against the pillows properly.

Squall's eyes hadn't moved to look at him. Instead they were fixed on the wall at the opposite end of the bedroom. The Sleep spell had to be in effect to cause such a change from earlier, but the hollow look to Squall's eyes hadn't changed. It made Seifer's skin crawl. He took hold of the glass of water, needing to get this done as soon as possible.

As he brought the water to Squall's lips, he tilted the glass slowly and watched the water disappear little by little. Grabbing one of the pills, he placed it in Squall's mouth, pushing it in between pale lips. When the pill was swallowed along with a sip of water, he repeated the process until all the medicine and sedatives were gone.

Putting the glass back on the bedside table, he brought a spoonful of yogurt to Squall's lips. The process of spoon feeding someone was much slower than he would ever have imagined—much slower than he'd ever thought himself patient enough to sit through—but it felt good to finally get some sustenance in Squall.

For a couple of minutes he just sat there watching. It wouldn't be long before the sedatives would set in, and once they did, Squall would be out for the night. Even if Squall didn't recognize him, there was still some comfort in seeing the man awake and responding to the world around him, if only on the most basic of levels.

As he stood up again and moved Squall back into a sleeping position, he made the man as comfortable as possible. With a soft pillow placed back under Squall's head, he watched as Squall's eyes closed slowly once more. It was strange standing there, watching over a man he'd thought he'd never see again only the day before, but even stranger was the slow realization that it wasn't a desire to make up for the past that had made him accept the responsibility. He had wanted to help and would do anything to make sure Squall got better.

Reluctant to ponder the sentiment any further, he walked over to the window and opened it slightly in order to let in a light breeze. Turning off the light, he left the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Back in the living room, his eyes moved to where Calder waited on the couch, the man's eyes immediately meeting his gaze. Walking over to the couch, Seifer relaxed into it, feeling exhausted after a long day filled with one unpleasant surprise after another. Arching his head backwards, he closed his eyes and breathed in deeply.
The seconds ticked by slowly as Calder watched the blond. He wasn't sure if he could broach the questions that had been occupying his mind all afternoon. The blond looked so beat. He knew the situation was taking its toll on Seifer.

"He came to earlier," Seifer said, breaking the silence.

Calder raised an eyebrow. "That's good, right?" he asked, but without much enthusiasm—he could read Seifer well enough to know there hadn't been a big change in the commander's condition.

"He wasn't there," Seifer explained with a distant gaze. "Just a shell. Pure reaction to his environment, nothing else." After a pause, he continued, "He's in pain. Sounds hurt him." His left hand clenched where it was resting on the couch. "I've given him sedatives so he can stay out of it for a while longer."

He kept his gaze straight ahead. "He was my sparring partner for as long as I can remember."

Calder forced a small smile onto his lips. "I can't believe you didn't tell me you used to spar with the Seed Commander."

"Who he is doesn't matter," Seifer said in a tired voice.

Calder held back a sigh. "Maybe not, but who you are matters to me," he said, wanting to defend his words. "There's a lot you haven't told me."

As they both considered Calder's words, silence filled the room. Seifer had never imagined telling Calder anything about his past apart from the few inconsequential things he had already shared with the man. He still didn't want to tell the man anything, but knew it was too late to back out now. "I know," he resigned.

"Why?" Calder asked when no further words followed.

"I have my reasons."

The silence dragged on as Calder waited for the blond to continue.

"I was a cadet at Balamb Garden. I wanted to be a SeeD. Things changed," Seifer finally offered. He knew outright denying Calder an answer would cause a rift in their friendship.

It was what Calder had already suspected, but hearing Seifer say it made him consider the implications more fully. "What changed?"

Seifer frowned. He didn't need any reminders of that time. "I screwed up," he said, avoiding any details. "So I came here."

It sounded so simple when Seifer said it. Like it had been easy for the blond. Calder knew better than to assume as much. There had to be a reason why Seifer hadn't told him about the past, and he was certain it wasn't as uncomplicated as Seifer made it out to be. He knew not making SeeD would have taken Seifer's self-esteem down a notch, but that didn't explain the look in Seifer's eyes. Maybe some things were better left alone. For now.

"Do you still use magic?" he asked instead. The incident at the hotel had replayed in his mind countless times already. The only time he had seen humans use magic was during the clean-up effort after the Lunar Cry while he had worked side by side with SeeDs. When he'd learned about magic in his line of work, he'd only been taught which items to use to defend himself against it. None of his colleagues knew how to use magic either.
"Sometimes," Seifer replied. After the war he had only used magic sparsely. His spells hadn't been nearly as strong as before, and he was punished with headaches and nausea whenever he used them. Instead, he'd taken to bringing potions, antidotes, and the likes with him whenever there was a chance of encountering monsters.

"So you have one of those magical beings?" Calder said, remembering what little he'd been told about magic—that it was a connection to a magical entity that allowed one to cast spells.

"I have a couple," Seifer admitted. He huffed as Calder's eyes went wide. "Shiva is a Guardian Force."

"The thing you drew from him?" Calder asked as he tilted his head in the direction of the bedroom. Seifer nodded. His eyes became distant as he remembered Shiva fighting Ultimecia. The guardian force had been breathtaking, her skin a pale glowing white, her eyes a deep blue as she transformed the world around her to ice. "She's beautiful. An ice goddess."

Calder had a hard time imagining what a magical being would look like, let alone how you could be connected to one. "How does it work?" The stories he'd heard about SeeDs selling their souls, trading away their personality and memories, for magical power had to be wrong.

"They just become part of you. If you can persuade one to join you," Seifer said, a shade of smugness curving his lips upwards.

"You'll have to show me," Calder insisted. He'd never seen such a being.

"Maybe," Seifer agreed halfheartedly after a second's pause. He almost never got Bahamut out to play anymore and knew he'd be punished for it if he did. Showing Calder wasn't an option even if he wished he could show the man the impressive creature. He loved watching Bahamut's wings unfold as the creature hovered in the air next to him, preparing to strike. But he didn't want anyone to see his weakness. Summoning hurt more than spells, and it was hard to fight when it felt like someone was sticking a giant needle into your brain, scrambling it around.

"Maybe?" Calder returned, somewhat incredulous. "I know you can hardly summon one of them in the middle of Esthar, but as soon as he—" there was another nod in the direction of the bedroom, "as soon as he's better, the two of us will have to take a trip out during the weekend. You can't get out of this one. You have to show me."

"Maybe you can get Squall to show you Shiva," Seifer said with a quirk to his lips as he imagined Squall's displeasure at having to humor Calder with showing the man his icy lover. Back at Garden Squall had never had patience for anyone expressing awe at such things.

"Was that a joke?" Calder asked after a couple of seconds, not really sure what to make out of the secretive smile on Seifer's lips.

"Squall doesn't play well with others," Seifer commented, feeling the heavy load on his shoulders lighten. Apparently thinking about Squall being his old annoying self helped ease his mood. There was another upwards pull at the corner of his lips as he considered how Squall and Calder would get along if they ever met; he couldn't see anything other than gray-blue eyes narrowing in scrutiny as they regarded the taller brunet.

Seeing the deep fondness in Seifer's eyes, Calder wasn't surprised, not after everything he'd witnessed the last couple of days. He couldn't help but wonder if things went the other way as well, if the SeeD commander shared this fondness for his ex-sparring partner. There had to be something
there for the man to sleep with the blond, Avalanche or not. But where did that leave Rinoa?

Upon remembering the woman, his thoughts were effectively distracted. He still had so much trouble believing Rinoa was a sorceress. She had seemed kind, delicate—nothing like the pictures he'd seen of Adel.

"Is Rinoa really a sorceress?" he asked, meeting Seifer's gaze.

Pulled from his thoughts, Seifer nodded. "She wouldn't hurt a fly though."

A frown settled on Calder's brow. The truths he'd been told that day were too far-reaching for him to even hope to understand. He didn't know what being a sorceress entailed, and now he had to wonder how many more there were out there like Rinoa, walking around unseen by the public.

"But she doesn't look like one."

"They aren't all freaks like Adel."

"All?" Calder asked, unsure he'd heard that right. "You know more?"

"Knew," Seifer corrected.

Calder shook his head. He didn't know how much more he could take. "So there are lots of them?"

Seifer shrugged. "Hell if I know."

"What does being a sorceress entail?"

Leaning farther back in the couch, Seifer tried to relax. "Special powers—their own magic."

Calder nodded. That was the extent of his knowledge on the subject.

"What's a 'knight'?" he asked, remembering the term Rinoa had used to refer to Squall earlier that day.

With all the questions Calder was asking, Seifer should have seen this one coming, but it still caused him to tense up. "Someone that will do anything for his sorceress," he said after a brief pause, the answer coming to him easily.

"And a 'bond'?" Calder asked.

Sighing, Seifer considered how to explain it. At first it had simply been a way of communicating with his mistress. Later, he had no longer been sure of what exactly it had involved; he had no longer felt like a separate entity from Ultimcia.

"A connection between sorceress and knight," he said, bringing a hand up to massage at the back of his neck. "It allows them to share thoughts and emotions."

"And that's what Squall and Rinoa had?"

Seifer lowered his gaze to the floor. "It's how Rinoa knew we slept together."

There was a moment's pause as Calder considered Seifer's words. The full extent of the situation was finally becoming apparent to him. Rinoa had broken the bond with Squall after what had happened between the two men and Squall's current condition was the consequence. It was beginning to make sense why no one else had been involved. It had been a private matter.
Something else occurred to him.

"Why did Rinoa ask me to leave? At the hotel," he asked, that part of the puzzle still eluding him. He almost regretted asking his question at the drawn expression it elicited on the blond's face. Neither of them said anything for long minutes. Just when Calder was about to give up, the blond ran a hand through his hair—a nervous move he knew all too well.

"...I know what he's going through."

Calder frowned. "You've known other knights?"

"No," Seifer said curtly before looking away, obscuring his expression from view.

Having a sinking feeling he was about to learn another truth about the blond's past, Calder steeled himself. "You used to be a knight?" he asked lowly.

The ensuing silence was all the admission he needed.

Seifer had been a knight.

That was why Rinoa had asked for privacy. She had known and hadn't wanted to expose Seifer. Calder's mind went blank.

"This is a lot to take in."

"...I wanted to forget," Seifer said after a long silence. "And I wanted a new start," he added, leaning forwards in his seat. "That's why I never told you." Without another word of explanation, he got up from the couch and headed to the kitchen counter. He didn't want to tell Calder more than that—he had already said much more than he'd intended to. He got out two tumblers and poured them some whiskey. The alcohol was way overdue.

At the thought that occurred to him, Calder's brow knitted into a frown. "Were you Rinoa's knight, too?" It was the only logical conclusion he could reach.

"... She wasn't a sorceress back then," Seifer relented.

Calder's frown deepened. He'd always assumed sorceresses were born that way. "Who was your sorceress then?"

Seifer locked his eyes on the counter. He couldn't tell Calder. Every part of him was opposed to it. If he told him, the man would never look at him the same. They'd never be able to go back.

"It doesn't matter," he said lowly, even though he knew it did. "It's in the past. I need it to stay that way," he added, raising his eyes to meet Calder's gaze.

"But you only ever told me about Fujin and Rinoa," Calder plowed on. "Don't tell me Fujin is a sorceress too?" he asked, half expecting Seifer to just come out and tell him it was all one big joke.

"She isn't," Seifer growled.

"Then who?" Calder repeated. "I mean, from the sound of it, it's an intimate thing and those are the only two—" Calder curbed his words as his eyes fell to Seifer's clenched fists.

I wanted to forget.

Calder took a deep breath and collected his thoughts. Seifer didn't want to tell him and most likely
wouldn't, no matter how hard he pushed. Did it matter who she'd been? It couldn't have been Adel. Seifer hadn't been born yet when she'd been in control. And the blond had admitted to knowing other sorceresses.

"Why does it matter if I know?"

"Push more and you're leaving," Seifer said sternly.

Calder lowered his gaze. Maybe he could figure out things on his own.

"You don't have to tell me," he said as he leaned back in the couch, sighing.

Watching Calder carefully, Seifer took a sip of his whiskey. It seemed the man had caught on after all. Grabbing the glasses, he walked over and joined the man on the couch.

Taking the offered glass from Seifer's hold, Calder let his eyes travel the blond. "So, a Garden cadet," he commented, wanting to return to a safer topic. "What was it like?"

Allowing himself to think back to his time there before the war, Seifer fell silent. He'd loved Garden. He could've done without some of the more boring classes, but the focus on honing your skills in combat and executing missions had given him drive from an early age; a drive that he'd only recently learned to direct onto something else.

"Good," he said honestly. "But not for the weak." He met Calder's gaze. "You're forced to push yourself constantly. In the morning you have theoretical classes; in the afternoon, physical ones. In the evening you're expected to continue your training on your own or hit the books. Same goes for the weekends. Never a moment off."

"You think Nolan could've cut it?"

Seifer chuckled. "No. No way."

Calder's lips quirked upwards. "That bad?"

"You have to actually show up for classes in order to learn the shit."

"You saying you weren't a skiver?" Calder teased.

"This is going to hurt my reputation, isn't it?"

Calder chuckled.

"Nolan would love to hear all of this—to see your Guardian Forces."

Seifer's smile faltered. He shook his head. "You know why you can't tell him."

Calder sighed, but nodded. Nolan would never be able to keep a secret of that magnitude. He glanced at his wristwatch and let out a deep sigh, before rolling his eyes and leaning forwards in his seat. "I promised to pick him up at 8."

Checking the time, Seifer chuckled. "You'd better get going then."

"He can wait," Calder said, taking another sip of his whiskey, but the moment he swallowed the liquid, he felt his phone vibrate against his leg. Getting it out, he groaned at the name that greeted him on the display.
Listening as Nolan reamed out his older brother for being late, Seifer grinned, taking no little pride in the fact that he'd taught the boy at least half of the expletives that seemed to pour from the boy's mouth. It was Calder's own fault for being too soft.

When the call ended, Calder stood up from the couch and emptied his glass.

Seifer laughed. "You're such a pushover."

Calder rolled his eyes. "Don't complain. You exploit it just as badly."

Eyeing the man fondly, Seifer chuckled. He had been known to take advantage of Calder on more than one occasion.

Putting on his jacket, Calder hesitated. "Call me."

"I will."

"All right then. Keep me posted. I hope he gets better soon," he said, once again indicating the bedroom. Referring to the SeeD commander by his first name would be too odd, the formal title no good either.

"Me too," Seifer said, standing from the couch as well and walking Calder to the door.

"See you," Calder said, then turned to leave.

Closing the door behind Calder, Seifer walked over to refill his glass. He took a few sips of his glass as he went over their conversation in his head. The atmosphere had been almost back to normal at the end. Calder hadn't pushed.

Putting the glass down on the kitchen counter, he walked towards the bedroom. As he opened the door quietly, it was a moment before his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. It was dark outside the window, a faint blue hue the only light in the room.

Squall was still asleep on the bed. This time Seifer was actually relieved to see Squall hadn't moved an inch. He wouldn't have known what to do if the sedatives hadn't worked. He didn't want to watch Squall in pain, and the longer Squall rested, the more Seifer allowed himself to hope that the man would be all right.

He walked over to where Squall was lying and carefully sat down at the edge of the bed. Reaching over, he pressed the back of his fingers to Squall's forehead. It was still warm, but less so than earlier. He moved his hand and pressed it to Squall's cheek instead.

Sighing, he stood up from the bed. There wasn't anything to do but wait.

Turning his back to Squall, he grabbed a pair of boxers and entered the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later he was clean, shaved, and dressed.

Tired, he stood still as he considered what to do. He couldn't join Squall in bed. Squall could wake during the night and all hell would break loose that way, even if it was just as harmless as him wanting a place to sleep, and the couch was in the other room, far away from where he wanted to be.

Deciding to forgo sleep for the time being, he walked over to sit by the far wall. Slumping back against the hard surface, he watched as the white duvet rose and fell slowly in time with Squall's breathing.
Shiva seemed to have calmed down. He couldn't pinpoint when it had happened, but it was nice to be free of her aggrieved presence, her pining for Squall.

The image of Rinoa sitting next to Squall on the bed in the hotel room came to mind. There had been love and concern in her eyes. The girl's broken voice and the words "I love you" replayed in his thoughts; the words he'd heard in her voice message. Squall should never have heard it.

Her admission had surprised Seifer; that it had been five months since she and Squall had split up. The "why" of the break up still confused him. She'd said it had been because she hadn't wanted to wait for Squall to love her back any longer, but in spite of her take on events, Squall obviously cared for her a great deal. But love? He couldn't judge that. He'd never seen love, never experienced it. If he had to take a guess, then downing a bottle of alcohol because of having lost someone would probably be high up there though.

And really, what else could love be if not Squall's reaction to Rinoa's voice mail? The brunet's lack of composure after what had happened at the club and the way he had changed for her—it all showed exactly that.

Why had Rinoa failed to see that? And why punish Squall with breaking the bond? Even he could tell Squall hadn't been ready for that.

Back to the more familiar feeling of resentment towards Rinoa, he had to wonder what the hell Squall had seen in her. She'd always been lively and fun to be around, but that hardly fit with what he'd expect for Squall to look for in a girl. He'd sooner think her behavior would act like a repellent when it came to the reticent brunet.

He tried to empty his mind. The train of thought did little for his mood, but the stubborn part of him wouldn't let the topic go. He couldn't help but wonder what Rinoa and Squall had been like as a couple. He grimaced in distaste. Just thinking about the two together made his skin crawl.

Forcing his mind into a blank, he slowly steered it onto a different topic. What was the rest of Squall's life like? How many missions did the guy go on? Had his fighting style changed? Did he train students?

He couldn't see the gunblade cases from where he was sitting, but he had recognized Revolver's well enough. The other one had to be the blade Squall had used in his final battles against himself and Ultimecia. He hated to admit it, but those battles had been tough. Squall had always been the one to push him the hardest—during the war and before.

Would they ever get to spar again?

Their last conversation had been tense to say the least. Could they get past that?

More than likely, sharing his apartment with Squall would be awkward as hell. The part of him that wished Squall would just stay knocked out piped up again, but no matter how awkward things were going to become, he was looking forward to having Squall around as well. He'd always enjoyed riling Squall up, and when the man actually relented to a retort it was usually dry and snide. The kind of humor he could appreciate.

Quite possibly, he would just be ignored, but that was one thing he'd learned how to handle. Squall could never ignore him fully.

Arms and legs heavy with exhaustion, Seifer blinked. He angled his head more comfortably, slumping further against the wall.
...He'd close his eyes for a just few minutes, then get up and get a glass of water…

~ 0 ~
Huddled on his side, Squall woke buried under warm, soft fabric. Cold morning light was brushing his face, its brightness piercing through closed eyelids. He would have turned around but his limbs felt far too heavy and sore, so he scrunched his eyes tighter to ward off the incessant play of light.

A banging sound filled the room, oddly distant yet echoing and twisting sharply in his ears. Pain shot through his head in response, and even as the aggravating noise disappeared, a slow throb continued to pulse harshly against his skull. Unable to force himself into full alertness, his pulse quickened. Opening his eyes, he blinked several times before the painful blare of white shrunk into a bright square of light. A window.

He never slept in this long after sunrise. Usually the slightest disturbance snapped him from sleep, yet he felt more disoriented than he had in years. Why hadn't his alarm clock woken him?

Muddled thoughts of when exactly he'd fallen asleep were cut short as renewed banging filled the room, this time accompanied by the sound of someone groaning to his right. He stiffened as he realized all at once that he wasn't alone and that he didn't know where he was. The bed he was lying in was definitely not his.

Pushing himself upright, readying himself to bolt from the bed at the slightest sign of danger, he was given no chance to further take in his surroundings as his stomach instantly lurched at the too sudden shift in gravitation. Breaking out in a cold sweat as the room started to spin violently, he placed a hand on the soft bedding to stabilize himself. Eyes wrenched shut and jaw clenching at the acidic surge fighting its way up his throat, he only barely kept himself propped up, his trembling arm ready to give way any second.

"Fuck," someone cursed to his right, the sound followed by the rushed retreat and return of heavy footsteps.

Not having the luxury of questioning the sudden strong hand supporting him or the plastic container shoved underneath his face, Squall keeled over as his body erupted into convulsions, forcefully expelling what little content there was left in his practically empty stomach. His eyes instantly stung with involuntary tears at the acidic burn.

Dry heaving a final few times in vain, Squall shuddered when his queasiness started to subside. The only thing keeping him from collapsing was the firm grip on his shoulder.

"I'll get you some water," someone said, this time to his right, the voice ringing sharply in his ears. Unable to suppress a slight wince, he fought down his alarm at lacking the strength to resist being guided into a reclined position by the strong hand on his shoulder. He'd probably been drugged and most definitely needed to get the hell out of there. Peeling open heavy eyelids to assess his surroundings, he stilled against the mattress at the sight of the familiar blond.

"... Seifer?" he managed hoarsely after spending long seconds making sure it was Seifer who was studying him closely and not some drug induced mirage.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Seifer said softly.

Welcome back? Squall wasn't even aware he'd been away. The way Seifer was smiling at him
without pretense was unsettling—the man only ever grinned or smirked to try and rile him up. Immediately, contradictory flashes of a gently smiling blond, holding him tight, popped into his aching head along with returned theories of drug induced mirages. He must have hit his head hard. It definitely felt like he'd been down for a long time.

Watching as Squall scrunched his brow and brought up a hand to rub at his temple, Seifer grabbed the bucket from the floor. "I'll be back in a second."

As he entered the living room, a sound drew his eyes to the doorknob of his front door. Someone was trying to get in. Scrunching his brow, he closed the door to the bedroom softly before striding over to open the door. Outside Calder looked up from his cell phone, his hand hovering idly over where the doorknob had been. Seifer raised his eyebrow.

"What?" Calder asked as he walked past the blond into the apartment. "I was worried. You didn't answer any of my knocks."

He'd been up until late the night before, twisting and turning in bed as he had considered everything he had been told and had witnessed. In the end he'd decided to check up on Seifer and Squall before heading in for an early workout session at the SCTA. When no one had answered his knocks, he'd been unable to leave without making sure everything was all right. By the looks of it, Seifer was far from okay. He joined the man by the sink, where he was already busy rinsing out a plastic bucket.

"Rough night?"

Seifer met Calder's glance only briefly before he filled a glass with water.

"Wait here," he said, walking past the man to get the pills Squall needed. Grabbing the clean bucket, he returned to the bedroom and set it down next to the bed. Placing the water and pills on the bedside table, he separated the two sedatives from the rest. Squall hadn't looked his way yet, the man's gaze locked on the ceiling.

He wasn't sure what to expect—how much Squall remembered. Those gray-blue eyes were back to their usual look of indifference, even though he knew the mind behind them was probably running a mile a minute. Sitting down at the edge of the bed, he watched the brunet closely as he waited for a reaction.

Squall remained still, ignoring Seifer's presence as he finished puzzling together what he could remember.

He hadn't hit his head... not that he knew anyway. The reality of what had happened was far worse. Rinoa had broken their bond, her absence from his mind glaring and drawing all his thoughts to the void where she used to be. But he couldn't allow himself to dwell on the fact; not now, not when he didn't have a clue about what was going on.

Something had obviously gone wrong at the lab, but he failed to fill in the blanks of exactly how he'd ended up from whatever had happened there to lying incapacitated in Seifer's bed.

Slowly, in order not to worsen his growing migraine, he shifted his head on the pillow and faced Seifer. "I'm at your apartment," he finally managed, his voice gravelly.

Seifer had to suppress a grimace at Squall's words. Of course that was the first thing for Squall to bring up. "Blame Rinoa," he said as he avoided the man's gaze. The decision had been made, and Squall could put two and two together easily enough. "I've got your pills," he added. "Do you think
you can manage to keep them down?"

Squall frowned. Like hell he would accept any pills from Seifer again without knowing exactly what they were for, especially when the blond couldn't even be bothered to explain why he'd been tucked into the man's bed. He didn't believe for a minute that this was Rinoa's doing.

Eyes narrowed at Seifer's evasive reply, he rephrased his earlier statement. "Why am I at your apartment?... And where is Shiva?" he asked darkly, suddenly aware that his ice goddess was missing.

Releasing a deep sigh, Seifer returned his gaze to Squall. "How much do you remember?"

Squall frowned at the question, wondering just what Seifer knew. The blond had mentioned Rinoa, so they'd talked over the phone at least. Again. Searching his memory one last time, he suddenly had the unsettling thought that maybe he'd been the one to drive all the way back to Seifer's apartment.

"...I was in my car. I had Shiva junctioned," he answered with a frown. It was all he could remember, the images blurry and distorted. He could still recall the panic of his ice goddess, his own disorientation, but not much more than that. "I was... looking for somewhere to go," he added as a vague impression of Shiva urging him to flee, to go somewhere safe, filtered back into his thoughts. Groaning inwardly, he sincerely hoped his subconscious hadn't chosen Seifer's apartment as said safe haven.

Resigning himself to fill in the blanks for Squall, Seifer's expression hardened. "You went to a hotel close by," he said, his lips sloping downwards as the image of how they'd found the brunet reasserted itself. "You were in a bad state. Rinoa came here. She hadn't heard from you in three days."

"We found you at the hotel. You weren't responding—hadn't taken your pills... Shiva's junction was messing up. You kept sliding in and out of it... Odine said your mind couldn't take it so I drew her from you," he said, recalling just how resistant and uncooperative the ice goddess had been. "She really doesn't like me. I think she's been too spoiled in that head of yours. Too much composure and logic," he added with a smirk.

A weak glare was all Squall could muster in reply. He couldn't decide what was worse: him having been unconscious for three whole days in a hotel room, or Seifer witnessing him in such a sorry state. It was the club all over again—the blond seeing exactly those things he least wanted the man to see.

Annoyed with talking to the blond from his reclined position, he slowly moved into a sitting position. He was spared another attack of crippling nausea, but his head throbbed with a new onslaught of pain, temporarily thwarting his resolve to get answers. Releasing an uneven sigh, he briefly closed his eyes and brought up a hand to massage his forehead when he remembered Seifer's mention of pills.

"... Are those Odine's pills?"

"Mhm," Seifer answered, growing less tense at the change of topic. "The two on the left are sedatives, in case you just want to zonk out," he added, feeling some of his own tiredness returning. He couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep on the floor.

Following Seifer's gaze to the two pills, Squall immediately shot down the suggestion. "I've been unconscious long enough."
Taking the glass of water from the bedside table, he grimaced as he sloshed around a mouthful of water to rid himself of the sour taste lingering on his tongue before spitting it out into the bucket Seifer had placed beside the bed. Downing the pills one by one, he left only the sedatives behind.

He didn't immediately look up from his empty glass as his thoughts returned to the crucial bit of information Seifer was still withholding from him. It didn't make any sense for him to be at the blond's apartment. He'd sooner expect to wake up at Loire's.

"Why am I here?"

Seifer narrowed his eyes at Squall's firm tone. "Get over yourself," he said, getting up from the bed and crossing his arms. He was done listening to Squall's incredulity.

"Rinoa thought it'd be best if I looked after you because of my... experience," he said harshly, spelling it out when the brunet was obviously too slow to make the connection himself. "You're not going anywhere until you're better, so just deal." Squall would either catch up or find his ass relocated to Garden.

Squall cringed as Seifer's incensed voice reverberated loudly through the bedroom, aggravating his headache. Apparently something had gone on to change Rinoa's mind about Seifer for her to agree to something as outrageous as this, let alone suggest it. But what he could understand even less was Seifer going along with it. Maybe Rinoa didn't understand the stupidity of her plan, but Seifer should.

He had left the blond's apartment not because he had wanted to, but because Seifer had needed him to. Seifer was the last person who should have to look after him, the man's experience precisely the reason why this was a terrible idea. Anybody else would have found his situation ironically fitting, would have wished it on him even, not take him in.

"After last time... I didn't think you'd—" Discomforted by his inability to find the right words, his features turned expressionless. "Never mind."

"No, Squall, go on. Finish your sentence," Seifer said as he scrutinized the brunet, his voice tempered only in consideration for the man's apparent sensitivity to sound. "You didn't think I'd what?"

Only a small twitch interrupted his composed mask as Squall kept his eyes lowered, his gaze traveling the creases and folds of white cotton sheets. He didn't want Seifer to see how affected he was by being back in the blond's apartment. He simply wasn't supposed to be there.

Meeting Seifer's gaze, he kept all inflection out of his voice as he called things as he saw them. "You don't want me here. I don't know what Rinoa said, but... you don't need to do this. I can leave."

"You're not going anywhere," Seifer stated firmly.

An incredulous huff from the other room broke the silence, immediately drawing Seifer's attention to the doorway. When Calder entered the room, Seifer stared at him coldly, making sure his body language conveyed nothing but get the fuck out of here.

Unfazed by Seifer's grim demeanor, Calder looked over to the brunet sitting on the bed. He'd been surprised to hear the man behave just as stubbornly and hare-brained as the blond. It seemed neither would face the obvious or own up to the truth.

"First of all, you're in no condition to leave," he stated plainly. "Second of all, if Seifer could spend
the rest of his life pampering your ass, I think he'd die a happy man,” he added, annoyed at how Seifer was behaving like he hadn't been worried sick and hadn't done everything in his power to take care of the brunet.

As Seifer returned Calder's stern gaze, his expression grew impossibly dark. He wanted to deck the guy, to punch the living daylights out of the meddling shit.

"I'll find my own way out," Calder said, lingering a moment longer before leaving the two men staring.

Raising an eyebrow at the stranger who was actually stupid enough to turn his back and walk away after pressing almost all of Seifer's buttons, Squall wasn't surprised when Seifer immediately started after the guy, hot on his trail and absolutely seething.

Sounds of metal scraping against wood came from the other room, soon followed by something heavy thudding to the floor. Seifer had clearly caught up with the stranger.

"What the fuck was that about?!" Seifer's voice boomed. An image of the blond roughly pinning the other guy to the wall materialized easily before Squall's mind's eye, a treatment he'd been intimately familiar with during his cadet years.

Renewed sounds of struggling reached the bedroom. "Oh, come on, Seifer, it's obvious you have a th—" The man's words were abruptly cut off and replaced by the gasp of someone having the wind knocked out of him.

For a while the sound of uncoordinated footsteps and labored breathing were the only things Squall could hear, until a door was opened forcibly. "Out!" Seifer yelled hotly.

After a moment of silence he heard quick footsteps retreating and then the front door was slammed shut.

Squall remained in place. Why had the stranger been so intent on starting a fight, and why had he been in Seifer's apartment in the first place? Judging by the way Seifer had reacted, the blond had been angered by the man's words, but not the man's presence in itself. He wasn't sure what to make of that; the fewer people who saw him this weak the better. But more than that, he didn't like the assuming way the stranger had spoken to him.

No one told him what to do—not Seifer and definitely not strangers.

At the image of the blond looking down at him, arms crossed and laying down the law, Squall's mood darkened. It would take more than a little nausea and a few barked orders to keep him from going wherever the hell he pleased. Slowly, he moved to the side of the bed and swung his legs over the edge, planting his feet against a floor that seemed to be shifting for a few moments. White swarmed at the edge of his vision before his sense of balance was restored.

Steadying himself with both arms, he cast a look at the open bedroom door. Seifer hadn't made any sign of returning. At a loss for what to do, his resolve to leave deflated as quickly as his irritation.

It didn't make sense for Seifer to do this. Just a few days ago, the man had practically fled from his presence, and now he was ordering him to stay? He knew Rinoa could be convincing, but this was a stretch too far.

He couldn't bring himself to get up and get out, even though self preservation and common sense dictated that he should.
Realizing staying would be just as wrong, he scoffed at his lack of resolve. Wondering why Seifer still wasn't coming in, the odd thought occurred to him that they were waiting each other out.

That was new. And ridiculous.

He commanded himself to man up, but Seifer beat him to it. Renewed footsteps reached his ears, drawing closer and stopping in the doorway of the bedroom. Green eyes met his as Seifer leaned against the door frame. The blond offered no explanation for the stranger's presence.

Pushing away the sheets bunched up around his waist, Squall shifted on the mattress to better face the blond. "A friend of yours?" he asked, all momentum of their earlier confrontation lost.

"Yeah," Seifer said noncommittally, not feeling much friendship towards the annoying prick he'd just forced out of his apartment.

Watching Squall on the bed, the man's pose rigid, he suppressed a sigh. He didn't know what the brunet had made of Calder's words, but together with his own admissions of not having been able to control himself the night they'd ended up in bed together, the evidence was pretty damning.

"Look..." he started, but immediately fell silent again. He wouldn't deny his attraction to Squall. Not only would it be a complete lie, it would also be far too late to start down that road now. He wasn't ashamed of wanting Squall. He was gay, and the brunet was damned sexy; that was just the reality of their situation. Squall had probably already figured things out before Calder's interference anyway.

"Do you need anything? You shouldn't get out of bed."

Squall frowned at the evasive response. Bristling at the blond's supposed authority but lacking the energy to start another argument, he raised a tired hand to knead at his brow instead. The meds he had taken were starting to drag his eyelids back down again.

Not liking how weak Squall looked, Seifer considered blindsiding him with a Sleep spell, but for all he knew the brunet's uncanny affinity for magic had recovered right along with the man's return to cognizance. "You should lie down."

Brow twitching, Squall took a slow breath and told himself to at least keep his composure intact, even if his pride was already a lost cause. "Stop telling me what to do," he said, pushing up from the bed.

Studying the brunet, Seifer narrowed his eyes. Of course the stubborn prick would interpret his suggestion as an order. "Where are you going?"

Squall sent the blond a withering glare. "To take a piss," he replied dryly. He would never admit he hadn't decided on what to do yet.

Almost chuckling at the harsh delivery that reminded Seifer of their cadet days, he instead held Squall's gaze. At least the brunet didn't seem to be heading for the exit. Maybe things could work out. They'd need to get used to each other, sure, but the brunet wasn't looking at him with disgust or loathing, just that same old stubborn stare he'd fought off a million times before. What they needed was time to regroup, and he sure as hell could do with a nap.

"Suit yourself. I'll be in the other room," he said, straightening up. Turning around to leave, he stopped in the doorway and fixed his gaze on Squall. "But no leaving," he stated firmly, holding Squall's glare for a second longer before taking the final step into the living room. He'd hunt the man's ass down if he woke up to an empty apartment.
Irritated by the overly-confident parting shot, Squall listened out for what the bastard was up to. Not thinking the man beyond taking up a guarding post near the bedroom door, he was relieved to hear Seifer's footsteps leading further away, followed by a muted thud and low groan. It sounded like the blond had retired to the couch.

With Seifer out of sight and the need to keep a strong front temporarily gone, his exhaustion came back full force. When no additional sound came from the other room, he decided he might as well accept the ceasefire. He would figure things out later, when he was rested and equipped to deal with the situation. As much as he hated to admit it, Seifer's visitor had hit too close to home when pointing out his weakened state.

Stretching sore back muscles, Squall glanced at the inviting sheets and pillows, but as tempting as the thought of lying back down was, he could smell himself. The grime on his skin and in his hair was impossible to ignore once he'd paid notice, and a sour taste lingered on his tongue in spite of the water he'd downed.

Eyes traveling to his duffel bags, the promise of a toothbrush stirred him into action. Some fresh clothes would be welcome, too. About to get to his feet, he halted mid-movement as his gaze wandered down to take in the faded t-shirt and boxers he was wearing—items that definitely weren't his.

Clenching his jaw, Squall processed the humiliating realization that Seifer had had to undress and clothe him. Praying to Hyne that three days of fevered sweating was the only reason to have prompted such actions, he hated that he couldn't even blame the bastard blond. He'd woken up in Garden's infirmary plenty of times, cut out of his clothes and dressed in nothing but a gown and bandages... but Seifer wasn't Kadowaki.

Releasing the sheets from his white-knuckled grasp, he pushed up from the bed a bit harsher than he should have, his head reeling as he shuffled over to where his bags were placed. Holding out a hand to the dresser for support, he paused and shook his head to dispel the odd sensation of the floor surging upwards, enveloping his feet in darkness.

Hyne, what has the bond done?

Suppressing the flutter of panic that started to squeeze the air from his lungs, he took a deep breath and willed himself to continue with the task he'd set himself. Pulling open the zipper of the largest bag, he stared at its contents far too long before he reluctantly settled on a pair of drawstring pants instead of jeans. He'd leave once he'd gotten some rest. He'd leave once he'd gotten some rest.

Grabbing what he needed, he made his way to the bathroom. As he pulled the door closed behind him, he was overcome with a sense of déjà vu. The small room was as messy as the last time he'd been there, and he felt just as overwhelmed by the situation as he had then. His gaze landed on a small pile of sodden towels in the sink. Surmising their purpose, he tried to imagine the blond brute placing a cooling towel on his forehead but failed. Seifer had never had any patience with the ill or injured back at Garden, his bedside manners nonexistent.

With a small frown, he wrung out the small towels and removed them from the sink. Making thorough work of brushing his teeth, he avoided his reflection in the mirror after the first glance he'd caught of the dark circles under his eyes and his sickly complexion. He quickly stripped out of Seifer's boxers and t-shirt and tossed them onto a pile of white bed covers protruding from the hamper.

Too exhausted to muster more than a frustrated sigh at finding himself back where he'd started, he stepped under the hot spray of the shower. His thoughts were distracted with the need for sleep, the
hand rubbing at his temples not bringing any clarity. Turning up the temperature to the brink of what was bearable, he focused on how the scalding water washed away three days worth of grime, the heat doing wonders for the aches all over his body.

Eyes shut, he felt around in the billowing clouds of steam for soap, his hand closing around a plastic bottle. Squirting an ample amount of gel into his hand, he started to methodically scrub down his skin.

As his fingers worked the soap into his scalp, a stale scent permeated the air, the odor familiar yet dancing just outside the grasp of his memory. Turning his face into the spray, he rinsed the soap from his eyes and glanced down at the bottle he'd used. Sniffing its contents and his skin, he couldn't pinpoint the source of the old, damp scent that filled the shower stall. A shiver rolled down his spine as he remembered the unnatural cold that had accompanied the smell in the past.

Hastily, he washed away the last of the suds. Pulse thrumming fast, he turned off the water and drew the shower curtain aside. Steam swirled thickly in the air as he stepped onto the cold tiles and looked around the room.

Just as he was about to chalk everything up to the old building's bad plumbing, feeling foolish for his overactive imagination, darkness gathered at the lower edge of his vision and the feeling of the floor moving beneath his feet returned. The steam in the air seemed to be sinking to the floor, gathering in thick wisps of gray fog that curled and swelled as if alive. Looking down, he could no longer see the tiles of the bathroom floor. Large drops of water dripped from his hair and skin into the moving mass, only slightly disturbing the flow of its currents.

Instinctively, he sought out Shiva, only to stumble onto her absence. He quickly pulled Griever into junction instead, but before he could complete the link, the vision of fog was shattered by a sharp jolt of pain that cut straight through his brain. Releasing an involuntary groan, he snapped his eyes open again to the sight of white tiles and a large puddle of water growing at his feet. His nostrils filled with the fresh scent of soap.

His thoughts raced as the rush of adrenaline kicked in belatedly. In the back of his mind, he sensed Griever stir in mild concern, but apparently the protective alpha didn't sense any threat that warranted more than the equivalent of cracking open a heavy-lidded eye to see what the fuss was about.

//There's nothing here//? Squall asked, not trusting his own instincts. A snorted breath was all the reply he received as the unimpressed lion returned to his slumber.

Only mildly reassured, Squall grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist, glancing at the bathroom floor. He didn't like the theory that was forming. If the fog hadn't been real, then that left only one other option.

He knew of this sort of thing: an exhausted subconscious playing tricks. During training at Garden, they'd been warned that sleep deprivation could lead to hallucinations—that they might encounter it in the field as a torturing tactic when captured. His current circumstances were quite different, but the notion wasn't that far a stretch. Three days of unconsciousness didn't exactly amount to restful sleep, and the breaking of the bond couldn't have helped matters.

In spite of his conclusion, Squall couldn't help the urge to quicken his moves and dress quickly. He felt as if the ancient air that had hung over the plains of Time Compression still clung to him, nameless fears threatening to spill back into the present.

He didn't care to scrutinize why his subconscious had dredged them up, but apparently even
memories of Time Compression weren't enough to make much of an impression, his eyelids beginning to droop.

Sluggish steps brought him back into the bedroom and after a slight hesitation, to the door leading to the living room. As he stood in the doorway, his gaze fell to where Seifer's large form was sprawled across the too-small couch, the plaid blanket already slipping off to one side after the blond had moved around in his sleep.

In his exhaustion, he didn't ponder the fact that he was far less bothered at the possible prospect of staying with Seifer than he should be; he could only think of getting some much needed rest. He tore away his eyes from the sleeping blond and slowly moved to lie down on the man's bed, leaving the bedroom door ajar.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Wednesday, 22nd of October, 10:24 am]

The loud ring tone and insistent buzzing against Seifer's thigh jerked the blond from his sleep. Letting out a low groan, he tried to force himself awake, his limbs protesting.

"Yeah?" he managed in a hoarse grumble, bringing the phone to his ear.

"Forgot about work?" Arc demanded.

"Not coming in today either?" the older man asked, unimpressed.

Seifer knew he couldn't head in to work, not right away at least. Squall might be better, but they still didn't know by how much. "No," he said, resigning himself to letting Arc down. "I—"

"You know I'm relying on you," Arc cut him off. "You were supposed to have the blaster edge ready by today."

"I know," Seifer intoned, clenching his hands. "I'll try and come in tonight. It'll have to wait until then." That was as much as he would concede to. He knew he needed to get further on the weapons, but he had to make sure Squall would be all right first.

"Hn", Arc grumbled in acknowledgment, sounding far from appeased. "You better have the blaster edge ready by tomorrow morning," he said before hanging up.

Closing his cell phone, Seifer cursed. Just yesterday he'd been ready to take a month off or however long it would take for Squall to recover, but already the reality of his situation was sinking in. He couldn't just ignore Arc and his responsibilities, nor did he have much money to spare. Any time spent away from work meant deductions in his wage: money he sorely needed to pay his bills.

Staring at the ceiling, he almost didn't hear the soft shuffle of slow footsteps entering the room. Straightening in his seat, he took in the sight that greeted him; a sleep mussed Squall wearing cozy drawstring pants and a soft cotton shirt. Wild strands of dark hair pointed in every direction apart from where a pillow had flattened them entirely.

He would have enjoyed seeing Squall like that, if the brunet hadn't looked so out of it. The man's unstable gait didn't help matters, nor the hands placed on the kitchen counter in a steadying move. Squall looked spent after the mild relocation.
"Hey..." Seifer said softly. "You really shouldn't be up. If you need anything I'll get it for you."

"I needed a change of scenery," Squall returned curtly, not very endeared by the thought of lying in bed all day. The few hours of sleep he'd caught hadn't been restful at all, and he doubted any more sleep would do the trick when the problem wasn't quantity but quality.

Moving his gaze from the counter to rest on the blond, Squall straightened his posture when he spotted the man's frown. Any remaining vestiges of sleep disappeared as he realized his more than disheveled appearance and the rather unimpressive entrance he'd just made.

Pushing away thoughts of having earned himself Seifer's pity, he moved away from the kitchen, needing to sit down. Carefully he made his way to the couch and lowered himself to sit next to the blond, sighing softly as he relaxed into a reclined position.

His thoughts returned to the already dissipating images he'd woken up from. He recalled the vague impressions of foggy landscapes, always shifting and plunged in silence, and the feeling of old dust grating his lungs with every inhale of stale air. It had been a long time since he'd slept this badly, his rest disturbed by a dream for the first time in over two years. He should have expected it, but more important matters had occupied his thoughts than the possibility that he might start to dream again. With the bond gone, Rinoa could no longer give him undisturbed sleep.

"It's good to see you up," Seifer said as he leaned into the couch as well. His uncomfortable night on the floor had left his body tired and aching. Arching his neck to rest against the back of the couch, he closed his eyes and slowed his breathing.

Pulled from his thoughts, Squall glanced at the weary-looking blond, reminded of the phone call and curses that had woken him in the first place. "Trouble?"

"Just work," Seifer replied, keeping his eyes closed. "I'll probably have to go in tonight," he added reluctantly, turning his gaze to study Squall closely. He wasn't happy to leave the man alone after what he'd witnessed so far.

Scowl in place, Squall supplied dryly, "I'll be fine without a babysitter."

Not convinced the brunet should be left alone so soon, Seifer frowned. "I could stay home."

"No need." Squall didn't have to think before dismissing the offer, already frustrated enough with his less than ideal condition without someone else continuously pointing it out.

"And how do you judge that?" Seifer asked, unable to curb his tongue as he sat up in the couch properly again.

"I'm fine," Squall deadpanned, officially annoyed with the blond. Apparently his having stayed this long was giving Seifer the false impression that he wouldn't just leave the moment he wanted to. He sure as hell wasn't staying because he needed the blond to hold his hand.

"Fine?" Seifer asked back, raising an eyebrow at Squall actually having the audacity to use that line on him. "Unless getting out of breath from walking ten steps is actually normal for you, you are far from fine." He paused as he looked Squall over. "I'll agree to no babysitter on one condition: You call if anything changes. Anything."

All retorts died on Squall's lips as Seifer implied he couldn't even be trusted to walk without falling over. One brief moment of not being perfectly awake, of letting down his guard, and already he was paying for it, the bastard throwing it right back in his face. He couldn't exactly deny his unsteady entrance into the room, but being tired didn't make him a damned invalid.
Eyes narrowing darkly, he turned his gaze away before he felt tempted to land a punch and prove just how little he needed to be looked after.

"Deal?" Seifer asked firmly.

Squall huffed inwardly. Deals were supposed to be mutually beneficial, not enforced.

"I guess I'll be staying home then."

Alarm bells ringing, Squall turned to meet Seifer's eyes, the man seeming completely serious in his threat. He didn't put it beyond the idiot to ditch work for the sole purpose of irritating him all evening instead. Seifer had never been very good at taking no for an answer. Frowning, he briefly closed his eyes. He really couldn't deal with an entire day of this crap.

"Fine. I'll call." It was the lesser of two evils, the one that got Seifer off his back. Besides, nothing would happen to warrant a call for help.

Suppressing a smirk when Squall played right into his hands, Seifer leaned his head back against the couch and closed his eyes. He was still tired as fuck and couldn't think of much else but catching a nap. The prospect of talking to Squall wasn't that appealing with how strained things were between them. Maybe after some sleep he'd actually be able to muster the energy to deal with the brunet.

When no gloating comment came, the blond lounging back contentedly against the couch, Squall inexplicably felt his annoyance rise. Seifer had never been graceful about a victory before, usually more than happy to rub it in whenever he won anything. Being dismissed so easily the moment he'd yielded seemed more insulting somehow.

Scoffing, he reminded himself that he wanted to be left alone when the sound of deepened breathing reached his ears. Incredulous, he looked next to him to find the blond fast asleep, the man's head tilted to the side and his mouth hanging open slightly. The bastard had actually fallen asleep. Unsure whether he should consider that less or more insulting than being disregarded completely, he watched the blond with a growing frown.

Why had he taken such crap from the man in the first place? The moment Seifer had started planning for the evening, he should have told him not to bother, that he wasn't going to stick around—but he hadn't. Seifer had insulted him, had stressed the necessity of a babysitter, and his only response had been "no need." Most incriminating of all, he hadn't said a thing to correct Seifer's assumption that he would be staying.

His mood darkened at the realization. He was rarely this conflicted over anything. He made decisions and stuck to them—never stalled the inevitable. He'd have to leave eventually—if not right away, then the moment Seifer considered his duty done. He shouldn't even want to stay in the first place. Nothing more would come of it than a lot of discomfort and them frustrating each other endlessly. He didn't want to see Seifer lose it again because of his presence.

As he watched the sleeping blond, restless thoughts started to pluck at the edges of his composure, demanding he analyze their situation until it made sense. After everything that had happened, it sure as hell didn't make sense for Seifer to take him in like this. His eyes brushing past angular features and blond strands of hair, he was confounded by the invasion of foreign emotions overlapping and interweaving with the familiar mess of feelings Seifer usually invoked.

Their rivalry had given him the drive to become stronger, to outgrow his childhood weakness. It had given him companionship at a time when he'd told himself he didn't need any; a goal when
everything else had seemed pointless or uninteresting. And even though those days had been the simplest, the way he'd felt around the blond had already been conflicted even back then: equal parts admiration and annoyance. The war had layered on darker feelings. Anger. Powerlessness. Regret. He had thought it couldn't get much more messed up than that, but now...

Now he knew the truth and its consequences. Seifer wasn't the cadet he used to know anymore. The man still seemed arrogant and short-tempered, but the war had changed the blond. He'd witnessed Seifer weary and evasive, apologetic even, and that was only what Seifer had allowed him to see. That he was partly to blame was reason enough for him to stay away, but he seemed unable to, even when nothing had happened to make things easier between them since their accidental meeting at the club.

His interactions with Seifer had been schizophrenic to say the least, ranging from attacking the blond to ending up in the man's bed. Around the blond his actions seemed inspired by stupidity, pride, or impulse; rational reasoning was a hard thing to come by when Seifer was pushing his buttons like no one else could. He couldn't decide whether to punch the guy and leave or to try and go back to the way things used to be. Hell, he wasn't even sure whether those two options were mutually exclusive when dealing out punches had been their preferred method of communication as cadets, second only to sparring.

Next to him, Seifer was starting to tilt to one side inelegantly, slumping towards the armrest opposite of where Squall was sitting. Watching the almost humorous display of sleep lulling the big bad blond into an awkward position, the man's features completely unguarded, Squall felt his own tiredness again. He was almost envious of Seifer's apparent ability to fall asleep anytime, anywhere. If he was right in his guess, the idiot had slept on the floor the night previous.

Why the man bothered so much was beyond him. He couldn't even understand Seifer allowing him back into the apartment. The man seemed to have convinced himself that he had to do this. Blame Rinoa. That's the excuse Seifer had chosen to use, but Squall knew better than that. No one could make Seifer do anything unless the blond decided he wanted to himself—which didn't make any sense in this case. There was no reason for Seifer to want to do this.

In fact, he couldn't think of reasons for a lot of things the blond had done—especially the one thing he had tried to avoid thinking about the most, but it was rather difficult to keep that up when the object of his confusion was sitting right next to him.

Seifer had offered him Avalanche. At the time he had reasoned it away as a strange peace offering, but it was hardly a normal way to start things off after years of not having seen each other, after a war. Why accepting the drug had seemed like a good idea eluded him now. He sure as hell was cured of his curiosity now that they were saddled with the aftermath and Seifer could only be feeling the same regret on the matter.

Perhaps neither of them had ever needed actual reasons to do monumentally stupid things when merely the other's presence seemed to suffice. The unexpected effect of those pills had been no one's fault, just an unfortunate freak accident. There was no way Seifer could have known, no way he would have even mentioned the Avalanche if that was the case. At least that much was clear to him now. It had been an accident they simply needed to forget.

It could almost have been that simple too, that easy to shrug off, if it hadn't been for his actual memories of that night. He was afraid to examine them. No good conclusions could come from pondering sex with Seifer when those three words alone sent his sanity running.

Glancing at the blond who was now fully slumped against the armrest, Squall frowned. Of course the experience hadn't been horrible or repulsive. At least if it had been horrible, he could have
classified the whole ordeal under the category "unimpressive and unimportant" and moved on, but that description refused to apply to anything to do with the bastard blond. He knew the Avalanche was to blame for all of it, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with—not when he could still remember everything they had done, everywhere Seifer had touched.

Sex with Rinoa hadn't been something he'd really enjoyed. He'd never wanted it in the first place. On the contrary; it had required more intimacy than he cared for, a vulnerability he didn't want to expose himself to. It meant letting go. The problem hadn't been with Rinoa. She had been beautiful and patient, so concerned with what he had needed and what she could do to get him to relax. But in spite of her efforts, the sex had been awkward and unsatisfying for them both. It couldn't have been more different with Seifer.

It made him wonder what kind of effect Avalanche could have had on his inhibition problems with Rinoa. Would it have been just as good? He had difficulty imagining it the way he and Seifer had had sex. The blond had been rough and aggressive, and perhaps the most unsettling memory was how easily he'd succumbed to the passive role, how good it had felt to let Seifer take the lead. No woman could touch him the way Seifer had, dominance and masculinity in everything the blond did. He could still feel the way his thighs had been gripped tightly by large hands, his hips yanked up and heat pressing into—

Seifer chose that moment to stir in his sleep and cradle his head a bit more comfortably against the cushioned armrest with a soft sigh before stilling again. Snapped from his thoughts, Squall tore his eyes away from the downward path they had been following along Seifer's chest and stood up from the couch. Fleeing to the kitchen area, he turned his back to the sleeping man.

...Hyne. Apparently it didn't matter that drugs had made the experience into what it was; he was still affected by it regardless. Avalanche had turned sex with Seifer into the single most sexually satisfying experience he'd ever had.

Frowning at how quickly his thoughts had deteriorated, he realized he'd need to put a stop to this immediately. There was no point in trying to make sense of something that had happened under the influence of chemical substances, no point in reanalyzing his disposition towards sex because of it. So what if it had been good? It had also been wrong and would never happen again. That was the only way to deal with it; to accept it had happened and forget about it, especially if he was to stay.

Pausing mid-thought then, he wasn't exactly surprised at where his train of thought had led him. He could no longer maintain he needed more rest before he'd be able to hit the road. He could've left already.

Reminded of moths and flames, he scowled, but knew his decision was made. No matter how stupid it would be for him to stay, their shared past deserved at least some effort. Maybe they could even return to their spars if he managed to put up with the bastard long enough.

Glancing at the blond, he wondered if even a small part of Seifer's reasons stemmed from the same desire to clear the air between them. The man's orders hadn't been up for creative interpretation—no leaving.

Shaking his head, Squall huffed. Apparently he was still capable of foolishly naive thoughts, in spite of the lessons life had taught him.

No, if anything had motivated the blond into taking him in, it was a misguided attempt at redemption. He hadn't forgotten Seifer's confessions of the war, nor the guilt eating away at the man. If he left, Seifer would never believe otherwise, but if he stayed... maybe things could change.
Drawing resolve from the tentative hope, he had all the more reason to cut short his inappropriate musings. He'd need a level head if he was to deal with his self-appointed guardian without resorting to deck the guy. He wouldn't allow their night together to become a weakness.

Satisfied he'd made the right choice, some of the tension left his shoulders.

Walking over to the kitchen cupboards, he quietly opened and closed several in search of a glass. Filling it with water, he leaned back against the counter and let his eyes roam the small apartment.

The most pressing issue dealt with, there were other matters to consider. What would he tell Garden... his friends? He hadn't foreseen any complications when deciding to keep them in the dark about the bond. There was no telling how quickly he'd recover, and he only had a few days of leave scheduled. Quistis would start asking questions soon.

Finishing his glass, he considered his options. The sooner he made some calls, the sooner he'd be able to keep this incident from spreading through the grapevine. And somehow, he'd need to keep Seifer out of the spotlight. The man might be willing to house him, but he doubted the blond wanted any attention drawn to him as a result.

Setting the glass in the sink, his eyes fell to his leather jacket hanging by the front door—where he'd last left his cell phone. Quietly, he padded over, hating how he needed to place a steadying hand on the counter. Waiting a few seconds for the resulting head rush to disappear, he patted his jacket's left pocket and retrieved his phone. Any missed calls would be the best way to know how obvious his three day absence had been—just who had taken notice.

Flipping open his cell, he raised an eyebrow at the message flickering on the display.

25 missed calls.

Calling up the menu to inspect further, he frowned as he skimmed over the list. Three calls from Odine Laboratories, two from Loire, and not very reassuring, one from Quistis. The headmistress in training rarely disturbed him during his leaves in Esthar, unless it was for official business. He'd have to figure out what to tell her, and fast.

But even as he tried to focus on a game plan, his eyes kept glancing back up to the name at the top of the list.

Rinoa. 19 missed calls.

His chest tight, he quickly pushed away the list, only for another one to pop up, demanding his attention.

4 voice mails.

All from Rinoa.

He stared at his cell, the name displayed on the screen bright and accusing. He swallowed deeply, his thumb lingering idly above the button that would summon her voice.

He couldn't avoid this indefinitely.

Pressing play before he changed his mind, he brought the cell phone to his ear.

The subdued crackle of an open phone line told him the recording had started, but nothing was said for a while. Then there was a soft cough, as if the woman wanted to clear her throat; stall a bit
"...Hi." The greeting sounded as numb as he felt. "I thought, in case you're wondering—I'm back at
Cecilia's, but she's out... It's just me and Angelo—" Rinoa's voice cracked on the pet's name. He
recognized the sound well enough, having been the cause of most of her crying fits. "Hyne, I know
I shouldn't be calling you... It's only been, what, five hours? I just—I hope you're okay. You left so
quickly... Call me when you hear this?" The feeble request was followed by a soft sigh, a muted
silence, before she spoke again. "Never mind, just—just call me tomorrow, as agreed, okay? ...Take
care, Squall."

Another pause fell, but she seemed to think better of adding any parting words and the call was
broken off.

Blindsided by the impact of her voice, the frail silences and soft pleas making everything painfully
real, Squall snapped his cell phone closed. The brief call, made against Rinoa's better judgment,
had bled loneliness.

They were no longer each other's rock.

Stirring from his stupor, Squall glanced at the couch. Seifer still lay oblivious to the world, no
longer offering any distractions to keep his mind from going where he didn't want it to go—to
where Rinoa had been. The windowless living room seemed too small all of a sudden,
claustrophobia sneaking up on him. Normally, he'd already have been out the door, Lion Heart in
hand and on his way to the nearest monster population. For a brief moment, he seriously
considered doing just that, but the reality of his condition quickly caught up with him as his vision
began to swarm with white flecks again.

Fist clenching around his cell phone, he made his way back to the bedroom, the only reprieve
within reach. Throwing open the window, he slowly unclenched his hold on the cell phone and
placed it on the window sill. The chill of the autumn air flowed into the room, soothing as it hit his
skin. The reflex to look for comfort in the open air, in the cold, was an old one, stemming from the
day he'd finally yielded to Shiva's promise of comfort and accepted her as more than an alien entity
buried in his mind.

She had been his first taste of what it felt like not to be alone; to matter to someone, even if it was
only as a host.

Rinoa had been his second taste. The touch of her mind had been much more fulfilling than
Shiva's, the girl's love a bright burst of feelings that no ice goddess could emulate. As caring as
Shiva was, she wasn't human. She couldn't hold him or care for him the way a lover could.

It had seemed so perfect at first. With Rinoa he hadn't needed to second-guess her feelings for him.
They had been there, in his head, free for him to prod at and explore. He'd only been able to hold
on to his doubts for so long, when tangible proof had been broadcast into their bond with her every
smile and kiss.

But with new realizations came ugly suspicions. He'd needed it so much. He'd used her. If love
was selfless, then he'd failed miserably. He'd taken all she had to offer but had given nothing in
return.

And now a gaping absence in his mind was all he had to show for a two year long relationship.

His head hurt, and his body felt like it wouldn't hold up in battle longer than a minute, but other
than that the consequences seemed inconspicuous. Rinoa was simply gone. It was a dull ache, but
with a twinge of guilt he realized it wasn't because he missed her. It was the emptiness she had briefly filled. Frowning, he wondered how much of a bastard that made him.

Overtaken with self-loathing, he tried to purge the thoughts from his mind and closed his eyes to better feel the wind. He'd get used to this. It's how he'd lived for seventeen years before she'd come along. Shiva was all the company he needed.

Leaning against the window sill, he let his mind drift and remembered the trips Shiva used to take him on whenever he'd sought her out in the past—before Rinoa. Half-formed images of a white landscape, crisp and blissfully uncomplicated, took shape. He called to mind the scent of old pines, the cry of forest animals in the distance, all of it infused with an otherworldly sense of peace. The conjured memories were a poor imitation of Shiva's dream weaving, but it would have to be enough. It was the only escape he had left.

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Failing Masks

[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Wednesday, 22nd of October, 2:04 pm]

Waking up to the feeling of a cool breeze against his skin, Seifer stretched and stifled a yawn. He wasn't sure how he'd come to lie down, but he'd managed to spread himself across the entire couch. Blearily, he searched the room for any sign of Squall. Spotting the brunet's jacket still hanging at the back of his front door, he let his head fall back to rest against the soft cushions. At least he wouldn't have to hunt the bastard down a second time.

As another cold gust of air flowed against his arms, he glanced over to the bedroom. Muted sounds of the outside world traveled in through the open door. He glanced at his clock.

2:06 pm.

He'd slept for far too long, but at least he felt rested now. Smelling old sweat on himself, it wasn't hard to imagine what he looked like: crumpled clothes, messy hair and morning stubble. Definitely not a winning combination.

Not that Squall had looked any better that morning. In all the years he'd known the brunet, however hard they'd driven each other, he'd never seen the man so worn. Even more disturbing was the fact that Squall hadn't even tried to hide it at first. The moment Squall had caught himself had been plain: the sudden tension and steely eyes. He'd felt sorry for the man.

Was that how Raijin and Fujin had looked at him after the war? With pity even though they knew he hated it?

He shook his head. Crossing the distance to the kitchen to get a glass of water, his eyes were drawn to the bedroom again, but he didn't catch sight of the brunet, nor could he hear any movement. Squall was most likely back in bed.

He'd let Squall rest for a while longer and get cleaned up in the meantime. Afterwards he'd play host and treat the Commander to a meal that would hopefully help get the man back on his feet. Checking his fridge, Seifer tried to recall what Squall had loaded onto his trays back at Garden, but he could only remember the standard blue plastic trays. Useless. He'd have to improvise.

Realizing how he was fussing over what to feed the grumpy icicle, he shook his head at himself and placed his glass in the sink. He should probably worry more about how to keep Squall entertained without them tearing each other's heads off. That, and getting a shower.

As he stepped into the bedroom, his eyes immediately settled on the lone form by the window, his guest not asleep but watching the outside world with vacant eyes. Seifer knew the view well; the far drop to the street below and the rundown skyscraper across the street—a far from special view. Lost in his own head again.

Back at Garden he'd often witnessed the brunet like that—a distant gaze and a near complete lack of movement or expression. Occasionally he'd let the brunet be, but most of the time he'd pulled the brunet right out of his musings and demanded attention instead. This time he'd give Squall until he got back out of the shower.

He huffed. The atmosphere hadn't been top notch so far, but that wasn't all that different from their cadet days. He hadn't given two fucks about whether he'd been a pain in the ass back then and he
wouldn't care now either, but it was obvious the Commander needed some downtime.

Ignoring the mess in his bathroom, he reached into the shower to turn on the faucet. Under the hot spray of water, he wondered how the hell one would go about making the ice prince comfortable. For all he knew, the concept didn't even exist in the brunet's world. He couldn't even recall ever seeing the guy happy, until a recent memory emerged. He had witnessed Squall relaxed and happy, and fuck it if it hadn't been the sexiest sight he'd ever seen.

Cursing, he forced that night away from memory and tried to consider Squall happy under any other circumstances—without the aid of drugs. He'd been able to picture it after the war, back when he'd seen Balamb Garden cross Timber's skyline. He'd already heard about Squall and Rinoa by then, and the first stories about the valiant Commander had started to surface. He'd never once felt envious—the brunet deserved a happy ending like that.

But now... Seeing how things had ended between Squall and Rinoa, it seemed the man had a knack for going from one shitty situation to another.

Grabbing the shower gel, Seifer began lathering himself up. He couldn't blame Squall for being the same old ice prick he'd grown up with. Things hadn't gone well for him. Maybe the brunet was just doomed to early frown lines.

With a big dollop of shampoo in his palm, he kneaded the thick gel into his hair, closing his eyes. All this thinking wasn't doing him any good. He'd always been a man of action, not brooding, and the most pressing issue was how to keep from driving one another mad—never mind Squall's comfort.

Maybe weapons were the answer. The night Squall had followed him home, the weapon parts on his work desk had immediately drawn the brunet's attention. Also, the man still kept Revolver close by at all times, even when he had a new and far superior gunblade to wield. They still had their love of gunblades in common.

He arched his head backwards and rinsed the remaining shampoo from his hair. The only times he could remember Squall ever being at ease in his company had been after their training sessions. Sparring had always taken the edge off when the tension between them had become too much, but they could hardly spar with Squall's current condition, and any other ideas on how to improve Squall's mood would probably get his head chopped off. There really wasn't any way Squall would accept Avalanche a second time around.

Smirking slightly at the thought, forgetting the amount of shit that evening had landed him in, Seifer froze and did a double-take. He'd just spent a good five minutes lost to thought—all on how to make Squall feel at home. Snorting out loud, he turned up the stream of water along with the heat and turned his head directly into the spray.

Apparently he cared a great deal about what Squall thought of him and that had to change. If confinement in his apartment or lack of entertainment made the man crabby, tough luck. As Squall had so keenly pointed out, he wasn't the man's babysitter. And hell, if his attraction made Squall uncomfortable, screw that too. He wasn't about to hold back for anyone.

Getting out of the shower, he dried himself off with brisk moves. He'd treat the guy the way he always had—tease him and drive him up the wall. Sending himself the beginnings of a smirk in the mirror, he quickly got dressed and prepared himself for some fun. He left the bathroom in a much better mood than he'd entered it.

Squall was still in the same position by the window, still lost to thought. Seifer would get to honor
their old ritual after all. His smirk grew as he walked over to stand near the brunet.

"I must say I miss the belts," he drawled, winking at the brunet. When Squall didn't acknowledge his presence with more than an annoyed twitch of his brow, Seifer turned to look outside as well. The gust of wind that met his arms was cold enough to line his skin with goose bumps in spite of the bright sun outside.

"Watch it, Squall, you might get lost in there," he said, remembering all the times he'd spoken those exact words to the brunet in the past. They had always been a prelude to something more; his way of announcing to Squall that he was getting the brunet's attention whether the man wanted to give it to him or not. This time it earned him the beginnings of a scowl.

"I forgot how much fun it is to talk to you," he continued with a huff. "Come on, gimme a good glare for old times' sake."

Getting exactly what he'd asked for, Seifer smirked. "There's a good boy."

Forcing his reflexive response into submission, Squall smoothed out his expression and reaffixed his gaze on the outside view, but it was pointless. He'd lost his calm, along with his numb state of mind. He hated how the man could do that.

"Fucking hell, it's cold," Seifer cursed, trying desperately to gain back some of the earlier warmth to his skin. Glancing at Squall's bare arms, he narrowed his eyes. He'd only been standing by the open window for a little while and already it felt like his skin was about to fall off—Squall had been there for Hyne knew how long.

Ignoring the man's carelessness, he fixed his eyes on the two gunblade cases at the other end of the room. "Mind if I take a look at your new blade?"

At the first words that weren't aimed to test his patience, Squall shifted his position by the window sill to regard the blond. Wondering what the weapon smith in Seifer would make of his blade, he nodded his permission.

Smiling to himself, Seifer lifted the unfamiliar case onto the bed. He had an idea of what lay inside: the blue blade Squall had wielded in the battles that ended the war. Undoing the latches, he opened the case, a soft blue glow spilling out. Running his fingers across the translucent material, he gently lifted the blade out of its casing. The weight felt good in his hands, definitely on the heavy side, but not as heavy as most two-handers.

"Does it have a name?" he asked, turning the blade in his hands as he studied its curves and edges.

"Lion Heart," Squall replied as he scrutinized Seifer's every move, the sight of his blade in the hands of someone else kindling a reflexive dislike.

Chuckling, Seifer couldn't let the opportunity pass by. "Really, Leonhart?" he asked as he cast a glance over his shoulder to watch Squall's reaction. Already he'd managed to coax a frown from the man. "Ten points for originality."

"The blacksmith named it," Squall supplied dryly, not remembering the old and enthusiastic Shumi with any fondness.

"—after you," Seifer pointed out with a big grin.

Glaring, Squall felt vindictive as he remembered how Seifer had read up on Centran mythology, in pursuit of a sufficiently worthy name for his first weapon. "At least I didn't spend a month deciding
which god to name it after." The slight freeze in the blond's expression immediately alerted him. "...What's your new blade called?"

Gritting his teeth, Seifer was just about to supply his answer when Squall raised a pointed eyebrow, the brunet clearly assuming he'd already won.

"Kronos," he answered offhandedly, his mind racing on how to gain the upper hand again, but he was immediately sidetracked when catching sight of the twitch to Squall's lips. It had been years since he'd seen it, but he recognized it well enough.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up Princess, try and pretend you're not jealous," he said, nearly smiling as well. "Just listen," he added as he held Squall's gaze, pausing for added effect. "Hyperion," he said, letting the name hang in the air between them. "Kronos," he added in a low voice.

"Sexy, huh?" he said with a playful wag of his eyebrows, when Squall just stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Reeks of power just like yours truly."

Rolling his eyes at Seifer's absurdity, Squall fought the quirk of his lips back into submission, but secretly he was relieved. They still tried to one-up each other whichever way possible, and the arrogant bastard still named his blades after gods. It was a foolish thing to draw hope from, but he let the feeling suffuse him as he watched Seifer return his attention to the blade and turn the handle a few times with quick dexterity. Squall's unease at handing over his blade all but disappeared, the man's touch and gaze respectful as he cataloged every detail.

Impressed by the mechanics and materials used, Seifer brought the handle closer to inspect the firing mechanisms. It was a cylinder model just like Revolver—no surprise there. Most fighters kept to upgrades or new versions of weapons they were already familiar with. Returning his attention to the blade itself, he ran a fingertip along the razor sharp edge.

"It looks and feels like Adamantine, but the glow... Pulse Ammo..." he paused, frowning. "The alloy shouldn't be this hard," he spoke lowly, testing the strength of the material. Translucent weapons were generally unheard of.

"Dragon Fangs," Squall provided from the sideline, impressed by the components Seifer already had managed to puzzle out. He could tell the make and smith of most gunblades himself, but alloys and forging crafts were beyond him.

"Dragon Fangs... bitches to get and bitches to meld," Seifer said thoughtfully, lost to the impeccable nature of the blade before him. What he wouldn't give to have a blade like that; a low burning red with cross swords etched deeply into the sides. "Impressive."

Unable to find the blacksmith's mark, he moved his fingers back to fiddle with the cylinder release latch, studying it as he released and closed it a couple of times. "I could upgrade this for you if you want. It'll make it faster."

Snapping out of his study of the blond, Squall considered the offer. He hadn't had Lion Heart remodeled since the war, hadn't even heard of any new upgrades on the market. Moving from his perch by the window, he stepped closer to inspect where Seifer's fingers were fiddling with the cylinder and then he caught up.

"Your own customization?"

"Yeah," Seifer replied, looking back up at Squall. "I've designed it so the wielder doesn't have to reposition their hold on the gun to release the latch. The friction of the latch is slightly better as
well. It's a quick fix."

Squall quirked an eyebrow at the explanation. He'd never really considered the small latch move—a small margin for improvement, but in battle even a fraction of a second could make all the difference. He nodded his assent.

Satisfied that Squall trusted him enough to let him upgrade the man's gunblade, Seifer thrust the blade out in front of him, testing its aerodynamics. "I'll do it after work tonight," he said, eager to add his own touch to the weapon. He cut through the air again and stretched his arm out in front of him—his trademark fighting stance.

"As soon as you're better, we're going to have to spar," he said, performing a sideways cut. "Like old times," he added with a smirk.

Not having expected the suggestion, especially so soon after being judged an invalid, Squall found himself nodding. He'd made his peace with never seeing this man on the other end of a friendly spar again, but now... It was exactly what he wanted, offered so easily.

At the prospect of getting to kick Squall's ass, Seifer couldn't contain his excitement. He hadn't felt this eager in ages. Squall had better get back to normal soon so they could get started. Returning Lion Heart to its case, he placed it back on the floor to rest next to Revolver and flopped onto the bed. He propped himself up on his elbows.

"So... what do you want to do?" he prompted. "I'm all yours for a couple of hours," he added with a lazy smile, feeling the all too familiar urge to tease the brunet."You could always give me a striptease. Show off that fine ass of yours," he joked as he let his eyes roam Squall's body in blatant appreciation.

Growing rigid, Squall was too blindsided by the offhand remark to decide on a reaction. Looking away with an involuntary frown, he hated how Seifer had managed to get him this self-conscious with one comment.

"Yeah. Thought not..." Seifer said, feigning disappointment, but immediately failed as a big grin grew on his lips. He loved making Squall uncomfortable, and by the look of things, he'd just hit the jackpot. "Well, I don't really have much stuff around here for entertainment. Like I told you, I'm not really here much. We could talk, I guess, but then again, you've never been much of a conversationalist, have you, Princess?"

Scowling at the immediate change from lewdness to mocking insult, Squall stared at Seifer incredulously. The asshole was toying with him, he knew that, but the man was hitting new lows.

Watching as Squall's expression changed from confusion to annoyance, Seifer almost reconsidered what he was about to say. Almost. "The words not coming to you, Love?" he asked, wearing a shit-eating grin.

"You think this is funny?" Squall demanded harshly, the saccharine pet name leaving a particularly bad taste.

"Kinda, yeah," Seifer supplied easily, having a blast.

"...Kinda," Squall echoed in deadpan, his fingers curling into tight fists. "Don't joke about shit like that. And don't call me Love."

"Sure thing, Sunshine," Seifer said, fighting his grin to adopt a more serious expression. "Whatever you say." His lips twitched in spite of himself. "So about that striptease...?" he asked, breaking into
a shameless lopsided smirk.

Squall's heart rate spiked dangerously with the effort to restrain himself. His choices effectively reduced to either punching the bastard or leaving the room, he only barely managed to turn on his heels and stride out of the door.

Rolling his eyes, Seifer threw his head back against the bed. Squall was so fucking sensitive.

After a push up from the bed, he walked over and closed the window. He'd leave for work as soon as possible and leave Squall to his own crappy company. He'd leave right away if it wasn't for the hungry grumbling of his stomach. He'd make some pasta and his favorite sauce—should be enough to keep the grumpy icicle alive for now as well.

Crossing the threshold to the living room, he stole a glance at where Squall was sitting on the couch. The brunet still looked pissy as hell, and he just knew things would get out of hand if they started talking.

Startled from his thoughts, Squall looked up to see Seifer round the kitchen counter. Not acknowledging him even once, the blond opened the fridge and started getting out groceries.

Irrked by the silent treatment that had been his plan, Squall followed Seifer's moves from the safety of the couch. He scowled. Already, within the span of a few minutes, the bastard had brought him very close to reconsidering his resolution to stay. He couldn't quite believe the idiot had added what happened between them to his arsenal of insults.

*Striptease.* His scowl deepened as the hated word kept popping up in his thoughts. Sex with him had been inconsequential enough for the blond to use it as a source of inspiration. *Just a joke.*

Next time the man joked like that, he'd go for the option he'd foregone—the man only ever seemed to understand punches anyway. It probably wouldn't do much to actually deter the man, but at least it would be more satisfying than quietly seething while the bastard turned his back to him to do something as mundane as *cooking.*

As he took in the scene that was unfolding before him, his scowl wavered. It seemed like Seifer was indeed *actually* cooking now that he paid notice; the kind that didn't involve microwaves or instant meals. A pile of diced vegetables already lay stacked on the side—when had that happened?—and now Seifer was setting two pots on the stove, turning the gas valve underneath one of them alight. Soon after a loud sizzling followed as the man poured a liberal amount of oil into the heated pot, the sound joining in with the soft whir of the range hood. His eyebrows climbed higher in spite of himself.

The sounds of clinking kitchenware and the first scents wafting from the kitchen reminded him of watching Matron cook as a child. It was the only other time he could remember having watched anyone preparing food. A life of canteen food hadn't engendered a particularly developed taste palette in him, and after that, his and Rinoa's ineptitude at cooking had led to mostly take-out and restaurants.

And just like that, it was nearly impossible to stay angry. His eyes were glued to the odd scene, following the seemingly random sprinkling of herbs, the adept stirs and test tastes, the fiddling with gas settings. His lips quirked when the illusion was partly interrupted by a curse when the blond burnt his finger on the stove.

When what he assumed to be sauce was gently simmering and a bowl of salad was placed on the kitchen counter, Squall realized Seifer had stopped moving about and was looking his way.
"Hungry?" the blond asked, looking slightly bemused at the close scrutiny.

Squall blinked and answered belatedly, "Somewhat."

"Good," Seifer said, leaning back against the kitchen counter, waiting to see if Squall would make a comment about what had happened in the bedroom. The scowl from earlier was gone from the brunet's brow, but he was never quite sure what went on inside that head.

"Anything you want me to get when I head in for work later? Some magazines or something?" he asked, pushing away from the counter. "I'd go crazy if I had to stay here all day."

"No," Squall replied with a frown, the blond's suggestion reminding him of his predicament. He probably would go crazy.

"Hn. Well, feel free to read any of my books."

When Squall didn't say anything in reply, Seifer returned his attention to the food. The sauce was almost ready. Filling two tall glasses with water, he set them down on the coffee table along with the salad bowls. After one last taste of the sauce—perfect—he ladled out two big servings and joined Squall by the coffee table.

Eyeing the food set in front of him, Squall hesitated only briefly before placing the plate on his lap. Knowing Seifer, the blond wouldn't actually present him with something that might damage the man's inflated ego. Sampling the brightly colored sauce and pasta, he couldn't deny it tasted great.

"Who'd have thought I'd ever be making you lunch?" Seifer mused. His lips curled into the beginnings of a smirk. "Or spoon feed you yogurt for that matter..."

Fork freezing midair, it was a moment before Squall looked Seifer's way. "...What?"

"I'm just saying it's a bit surreal is all," Seifer said, his lips curling upwards.

Realizing this wasn't another of the blond's bad jokes, Squall lowered his fork to his plate and tried to keep his mortification from his face. He dressed you as well, his mind added unhelpfully.

"It was last night. You were really out of it. Probably hadn't eaten in days," Seifer explained, his expression falling at the memory.

At the annoyingly reasonable explanation, Squall poked his fork around in the steaming plate of pasta, the food temporarily forgotten. He couldn't remember any of it.

Seifer took a sip of his water as he took in Squall's unfocused gaze, and then it hit him—he'd forgotten all about Rinoa. He hadn't even as much as messaged her to let her know Squall was awake again. "You should call Rinoa."

Reminded of all the missed calls and the voice mails he couldn't even bring himself to listen to, Squall wanted to ignore Seifer's words, his lips turning down at the corners. He was far from ready to hear her voice again, but he knew he couldn't avoid her forever. Giving a soft hum, he returned his attention to his meal, but his briefly kindled appetite had left him.

Seifer nodded at the reluctant agreement, glad enough to have gotten out of calling her himself. Chewing on the last bit of his meal, he got up from the couch and dumped his empty bowl in the sink. Squall hadn't even made a dent in his food yet. Frowning, Seifer grabbed the keys off the counter. Better to just leave the man to it.
"What's your number?" he asked, flipping open his cell phone.

Distracted, Squall set aside his unfinished plate and exchanged numbers with the blond, not bothering to start their discussion anew. If a simple phone number helped appease the man, then he wasn't about to burst the man's bubble. He needed to be alone.

He watched with impatience as Seifer gathered his things and reminded Squall of the leftovers in the fridge and the spare keys in the kitchen drawer. Halting at the front door, Lion Heart's case in hand, the blond almost looked reluctant. "I'm not sure when I'll be home. Probably late."

Giving the blond an indifferent look, the man cast a last cursory look around the room. "Call me if anything changes."

Seemingly satisfied with Squall's vague hum in reply, or perhaps sensing his mounting annoyance at the coddling attitude, the blond nodded and was out the door.

Now that Seifer was finally gone, taking any chance of distraction with him, Squall's headache made itself known again with ruthless, short stabs. Glancing at the corner of the kitchen counter, where the brown bag of medication sat innocently, he sighed and resigned himself to the aid of the painkillers at least. The silence in the apartment seemed loud as he made his way to the kitchen and fished out the pills that would hopefully dull the sensation.

The fridge hummed, the stream of water into his glass echoed sharply, and somewhere in a neighboring apartment someone had started up what sounded like a vacuum cleaner. All of it seemed to underline a sense of idleness, reminding him he wasn't in the field or on the job, but in the most dull of places.

Snorting at the reappearance of his fickle side, he refused to admit that perhaps having Seifer around to annoy him was better than his darkening thoughts. Quickly, he downed the painkillers with distaste and contemplated for the first time in his life whether another nap would make his day go by faster.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Wednesday, 22nd of October, 7:28 pm]

With a grumbled complaint Squall leaned back from the far too bright screen of his laptop and rubbed at his eyes. He couldn't seem to focus, and his predicament had only worsened since he'd first sat down in the couch with the aim of getting some work done. With a sigh he moved his fingers to knead at the bridge of his nose, the headache that had only been dulled by the painkillers picking up in intensity again.

Useless pills.

By now he could swear a high, almost indiscernible pitch was emanating from his laptop, the sound grating on his nerves and joining in with the gurgling of invisible pipes and the occasional drip and clang of the old radiators.

Fed up, he considered defeat. He'd given up on reading reports almost from the get go and had settled for working through his backlog of emails as best as his short attention span would allow instead. There had been a lot of them, those from Xu and Quistis consistently flagged as urgent. He'd only managed to skim through Quistis's emails. They'd initially discussed the meeting which was... little more than a week ago? It seemed like ages now. But the tone of her mails had quickly changed to suspicious concern. He usually never waited more than a day or two to get back to her,
even when on leave.

He should type up a reply, but the moment he opened his eyes and glanced back at the screen, the bright blue light caused another merciless stab of pain behind his eyes. Holding down the power button, he closed the laptop with a quick move and pushed the damned thing off of his lap. The blissful absence of the high pitch whir made him sigh as he reclined further, his neck sore from sitting bent over his work.

With a frown he concluded he'd just have to call Quistis. He doubted it would do his migraine much good, but it needed to be done. He couldn't keep everything that had happened a secret, but maybe there was still a chance of censuring some of the facts. Seifer had been right, though—he needed to call Rinoa first.

Getting up, he groaned as the room started to spin for a few seconds. Low blood pressure, he told himself as he continued on to the bedroom. Finding his cell phone where he'd left it on the window sill, he ignored the alerts of several missed calls from Loire and dialed Rinoa's number before he could change his mind.

Only making it to one ring, the call was immediately picked up by a frantic Rinoa. "Squall! Is that you?!

"...Yes," he replied evenly, dreading the coming conversation. The fact that she was already this upset to begin with didn't bode well.

"Hyne, I was so worried! Seifer didn't call... I—I didn't think you'd be conscious yet." Pausing her rush of words, she drew a long, tremulous breath. "...How are you feeling? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I woke up this morning."

"This morning?" came the incredulous reply. "Squall, I've been worried sick! Why didn't anyone call me sooner?"

When he offered no immediate explanation, she continued angrily, "I specifically asked him to keep me posted! He what—just conveniently forgot about it?"

As Rinoa's heated words washed over him, Squall pinched the bridge of his nose and frowned. "Look, it doesn't matter. I'm calling you now," he stated calmly in an attempt to placate her, not about to confess he had been the one putting off the phone call.

"It doesn't matter?" Rinoa echoed feebly. Falling silent, she released a long sigh. "...In any case... I—I'm happy that you're up again, Squall," she said softly. "I wasn't sure what would happen... When we found you..."

"How did you find me?" Squall asked, having wondered about that very question several times that day.

"Seifer didn't tell?"

"...I didn't ask," he answered evasively. Pretty certain the full account of what happened wasn't going to be pleasant news, he'd decided the last thing he needed was to discuss the embarrassing incident with the blond. Having been spoon fed and dressed by the man was bad enough.

When Rinoa finally answered, her voice failed to mask her emotions. "Well... When you didn't answer any of my calls, I started to worry. I looked for you. When I couldn't find you anywhere, I thought that maybe... you'd be at Seifer's..." The faltering words were followed by an
uncomfortable pause. "...I—I was able to find his address and went to see him. When I told him
you were missing, he was really worried... You didn't tell him we were breaking the bond."

Not understanding the reason for the odd remark, Squall didn't see why it mattered. Whatever
happened between Rinoa and himself was their business and theirs alone. Anything he had let slip
to Seifer the night he'd followed the man home was solely because of the Avalanche. In no mood
to discuss anything pertaining to Seifer with her, he remained silent, wordlessly urging her to
continue.

"... Right," Rinoa muttered. "He offered to help immediately. A friend of his helped out as well. He
—" Pausing briefly, she continued hesitantly. "His name is Calder. Apparently he works for the
police. He helped us track you down through your cell phone signal. That's how we knew you were
at the hotel." Another silence fell, before she asked quietly, "You didn't meet him?"

At the words that implied that he probably should have, Squall frowned. He'd only met one new
person since waking up at Seifer's apartment and he hadn't been too impressed. "Briefly," he
replied impassively, finally understanding the stranger's presence that morning.

"I see," the young woman stated quietly. "He's trustworthy, I think. Real nice too. He was a big
help. If it weren't for him, you might still be in that hotel room," she offered, clearly waiting for a
reply.

Immediately alerted by the use of the word "trustworthy," Squall's mood darkened. "He knows my
identity?"

A deep sigh sounded in response to his disgruntled statement. "Don't worry about it, Squall. I'm
telling you, he's a good guy," she said. "Seifer wouldn't have called him if he didn't trust him."

A disconcerting thought occurred to Squall at Rinoa's reassurance."Was he at the hotel? In the
room?"

"That's what you're worried about?" Rinoa blurted out. "We found you unconscious on the
bathroom floor, burning up with a fever and Shiva going haywire, but you worry about who saw
you?!" The girl's voice cracked under her mounting distress. "Finding you like that... It was awful!
Seifer had to carry you out of there... Why did you leave Odine's lab like that? Junctioning Shiva
when you were in such a state. You're lucky we found you in time. I can't believe you. You're so...
so stupid!"

Grimacing at the angry outburst and the precise details of how he was found, Squall didn't attempt
to interject anything, more than accustomed to Rinoa venting her frustration with him. But when
quiet sobs started to filter through the connection, he let a tired sigh escape. "...Rinoa."

"No. Don't," she whispered quietly, her voice uneven and thick. "I didn't want this to happen,
Squall... Why couldn't you just say you needed help? ...I should have done something. Anything."

"It's not your fault. I just—I had to get out of there."

"If you hadn't run away like that, then maybe this could have been avoided," Rinoa commented.

"I'd feel so much more at ease, if you would just let Odine examine you."

"I'll think about it," Squall supplied evenly. A quiet sigh told him Rinoa had expected the evasive
reply.

"So... How are things with Seifer?" Rinoa asked tentatively, her voice small.
"Great," Squall replied darkly, not having forgotten how Seifer had pointed out Rinoa as the mastermind behind his confinement in the blond's apartment.

"I only did it because I think this is for the best, Squall." When he didn't comment, the girl continued in a more pleading tone. "Just... Don't run off on your own again... Promise you'll stay put for now?"

Tired of being told what to do, Squall barely curbed the frank words he wanted to say. Unable to make any promises, he kept quiet.

"You are still at Seifer's, right?"

"I am," he replied, wondering why indeed he still was. His earlier plan didn't quite hold up under scrutiny and seemed far too naive.

"Don't be like that. He cares... And I know you do, too," Rinoa commented soberly, weariness entering her voice. "Hand me Seifer on the phone."

"...Why?" Squall asked, not exactly keen on having the two interact with each other any more than they already had.

"Because I'd like to have a few words with him," she answered levelly.

Well aware of the fact that Rinoa was just as stubborn as she believed him to be, Squall knew he was facing a losing battle. "He's at work," he said, hoping that would deter her.

"You're alone?!!" Nearly inaudible mutters traveled across the connection. "For Hyne's sake... He knows you shouldn't be alone right now!" Cutting herself short, the girl took a deep breath and Squall steeled himself. "If I call a cab, I can be there in about—"

"No."

"Squall."

He could easily imagine the hand placed on her hip, the way she usually did when she thought he was being crude or difficult. He sighed.

"I told you, I'm fine. There's no need for you to come over." His tone didn't leave any room for discussion.

"Impossible... the both of you... After this call, text me Seifer's number."

"If that's all," Squall answered tiredly, his patience waning.

"Wait! ...Just wait a second. I still need to tell you some things before you go." Taking his silence as her cue, she continued cautiously—too cautiously. "I visited Laguna. I told him about our breakup and the bond."

Though not at all thrilled, Squall couldn't say the news came as much of a surprise with all the missed calls he'd spotted from the man earlier.

"Did you two talk already?"

"...No." He had been too tired to even consider braving a phone conversation with Loire.

"I know for a fact he must be trying to reach you. You should pick up when he calls you. He's just
as worried as the rest of us.” Pausing, she continued more hesitantly. "I've contacted B Garden as well, to explain the situation and arrange for sick leave... I told them you'd need some time to recover. Quistis assumed you're at Laguna's... I didn't correct her, but..."

"But what?"

"I didn't have any choice but to tell Laguna where you are. He was adamant about knowing who's taking care of you," she admitted apologetically. "You know he's capable of using all of Esthar's resources to sweep the city in search of you... I made him promise not to show up unannounced. And he'll cover for you if Garden asks anything. I doubted you'd want them to know where you are... Unless you—"

"No," he interrupted immediately. Supposing an informed Loire was better than an informed Balamb Garden, he added more gently, "You made the right call."

"He'd do anything for you... Just pick up next time he calls, okay?" Rinoa replied softly.

"...I will."

"Then I guess all parties have been informed," Rinoa concluded.

A deep sigh escaped Squall at the statement. He would have preferred dealing with it on his own, so he could censure where necessary, but the damage had been done. At least Rinoa's intervention had bought him some time, sparing him from having to try and explain the entire mess to his friends and Loire right away.

"They would've found out eventually anyway..." Rinoa continued feebly, misunderstanding his prolonged silence.

"I know," he reassured. "...Thanks."

She didn't immediately reply and when she finally did, her voice was unsteady. "That's alright... Call me if you need me?"

He gave a soft hum of acknowledgement. "You, too."

"...I will." A quivering breath followed. "I'll keep in touch... Take care, Squall."

Uncomfortable with Rinoa's obvious distress and the heavy atmosphere, he was at a loss for what to say. Needing the conversation to end, he offered a soft "Goodbye" and disconnected the line. With a resigned sigh, he forwarded Seifer's number as she had demanded.

Placing his cell back onto the window sill, he looked down to watch the tremor of his fingers with a sense of detachment. His chest was tight, and the now familiar sensation of spinning rooms and weak legs had returned. He drew a tremulous breath and placed his hand onto the window frame for support, but it did nothing to alleviate the onset of... a panic attack?

He couldn't be sure, never having experienced one before, but it seemed textbook so far. Palpitations, trembling, shortness of breath, chest pain and dizziness. One by one, he ticked off the symptoms he'd once been taught at Garden, with a disconnect from reality that had been described as one of the symptoms as well.

_Breathe with the diaphragm_, he remembered, to stop hyperventilation, but all he managed was to half-lean, half-drop back against the window sill as bile rose in his throat. Debilitating nausea was all he registered, and any breathing techniques were instantly forgotten. He blinked, and then
blinked again, as the room darkened.

Was the sun setting? No... It had done so at least an hour ago. He shook his head and forced himself to move towards the kitchen where his pills were. And water. In front of his every step forward, the floorboards seemed to narrow and widen, dancing out of his way. Had he turned off the light at some point? He couldn't remember.

Slumping against the door frame, he tried to catch his breath as he stared into the living area. Was he asleep? His thoughts seemed too clear, too sharp to belong to a dream. And the threatening aura of the room in front of him seemed very real.

All blood left his face as he watched the wild coiling of a thick layer of fog that occupied the entirety of the floor. It almost looked as if it was boiling—agitiated and dangerous. He'd seen it like that before. Above the fog, a canopy of shades was creeping down the ceiling and walls, narrowing his world into stale, cold darkness.

_Breathe_, he reminded himself, but his breath wouldn't come. He couldn't find Griever, any of them—as if they'd never been there.

He startled when a high pitch rang through his ears. His laptop? _No_, he'd shut it off. The sound grew sharper and higher, until it drowned out all silence and sounds and pressed against his eardrums with such force that he nearly missed a clearance forming in the fog—a clearance that moved with the shape of footsteps, drawing steadily closer.

_It's not real_. He wrenched his eyes closed and tried to will the darkness away with sheer strength of mind. _Not real. Not real._

In his mind's eye however, he could calculate the speed of those steps and envision how they sought him out. The moment he knew they were upon him, a terrifying cold took hold of him and then... it passed through him.

With a gasp, he slumped to his knees and looked wildly around the spinning room, seeing nothing, nothing at all. The next moment Griever was with him, without him ever having made the conscious decision to call on the lion. A displeased growl was followed by uncertain silence, but he thought better of junctioning in the state he was in. The GF didn't like it one bit.

"Stay... For now, stay."

Griever obeyed and immediately took up a protecting presence in his mind. The lion was reassuring in his immovable quality, and Squall allowed himself to drop his guard enough to calm down and catch his breath. _Not real_, he repeated to himself.

Sliding into a seated position, he leaned his head back against the door frame and pressed his hands together. His head felt like bursting, the migraine sharp and relentless, but at least it was better than what had just happened. Looking up at the plain, white ceiling, the dark shades gone now, he drew in a long breath through his nose and let the safe feel of reality sink in. _He wasn't alone._

Griever gave his mind a gentle nudge as if to confirm the stray thought. That made Squall frown—he had to be in a bad state for the usually brutish GF to resort to kindness. It was hard to shake the feeling Time Compression stirred in him, however loathe he was to admit how it affected him. Beneath the stark fear, there was something far worse that had haunted his every lost step whilst trapped there—utter and complete _loneliness._

Snorting at himself, the sound coming out more shakily than intended, he steered away from the
pointless psychoanalysis and instead considered what was happening to him. Somehow it had to be a consequence of the broken bond and it had happened twice now—though the episode in the shower had been far milder.

Hallucinations, then. Griever seemed concerned but not particularly alarmed at any real possible threat. It all had to be in his head. Also, whenever it happened he seemed to be unable to reach his GFs and junction them, which was probably the most worrisome part of all.

When a ring tone cut through the silence, he slowly pushed himself upright. He peered into the bedroom, discouraged by the distance to his phone, but Seifer had said he might call. He groaned—the blond couldn't have picked a worse time.

Raising himself the rest of the way, he unsteadily moved to his cell and picked up just in time.

"...Seifer," he answered, forgetting for a crucial second he hadn't actually checked the display. Holding his breath, he prayed it wasn't Quistis on the other end.

"You okay?" the blond demanded.

Thanking Hyne, he let out a long sigh. "I'm fine," he replied, not even trying to sound like his usual self. He wouldn't pull it off.

"You sound tired."

At the obvious observation, Squall let out a noncommittal hum.

The line went silent as his non-reply was mulled over. "...I'll leave you to rest then. I'll phone again later," the man said with more concern than Squall liked to hear. "Have you taken your meds?"

"...Not yet," he answered, realizing he might need those pills more than he thought. "I will after this."

"Okay," Seifer agreed, sounding frustrated. "I'll talk to you later."

When the line went dead, Squall cursed inwardly. That hadn't gone well. Hopefully Seifer hadn't read too much into his meek replies. About to set his phone aside, he spotted another missed call alert.

Seifer. 7:49pm.

Only minutes ago. And then he realized—the high pitch that had assaulted his ears. Ever since coming to, he'd been sensitive to sound, mostly when tired. All the little sounds that had been too sharp, too distorted and aggravating, were shed into a new light. Another symptom.

Pocketing the phone, he straightened and walked back into the living area, listening out for anything out of the ordinary. His footsteps echoed dully, and he tried to remember if small things had always been this loud. In the back of his mind, he could sense Griever's concern mounting. "It's fine," he said and glanced at the bag of medication, indicating them to the lion. "Those will help."

Steered to the kitchen by the GF's adamancy, he pulled the bag open and lifted out the jars with meaningless labels. Sticking to the guidelines for once, he quickly downed far too many pills.

Dragging a hand over his eyes, he shuffled to the couch and lay down on his back. When he closed them, the world danced with a maddening spin, tugging harshly at nausea. When he opened them, the ceiling became a living thing, the many spots and imperfections migrating and warping.
He should be more panicked he realized, but he was too... exhausted. The push and pull of his headache made it near impossible to manage sleep, but eventually he was carried along a restless tapestry of moving images and fog, moments of wakefulness never far off—as if he was being pushed under dark water. He'd briefly emerge from time to time and stare at the bland ceiling again. At least the pills seemed to do their work as the edge was taken off his migraine, lights and sounds less harsh than before.

But his attempt at rest didn't last long, interrupted by a loud banging that startled him upright. He blinked, willing his spiking heart rate to settle down. A second bang sounded, which he finally recognized as a knock on the front door.

Shaking his head, he tried to collect himself and slowly pushed himself to his legs. He stared at the door and wondered whether he'd imagined the knocks. More than anything, he just wanted to ignore them and lie back down, but he grew uneasy, not knowing what was real and what wasn't.

With a frown he unsteadily walked up to the door. His hand lingered in indecision over the door handle and for a moment he feared there'd be no one there—just the emptiness that had assaulted him in the hallucination.

Quickly, he pulled the door open and stared at the man in the hallway, his brow wrinkling into a frown as he realized who it was.

"Hey, erm... Sorry if I woke you," the tall man said, looking uncomfortable. Squall almost considered just closing the door then and there. He was not in the mood to deal with Seifer's friends—let alone this one.

"I'm Calder," the man introduced himself, holding out his hand in greeting. "I thought Seifer would be in."

Not releasing his support on the door frame to shake the man's hand, Squall hoped he didn't look as bad as he felt and fought to keep his expression impassive. He couldn't care less about the slight narrowing to the man's eyes when he didn't follow proper social cues.

"He won't be back until late."

That brought a surprised look to the man's face. "Did he go to work?"

"Yes," Squall replied curtly, needing to be rid of the man. A new tremor had started in the hand he had placed behind the door, out of sight. An upward tug appeared at the corner of Calder's lips, the man seemingly amused for reasons that eluded him.

"Arc must've really been on his case then."

When the man paused, perhaps expecting elaboration, Squall found himself scrutinized. He only half paid attention to what the man was saying, when simply maintaining his composure was demanding all of his energy.

"...I'm sorry about earlier. It really wasn't my place," the man said as Squall found himself scrutinized. He only half paid attention to what the man was saying, when simply maintaining his composure was demanding all of his energy.

"He's just so dense sometimes," Calder continued, unaware. "He tends to come across like an asshole, but he means well."

Blinking, Squall realized Calder was talking about Seifer, and judging by his expectant gaze, the man was waiting for some kind of feedback. Squall just made his silence louder, his posture rigid
as he tried not to betray the tremor now moving onto his legs as well.

"Hey, are you okay?" Calder asked, furrowing his brow.

"I'm fine," Squall dissuaded quickly. The fact that a stranger could see through his façade was alarming.

"No offense... but you don't look it," Calder said. "Maybe I should come inside?"

Having had enough babysitting for one day, Squall bristled. "No," he bit out evenly. "Like I said, Seifer won't be back until late." Unable to feign composure any longer, he shut the door in the man's face.

"Hey... I only wanted to help," Calder's voice sounded through the door.

Squall ignored the man and waited until he could hear footsteps disappearing down the hallway. Leaning back against the door, his mask shattered. Raising his hands in front of him, he watched the mild but persistent tremble and finally started to feel the panic he'd been waiting for. The pills had already stopped working and he'd only just taken them. Hyne, he didn't want Seifer to see him like this.

Needing to know how long he had before the blond might return, he fumbled for his cell and glanced at the screen to check the time. His brow furrowed.

...That couldn't be right. He couldn't have been resting for more than half an hour, but the display announced brightly and impossibly that somehow it was already 11:04 pm. He had not been lying on that couch for over three hours.

Snapping his phone closed, he stared ahead, his trembling arms dropping to his side.

What was happening to him?

~ 0 ~

[Outside Arc Balios' Weapon Shop, Wednesday, 22nd of October, 11:32 pm]

The dull thud of the car door resounded in the quiet night. The sun had disappeared hours ago and there weren't many lights in this part of town. Walking down the gravelly path that led to the courtyard attached to Arc's workshop, Calder steeled himself. Seifer still hadn't replied to any of his texts, four so far since that morning, even though Calder had apologized and pretty much begged for a call. He'd been lucky to have escaped the blond's apartment with only a few bruises and a split lip.

Nolan had wanted all the details—had asked about the scab the moment he'd stepped into their parents' home. He'd made the mistake of avoiding an answer, and not a minute after they'd sat down for dinner, Nolan had repeated his question. He'd lied in the end, making up a story of interrupting a robbery on the streets earlier that day. His parents didn't need to know about his friend's temper issue.

And still... here he was, groveling for forgiveness.

At some point during the afternoon he'd realized that maybe he'd overstepped his boundaries—however well-meant. Seifer had told him about Squall and Seifer's past, but nothing in-depth, and it was obvious there was a lot of history there. Maybe it hadn't been his place to interfere after all. He just didn't understand why Seifer didn't want Squall to know how much he meant to the blond.
Their behavior around each other had been ridiculous. Almost as ridiculous as Seifer leaving Squall on his own when the brunet still looked like he might collapse at any given moment.

He shook his head. He still had trouble connecting the name "Squall Leonhart" and the title of SeeD Commander to the slight man in Seifer's apartment. The brunet looked *nothing* like he'd come to expect from the stories, nor did the man behave like he'd imagined, so he'd ended up just referring to him as "Squall" in his thoughts—one of Seifer's friends. That made things easier.

The door creaked as Calder let himself in through Arc's back door, the old floorboards joining in on the complaint as he made his way through the kitchen. The light in the room was already turned off, the old weapon smith most likely in bed. Bright, yellow light had spilled out into the courtyard from the workshop though, along with the sounds of someone working at the anvil.

Pushing the door open, he was greeted by the heat of the workshop. Seifer's gaze lifted only briefly from the dagger he was working on. The smell was strong: smoke, metal, and grease. He'd never quite gotten used to it—not even after the number of nights Seifer had come over for some fun with the same smells still clinging to his skin.

The blond's focus had returned to where sparks sprang from heated metal upon impact with the hammer. His expression hadn't changed. Calder was being thoroughly ignored, which meant no forgiveness yet.

"Oh come on, Seifer, it wasn't that bad." Calder said, suppressing an eyeroll at the glare Seifer sent his way. "You were both behaving like idiots."

"You were the asshole as far as I remember," Seifer said with a sour expression.

"I was an idiot too, yeah," Calder admitted with a shrug. "That's why I came here to apologize and why I sent those messages."

Seifer huffed. "Great fucking start."

"It was wrong of me, all right?" Calder said contritely. Maybe his opening line hadn't been the greatest, but he just hadn't been able to help himself with Seifer so childishly giving him the cold shoulder. "Even though I still think you're both idiots for the way you were behaving, it wasn't my place to say anything. I *know* that."

Narrowing his eyes, Seifer didn't give Calder the satisfaction of a comment.

"I already apologized to Squall."

That immediately caught Seifer's attention. He didn't like the thought of Calder interacting with Squall at all. "...Just what the hell did you say to him?"

"Don't worry, it didn't last more than a couple of seconds—he shut the door in my face."

Seifer didn't bother hiding his vindictive amusement, a slight twitch curling his lips. At least Squall appeared to be getting back to his old self.

Catching the budding smirk, Calder almost regretted having to break the rest of the news about his visit. "He didn't look well." Seifer looked at him but didn't say anything, the smirk already gone. "I was going to stay there for a while to help him out and make sure he was okay, but he wouldn't even let me in."

"Good," Seifer said, but he looked none too happy. "I don't want to imagine what other stupid ass
things you could've said."

Calder sighed. "I just wanted to get to know him a bit and help him out. He looked like shit."

That brought a frown to Seifer's brow. "... But he was standing up?"

"Barely."

"Hmm," Seifer let out. Squall had looked like shit when he'd left earlier that day as well and had barely been able to walk. Hopefully the brunet hadn't changed for the worse. "He didn't say anything?"

"Only that you'd gone to work and that you'd be home late."

Apparently satisfied by the answer, Seifer returned his attention to his work. Calder walked a bit closer, feeling like things had finally settled a bit between them.

"How much have you got left?" he asked, watching as Seifer heated the dagger and returned to the anvil.

"Just have to finish this fucking dagger," Seifer said, eyeing the blade in contempt. "And make an adjustment to his blade." He indicated Lion Heart's case on the worktable. "I'm fixing the release latch. Like I did on yours."

Calder nodded. "Can I take a look at it?"

"Not if you want to keep your head."

After what little he'd experienced of the Commander, Calder no longer doubted the statement. "You know... how can someone who doesn't even shake hands end up a Commander?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "I thought you'd have to have certain ways with diplomacy to get that far."

That brought the smirk back on Seifer's lips. "You've never seen him with a blade."

"That good?" Calder asked, taking a step closer.

"The best fucking fighter on the planet."

Surprised to hear the words leaving Seifer's mouth, Calder realized his brother wasn't the only one with a hero worship complex. "You really think so?"

"I've never seen anyone handle a blade like him or use magic like him. A million times quicker than anyone else and absolutely relentless. During the war he could go on for hours when others gave up within minutes. He doesn't have to play nice."

Still half in shock from hearing Seifer speak with such clear admiration for anyone other than himself, Calder finally caught up with what exactly the blond had said. "...Which war?" he asked, unable to imagine Seifer having fought in one. When Seifer didn't answer, he thought back to rumors about the Commander and could only reach one conclusion. "The Galbadian Civil War?"

The blonde didn't answer and instead looked down to the blade he was working on. The man looked serious, his posture alerting Calder that something was up. "It wasn't the Civil War?"

"No," Seifer said in a low voice.

Racking his brain as he tried to remember other wars, Calder couldn't think of any. The only
disturbances he remembered around that time was when monsters had fallen from the sky and later, Timber's liberation—nothing even close to resembling a war. "I don't know of any other wars."

Recalling the grim and foreboding expression Seifer had worn the night before when he had talked about leaving Garden and being a knight, Calder frowned. "Was a sorceress involved?"

This time he didn't even get a reply and the tension between them got thicker by the second. He'd definitely hit a sore topic, but it was also too big for him to just look past and leave alone. In the span of two days he'd realized just how much the public had been misled and misinformed. Or perhaps just not informed at all. How could a war have gone on—with a sorceress no less—without the citizens of Esthar even being aware of it?

Briefly, Seifer's gaze met his, making it clear to leave the topic alone. Clenching his jaw, wanting to demand answers to make sense of it all and to understand just how far the conspiracy went, he curbed all his questions. He had the means of looking into it himself. Being a member of the Estharian police force had its perks. If any of what Seifer had told him was true, then there would be trails to follow. There'd be mistakes he could pick up on and information he could piece together. He wanted the truth, most of all about what had happened to Seifer.

He'd thought he'd known all there was to know about the man, but what he'd seen these past couple of days had shocked him. He'd rarely seen such care and devotion displayed by anyone, let alone Seifer. The way the blond's attention had singled in on one person, without even straying once, had seriously caught him off guard. When he'd been lying in bed the night before, considering it all, the realization had hit him hard: if Seifer had ever focused that kind of attention on him, he might actually have considered a relationship with the man. But Calder had never felt even a hint of what he'd seen Seifer do for Squall in the time they'd known each other. That was one of the main reasons why he'd interfered that morning. He didn't want Squall to only see Seifer's harsh, uncaring front, when in reality the blond was ready to do anything to make sure the brunet was okay.

Lifting his gaze from where it had dropped to a rifle, he took in the Seifer's grim expression and remembered why he'd come there in the first place. He needed to set things right.

"Look. I really am sorry about this morning," he said softly. "I just thought he deserved to know that you care about him and that you don't mind him staying at your apartment... If it was me, I would've liked to know."

Seifer frowned, annoyed Calder was returning to that topic. "Why? What the fuck difference does it make?"

With a sigh of exasperation, Calder underlined his explanation with heavy gestures. "It makes all the difference. If you'd treated me like you've treated him... things could've been different. It wouldn't just have been about sex."

Seifer met his stare head on. "Who said I wanted anything else?"

"You don't," Calder immediately agreed. "Not from me."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Seifer asked, his voice growing louder.

"You know what it means," Calder replied without much fire himself.

"Fuck, you're getting on my nerves," the blond bit out.

"For speaking the truth?"
Seifer put down the dagger and turned to face Calder fully. "And just what truth is that?"

"That you've got some longstanding unreciprocated feelings for the Commander," he said, finally calling things exactly as he saw them. "That you'd do anything for him."

"You don't know a Hyne-damned thing," Seifer said, dismissing Calder's words and turning his attention back to the weapon he was working on. He hit it hard with his hammer.

"I know you blamed yourself for the two of you ending up in bed together and I know things sounded less than pleasant between the two of you this morning. You were putting on a show for him, trying to protect yourself."

"Fuck off."

Calder took a deep breath to try and calm himself. "I've been there for you these last couple of days and helped you in whatever way I've been able to. But watch it, Seifer. If you keep this up, I'm not going to stick around."

"Because I'm not giving you any cock anymore?" the blond said spitefully.

Calder rolled his eyes at Seifer's crudeness. "I don't care about that. Well, I do, but that's not what's important. What's important is that we're friends." He paused to let the words sink in. "At least I thought so." He tapped his fingers on the worktable as he waited for the blond to respond.

Seifer didn't look at him when he finally spoke, the blond's eyes on the dagger in his hands. "We are."

Feeling some of the tension leaving his shoulders, Calder knew things would turn out all right between them. What Seifer had just said was the closest thing the man would ever come to an apology.

"Look, I'll lay low for a bit. I know you've got your hands full at the moment. And like I said, it isn't my place to interfere." He'd learned his lesson. "I'd still like to get to know him though—he's your friend and I'm yours... We'll see, huh?" When no answer seemed forthcoming, he walked over to the door. "Give me a call if you want a spar. I sure could do with one."

The blond still hadn't looked up, but finally replied. "I'll call."

"Okay then," Calder said and nodded in parting. "I'll see you around."

Glancing over at the now shut door, Seifer wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. He was still pissed at Calder, especially for that fucking ridiculous line of his. The man had some fucking nerve to pretend he knew anything about his and Squall's relationship. Unreciprocated fucking feelings and wanting more from Squall than just sex? So what if he was fucking treating a guy with a bit more respect and didn't just think about sticking his cock up the man's ass—Squall had earned that respect. Not like anyone else had.

Grumbling, he tried to steer his mind back onto the work in front of him. He needed to get the designs punched into this dagger and then—

Cursing, he remembered another task and strode into the back room of the workshop where they kept another furnace going for melting metal. Arc would hand him his ass if he forgot to cast the gun parts. Grabbing one of the ladles, he filled it with the liquid metal before pouring it into the molds. He'd have to hurry with the dagger in the other room almost prime for punching, but he should have done the gun casts hours ago. The metal would barely have time to harden and set
properly for when Arc needed the parts. He grimaced.

Finishing up quickly, he strode back into the main room and put his gloves on before grabbing the dagger with the tongs and placing it on the anvil. He didn't have time for this. Not after what Calder had told him about Squall's condition. The phone call he'd promised the brunet earlier was already way overdue.

With his attention slipping more and more, he placed the dagger on the worktop. Screw proper heating and cooling techniques, he needed to know things were okay with Squall and only then would he be able to deal with his work—or blow everything off instead, depending on how the call went.

Getting out his phone, he quickly navigated to "Pussyheart" and pressed the button. Each ring lasted an eternity. By the time the call was picked up he was already fiddling with his car keys.

"...Hm?" A tired hum sounded from the other end.

"You in bed?" Seifer asked, immediately frowning.

Squall mumbled his reply. "...The couch."

"Go to bed," Seifer ordered.

"I'm fine with the couch," Squall answered, the haze of sleep disappearing little by little from the man's voice.

"Get your ass to bed now—or I'll come put you there myself." He had every intention of following up on his words if Squall decided to be difficult. He might've been too angry to reply to Rinoa's earlier text, chewing him out, but she'd been right—he shouldn't have left Squall on his own just yet.

He heard Squall sigh, but didn't get a reply.

"I'm not hearing you moving yet."

A long silence stretched on, but then Squall muttered a clipped "fine." Soon Seifer could make out the shifting of fabric and a sleepy groan. Then came slow footsteps—far too slow for his liking—followed by the sound of the springs of his bed complaining as Squall sat down. He could hear the blankets being rearranged. Finally, everything went quiet, Squall's soft breathing the only sound remaining.

"Sweet dreams, Princess," he said with a small smile on his lips as the image of Squall nodding off in his bed played in his mind. At least Squall would be all right for now. He hung up and let out a sigh. He still had hours to go, especially if he wanted to fix Squall's blade up as promised and cut down on the time he'd have to come in the next day. Squall was in bed now anyways, there was nothing he could do.

Running a hand through his hair, feeling the ache in his body from the long hours at the anvil, he wanted nothing but sleep. He only briefly closed his eyes, but then took a deep breath and returned to the dagger that hopefully hadn't cracked yet.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Chimera District, Thursday, 23rd of October, 2:53 am]
Seifer could hardly keep his eyes open as he walked down the far too brightly lit corridor, his brain pretty much asleep already. The drive home had taken care of that, the hum of the engine and the empty roads not doing much to fight off his exhaustion. The only thing left to do was to check on Squall and then he'd be able to collapse on the couch. He needed it so fucking badly. Screw showering—the couch would just have to smell of soot for a week.

Unlocking the door to his apartment, it was a moment before his eyes adjusted to the softer lighting inside. One of the lamps had been left on.

Closing the doors behind him, his eyes traveled to the blanket and cushion lying in a mess next to the couch. A cup of water had been knocked over on the coffee table, its content having trickled into a puddle on the floor. He frowned—Squall was too anal to leave the place like that. Hastening his steps, he made a beeline for the bedroom and froze into place when he crossed the threshold.

Squall was lying on his back, the sheets kicked to the side almost completely. The man was moving restlessly in his sleep, cheeks flushed and a deep frown marring his brow. Quickly setting Lion Heart’s case on the floor, Seifer crossed the room and leaned in over the bed. He immediately pressed the back of his hand to the brunet’s forehead.

Fuck.

Squall was fucking burning up again. Not as badly as before, but there was heat there—just when he’d hoped to come home to a sound asleep brunet already on the mend. Reality was far from that, the brunet’s breathing coming in fast and shallow. Beneath closed eyelids the man’s eyes were moving wildly, never pausing. Squall looked distressed.

"Squall," he urged, moving his hand to rest on the man’s shoulder. He wanted to wake Squall from whatever was affecting him. The man twitched beneath his touch, but didn’t wake. He could feel a slight tremor beneath his fingers.

"Squall," he repeated, louder than before.

Squall’s eyes scrunched tightly in response and his lips parted to mutter incomprehensible, almost soundless words, but there was no further reaction. Squall wasn’t waking up.

Taking hold of the brunet’s shoulders, Seifer shook the man roughly. He was yelling Squall’s name now. He needed to know if Squall was all right or if the man had reverted to nothing more than a shell. He’d have to call Odine—

Gray-blue eyes snapped open, but didn’t focus, Squall’s pupils blown wide and his arms still trembling in Seifer’s hold. The restless moves ceased as Seifer felt fast puffs of air against his cheek. Squall’s chest was falling and rising far too rapidly.

Placing himself within Squall’s eyesight, Seifer searched the man’s eyes for any hint of recognition.

"Squall?" he asked, repeating the man’s name much softer than before. Squall’s gaze seemed to focus.

"...Seifer," Squall said with a slightly furrowed brow.

Taking in a deep breath, only now becoming aware of just how strong his grasp on Squall was—crushing—Seifer slowly eased up, still fighting the adrenaline that pumped through his body.

"Sorry," he managed, "It was the only way to wake you." He moved his hand down a couple of inches to rest against Squall’s bare arm. The brunet’s breathing was slowing down.
"Everything's all right, Squall," he said softly, frowning at the brief grimace the sound brought to the brunet's face. He paused, not wanting to aggravate things further, but he needed to know. "Have you taken your meds?" he whispered, relieved at the nod that followed before Squall closed his eyes again.

He trailed his hand upwards until it rested in brown locks. Squall didn't shy away, probably too exhausted and still halfway lost in his fevered dreams. Seifer let out a soft sigh. At least Squall was much calmer now, reassuring him it was only a temporary relapse. In his experience most illnesses got worse in the evening with a spike in temperature—hopefully this was the same. He'd watch over the brunet and pull the man out of any more restless dreams.

"I hate to see you like this," he murmured, as Squall blinked through heavy-lidded eyes. He slowly let his hand travel down the edge of Squall's neck, feeling the damp skin there. The man's breathing was even and paced now.

"Hey... scoot over," he whispered after a moment, a tired smile tugging at his lips when Squall complied without even opening his eyes.

Grabbing the bunched up sheets, he shook them and then covered the brunet lightly, before quickly undoing his pants and dropping them to the floor along with his shirt. Moving under the sheets himself, he lay on his side to better watch the brunet.

The distressed expression from earlier was gone, the man's features relaxed. He could still see beads of sweat forming on the man's brow however, so he got out of bed again and opened the window to let in a slight breeze. He wet a cloth with cold water and held it to Squall's brow. The brunet didn't even twitch, already fast asleep.

Seifer sat there for ages, just watching, making sure. He cooled down the damp cloth several times, never straying far.

Only when he had trouble keeping his eyes open for longer than a minute at a time, his body sagging with exhaustion, did he lie down again. The last thought he had before falling asleep was that he'd wake up if Squall had another feverish nightmare. He'd feel it. He'd be there.

~ o ~
Collateral Damage

[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Wednesday, 23rd of October, 9:13 am]

Squall was leaning heavily into the couch, his head tilted backwards and an arm draped across his eyes. In his free hand he loosely held an almost empty glass of water—his morning dosage of pills was all the breakfast he'd been able to get down.

The last clear memory he had of the previous evening was Seifer's phone call, ordering him to bed. He'd complied far too easily, a clear sign his mind hadn't been right. After that, everything was a blur of fevered images—dark fog, a black sky, cracked earth and dust. All of it provided the backdrop for a bleak kind of hopelessness that had squeezed his chest with the certainty he'd be trapped and alone forever.

It was confronting to suffer that particular nightmare again, and telling. Unlike just after the war, he hadn't dreamed of all the lost lives, of all the people he'd failed. He hadn't even dreamed of crazed, green eyes as an electric current tore him apart. After all this time, it seemed the worst nightmare remained and it had gained a far sharper, far more real edge. Whether it was the result of the broken bond or losing the one person who had promised to stay with him forever, he wasn't sure.

He groaned softly as his migraine finally started to abate, the meds kicking in. Raking his fever edged memories, he tried to remember what had happened for him to wake up in the embrace of a far too underdressed blond. Seifer had been pressed close, an arm wrapped tightly around his waist. He'd also found a small, wet towel next to his head, the cloth having soaked a large stain into his pillow.

Seifer must have tried to bring his fever down.

What he wasn't clear on however, was why they'd ended up in such an intimate position.Stripping down to one's boxers and getting under the blankets with a patient did not constitute necessary bedside manners. He would've been angry, if it wasn't for what little he did remember—the overwhelming relief at Seifer's presence. He couldn't be certain the man hadn't joined him at his own request. Even now, he still couldn't completely shake the unsettling nightmare.

It seemed there was no end to his shame. After the war, he'd allowed Rinoa to dull his dreams until they'd eventually disappeared altogether, but not once had he fallen far enough to crave physical comfort.

Cursing the broken bond and the debilitating weakness it had reduced him to, Squall startled when his phone vibrated in his pocket. With a groan he set down the glass on the coffee table and got out the offending item. One glance at the bright-blue display almost had him reconsidering the promise he'd made Rinoa the previous day.

"Yes?"

"Squall," the president intoned. "I've been trying to reach you. How are you, son?"

"I'm fine," he said, clenching his jaw at the affectionate term.

"Hn," the older man hummed noncommittally. "Rinoa told me what happened... From what she said, I wasn't sure what to expect. I should have trusted my gut feeling something wasn't quite
right. The two of you spun one hell of a story, making everyone think you were still together."

"What we tell people is our business."

"It is," the president conceded, "but nobody should go through something like that alone."

"It's done. It's over and I'm fine," Squall said harshly. Hearing movement from the bedroom—drawers being pulled open and closed, a showerhead sputtering into action—he knew he had to wrap up the phone call quickly.

"How's the medication?"

Squall frowned. It seemed like Rinoa's report to the man had been comprehensive. "It helps."

"Good, that's good..." Loire said, trailing off. "You know, your friends have told me you're Garden's worst patient. I'm the same, I'm afraid. Can't sit still for a moment." A soft chuckle was followed by an awkward pause that instantly had Squall apprehensive. Loire rarely ran out of words.

"... If you'd stay at the palace, I'd leave you your space. You could—"

"No."

"Hear me out," the man pleaded. "You'd have all the space and privacy in the world, there would be a physician on standby at all times—"

"Loire—" Squall tried to interrupt.

"—I'd be at ease, Rinoa would be at ease, and quite frankly, I don't like lying to Quistis."

Raising a hand to knead at his brow, Squall took a few seconds to calm himself before answering. "I already have a place to stay. I'm not going to the palace."

"...Rinoa told me as much," the president yielded with a small sigh. "Don't fault me for offering, Squall. Anything you need, anything I can do, just let me know."

"I told you, I'm—"

"Fine, yes, yes. I know. As I said, I justed wanted to hear so for myself." The man paused. "So, you're getting along then? With this... Seifer Almasy?"

The way Loire said Seifer's name sounded too much like the man was reading the name off a file—as if he didn't already know everything there was to know about Seifer's past.

"He won't be any trouble," Squall replied, inwardly huffing at the lie. Seifer was always trouble.

"I sure hope so, for both our sakes," the president said. "Quistis called me last night, demanding to speak to you. She put me on the spot when I couldn't give her any detailed information. She's not an easy one to fool."

"What did you tell her?"

"Ah, well, what little I know from Rinoa, but the redacted version of course." The president let out an amused huff. "Can't say she was happy about it. She had me squirming faster than any politician could with those questions of hers. She'll be expecting a medical report sometime soon."
Squall suppressed a groan. "What else?"

"I took the liberty of contacting Odine."

"I'm not going back there."

"I had to give her something, Squall. It was either that, or she would've sent Doctor Kadowaki on the next train to Esthar," the man replied, not sounding the least bit apologetic. "I doubt she'd trust anyone else to examine you, and to be honest, neither would I."

When Squall didn't immediately reply, the older man continued. "I could arrange an appointment for you. No waiting list. You could have it over with by the end of the day."

Loathe as he was to admit it, Loire had a point. He couldn't ignore Quistis and Garden, nor could he ignore his condition. "What would the examination entail?"

"A full physical and some tests of your magic. Odine would like to examine what went wrong with your junction with Shiva as well." The president paused briefly. "He's already agreed to clear his schedule for the afternoon," he confessed. "Go in, hear what he has to say, and we'll take it from there."

Not having missed out on the "we" in that suggestion, Squall narrowed his eyes. "What time?"

"How about 12 o'clock?"

Squall frowned. He'd have to leave within the hour. "Not much of a heads-up."

"I know... but I only just managed to get through to you," the president said apologetically. "I can pick you up on the way if that makes things easier?"

"No," Squall immediately cut off, cringing at the prospect of a presidential escort. "I'll drive there myself."

"... Are you sure? It wouldn't be any trouble. Also, I would like to meet Mr. Almasy—"

"Loire."

The president sighed. "I can't help but be concerned, Squall, and not just about your health—"

No longer able to hear the shower running, Squall willed the man to get on with it.

"—When Rinoa came by... She's still crazy about you. I'm having a hard time believing she was the one to decide on such drastic measures." The man paused, uncharacteristically weighing his words. "Are you sure you made the right choice?"

Brow twitching at the man's audacity, Squall replied coolly, "There was no other choice."

"There always is," the president countered gently. "If you still love each other, I don't see why it has to end like this. I know it's... difficult for you to meet people halfway, but perhaps it's not too late. Perhaps you can still mend things?"

"There is nothing left to mend," Squall bit out, his fingers tightening around his phone. "Rinoa and me—we're over."

"I don't know what happened, son, but I do know some things are worth fighting for—"
Don't.

Noticing movement from the corner of his eyes, Squall looked up to see Seifer standing in the doorway of the bedroom, watching him with a raised eyebrow.

Alright, alright... the president continued, unaware. "I just—I don't want you to regret this. Take it from a man who knows what it feels like—"

Gaze on the blond who was now heading to the kitchen, Squall interrupted the president. "I have to go."

"Right away?" the older man asked, recovering fast when Squall didn't reply. ’Okay. All right... I'll see you at 12 o'clock then?"

"Yes."

"Great. See you there, son."

Giving a hum of acknowledgement, Squall snapped his phone shut and dropped his hand to the couch. Watching as the blond made himself breakfast, he slowly relaxed when the man didn't give any indication he'd overhead anything.

With a bowl of cereal in hand, Seifer walked over to sit next to the brunet on the couch. Squall looked better than he had the previous morning, but not by much. The man's expression was still drawn and his skin even paler than usual. It didn't seem like the phone conversation had helped.

"The pills working at all?"

Squall leaned back in the couch and shrugged. "Somewhat."

"So you're feeling better?"

Biting back the urge to coldly dismiss the blond, Squall knew he'd lost all credibility the night before and hummed an affirmative instead.

"Good enough to go on a bit of an explore today?" Seifer asked. They'd drive each other nuts if they had to stay in the apartment all day. "I can show you the wonderful sights of the area or something."

Squall raised an eyebrow at the unlikely invitation. He had a hard time envisioning himself strolling about the city with his one-time rival, seeing the sights. "I have somewhere I need to be later."

"Where?" Seifer immediately demanded.

"None of your business," Squall replied, disinclined to bring an audience. He wanted to hear Odine's verdict in privacy. Loire's meddling would already be bad enough. Remembering the conditions of the tests, he faced the blond. "I'll need Shiva."

"You're fucking out of your mind, if you think that's going to happen," Seifer said under his breath. "And you're not fucking going anywhere on your own."

Squall narrowed his eyes. "It's not up to you," he said with forced calm. "I'm going, and I'm taking Shiva." This new concerned side to the blond was proving troublesome. Back at Garden, he could've walked off a cliff or taken on a T-Rex heavily injured, without even garnering the blond's interest.
"You're wrong, Squall. It is up to me," Seifer said, getting fed up with the brunet's attitude. "I didn't just nurse your ass back to health just so you can go out and screw it all up again." He barely paused to breathe. "I don't care where the fuck you're going, but I'm coming, and you're not getting Shiva. She's part of the reason why you got into this fucking mess in the first place." His next words came out in a low growl. "That, and the fact that you didn't fucking listen when I told you I'd been out for a month after Ultimecia."

He faced Squall head on. "What the fuck were you trying to prove going off on your own like that?" Shaking his head, not expecting an answer, he put the unfinished bowl of cereal down on the coffee table with a loud clang. "Fuck," he cursed, flopping back against the couch, his mood officially ruined.

Keeping a tight rein on his composure, Squall refused to be provoked by the blond. "You have no right to Shiva," he declared. Shifting on the couch until he was sitting face to face with the blond, he didn't wait for a response as he placed his hand on Seifer's leg, his mind searching for and immediately finding his ice goddess.

Not breaking their locked gazes, Seifer narrowed his eyes. He couldn't deny Squall Shiva, but he could damn well make sure the man knew just how little he approved. As Squall formed a connection with the Guardian Force in his mind, he was overwhelmed by Shiva's eagerness to return to the brunet. Clenching his jaw, he closed his eyes at the pain that suddenly consumed him.

Reveling in the sensation of his ice goddess reaching out to him, Squall contained himself. He wasn't entirely without caution—he'd simply draw her, not junction her. He shivered at Shiva's all encompassing cold as it flooded his consciousness and froze the air around them. His hold on the draw was tenuous, but her willingness more than made up for his shaky control, her enthusiasm spilling over and flaring brightly in the blue tendrils of magic licking the air.

When the magical connection finally died down, he drew in a tremulous breath, his ice goddess content to settle in the back of his mind unjunctioned.

Opening his eyes, he stiffened. Seifer's face was drawn taut, the man's fists white-knuckled and his breath coming in rushed and shallow. Before he could react, the blond was off the couch with a venomous glare sent his way, disappearing into the bedroom.

Squall sat stunned as the sound of slamming doors was immediately followed by the distant sound of retching. Realizing he'd made a mistake—that there'd been more too Seifer's refusal to give back the GF—he pushed off the couch and followed after the blond. Opening the bathroom door, he stared at the sight before him. The blond was bent over the sink, his features contorted in pain.

"I've never seen anyone react like this," Squall said with a frown.

Tilting his head up to meet the brunet's gaze in the mirror, Seifer forced his expression under control. Ignoring the twitch another wave of pain brought to his features, he turned around and placed a firm hand on the brunet's chest, forcing the man back out of the room.

Finding himself shut out a second time, the sound of retching immediately resuming, Squall resigned himself to waiting the man out. He didn't understand what had brought about such a violent result. As a cadet the blond had never had any trouble with junctioning or drawing. He couldn't chalk it up to Shiva being exclusively compatible with himself either—he'd been forced to let others draw her a couple of times in the past and never with a result like this.

A disconcerting thought niggled its way into his mind. What if it wasn't just himself that had been affected by the broken bond? What if Shiva had been damaged as well? Carefully, he examined her
presence in his mind, but he couldn't be sure without junctioning and he didn't dare risk it after the disastrous results of last time.

He startled from his musings when the bathroom door finally opened. Seifer only spared him a brief glance before heading into the kitchen. Following suit, he curbed his questions when his gaze was drawn to the box of painkillers Seifer had gotten out of the cupboard.

Watching as the blond swallowed down two pills, Squall thought back to the morning they'd both been hung-over...Seifer had asked for Esunas, and when he hadn't been able to cast, the man had resorted to Antidotes instead of his own curative magic.

"You don't junction anymore," he stated with a frown. It was the only conclusion that added up, yet it made no sense at all. Seifer had been good with his magic. He couldn't imagine the blond giving up any of his GFs.

"No," Seifer said, not caring to elaborate in the slightest. He was still pissed at Squall for going ahead and drawing Shiva. And now Squall knew how fucking low he'd sunk. No fucking GFs to back him up. No magic. All he had left was his fucking gunblade.

Squall eyed the blond carefully. "Why?"

Seifer snorted. "You saw what happened."

"It's like that every time?"

Looking away and gritting his teeth, Seifer put down the empty glass of water. "Since the war," he admitted gravely. Walking over to sit down on the couch, he brought up a hand to knead at his forehead.

Rooted in place, Squall had trouble accepting the implications of what Seifer had just said, but he pieced it together easily enough. Seifer meant since Ultimecia—since the bond had been broken. He felt his chest constrict. His chances of full recovery had suddenly become very slim. Taking in Seifer's weary expression, he balled his hands into fists. What more had Ultimecia taken from the man?

As the silence stretched on, Seifer refused to wallow in front of Squall. "Who needs magic anyways?" he said with a shrug, wanting to dismiss the topic altogether. "I'm doing fine without it."

However unconvincing Squall found the blond's indifference, he at least agreed that Seifer had indeed managed without. The man was a force to be reckoned with, whether he used magic or not. It would be different for himself. Magic was his edge, how he set himself apart. Garden would no longer have a use for him; he'd have nowhere to go.

Letting out a sigh, Squall considered his options. This changed a lot. It wasn't just about him anymore—Seifer had a stake in this as well. Whatever conclusions Odine would arrive at, they'd probably be relevant to the blond. Bringing up a hand to knead at the bridge of his nose, where a dull ache still throbbed behind his eyes, he already regretted the decision forming in his head.

"I'm seeing Odine today."

Pulled from his thoughts, Seifer regarded Squall suspiciously. Of all the places he'd imagined Squall to run off to, Odine's laboratory had never even occurred to him.

"Check-up?"
Squall nodded.

"I'll take you then," Seifer said, as if they hadn't just argued about the exact same thing ten minutes ago. "When do we leave?"

At Seifer's assuming words Squall nearly thought better of his decision. Giving in like this went against years of rivalry and standing up to the blond. "Don't misunderstand," he warned, giving the man a level look. "I'm not bringing you in as a chaperone."

"Well, you're not going in alone," Seifer said firmly.

Squall rolled his eyes at the blond's one track mind. "I'm going in to check my magic—to find out when I can get back to the field. You never had that chance. I might not trust Odine, but... you get to hear what he says."

"...You think it's the same for us?" Seifer asked. "That your magic will be affected like mine?"

Squall shrugged, not feeling the levity of the gesture. "It's a possibility."

"Fuck," Seifer cursed lowly, wanting to punch something. "Why the fuck didn't you tell me you'd do something as stupid as breaking the bond?" he demanded as he shot off the couch. Squall couldn't be affected like him—that'd mean the end of his career.

"When are we going?"

"We should leave in fifteen minutes. The appointment's at twelve."

"All right... Okay."

As the blond grappled with his hypothesis, Squall considered how to broach the one thing he hadn't mentioned yet. It wasn't so much that he didn't want Seifer to know—he'd simply never had to explain the unlikely situation to someone as of yet. Everyone just sort of found out, Rinoa being the first. With one of his friends informing the other within the time span of a week, he'd been spared the ordeal of trying to broach the awkward subject.

Watching as Seifer grabbed himself a drink and moved to sit on the couch, the man's expression grim, Squall decided on the straightforward approach. No matter how he phrased it, it would still come out sounding ridiculous.

"I wasn't the one who made the appointment," he started, uncomfortable. "President Loire did. He'll be there." Pausing, he let that fact sink in first.

His drink forgotten, Seifer studied Squall. "What the hell for?"

"...He's my father. I found out after the war."

"You're fucking with me," Seifer said, not even considering it being the truth. When Squall just held his gaze, reminding him that no, the brunet never did fucking joke, his brain struggled to keep up. "How the fuck did you find out?"

"Loire told me," Squall replied simply, the full account far too fanciful to just drop on the blond.

"And you believed him?" Seifer asked, not buying the story for a second. "He probably just wanted a prodigy for a son or something," he found himself saying, but immediately realized the flaw in his statement—Squall's reputation might be well known, but the man's identity certainly wasn't.
Worst of all, Squall seemed convinced it was the truth. "Does he have any proof?"

"Ellone," Squall said, hoping he wouldn't have to explain about the woman's powers or her connection to him and Loire. "She...showed me," he simplified. "And I requested a DNA test."

Seifer raised an eyebrow. "So it's true?"

He should have expected the lack of reply, but hell, Squall had to know anyone would have trouble wrapping their head around something like that. Leaning back against the couch, he ran a hand through his hair. This was ridiculous. Of course Squall's dad had to be the fucking President of Esthar.

The idea of Squall suddenly having a dad in the first place was absurd enough on its own. He couldn't imagine Squall as part of a family. Neither of them belonged in a domestic setting like that. If anyone suddenly came along and told him they were his mom or dad, he'd tell them to fuck off.

"What's his excuse?" he demanded. "For leaving you behind."

Sighing, Squall moved to join Seifer on the couch. When Loire had first come forth, he'd often wondered which was the most tragic—the scenario of abandonment he'd feared as a child, or the truth. Now he just felt numb towards the whole ordeal.

"Loire didn't know about me," he finally said. "We found out around the same time."

"Really? ...What a headfuck," Seifer said, eyeing Squall. "How did he take it?"

"Better than me," Squall replied dryly. "He's trying to act like a father—make up for lost time."

The thought of anyone trying to act like a dad to Squall briefly put a smirk on his Seifer's lips. "So you don't get along well?"

Squall considered the question. It had never really been a case of them not getting along, but rather of him not needing anything from the man to begin with. "...He wants a son. I don't want anything from him."

"Do you see him often?"

"When I can't avoid it."

"And when's that?"

Squall glanced at Seifer, the man's curiosity catching him off guard. "On the job, mostly. Dinner occasionally." He huffed. "When I'm seeing Odine."

"Shit, I'd already forgotten about that," Seifer let out. He couldn't believe he was going to meet the president of Esthar—Squall's dad—and soon. Coupled with his headache, it felt like his head was about to explode. "You think your dad's going to make me disappear into a cell somewhere? I did kinda piss on his territory and all..."

Squall frowned at the blond's remark, realizing the implications of what Seifer had just said. No one entered Esthar under the radar—strict migration policies and a secret service prevented any "unwanted" elements from disturbing the status quo.

"The moment you crossed the border and applied for Estharian citizenship, he knew about you,"
Squall said, his frown deepening. Loire had purposefully hidden Seifer's whereabouts from Garden, and he'd like to know why.

"Maybe my name just got lost in the system," Seifer mused.

Squall shook his head. "Not in Esthar..." Everything was monitored here. That was when he realized his mistake—that the blond couldn't possibly know about the Treaty of Nortes. He'd never had the chance to broach the topic the last time they'd talked about the war. He regarded the blond, unsure of how the news would be received.

"No one is looking to punish you... The war isn't public knowledge because it's been kept that way," he said, weighing his words. "After the war there was a diplomatic summit to deal with the aftermath—top brass only. A general exemption was signed."

"An exemption for what?" Seifer asked as he furrowed his brow.

"It was meant for the Galbadian soldiers that followed Ultimcia's orders, but in effect it exempts everyone that acted under her rule," Squall explained, his thoughts returning to the chaotic weeks after Ultimcia's demise. The vacuum of power after Ultimcia's defeat had plunged Galbadia straight into civil war, nearly dragging the rest of the world into war as well.

"Why?" Seifer demanded with a frown.

"Galbadia needed its soldiers. There was no time for tribunals, and informing the public would've created a panic," Squall replied evenly. "All nations signed the exemption and a contract of non-disclosure to prevent escalation. Garden signed as well."

Seifer let out a deep breath. "...Damn." It was hard to believe that no one would ever make him pay for what he'd done—that no one even had the right to. He'd stopped looking over his shoulder early on, not wanting to spend his life worrying about what punishment might come, but he'd always expected it would come, sooner or later. It had only been a question of when.

Pushing up from the couch, he walked to the kitchen. It was early to start drinking, but he needed something to get his head around this. Pouring some whiskey into a tumbler, he leaned back against the kitchen counter. "So no one can do anything?"

"It's to no one's advantage," Squall said with a shrug. "Politics isn't about justice or integrity."

Huffing, Seifer took a large gulp of the golden liquid before resolutely placing the glass on the counter. "So the president knows I'm here and can't do anything about it. And you're his son. Whom I slept with, "And now you're bringing me in to see him..." He shook his head. "You know this is fucked right?"

Squall frowned at the blond's breakdown of the facts. "I'm bringing you in to see Odine," he corrected. "Loire is none of your concern."

Thinking the president could very well become his concern, Seifer took another mouthful of whiskey. No matter the circumstances, he wouldn't let Squall go in on his own—he wasn't about to risk a repeat of what had happened to Squall at the hotel. Glancing at his cell phone, he clenched his teeth.

11:22 am.

"Fuck. It's time to go," he grumbled as he pushed away from the counter.

Getting up from the couch, Squall tried to suppress his unease. He'd just complicated everything by involving Seifer; the one person he least wanted to see him this weak. Any hope he'd had for a
positive outcome at the lab was diminishing the more he thought about it, and to top it all off, he'd also have to contend with two of his least favorite people—the mad doctor and his father. With a soft huff, he shrugged on his jacket and hoped he wouldn't regret the decisions he'd made.

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[Odine's lab, Chimera district, Wednesday, 23rd of October, 11:48 am]

Taking in the complex of steel blue skyscrapers in front of them, Seifer pulled his key out of the ignition. He'd never passed by Odine's new lab before, but he had seen it advertised on numerous public announcement displays around Esthar when it had first been completed. A benchmark of Estharian technology and architecture. A small park meandered between the buildings, no doubt an attempt to try and distract from what went on inside. He'd read the headlines about the magic and monster research that supposedly went on in there.

When the passenger door slammed shut next to him, he got out of the truck and followed Squall across the parking lot. It was impossible to miss the long black Torama limousine parked near the entrance. Guards were posted next to it, leaving no doubt to whom it belonged. *Fuck.* He hadn't figured out how the hell to deal with that part of their outing yet.

Entering the huge lobby, he followed as the brunet led them down a maze of corridors before coming to a halt inside a hover lift. Squall had been nothing but rigidity and determination since they'd arrived—the man definitely didn't like the place. Not that he could blame the guy. The brunet's entire future depended on what would happen the next couple of hours.

Growing tense, he stared ahead as the levels whizzed by. Squall hadn't ever done *anything* to deserve this. What had happened to himself, he could accept. He'd fucked up and he was paying the price, but Squall—Squall had done *everything* right and now the man's entire future was on the line, simply because he'd fallen for the wrong fucking girl at the wrong fucking time.

When the lift's energy field dissipated, Seifer forced himself to unclench his hands. In front of them a short corridor led to a double door with two guards posted in front of it. They wore the exact same get-ups as the guards he had spotted next to the president's ride.

He watched as Squall sent the two men a curt nod and spoke a firm "He's with me." When the guards stepped aside without any sign of surprise and with the respect they would show any high ranking official, he studied the brunet. Just how much power did Squall have over the president's private entourage?

Only given a second to ponder the question as the doors slid open, his eyes immediately fell to the man waiting inside the next room.

"Loire," Squall offered in reluctant greeting.

Breaking away from his study of Odine's outlandish machines, Laguna smiled and suppressed the ever present giddiness he felt whenever he was meeting his son. Even after more than two years, he still hadn't gotten used to seeing the young man—he looked so much like Raine.

Walking over to his son, Laguna hid his surprise at the unexpected guest lingering only a step behind Squall. Tall and blond, he recognized the man from the photos in his file.

"Squall," he greeted with a broad smile, more than used to his son's lukewarm hellos. Bringing up his hands to briefly squeeze Squall's shoulders, he scrutinized the brunet's appearance. Satisfied the man looked his usual self and nothing like he had feared, Laguna dropped his hands and looked
between his son and the tall man expectantly.

"Seifer Almasy," Squall introduced, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Laguna stepped forward with an easy smile and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Seifer."

Seifer shook the president's hand. "You too, Sir," he said with less firmness than he would have liked. The man hadn't called for his guards yet and seemed friendly enough, but it just didn't feel right. He'd attacked the man's country for Hyne's sake and now he was being treated as a friend of Squall's.

Sensing his son's close scrutiny, Laguna knew from years of diplomatic experience that he had to break the ice and fast. "I must admit, I wasn't expecting Squall to bring anyone. You've caught me by surprise," he said affably. "Rinoa told me my son has got you playing host?"

"Host and servant," Seifer corrected. "If you don't cook for the guy, he doesn't eat." When the president's smile widened at his words, Seifer felt some of his tension fade. "I'm surprised as well," he added. "I can't believe you managed to persuade Squall to come in for tests. That's quite a feat."

Laguna raised his hand in denial. "I don't think anyone would dare presume to have such sway over my son," he said, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Not if they want to keep their balls," Seifer added quickly, turning to smirk at Squall.

Great. Kindred spirits. "Where is Odine?" Squall asked, cutting short the niceties as he walked further into the lab. Already he felt tempted to take Seifer up on the challenge he was sure he'd heard in the man's words. Apparently the idiot wasn't attached enough to his balls to heed his own advice.

Sobering up at the question, Laguna sent Seifer a regretful smile. His son was the most impatient person he'd ever met. "Odine is making preparations in his lab for the moment. He said we should head downstairs for the first part of the tests. A full physical, I believe."

"Fifth floor?" Squall asked tersely. He'd accompanied Rinoa there once, at the time of her first consultation. It was the only place in the entire building that looked like it was actually meant to treat patients.

"That would be it," Laguna nodded.

Curiosity piqued at another hint of Squall's familiarity with the place, Seifer quickly caught up with father and son. "Come here often?"

Calling the lift down, Squall regarded the blond. "With Rinoa," he replied tersely. He didn't want to think about her, when too much about the place already reminded him of her.

"Why?"

Noticing the stiffening to his son's shoulders, Laguna tried to diffuse the tension. "Odine has been helping Rinoa," he explained. "She wasn't born a sorceress and was never instructed on how to control her powers. Odine is the leading authority in the field—" He gestured for the two young men to enter the lift when the energy field faded. "—the same reason we're here."

Walking ahead, Seifer considered the president's words. He hadn't expected Rinoa to need any help... or for Squall to have accompanied Rinoa to such appointments. Squall must've really been smitten with her, to spend his free time holed up in a lab. "I see."
When Seifer let the topic rest, Squall met Loire's gaze. The man had just saved him an unpleasant conversation with the meddling blond, omitting in the right places without resorting to outright lies. Ignoring the president's smile, he looked away.

The moment the lift came to a halt, he exited and made for the assistant who was standing in wait for them. "Commander," the man nodded in greeting. "Mr. President."

Tuning out the formalities as the assistant led them to a consultation room, Squall wished they could skip ahead to the examination of his magic and junctions. He knew his physical condition was improving—a lifetime of suffering injuries had taught him how to interpret his body's signs and limitations. Apart from the piercing headaches, the weakness he'd felt the day before had disappeared almost entirely.

Ushered into a large room with a desk, chairs and examination table, Squall took in his surroundings. The space almost passed for a room one would find in any hospital, if it hadn't been for the camera mounted on the ceiling. Behind him, Loire was grilling the assistant on the exact proceedings of the day's tests. Whatever. He just wanted it over with.

"Can we start?" he asked, turning to face the assistant.

"Of course," the man said, sitting down by the desk. "I'll start with some questions."

Pulling up a chair, Seifer was surprised when Squall didn't tell him to get the fuck out of there. He didn't really have any right to be part of this, but it seemed the brunet didn't care either way. Happy enough to take advantage of the situation, he leaned forward in his seat, not about to miss anything.

"First of all, please tell me what happened after you and Ms. Heartilly broke the bond?" the assistant asked, his gaze neutral and his pen ready.

Loathe to inform a total stranger about something so personal, Squall distanced himself from the facts—the way he always did when debriefing. "I junctioned Shiva. Immediately after, I left the lab and drove to a hotel."

"And how did you feel before you lost consciousness?"

"...Disoriented."

"In what way?"

As Squall supplied yet another brief reply, Seifer arched an eyebrow. If this was how it was going to play out, then it would be about just as exciting as watching Squall going in for a dental appointment. He should have stayed home in bed.

Next to him, the president was listening intently, hanging on to Squall's every reply, no matter how succinct. The man really seemed to care—there had been genuine excitement in his eyes when he'd laid eyes on his son.

Seifer couldn't deny the resemblance. The older man was attractive, just like his son. His hair was darker and longer, and his eyes were green, but even without a paternity test, you could tell they were related.

"Have you had any nightmares?" Seifer heard the assistant ask, pulling him from his thoughts.

Realizing he'd missed a bunch of questions, he waited for Squall to answer. At the simple "no," he
frowned. He was certain Squall had been suffering from nightmares the night before.

Wondering if Squall was lying about other things, Seifer listened more closely to the next questions, but Squall answering in the negative every single time couldn't hold his attention for long. The only thing Squall had confirmed so far were headaches and nausea and that much he'd already guessed. This was starting to look like one giant waste of time.

Leaning forwards, he let his hands hang between his knees. He hadn't even brought along any form of entertainment. The only thing that was even remotely interesting was the bizarre father-son thing. From the president's answer in the lift, it seemed like the man actually knew Squall quite well—much better than he'd expected. Squall wouldn't have told just anyone about Rinoa unless he'd absolutely had to.

He frowned. Maybe Rinoa had been the one to keep father and son in touch? Looking back over to Squall, he couldn't help but wonder just how different the brunet's life had been to what he'd imagined.

Half-hearing the next question, concerning hallucinations, he narrowed his eyes when he spotted Squall tense in his seat. There was no way those shoulders could be set any straighter.

"... No," Squall replied after a short pause, unrepentant. When the assistant didn't seem to notice his hesitance, he relaxed. He knew hiding the hallucinations wasn't the best solution, but it was his only real choice.

Feeling the blond's eyes on him, he glanced to the side and immediately stiffened. Seifer was looking at him intently, when before the man had looked bored out of his mind.

The bastard couldn't possibly know. He'd barely hesitated. He'd skirted the truth with plenty of the other questions, denying nightmares and disturbed sleep, not once earning Seifer's scrutiny. His unease mounted—bringing Seifer had been a mistake.

Growing more and more impatient, he kept his answers as brief as possible, rushing the assistant along. He didn't want to give the blond any opening to pipe up. When finally the last inane question had been ticked off on the assistant's clipboard, he was out of his chair.

"Well, that wasn't too bad," Loire said pleasantly, sending him a smile. "Next are the physical tests then?" he directed to the assistant.

"Yes," the assistant replied with a nod, standing up from his chair. "The tests do require some exertion. If you prefer, it's possible to change into more suitable clothes in the changing room—it's the second door down the hall, on the right."

Glad for the excuse to leave the increasingly stifling room, Squall ignored the blond's fixed gaze and strode past him into the hallway.

*Definitely a mistake.*

~ o ~

**[Odine's lab, Chimera district, Wednesday, 23rd of October, 3:17 pm]**

As the lift came to a halt on the fifth floor, Seifer waited for the electric blue energy field to dissipate. Just down the hall to the right, he could hear Laguna still talking business on the phone. Throughout Squall's physical tests, the president had been busy in the background, all the while keeping an eye on his son.
Unfortunately, that meant the only thing to occupy Seifer's attention had been watching Squall undergo one mindnumbingly boring test after another. At least it seemed the brunet's physical condition was almost back to normal—Squall had done well in the endurance and strength tests. A lot better than Seifer would've put money on.

Walking over to the president, he held up a sandwich to get the man's attention before placing it on a nearby table. Laguna had suggested sending out one of his employees to get them lunch, but Seifer hadn't been able to take another minute of idleness and had insisted on going out himself. Nodding at the president, he turned around and headed down the hall. Just before he'd left, the assistant had been instructing Squall on the last test, so Seifer knew just where to find the stubborn man.

Stopping in front of the changing room, he leaned against the wall and waited. At the sound of the door to the changing room opening, he straightened and shoved one of the sandwiches he'd bought into Squall's hands.

Looking up from the sandwich to meet Seifer's serious gaze, Squall instantly realized the ambush he'd walked into. Quickly, he schooled his expression and started down the hallway, past the blond.

"Hey, wait up—I want to talk to you," Seifer said firmly, grabbing the man's arm when the brunet didn't listen. The glare it earned him only spurred him on. "Why did you lie?"

"Let me go," Squall bit out, not inclined to come clean in the slightest.

"Not until you tell me what the hell is going on," Seifer plowed on. "Tell me about the damn hallucinations."

Bristling at being held in place like a disobedient child, Squall yanked free from the bastard's hold. "There's nothing to tell."

"Wrong fucking answer and you know it. So let's hear it. The truth this time."

When the brunet still didn't say anything in reply, Seifer didn't feel any remorse at resorting to blackmail. "Either you tell me or I tell them," he said, cocking his head in the direction of the other end of the hall where the president was still busy talking on the phone. "Ready for daddy dearest to make sure you're not hallucinating?"

Following Seifer's gesture down the hall, Squall stiffened. "Don't."

Seifer raised an eyebrow. "No?" he asked, eyeing Squall briefly before starting down the hall.

Squall instantly regretted the mistake of presenting Seifer with a challenge. Grabbing Seifer's arm, he directed the man back into the changing room before Loire would notice. Closing the door behind them, he turned to glare at his assailant. It seemed his decisions always boiled down to choosing the lesser evil lately.

"Visual, olfactory, and auditory," he deadpanned.

"Like what?"

Curbing the reflexive urge to lash out at the blond, Squall clenched his jaw. Seifer always did this—pushed his boundaries and exposed what he didn't want anyone to see. "...Black fog. Noise," he ground out. It seemed so harmless and ridiculous when he said it out loud.
Looking away, Seifer took a few steps farther into the room. "When you were out of it, you seemed sensitive to sound—as if it was painful." He turned around. "Is the noise like that?"

Surprised at the information that was new to him, Squall wondered just how much Seifer had figured out by himself. "At its worst."

"How often does it happen?"

"Often enough," Squall said evenly.

Not liking Squall's evasive replies, Seifer stepped closer. "And just what the hell does that mean?"

"On and off since I came too," Squall said, his voice clipped as he stared the blond down. "You done blackmailing?"

"That depends," Seifer said, crossing his arms. "Why did you lie about it?"

Squall cast the blond an incredulous look—he'd have thought his reasons would be self-evident, most of all to Seifer. "I can't have 'hallucinations' on my medical record."

"You can't go on missions with hallucinations either," Seifer immediately retorted. "And maybe it's easily treatable... maybe not receiving treatment will make it permanent."

"If it's permanent, it would be worse than standard injury protocol," Squall said darkly. It wouldn't stop at him being kept from missions. Garden would declare him "unsound of mind" and he'd be honorably discharged. They could even order him to hand over his GFs if they deemed him too unstable. "I can't risk it."

Seifer let out a deep sigh. Any regular SeeD would be relieved of duty immediately, but this was Squall... Garden's commander. Garden owed everything to Squall. "You really think Garden would give you up?"

"I'd never see the field again," Squall said. "A desk job given to me out of pity maybe," he added bitterly, "so they can still use my name."

Seifer ran a hand through his hair and looked away. He just couldn't imagine it: the brunet's life as a mercenary over... They had to find a way around it.

"Maybe I could say something," he said, immediately realizing his poor choice of words when Squall tensed up further. "I mean, I don't have anything to lose. Maybe I could ask about treatment for me. Say that I've been hallucinating since the bond was broken."

"You have them?" Squall asked, his expression falling. It would explain why Seifer had seen through his lie. He'd already seen for himself the blond hadn't escaped Ultimemia's bond unscathed.

"No," Seifer replied, trying to remember what it had been like when he'd come to at Fu and Rai's. Only weird ass dreams stood out, no hallucinations. "At least not that I know of." He still didn't remember anything from the first month after Ultimemia's death.

"Then it's not worth it," Squall dismissed. The last time he'd dragged up Seifer's knighthood was still clear in his memory, and he didn't want to put the blond through anything like that again.

"I don't give a shit what anyone thinks about me. You need proper treatment."

"No," Squall replied with a shake of his head. "You don't know Odine. He doesn't take patients,
only test subjects." The questions would be endless; questions about Ultimcia, about the nature of their bond and more. Odine wasn't known for his tact.

"Either I do this, or you come clean. Your choice."

Frustrated at having come full circle with their useless argument, Squall glared at the impossible blond. This wasn't a fair choice and Seifer knew it; he refused to sacrifice Seifer's privacy and anonymity for a possible fool's errand, but risking his place at Garden, his life as a SeeD...

"You know I can't."

Committing to his decision, Seifer unfurled his arms. "It's settled then," he said firmly. Cutting short any further discussion, he turned and exited the room.

*The nerve.* Clenching his fists at the underhanded tactic, Squall started after the blond, but stopped short of speaking the sharp words on his tongue when he spotted Loire. The president had lowered his cell phone slightly, his attention on their exchange. Of course, the bastard blond just kept walking.

Reigning in the urge to deck the man, he caught up with him and hissed in a low voice, "I don't want this kind of help." Ahead of them, Loire was doing a poor job of pretending he'd returned his attention to his phone call.

"Too bad, Squally-boy—you're gonna get it," Seifer said, smirking at his victory. Squall wouldn't dare bring up the topic in front of his father.

Squall's mouth drew into a thin line, but he refrained from further comment as they walked up to Loire. The man cast them a curious glance, but luckily whoever was on the other end of the call was keeping the president occupied. Moving to lean back against the wall in wait, he glared at the blond for good measure, but the man just bit down on his sandwich in obvious satisfaction.

Finally hanging up, Laguna faced them fully with an apologetic smile. "That should appease the secretary for another couple of hours." Turning the sandwich Seifer had given him over in his hand, he let his gaze travel from his scowling son to the blond.

"Don't mind him, he just can't stand it when I'm right," Seifer said, returning the President's curious gaze as he took another bite of his sandwich.

At the unimpressed snort the comment elicited from his son, Laguna rose an eyebrow. "And what, if I may ask, are you right about?"

"Well, Mr. President, I'm afraid that's classified. A man's gotta look after his balls every once in a while," Seifer answered, his lips quirking into a lopsided smirk.

"Priorities," Laguna intoned in a voice of understanding, hiding his bafflement at the "classified." His son could be difficult about many things, so he hadn't actually expected the argument to have concerned anything important. His train of thought was interrupted however when Squall stalked past them, heading towards the elevators with an expression of barely contained annoyance.

"Better follow the Commander, eh, Mr. President?" Seifer said, unable to speak the titles without a smile on his lips. Here he was with two of the most powerful men on the planet, yet they acted like nothing more than a concerned dad and a petulant kid.

Humming in agreement, Laguna started down the hallway in step with his son's peculiar friend. Until that day, Kiros and Ellone had been the only ones to poke fun at his title and address him as
"Mr. President" in jest. Going by the not quite so reverent "Commander," he smiled at the realization that Squall hadn't escaped the same treatment. "Please call me Laguna."

"All right," Seifer said, nodding briefly at the President. "Laguna it is."

As they stopped by the elevator next to Squall, Seifer's smile widened at the wary look the brunet was sending him. When the elevator arrived, he strode in first, not caring for proper protocol in the least.

Filing into the elevator after the blond, Squall tried to ignore the ill-boding fact that Loire and Seifer were already on a first name basis. Impossible as such an outcome had been to predict, somehow he felt like he should've known. So far he hadn't met a single person who wasn't endeared with Loire in some fashion or other, and Seifer... people seemed to either hate or love him. Squall frowned at the implications of that disturbing train of thought, but Loire quickly broke it off.

"Not hungry, son?"

Squall ignored the pointed look Loire was sending the untouched sandwich in his hand. "No."

"Did you eat anything this morning?" Seifer asked, growing suspicious.

Biting out another "no," Squall stalked out of the lift when it came to a halt, away from the two gazes fixed on his back.

Brow twitching as Seifer continued to stick closely to him, Squall didn't give the blond any openings for more meddlesome questions and strode straight into the doctor's laboratory without stalling. At their arrival, Odine rose from his desk chair to meet them, looking far too pleased for comfort.

"Commander!" the man greeted, too focused on his soon to be test subject to bother acknowledging the two other men in the room. "I have gone over ze results of the physical tests and zey are as I expected." As if to underline his point, Odine tapped a finger on his clipboard, eyes skimming over the results.

"So far zere are many similarities between you and some of my former research... participants. Magic tests should confirm zis." Riveted to his clipboard, he turned to walk, gesturing in the direction he was going. "I vill conduct the first test in ze magic diagnostics room."

Seifer stayed in place. "You got something to help Squall's nausea?" he asked firmly, crossing his arms over his chest. It had to be the reason Squall wasn't eating—the brunet wasn't stupid enough not to eat when he needed the energy to get better.

Turning around when no one was following, Odine looked up at the towering blond with one eyebrow hitched high. "Nausea?" the man intoned derisively. "I did not rush away from other experiments to treat nausea—" he started, but was quickly cut off when Seifer stepped closer.

"Well tough luck, because you're getting Squall something for it right now," Seifer said, his voice brokering no room for argument.

Looking entirely unimpressed, Odine directed his gaze at the president, but he was only met with an equally firm expression. Grumbling beneath his breath, he walked to the nearest intercom to bark his orders. "Send someone up wiz some antiemetics. Now!"

Only briefly looking back at his guests, he resumed his brisk pace towards a room in the back. "If
you would follow me," he sneered with mock politesse.

Long used to Odine's questionable work ethics, Squall followed the doctor after sending Seifer a withering glare for the stunt he'd just pulled, but all he received in return was a smirk. _Bastard_. He hadn't even finished the thought, when behind him Loire decided to pipe up as well.

"Before you start _anything_, I'd like to know something. The former research you mentioned, in what way does it pertain to Squall's condition?" The president did not sound pleased.

Neither did Odine when he turned around to regard his boss with exaggerated impatience. "Ven I first researched magic, many of ze test subjects did not accept a junction and responded aversely. Ze symptoms ze Commander listed are similar enough to suggest a broken sorceress bond is not unlike zese failed junctions. However—" the doctor paused for emphasis, his gaze travelling pointedly to his desired destination, "further tests are necessary."

"If that's everthing," Squall said brusquely, not caring about the specifics of Odine's theories or methods. Only the diagnosis that would end up in his medical report mattered. Casting his two self-appointed babysitters a narrow-eyed warning, he turned to walk to the examination room. Odine immediately started after him, clearly approving of his haste.

Inside, Squall let his eyes roam the machinery and monitors taking up over half of the small space. On the left side there was a large window that looked into another room.

"Through that door," Odine ordered, gesturing towards a heavy, metal door right next to the large window. "On the blue dot."

For the sake of getting the damned tests over with, Squall let Odine's attitude slide and entered the room. Absolute silence followed the slam of the metal door, the large room apparently soundproof. Looking around him, the only thing that broke the monotony of white concrete were two large dots painted on the floor—one red and one blue. After a moment of hesitation, he moved to stand on the blue dot.

In the other room, Laguna immediately moved to the window to keep a constant eye on the brunet. To his left, Seifer did the same. He knew Squall was safe, but the sight of his son confined like that, while Odine was scuffling around in the background and fiddling with his machines... It was too reminiscent of how he had found Ellone so many years ago.

"What kind of test is this?" he asked, suddenly needing to know _exactly_ what Odine was going to do.

The doctor didn't look up from his work, his eyes sweeping over several monitors as he answered. "Zat room is sealed to contain para-magic and zere are sensors in ze walls. I vill evaluate ze Commander's junctioning and magic capabilities." Flicking on a few switches, he tugged a microphone a bit closer and turned his focus to the brunet in the other room.

"Can you hear me?" he said, tapping against the mic.

None too happy with Odine's disregard for proper explanations, Laguna resigned himself to keep a close watch on the proceedings. Inside the sealed room, his son looked around with a frown. Having located the speakers, the young man then turned to watch them.

_/Yes_./ Squall's voice came from a speaker inside the observation room.

"Have you junctioned or cast magic since ze breaking of ze bond?"
"Ze readings show zat you carry seven GF's. Name zem."


"Which GF was involved in ze unstable junction?"

"...Shiva."

"Junction Shiva."

Watching Odine's eager expression, Seifer felt like strangling the gnome. He just knew the little freak would jump in joy if Squall's magic had taken a turn for the worse. The whole place was giving him the chills.

Watching closely as Squall's irises changed to a soft glowing silver, Seifer didn't miss the slight flinch that crossed the brunet's features. Just as quickly as it had appeared, the man smoothed it away with a small frown, but it didn't fail to put Seifer on edge; Squall never flinched.

"Ze computer has assembled an inventory of your spells. Every minute I vill give you an order to cast one of zem. You vill aim over ze other red dot. Be precise and do not delay once ze order is given. Cast Ice on my mark." The doctor paused to fiddle with a final few settings.

"Now."

At the appearance of the first spell, Seifer frowned. It had taken a full two seconds longer for the cone of ice to appear than usual... Those timings were hard-wired into him from their countless days of sparring. The next spell materialized after an even further delay and it even flickered slightly. Seifer ran a hand through his hair as he watched Squall's eyebrows draw further together. This is bad.

"Can you tell anything from the readings?" he asked as he tried to decipher the graphs and numbers on the monitors himself. None of the numbers or graphs made any sense whatsoever.

When he only got an impatient "shhh" and a dismissive hand gesture for his efforts, he had to curb the rekindled urge to throttle the gnome.

"Now."

Switching his attention back to the white room, Seifer waited for the ice to appear. The delay was even longer this time. There was no doubt about it—Squall was getting worse with every spell he cast. Stepping closer to the window, he spotted the brunet's right hand clenching slightly.

"Now."

Seifer didn't miss the way gray-blue eyes shut for a fraction of a second this time, more strained than a normal blink. It had been brief and almost unnoticeable, but it had been there.

Looking back over to Odine, Seifer hardened his gaze. "He's in pain and his magic is affected. Even if your fancy machines can't tell you that, I can," he said firmly, then charged on. "How much more does he have to do? Just what exactly do you need?"

"Pain?" Laguna asked instantly. Squall had seemed composed to him, as if concentrating. "Doctor?"
"I am well aware of the fact. My equipment is quite adequate," the doctor replied with a huff, his eyes never straying from his monitors. "Now," he spoke into the mic, ordering the fifth Ice spell before turning to face the two men. "In order to correctly assess his condition, I must determine his limits. Without this data, no diagnosis can be made."

An assistant chose that exact moment to knock on the door and step inside. "The antiemetic you requested—"

"On the table!" Odine snapped, taking out his frustration on the assistant who rushed to place the meds on the table before hastily showing himself back out. The moment the man had gone, Odine bent towards the mic again.

"On my mark, change to Fire spells."

Unimpressed by Odine's explanation, Seifer forced himself to relent to the man's knowledge for the time being. Turning his gaze back to where the brunet was standing in the other room, he grit his teeth. Squall didn't protest before carrying out Odine's next order—even though it obviously hurt him.

The minutes ticked by slowly as he watched Squall cast one spell after another. The casting times were ridiculously slow now—there was no way the brunet would be a match for even a lowly cadet. Squall's hands were clenched into fists and a deep frown marred his brow. Seifer wanted nothing more than to see Squall cast Ultima or Holy with the same grace and speed he'd shown during the war.

Hearing Odine firmly demand another spell, Seifer frowned when the brunet didn't move. Squall wasn't reacting whatsoever. Not even a single twitch—nothing. Catching sight of the brunet's eyes, he immediately rushed to the door separating them. Squall's eyes were flickering between silver and gray-blue, just as they had back at the hotel.

Forcing the door open wide, he immediately began drawing the icy goddess. Offering no resistance this time, the Guardian Force calmly settled in the back of his mind. As the brunet started to collapse a few feet away, Seifer didn't have any time to deal with the searing headache and nausea that assaulted him. Closing the distance between them, he managed to hook his arms under Squall's shoulders just in time, the brunet falling back against his chest.

For a brief moment he was ready to tear the entire lab apart, to take it all out on Odine, until he felt Squall move in his hold. Helping the man stand back up, he distanced himself slightly, but kept a hand held out for the brunet to steady himself on.

"Squall?" he asked, eyeing the man carefully, needing to hear recognition in the man's voice. When no reply came, he stepped within the brunet's point of view. "Who am I?" he asked, unable to mask the urgency in his voice.

"An obnoxious bastard," Squall ground out without bite, gingerly stepping away from Seifer's support.

"Says the Princess," Seifer replied with a huff, bringing a hand up to knead at his brow.

Squall glared weakly in return, until realization hit him beyond his own massive headache. "You okay?"

Dismissing Squall's question, Seifer looked over to where Laguna was standing by the door. He felt about ready to vomit all over the floor, but he'd be damned if he'd show any weakness in front of
"What just happened?" Laguna asked shakily as he entered the room.

Spotting Loire's focus on Seifer's pinched face, Squall knew he had to act fast before the wrong questions would lead both Loire and Odine to all sorts of questions. He could explain away his own state, but not Seifer's.

"Ask Odine," he said with feigned nonchalance, stepping into the president's line of sight. But before the president could reply, Odine piped up through the speakers.

/Commander, Mr. President. Please leave ze room./

When Seifer turned to face the doctor in the other room with narrowed eyes and a straight back, no words of protest ensuing the man's order, Squall knew enough and cursed inwardly at the blond choosing the worst possible time for compliance. He would not let the doctor involve Seifer in this.

"Then I assume my tests are over?" he asked tersely, hoping Odine would prioritize him over whatever readings he had picked up on Seifer.

/Zey are not. I must simply exclude ze possibility zat my equipment is compromised./

At hearing the rational explanation Squall knew wasn't sincere, the far too impatient tone to Odine's voice confirmed his suspicion. Whatever the doctor had gleaned from his machines and monitors, the man wasn't letting it go. Seifer wasn't any help either, regarding him with narrowed eyes and the clear order to scram already.

_Idiot_. This wasn't the noble self-sacrifice the blond had envisioned; it was pointless and Squall wouldn't allow it.

"Your equipment is fine," he said evenly. He couldn't deny what Odine had seen on his monitors, but he could deny the doctor the opportunity to examine Seifer instead. "Either you examine me, or no one at all."

"Just do as he says," Seifer let out at Squall's continued stubbornness. "I can handle the imp."

"Why?" Squall retorted. "So Odine can get a new pet project? This has nothing to do with—" Loire's presence registered in his peripheral vision, the room's mics still picking up his every word. "—with your concern."

"I do not keep pet projects." Odine's voice dripped with distaste as he walked into the room. "If you are aware of zis man's readings," the doctor said sharply, jabbing his finger in Seifer's direction, "then you are aware zere are certain similarities you vill not have me ignore."

Regarding the doctor with contempt, Seifer resented the fact that he actually agreed with the gnome on something. "I used to be a knight," he said firmly as he eyed Odine. "Now fix Squall's problem."

Watching Odine's eyes widen at the idiot's revelation, Squall suppressed a groan. He could practically see the cogs turning in the doctor's head, plans taking shape that weren't likely to benefit either of them.

"Ze opportunity for a comparative study is very fortunate indeed. Zis vill certainly allow better understanding of ze Commander's test results!" Odine paused, looking at Seifer with clear intent. "I must know. Who vas your sorceress? How vas ze bond ended?"
"Ultimecia," Seifer said, his expression darkening. "And she died," he added in a lower voice, warning Odine to reel in his curiosity. He stepped closer to the doctor. "I'll tell you what's going to happen," he said, his behavior erring on threatening. "I'll do the tests you just had Squall do so you can have your little comparative study, and then you theorize and figure out how the hell to fix this shit. That's all."

Squall wouldn't have deemed it possible, but the doctor's eyes grew even wider with excitement. "Ah! I never did get access to zose files!" the man exclaimed happily, clearly unbothered with breaching comfort zones. "Vat was your name again? How long vere you bonded? And to vich of her incarnations?"

Seeing Seifer's eyes narrow warily in a revised examination of the doctor, Squall felt like supplying the blond with a dry "I warned you." Situating himself between Seifer and Odine, he forced the doctor's attention on himself. "Cut the questions. Finish my tests, and then we'll talk."

"You're not doing any more tests," Seifer interrupted resolutely from behind Squall. "He has all the information he needs."

"I most certainly do not!" the doctor exclaimed in outrage. "I am yet to determine vether his affliction is specific to ze GF Shiva or not. How are his summoning abilities affected? Vat of his magic defenses? Surely all zat is of importance. I do not even know vether ze Commander's incapability is limited to Fire and Ice magic. Ve have all but started!"

From his silently observing position near the door, Laguna didn't quite know what to make of the escalating argument playing out before him. "I'm not sure I've understood everything going on here, but this bickering stops now," he interrupted sternly, making sure he had everyone's attention as he stepped further into the room. "Clearly, Squall needs to have more tests done." Spotting the instantaneous effect his words had on Seifer's displeasure and Odine's excitement, he quickly continued to discourage both.

"My son getting treatment; that is the priority here," he emphasized, "not scientific experimentation." He eyed Odine sharply. "As for your curiosity concerning Mr. Almasy, you will curb it until a more appropriate time."

Waiting pointedly until Odine offered a reluctant nod, he then faced Squall. "We'll be right here on the other side. Warn us this time around—don't wait to unjunction until it's too late."

Pissed off at his opinion being so entirely disregarded, Seifer cursed under his breath as he made for the door.

"You are forgetting ze GF," he heard the little imp call out behind him. Turning around, he sent Odine a deadly glare before focusing his attention on Squall.

"Take her," he demanded, his stance forbidding.

Squall studied Seifer's drawn features, unsure whether the man could handle the strain. "Later," he refused. "I can do other tests first." Remembering Seifer's earlier request and the doctor's assistant, he added, "You should take the antiemetic."

Clenching his jaw, Seifer narrowed his eyes at the brunet. He wasn't sure what pissed him off more—having his opinion so completely disregarded, or having his weakness pointed out in front of the others. "Fuck this. I'll be in the other room." Turning around, he stalked out the door.

Squall sighed and refocused his attention on Loire, the man watching Seifer's retreat with a raised
"Will he be okay?" the president asked.

Squall huffed softly. The blond would get over himself. "Temper issues."

Laguna nodded after a moment of consideration. "Remember what I said. Don't push yourself." Receiving only a blank stare from his son in reply, he reluctantly let himself be ushered out the door by Odine's impatient muttering.

In the other room, Seifer stood leaning against the wall with his arms crossed in a forbidding stance. The young man only greeted him with a narrow-eyed gaze, before fixing his attention on the connecting window. Thinking better of striking up conversation just yet, Laguna instead watched his son as well.

He'd already known Squall had a protective streak when it came to Rinoa and his friends, but he'd never seen it manifested quite so... immaturely. His son usually kept a more level head, backing up his decisions with sound reasoning rather than simply forbidding something outright. Seifer had been no better. He hid a smile at the behavior he'd deem cute in eight-year olds, but he sobered quickly when Odine finished his preparations and spoke into the mic.

"Name and junction ze GF with ze second highest compatibility rating."

/Griever/

Laguna held his breath as Odine repeated the same orders to junction and cast on his mark. Squall's eyes changed to that eerie silver and focused on the target. Again Laguna failed to identify pain or anything more than slight strain in his son's expression as Squall cast spell after spell. He knew about Squall's tendency to keep a tight lid on any feelings or troubles he might have, but now he realized his son was just as good at hiding physical discomfort.

Casting an uncertain glance at Seifer, the blond's deep frown was infinitely more telling. It seemed this man could look beyond his son's mask. "How do you think he's doing. The same as before?"

"Worse."

Laguna frowned at the curt statement. "How can you tell?"

"Years of practice with the fucker."

"I understand it you two were classmates? Rinoa told me you were at the orphanage as well."

Seifer furrowed his brows. "Which orphanage?"

Remembering how his son had only found out about the orphanage later in life, Laguna quickly realized the blond's ignorance, even if he didn't understand why. He would've expected either his son or his friends to have informed Seifer a long time ago, but then again, he supposed it couldn't be an easy truth to share, certainly so because of Edea's involvement.

He summoned a mildly puzzled expression and shrugged. "Ah, forgive me. I must have misremembered. You were classmates though, right?"

"Only in our final year," Seifer corrected as his lips drew into a thin line. He didn't remember his last year at Garden fondly, especially not with how it had all ended.
"You knew each other outside class then?"

"We were the only gunbladers at Garden. Didn't have much choice in the matter."

"I see. No choice but to spar together for years," Laguna teased with mock understanding. He doubted anyone would stick around his difficult son for such a long time, if not out of choice or some form of friendship.

"Well, he wasn't half bad with a blade," Seifer admitted as he watched Squall. A slight smirk appeared on his lips. "And he's fun to rile up. Takes a while to get him steaming, but it's worth the hassle."

Laguna chuckled. After what he'd just witnessed, he could imagine it vividly. "You do match my son in obstinacy, I'll grant you that."

Seifer's smirk grew. "I might be stubborn, but no one can match Squall on that front. The fucker almost froze to death because of it once, back when we were teenagers." Seeing the eager expression on the president's face, Seifer couldn't help himself from elaborating. "An instructor wrongly accused us for a stupid prank in class. We both denied it, but the guy made us kneel outside in the snow until we would confess. Blessed with brains, I chose cleaning floors inside where it was warm over freezing my ass off, but Squall... he refused to admit to something he hadn't done."

Seifer shook his head slightly. "Later, when I'd finished, I looked for him. I just had to rub in how stupid he'd been for spending any minute longer outside in the snow than absolutely necessary." He huffed as he remembered the sight that had greeted him. "He was still there, his hair frosty and lips blue—in the exact same position I'd last seen him. He still wouldn't let up, all pissed off. In the end I had to get the instructor, who was, of course, horrified. The stupid prick had forgotten all about Squall... He went out and ordered Squall to get his stupid ass inside and report to the infirmary." He shook his head again. "Squall thought he'd won. Even when he was still suffering from a cold a week later."

Laguna laughed and shook his head at the story he hadn't heard before. "Hyne, that's awful...Sounds just like him, though." His gaze travelled back to his son, his own words catching up with him. Squall's tendency to disregard his health clearly wasn't a recent thing.

Seifer frowned at Squall's drawn expression and clenched fists. "He's close to his limit," he spoke lowly. Impatient for Squall to end the junction, he walked over to the window and banged on it loudly. When he had Squall's attention, he drew a line across his neck in an clear gesture for Squall to put a stop to the test.

Meeting Seifer's narrowed gaze, Squall swallowed thickly. For a brief moment he considered disregarding the man's warning, but already the edge of his vision was swarming with flecks of darkness. He could not manage it; a series of the simplest spells and he could not manage it. He closed his eyes, unable to stand another second of Seifer's gaze, and unjunctioned. He let out a sigh as the piercing headache ebbed away and the darkness receded. Unfurling his clenched fists, he shook away the slight tremor in them with a quick flexing of his fingers and wrists. He did not dare look back at the window—he knew Seifer could see it all.

The speakers crackled alive with Odine's voice. "Zis vill not do," the doctor complained with a suffering sigh. "Commander. Ze apparent time limitation to your ability to junction necessitates a change in plans. Ve vill abandon gradual build-up." Squall could hear the man ruffling about, before the doctor relayed his new order.
"Ven you are ready, junction and summon immediately."

A faint protest sounded through the speaker, Loire no doubt, but Squall knew the stakes better than all of them. He needed to know, without room for speculation or doubt, how bad his condition was. Keeping his gaze fixed on mid-distance, he junctioned. The pain returned instantly, along with the dark swimming at the edge of his vision.

It was too much, too fast. Gritting his teeth, he refused to give in and summoned.

Griever materialized, not calm and menacing by his side, but stalking around him in a protective circle. The effort of maintaining the summon took everything out of him, his head reeling and the onset of a blackout already threatening to overtake him. Even as he felt it happen, he could not control the connection—his disorientation and frustration flowed into the GF's mind unfiltered, unguided.

The lion bared its teeth in a low growl and stopped its protective stalk to fix yellow eyes on the window, on the three men in the other room—the perceived cause of their captivity and its master's distress.

Crippled with pain, Squall looked on powerlessly as the beast threw itself against the window, the metal frame groaning in its bolts under the impact. The glass trembled ominously as Griever retreated for another throw, again and again. The noise rang sharply in his ears, and it was all he could do to stay conscious.

/No,/ he tried to convey to his lion. /They are friends./

Griever didn't hear him. The glass held, but the bolts were beginning to give at the relentless onslaught. Slumping forward, Squall clutched his hands to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Stop!" he shouted, doing something he'd never done before—unjunctioning while a GF was still summoned. It was like pulling out the plug; crude and immediate. Griever's shock surged through him as the beast finally disappeared, leaving behind angry claw marks on glass and concrete.

Disoriented, he tried to right himself, but the room was swirling violently. Dark wisps of fog licked a slow path along the floor, towards him. His heart ran cold at the sight.

A loud thud sounded as the metal door swung open and someone ran towards him. He couldn't see anything—only darkness. Bile rose at the back of his throat as he swayed on his feet, but then someone grabbed hold of his arms, steadying him into place.

Keeping a firm grip on Squall, Seifer watched as gray-blue eyes finally rose to meet his. Squall still looked like he was in pain, but at least there was recognition in gray-blue eyes. As the man stood perfectly still, he carefully let go of his arms.

"Was that...?" he asked, nodding briefly towards the floor, certain he'd just caught Squall hallucinating.

Leave it to the blond to notice everything, Squall thought uncharitably. He looked back at the floor, but the dark, curling fog that had swallowed his feet was gone and the room no longer spun out of control.

"Squall! Are you okay? That GF—What happened?" Loire was walking towards them, his face pinched and a slight stiffness to his leg betraying the onset of one of the man's more peculiar traits. Squall eyed it warily and quickly gave Seifer a covert nod in reply before Loire could notice the exchange.
"I'm fine," he reassured, taking a step away from Seifer's side.

Seifer snorted. Crossing his arms, he turned to face the President. "You still gonna push for more tests?"

Laguna shook his head, looking bewildered. "...No. No, of course not." He glanced at the observation window, to where Odine was scuttling from machine to machine, the doctor's attention riveted to his readings. "That was certainly not what I had in mind when Odine said he needed more tests."

Releasing a sigh, the president gave his now fully cramped up leg a stretch and returned his gaze to his son. "What happened?" he repeated, not bothering to comment on Squall's statement that the man was doing fine.

Squall had no ready answer. All he knew was that he'd had no control over the summon. None whatsoever. And he'd been only moments away from blacking out a second time. Years of magic training, all his abilities, lost. The image unfolded in his mind's eye; his squad looking at him for help, for the skills that would turn their situation around, but he'd be powerless. Useless. And the hallucinations...

This meant the end of his career, simple as that.

Feeling increasingly trapped, Squall was unable to remain still in the confinement of the concrete room, under the close scrutiny of the other two men. Avoiding meeting anyone's gaze, he walked towards the door. He needed air.

"Where are you going?" Seifer asked, falling in step just behind the brunet.

"Outside."

At the distant quality in Squall's voice, Seifer felt the weight of what had just happened. Stopping in his stride, he held out an arm and stopped the President from following his son.

"Let him go," he said, keeping his voice low. "He needs space." He let his arm drop when the president remained silent. "Squall had no control over his summon. It's just as messed up as the rest of his magic." Running a hand through his hair, he left the room.

In the observation room, Odine was glaring at the door Squall no doubt had just stalked out of. "Zis is ridiculous!" he exclaimed, his hands raised. "Of course, Mr. President! I vill clear my schedule for ze Commander, Mr. President! Vat else could possibly take precedence!"

Turning around, the red-faced doctor directed his rant at the two remaining men. "How am I expected to vork like zis? Vith constant interruptions, and now, vithout ze test subject!"

"Just do," Seifer said harshly, walking to stand in front of Odine with crossed arms.

"You dare tell me how to do my job?" the doctor almost squeaked. "Vat do you know of science?! Vat else vill aid your dear commander, if not my expertise?"

"Odine," Laguna interrupted warningly. "You will have to do with the information you've got. What can you tell us?"

"Zat ze commander is possibly lying," the doctor answered. "I vas surprised to find zat his case was so similar to previous test subjects, all but in one aspect. Hallucinations. The majority of failed hosts suffered zem, but ze commander stated he does not." Grabbing a printout from the other side
of the room, he stabbed his fingers at the data and supplied thinly, "Zis strongly suggests otherwise."

He looked up at Seifer, his voice a sarcastic deadpan. "Shall I trust ze commander's word, or ze tests you so firmly protested against?"

Seifer glared at the doctor. He didn't want to expose Squall's secret, but couldn't risk him missing out on proper treatment either. "Just fix whatever the hell you think is wrong with him."

"Ze tests it is then," Odine said smugly. "As for any conclusions, I still have to examine zese last readings in more detail. I have never seen anomalies such as zese in a summon. Most fascinating!"

He pointed excitedly at a wildly spiking graph on the screen. "You see zis? Zese are ze first readings of its kind! Failed hosts from my earlier experiments suffered similar difficulties maintaining junction, but zey definitely could not summon! I speculate zat ze commander's extraordinary GF compatibility rates have been unaffected by ze sorceress' intrusion, allowing him to at least establish ze apparition of—"

"Doctor," Laguna interrupted, most of Odine's rant sailing right over his head. "Cut to the chase. What is wrong with my son? And what's this I hear about hallucinations?" He hadn't missed Seifer's evasive reaction.

All the while reading through yet another printout, Odine gave a vigorous nod. "Yes, yes. Hallucinating was one of ze main symptoms test subjects suffered from after an unsuccessful junction. A junction—" the doctor paused, tapping his index finger to his temple, "—is all in here. Ze host's brain is vere ze GF resides and zis comes at a price. Memory loss, yes?" The doctor fell silent for a moment, humming in distraction at something on a screen, before continuing.

"Ven a junction backfires, for vatever reason, certain types of trauma can occur. Too long exposure of an unfit mind to an invasive junction is particularly damaging, especially ven aborted. Like a leg amputated, ze brain must deal viz ze disappearance of ze GF. One could liken ze hallucinations to phantom pains, caused by ze sudden lack of sensory and magical input of ze GF in ze brain."

Gathering several printouts into a clipboard, the doctor turned to face them, his voice matter-of-fact."I have now sufficient data to verify zat ze sorceress' bond is indeed a junction of ze most invasive kind; ze knight is ze host, ze sorceress ze parasitic entity. And ze commander was exposed for over two years. I hypothesize zat we are looking at problems of dependency and trauma to ze brain."

Seifer balled his hands into fists. "What's the treatment?" he demanded. "And what about the others? Did they recover?" In the end that was all that mattered. "Would reestablishing the bond be able fix it?" he asked somberly.

"Any particular order you want zose answered in?" Odine replied in mock servitude, but the rest of his retort was dissuaded by the president's headshake. Releasing a grumbling sigh, the doctor continued.

"Vit ze limited data at hand, it iz impossible to predict ze result of reestablishing ze bond. GF junctions and sorceress bonds may be alike in how zey activate in ze brain, but zere seems to be one big difference. Control. A GF relinquishes it. A sorceress takes it. Ze balance of power is inverted." Odine paused, his frown suggesting he'd come to a reluctant decision. "However informative its study would be, I would advise...against rebonding."

The doctor let out a wistful sigh, eyes pouring over his clipboard again. "Unlike GF junctions, ze
bond does not seem symbiotic in nature; parasitic fits ze bill better. I dare even speculate zat a form of addiction is involved. Ze knight is made dependent on ze magic of his sorceress, ze access to his own innate magic cut off. Zat is vat ze readings suggest. And considering Miss Heartilly's problems are simply suppressed for now, not controlled, I vould not readily invite such a precarious bonding."

"As for ze treatment of ze failed hosts; it was very straightforward," Odine said, moving towards the intercom. "Medication to manage ze various symptoms, vile zey kept practicing junctioning and magic. Some came to tolerate junctions with varying levels of success, some failed but recovered once zey gave up practicing. Only a few suffered permanent damage." The last statement was delivered with a dismissive wave of the hand, as if such statistics were within perfectly acceptable norms.

"I suggest a similar approach for ze commander: medication and practice, under close monitoring. His system must fight off the bond's addictive properties; his magic must become self-sustained again. However— " Odine intoned, turning his narrow-eyed gaze to Seifer, "—If ze meds I prescribe are to optimally alleviate ze commander's symptoms, you must answer some of my questions. Vat kind of hallucinations is ze commander having? Vat else has he been dishonest about?" He paused. "And wiz you being ze only past case, I vill also need to know ze symptoms you experienced after your Sorceress's death and vich of those have persevered until today."

Returning Odine's stare full force, Seifer wished he could dismiss the doctor's demand for answers with an insulting remark. He still didn't want to break Squall's trust and the brunet had been right earlier—no information about hallucinations could make it into the man's file. Nor could anything that tied Squall to himself make it in there. He hadn't considered the damage Squall's reputation would suffer if anyone found out about their current connection—about the Commander staying with the man who spearheaded the opposite side of the war.

"I'll answer your questions," he said, leaning back against the edge of a desk. "But there will be no mention of hallucinations in Squall's file." His gaze was firm. "Nor will there be any mention of me in there. Whatever you put in your files, don't link me to Squall."

Laguna frowned at the requests. He could understand why the association between Squall and Seifer should be kept under wraps, just like his own connection to his son had to be. The hallucinations, however—those worried him. Deciding to trust the blond for now, he nodded at the doctor to proceed.

Odine rolled his eyes. "Confidentiality is required of me daily, mister Almasy. I have no qualms about zat."

"... His sight, hearing and sense of smell is affected," Seifer said as he focused on what Squall had told him. "Like everything else, he hides it well. He's told me he has them on and off. Black fog, noise, that kind of thing. Sounds can be painful. Also..." He grit his teeth. "He couldn't recognize me when he first came to. He just reacted on instinct, like an animal. I cast Sleep on him and then when he woke up again he seemed like himself. I think he's had nightmares as well."

Laguna's eyes widened slightly at all the new information. Earlier, when Seifer had rushed in to assist Squall, he thought he'd misheard the man ask "Who am I," but now he understood. "Could it happen again?" he asked, realizing just how much Squall had downplayed his condition. "The lack of recognition, I mean."

Odine hummed lowly, nodding as he drummed his fingers against his clipboard. "Most curious. Zis never occurred wiz my previous test subjects. It must be specific to ze broken bond," he mused. "My readings indicate zat ze strain of ze broken bond does not allow for junctioning, hence causing
ze peculiar state. It should be avoidable by drawing ze moment ze Commander loses control over ze junction—as Mr. Almasy demonstrated," he added with a disingenuous smile sent to the blond.

"Then, I'd say you have all the information you need, doctor," Laguna said, his thoughts wandering to his son sitting somewhere outside, or worse, having gone off somewhere on his own. "How soon can you have the medication ready?"

Seifer tuned out as the doctor started to drone on about all the pills Squall would soon be popping. When the doctor scheduled an appointment for Squall the following week and wanted to pen him in as well, he grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was to answer more of the little gnome's questions and go through the tests himself, but the doctor had said a comparison would be helpful in treating Squall. Maybe he could get some answers of his own.

Agreeing to an appointment before work the following Tuesday, his eyes dropped to the pack of antiemetics on the desk and he couldn't stop himself from asking outright. "Is there any chance the treatment would work for me?"

Odine looked up from his schedule. "Hard to say, viz so little to base conjecture on. I would not exclude ze possibility, nor attest to ze improbability."

Seifer pushed away from the desk. "I'd like you to prescribe me something for the nausea and pain," he said firmly, grabbing the antiemetics on his way out.

Eager to leave as well, Laguna turned to Odine. "I'll be in touch, doctor," he said, making for the door as well. "And send those meds right down. For both of them," he emphasized, in case Odine's more vindictive trait would make him forget Seifer's request. He hadn't missed the doctor muttering "oaf" under his breath at the blond's departure.

"Yes, yes," the doctor said with a dismissive wave of the hand, his attention already fixed on his screens again. "Until ze next family crisis."

Laguna sighed and let the man's attitude slip. Nothing short from funding cuts could keep that man in line—the downside of having a brilliant scientist under his direct command.

Joining Seifer outside in the hallway, in wait for the lift, he considered all that had transpired that day. He was grateful for the blond's presence, well aware how differently things would have gone without him there.

"I can see what Rinoa was trying to tell me now," he said, breaking the silence. "I wanted to take Squall in at the palace, but...well—you know how Squall is. He doesn't listen to me... Not the way he seems to listen to you." Meeting the blond's gaze, he smiled. "He wouldn't have allowed any of his other friends to accompany him today."

Turning his lips down at the corners at the unlikely use of "friend," Seifer realized just how little the man really knew his son. "He just wanted me to hear what Odine had to say. Similar circumstances and all."

Laguna nodded as he entered the lift. "Perhaps, but isn't that telling in itself? Earning his trust and concern isn't easy. Either way, I should thank you for helping my son. I can rest assured now."

Huffing, Seifer followed Laguna into the smaller space. Squall bringing him along had nothing to do with trust or concern. Just some strange sense of righteousness. But then he remembered how Squall had physically stepped in front of him as if to shield him from Odine and how the brunet had been thinking about antiemetics for him when the man should have been far more concerned
Following Seifer out into the lobby, Laguna's optimism flagged at seeing the blond so solemn. "Odine seemed confident about his proposed treatment," he tried. "Give it your all, and save the worrying for when all else has failed. That usually works for me."

"He'll be back to normal in no time," Seifer reassured, knowing he'd do whatever he could to make it the truth.

Laguna nodded as they came to a halt by the large sculpture in the large entrance hall. "Let's not forget about you," he said with a smile. "I hope you'll fare just as well." He looked around but there was no sign of anyone bringing down the meds yet.

"Seems like we're in for a bit of a wait," he said, glancing at the time on his phone. "You'll have to tell me some more stories about your cadet days. If I'm to believe Quistis, my son was nothing but a model student." He chuckled. "I suspect you have a more interesting take on things."

A smirk grew on Seifer's lips before he chuckled as well. "I can tell you a story or two," he admitted, his voice doing nothing to hide his eagerness at spilling Squall's dirtier secrets to the brunet's dad. "And trust Quistis to make Squall out to be the perfect student. You know she used to have a crush on him, right?"

Laguna's eyebrows shot up high. "I didn't until now."

"As far as the rumor's went, Squall managed to kill any romance early on by telling her to go talk to a wall," Seifer said with a grin. "I don't suppose that helped his nickname much."

Shaking his head, Laguna stifled his laughter. "And what nickname would that be?"

"The Ice Prince," Seifer said unapologetically. "He used to keep to himself."

Laguna gave a slow nod. He'd already gotten the impression that Squall's friendships didn't predate the war. "I'm sure he still would if he had any say in it. Thank Hyne for stubborn friends," he said, smiling. "So... others understandably called him Ice Prince, but I distinctively overheard you calling him Princess."

Seifer smirked brazenly. "Yeah, he's always hated that," he said as his eyes caught on a lab assistant heading their way with a white plastic bag in his hands. "About time," he said, nodding in the direction of the approaching man.

"Here you go, sir," the assistant said, holding out the small bag to the President. Impatient, Seifer didn't ask for permission when he snatched the meds from the man's grasp.

"I'll take those."

"Thank you for your trouble," Laguna said quickly, smoothing over the blond's crass behavior with an apologetic smile.

"No trouble at all," the assistant muttered. "Those were the pills we had in stock, but Odine upped the dosage to fit the symptoms. We'll have new pills customized by next week." Keeping his explanation short, he nodded at the both of them in parting.

"Sirs."

When the assistant was out of earshot, Seifer eyed the president seriously. "Let me deal with
Squall. On my own. The less people he has to deal with, the better.”

Letting out a sigh, Laguna nodded. "I understand. It's probably for the best.” He doubted he was the one Squall wanted to talk to right now. He'd already convinced his son to come to tests in the first place, so he wouldn't push his luck.

"One request though," he added. "Could I have your contact information? Squall tends to ignore phone calls." He already had the information—he'd read reports and files about everything the blond had been up to since his arrival in Esthar and more, but he made the request all the same. Reaching into one of his pockets, he pulled out a card. "You can reach me personally at this number."

Taking the card and borrowing a pen and paper from the President, Seifer scribbled down his own phone number and address. "If I don't answer right away, just leave a message," he said, handing the piece of paper to Laguna. "I'd say 'feel free to drop by' but I know that's not really an option given your job and Squall would probably throw a hissy fit."

Wondering just what Squall had told Seifer, Laguna hid the jolt of hurt the blond's words caused. "I'll refrain from unannounced visits," he acquiesced, the same promise he'd made with Rinoa. "That doesn't mean the two of you can't come to the palace instead, of course. I've been looking forward to having my son over for dinner ever since his leave started."

"I'll let him know," Seifer said, not mentioning just how unlikely it'd be for Squall and him to show up at the palace for a visit, as friends no less. He'd do what he could until the brunet was better, but he'd be surprised if Squall stayed for long.

Laguna forced a smile at the reply, not bothering to press further. "I trust you to make sure he'll take those," he said, nodding at the bag of meds.

"If he doesn't, I'll give him hell," Seifer said with a brief quirk to his lips. "Anyways, I better split."

"You better," Laguna agreed, extending his hand. "It was good to meet you, Seifer. You boys take care."

"You too, old man," Seifer replied as he shook the man's hand. "And good luck with running the country and all," he added with a smile. Before the president had a chance to reply, he turned and headed for the exit—time to track Squall down.

The man hadn't gone far. The moment he stepped outside, his eyes automatically landed on the brunet. Squall was leaning against the translucent fence not far away from the entrance, lost to thought. Seifer picked up his stride.

"We're done for today," he said as he stopped by Squall's side. He didn't get any reaction apart from gray-blue eyes raising to meet his. Brooding couldn't have helped the brunet's mood much. "You'll be fine. I've got your meds, so let's go," he said before starting down the path leading to the cars.

Squall pushed away from the fence and looked back at the building. Loire stood at the entrance and waved at him, giving no sign of coming out to say goodbye. Nodding at the man, he followed after Seifer with a frown. He hadn't expected for Odine to let go so easily of not one, but two guinea pigs. Going by the tense set to Seifer's shoulders, perhaps the man had just rushed out in a temper.

"That's it?" he asked when he drew even with the blond. He'd expected more tests, more bad news.
The declaration that he would be "fine" seemed rather ridiculous at this point.

"Yup. You just have to take these pills," he indicated the bag in his hand, "and practice using your magic. You'll be back to normal in no time."

Squall regarded the far too large bag of meds warily. Waiting for Seifer to unlock the car, he slipped into the passenger's seat and stared ahead. There was no such thing as an easy fix in this world—he'd learned that the hard way.

"We'll both have to go in for a check-up next week," Seifer said, before passing the bag of meds to the brunet. Putting his key in the ignition, he pulled out of the parking lot.

Not missing the "both" in that statement, Squall sighed and brought up a hand to knead at his temple. The headache still hadn't gone. Not in the mood to instigate another fight with the blond over this, he looked down at the seemingly innocent paper bag.

"The pills should get rid of your symptoms, including the hallucinations," Seifer said evenly, aware he might become very familiar with Squall's gunblade after this. "Nothing will go in your file about hallucinations. Nor your connection to me."

Slowly turning to watch the blond, Squall felt dangerously close to the limit of his patience. "You told them."

"Odine's readings gave it away. There was no point in denying it—apart from possibly fucking up your treatment. Odine's test subjects had them too," Seifer said, yanking the gear stick up a notch. "I made him swear it wouldn't be recorded anywhere. No one will know."

Squall huffed, letting go of the matter. No one knowing would do him little good in the end if it was permanent. Opening the paper bag, he inwardly groaned at the multitude of jars, his stomach protesting in advance. This "treatment" of pills and practice sounded far too naive.

Pulling a random jar from the bag, he eyed his codename written on the label. "E. Vargha." Apparently Odine was capable of confidentiality. The instructions written below however were far less innocent. "Nightmares, night terrors, insomnia?" he intoned incredulously. "What else did you tell them?!

Seifer met Squall's glare head on. He couldn't believe the man had the gall to speak to him like that after everything he'd done to help the fucking icicle that day. "The truth."

Eyes narrowing, Squall turned his gaze back to the paper bag. He had no reply to Seifer's statement, not without risking bringing up the previous night and the very real nightmare he'd had. Mood souring further, he picked out another jar which read "balance impairment and vertigo," the recommended dosage 4 pills a day.

"Look, I don't know what happened last night, but I told them what I saw. To me, it looked like you were having a nightmare. I know you said you didn't have any, but maybe you just don't remember. Odine said sleep disturbances were common, so it's worth trying, right? I mean, you've been more tired—maybe nightmares are the reason."

Squall suppressed a snort. Seifer didn't know half of his sleep troubles, and he'd like to keep it that way. Dropping the vertigo pills back into the bag, he picked out another jar with a frown. Turning it into his hand, he had to read the fine print to make out its purpose. Some kind of magic stabilizer he was supposed to take throughout the day. If they were anything like Rinoa's magic suppressors, he knew he was in for unpleasant side effects.
He'd just take the meds he felt he needed. It was the only thing he had control over—the amount of
meds that would be circulating his system. He didn't allow himself to think they might actually
work. He would do without false hope.

Going through the content of the paper bag, his mood deteriorated even further at the high dosage
he found on every label, but it wasn't the painkillers or stabilizers that caused him pause. Rereading
the labeling on the inconspicuous looking jar, the words remained the same.

"Big oaf. That would be you, I assume," he stated dryly.

Watching the blond's fists clench around the steering wheel, Squall felt little sympathy for the man
after he had blabbed to Loire and Odine. He returned his attention to the bag, pulling out another
magic stabilizer, for Seifer this time.

Apparently the conclusions reached at the lab were promising enough for Seifer to place hope in
the simplistic treatment of drugging the hell out of them both and "practicing." He looked at the
paper bag with new eyes.

He'd known Seifer's nonchalance about his crippled magic had been feigned. As much as he didn't
like the thought of exposing the blond to Odine's whims, he hadn't stopped to consider that Seifer
might not share his reluctance to seek help.

"...You think these will help?"

"They did for others," Seifer replied without inflection. "The research on magic and junctions
Odine mentioned—he seemed to think the bond you had with Rinoa was similar to that. Sounds
like it did quite a number on you," he commented, pausing briefly as he overtook a car in front of
them. "He said it was like a parasite, that you've probably become dependent on her magic and
now you can't use your own... Hence the retraining."

"The hallucinations are like phantom pains—like your brain's way of trying to deal with the lack of
input where Rinoa used to be." He shrugged. "I don't know." He ran a hand through his hair. "I
asked if rebonding would work, but Odine advised against it. That was before he told us about the
treatment and his past successes."

Squall mulled over the new information. He put little faith in Odine's "past successes" when he and
Seifer were the first knights the doctor would attempt to treat. "And you?" he asked. The blond
kept talking about the issue as if it concerned Squall only.

"Worth a shot," Seifer said, even though he didn't really believe it'd work for him. The doctor
hadn't seemed convinced either way and Seifer's magic had been neglected for over two years—not
the best starting point. But he'd take the pills and hope for the best. Even a slight improvement
could change so much.

Squall's gaze fell back to the pills in his lap. *Retraining.* He thought back to the pain and
disorientation he'd experienced in that white labroom, the destruction he'd almost allowed Griever
to cause. He'd struggled with the most basic spells, spells he'd mastered at the age of twelve.

He'd always been ahead of the pack when it came to magic. It had been his only source of pride as
a cadet, when for years he'd been scrawner than everybody else, lagging behind in physical
exercises. It had been the only thing to set him apart from other SeeDs at a later age as well, the
only reason to feel *some* confidence in his capacity as commander.

To have that taken away from him... Squall sighed and let his head fall back against the headrest.
Retraining would be difficult, not only because of the physical strain. But then a thought occurred to him. It seemed unreal, an uncanny twist of fate, that for a second time in his life Seifer would be there, training with him. Squall glanced at the blond next to him. To know that the blond was in the same boat as him made his predicament a little more bearable.

"I know somewhere we can practice," Seifer said, wanting to get started as soon as possible. "There's an unused warehouse where I work. It would be perfect. We could start tomorrow morning."

Squall grew thoughtful at the suggestion. Seifer had already thought up the specifics for their training, when all he'd done was panic and flee out of the lab. He contemplated the location—away from civilians, just him and Seifer. He couldn't assume accidents like Griever wouldn't happen again. ".Okay."

"I start work at ten. If we get up around seven, that should give us a couple of hours."

In spite of his own lack of faith, Squall drank in the familiarity of the moment. Seifer hadn't changed in how he approached obstacles; charging them head-on and never accepting defeat. The blond's effect on himself hadn't changed either.

"Sounds good," he agreed, more than used to training at ungodly hours of the day and being pushed by Seifer into more and better.

"It'll be just like old times, huh?" Seifer said, a smile growing on his lips.

Not expecting a reply, he began considering the practical side of things. Squall was bound to want to keep up his physical training and get back into that as soon as possible as well. Even back at Garden, Squall had been ruthless with his training regime, hating to lose as little as a day's worth of training.

"You should sign up at the local SCTA for your work outs," he said, focusing on the traffic in front of them. "It's close by and should have everything you need. If you feel like taking your frustration out on something, there's even a training area with your usual fake monsters."

"Of course, they're stripped of their magic for the sake of the lovely sheltered Estharians, but you can always draw the attention of a dozen for a bit of a challenge."

Meeting Seifer's gaze, Squall nodded. He could use the physical exertion to distract himself, but he'd skip the monster area. He wanted to wield his gunblade in a training session that demanded his best—not some easy targets that gave none of the satisfaction real monsters did. Even though he was tired and not in the best of shapes, he knew what he wanted.

"Let's spar."

Hearing those words again—words that had always been a prelude to his best times at Garden—Seifer couldn't suppress his excitement.

"We'll have to be quick then," he said, knowing he couldn't shirk his duties. "I have class from eight to ten and after that I have to go in for work." They'd be pressed for time for sure. But to spar with Squall... It had been far too long.
Squall frowned at the mention of "class." Seifer hadn't mentioned any kind of studies before. The blond had never prioritized class over sparring either, luring Squall into skipping class more than once in the past. It seemed both of them had been forced to accept accountability for their actions since the war. Grudgingly, he accepted the imposed time limit.

"Quick it is."

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Shifting Delusions

[Tiamat SCTA, Thursday, 23rd of October, 6:14 pm]

After a rushed drive and stop at Seifer's apartment to grab their gear, Squall tried his best to appear composed when they finally pulled up at the Tiamat SCTA. The blond had pushed the speed limit all the way there, and by the time they slammed the car doors closed behind them, the tension between them had risen to new heights. It was that old familiar anticipation, and having gone without it for over two years, he could admit to himself he used to live for those moments back when they were cadets. Everything else at Garden had been monotonous and routine, but never his sparring sessions with Seifer.

Squall looked up at the Tiamat building as they crossed the parking lot at a brisk pace, their gunblade cases and gear slung over their shoulders. He'd only ever seen the SCTA's Sphinxara division in the upper class part of Esthar. This building was older and smaller, but well maintained. A slow trickle of people entered and left the building, none of which Squall would have labeled as much of challenge to take on in battle. The casual greetings and sloppy postures were a far cry from Garden's sharp salutes and discipline. This felt more like a civilian school than anything.

His first impression was confirmed when they entered the foyer. Boisterous teenagers were sitting at either side of the large room, occupying tables and chatting loudly. There was no dress code or uniform that he could discern. There were also adults milling about with all kinds of melee weapons, but only a rare few of them sported any scars or signs of true battle.

Following Seifer to the reception desk, Squall raised an eyebrow when the blond introduced him to the receptionist as "Vargha," one of his favored codenames. He was certain he hadn't mentioned it to Seifer. The blond seemed to be on good terms with the receptionist, who rather dubiously granted Squall access to the training grounds with a lethal weapon, no credentials needed. All it had taken was Seifer vouching for him.

Squall started to wonder why the blond would need to attend any classes here. He doubted a facility like this could teach Seifer anything he hadn't already mastered years ago.

Nodding to the man at the reception desk, Squall let Seifer guide him to the left hallway. He could feel the receptionist's eyes on his back until they turned a corner, and wondered whether this was the first time Seifer had brought in a guest visitor.

Just outside the changing rooms, he wasn't sure he'd heard right when an exiting student greeted the blond as they entered. He didn't miss the perfunctory nod Seifer gave in return either.

"Sir?" Squall repeated dryly as the door closed behind them.

Seifer turned to face Squall with a smirk. "What can I say, the kids around here know how to show proper respect," he said, dumping his bag on a wooden bench. Squall rolled his eyes in response, just as expected.

As the man got out of his everyday wear and exposed pale skin, the true fighter was revealed: lean muscle and old scars. The worn black combat pants and white t-shirt Squall pulled out of his bag filled Seifer with anticipation—he knew exactly what Squall looked like in his usual training gear and it wasn't for the faint hearted. He'd lost count of the times he'd masturbated to that visual.

Suppressing the thrill at seeing Squall in his old gear, he grabbed his own bag and headed for the
end of the room. "My locker's in here," he said, pushing open a door with a sign reading "Instructors only."

Squall halted in his steps, looking from the sign to Seifer. "You teach here?" It made more sense than the blond being a student here, but he'd sooner have expected Seifer to avoid all classrooms after Garden. Working on weapons seemed more in line with his temperament.

"Someone has to show the brats the right end of a blade," Seifer said with a smug smile.

Squall huffed at Seifer's arrogance. Taking the news in stride, Seifer's mention of a "class" made sense now. It also meant they wouldn't have to cut their spar short in order for the blond to hurry to some class at the other end of the city. *A gunblade instructor.* That definitely had to mean the blond hadn't let his skills slide.

When Seifer dropped his bag into his private locker and stepped aside for him to do the same, Squall noticed the uniforms folded relatively neatly on a small shelf. He looked pointedly from the uniforms to Seifer.

"You know what they say about a man in uniform," Seifer said as he wiggled an eyebrow.

Dropping his own bag into the locker, Squall snorted. This evening was getting more and more unlikely. Seifer—an instructor who actually wore his uniforms. The man wouldn't have been caught dead in his cadet garbs back in the day.

Closing the locker, Seifer leaned against it while waiting for it to lock up, his eyes dropping to Squall's hips. Letting them slowly travel to the brunet's eyes, he lowered his voice and spoke conspiratorially. "Speaking of which, when do I get to see you in yours?"

Squall blinked at the statement, blindsided by the sudden return of lewd remarks minutes before they would spar. Acute discomfort followed where Seifer's eyes had studied him in mock appreciation. Squall frowned. Apparently the novelty hadn't worn off yet for the idiot blond, and Squall knew his own reactions of embarrassment were to blame.

He refused to be an easy target like that. Hitching Revolver onto his shoulder, he returned Seifer's gaze evenly. "I'd worry about the fighter, not the uniform."

Still smirking, Seifer pretended to consider Squall's answer. "Mmm, you're right," he said, pushing away from his slouched position against the locker. "After all, the fun only happens after the uniform comes off, right?" he added, glancing over his shoulder and sending Squall a wink before exiting the locker room.

Squall's grip tightened on Revolver's hilt. What had become a stain in his memory, a source of self-consciousness and self-doubt like he hadn't experienced since his early teen years, had apparently been bland and inconsequential enough for Seifer to turn into a joke.

Following Seifer into the hallway, he let his anger fuel his intent. A reminder of just *why* he wasn't one to toy with was more than two years overdue.

Leading them out back to the monster training area, Seifer followed a path that would lead them to a secluded area away from any spectators. He didn't want any interruptions. Setting a timer on his watch, he glanced back at Squall. The brunet was following him in silence, a serious expression on his features.

He hadn't expected them to spar this soon, or for Squall to find out about his job as an instructor. He hadn't detected any bad vibes from the brunet after he found out—only slight disbelief. He'd
always looked down on instructors himself, had always believed that if you were good at something, then you'd damn well do it and not spend your time teaching it.

He frowned. He would've preferred being out there, fighting monsters, doing missions. But for a second chance at making a life for himself, it wasn't half bad. At least he got to stay in shape this way. And boss brats around.

Nearing the clearing, he felt the adrenaline kicking in. It was always a rush to spar with Squall, and just like back at Garden, the fun started with the anticipation. He had no idea what Squall's moves would be like—it had been more than two years since their last spar. It'd be like a clean slate. All he knew for sure was that he'd definitely have a proper challenge. He stole a glimpse of Revolver. There was no way in hell he would be able to look at himself in the mirror if he didn't give Squall a proper fight. He'd quit his fucking job if it turned out he'd become what he'd always feared: a second rate gunblader that was only good for teaching kids.

With a grimace, he gestured towards the spot and moved back a bit before getting into his fighting stance. As Squall moved into place as well, he knew no more words would be spoken until one of them had been defeated. This was it. They'd find out if they were still on par.

Taking a few steps to the side, he tried to lure Squall into making the opening move. In the past he had been the one to plunge ahead without any reasoning or planning behind it. This time he wanted to see which opening move Squall would choose—it would speak volumes of the brunet's preferred fighting style.

Circling each other, neither taking the initiative, he watched as Squall narrowed his eyes. A huff followed seconds later and then before he could blink, their blades touched. They stood perfectly still as they watched each other over the crossed blades. He hadn't even seen the move, couldn't recall how Squall's blade had moved from its resting position to suddenly be pressing against Kronos. He grinned, excitement shooting through him. Taking a quick step back, he quickly launched himself forward again.

From the start, their dynamic was unpredictable. Once they got going and really gained momentum, Squall was a never-stopping blur of movement. Where the man had been reserved and cautious in the past, he now fought with an explosive energy that heeded no rules. Caught off guard, Seifer barely ducked in time to avoid a deep cut to his neck. Instead he felt a slight trickle of blood just above his collar bone.

Looking Squall's way, Seifer grinned and held his blade high. In the past, they'd learned to anticipate each other's moves so perfectly, they'd always trusted each other to dodge the more lethal attacks. No such certainty this time. That edge of danger sent his blood pumping faster.

No longer the hothead of his youth, Seifer circled and side-stepped, never leaving the increasingly frustrated brunet an opening. Squall hounded him, but he never gave an inch of ground, anchoring himself solidly. His parries and counters were met with flurries of attacks that left him perpetually on guard. A block, a low swing along Squall's blind side and the brunet jumped out of reach with a cut on his thigh. Eyes flashing dangerously, Squall swung Revolver deftly in his hands with a few fell swipes. The move was eager and showy, taunting Seifer in a way the man never had before. Bring it on.

After that there was no more time for thought or analysis, only instinct and pure reaction. In all his fights, he'd never fought anyone as quick as the Lion of Balamb. They fought relentlessly, until sweat dampened down their shirts and their breath ran ragged—there was no settling for less.

It was only when the alarm went off more than an hour later that the world around them registered
again. Dodging a low cut, he stopped to end the high pitched noise coming from his phone, only to feel a blow to the back of his knees. Unable to grab hold of anything, he fell flat on his ass. Watching as Squall walked into view from behind him, Revolver already pressed to his neck, he let out a low laugh.

"Dirty suits you," he said as he nudged Revolver away from his jugular. Getting up from the ground, not bothering to dust off the soil that clung to his clothes, he smiled at Squall. It had been just as amazing as he remembered. The years spent apart had only added to their mix, had made what was already his favorite pastime new and even more exhilarating. Squall had become more daring and hadn't resisted using non-gunblade moves—moves the man had shunned as cheating in the past. The brunet had even thrown in a couple of one-handed lunges with his two-handed blade. Seifer had ended up with a couple of cuts thanks to that. He smirked. He'd managed to get a couple of cuts in as well. For the entire time they'd been perfectly matched. If the alarm hadn't gone off, they'd still be at it, until both of them collapsed from exhaustion.

He looked in the direction of the SCTA, his excitement quickly dissipating. He didn't want their spar to end. He didn't want to teach when he could be doing the real thing instead. He sighed before he met the brunet's gaze again.

"...I have to get going. I'm pretty sure Calder will be around here somewhere," He paused. "He could show you around if you don't mind staying until I finish class. He's a gunblader as well. My sparring partner. He'd probably jump at the chance to spar with you." He smirked as his eyes catalogued the sweat on the brunet's brow and the little nicks the man had acquired during their spar. "That's if you're not completely worn already, of course."

Too much in that dismissal irked Squall to ponder it all, but he cursed inwardly at the blunt honesty of his own mind when it singled in on three words. My sparring partner. The guy who'd seen him being carried out of a dingy hotel room, comatose and helpless.

A frown crinkled his brow. A spar induced high was still rushing through his veins, his muscles burning, and the thought of being dismissed and carted off to some second-rate gunblader after having fought Seifer left a bad taste.

"I'll sit in on your class."

Seifer blinked, unsure he'd heard Squall right. He couldn't imagine the brunet getting anything out of watching him teach. "... Okay," he agreed reluctantly, wishing he knew Squall's motivations. "Sure."

At the uncertain permission, Squall's impulsive decision not to be dismissed turned into genuine interest. The fact that Seifer didn't seem one hundred percent comfortable with him attending only made things that more peculiar. Seifer was nothing, if not confident. He couldn't imagine Seifer being any different as an instructor.

Lifting Revolver onto his shoulder, he waited for Seifer to lead the way. Whatever misgivings the blond had, the man didn't protest and walked them towards the main building. Halting in front of a set of double doors, Seifer nodded at the open doorway. "It's in here. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Squall nodded and refrained from voicing his surprise that the blond was actually going to change into a uniform. When Seifer disappeared behind a corner, he finally acknowledged his hunger and thirst. Sweat still clung to his skin from his spar with Seifer, his throat dry because of his ragged breathing earlier. Seifer hadn't cut him any slack because of his condition. After a quick draught from the drinking fountain, he retrieved an energy bar from the vending machine and wandered
down the hallway.

He never would've imagined this job for Seifer—perhaps because of the blond's lack of patience; definitely because of the blond's lack of respect for authority. But now Seifer was the authority figure, which probably made all the difference. A smile threatened to tug at his lips at the thought of Seifer donned in a uniform of all things. The unlikely sight would be reason enough to stick around for the class.

Thinking back to their own gunblade training, he wondered what Seifer would do differently from their own instructors and what methods he would honor. Dumping the wrapper of his unsatisfying dinner into a nearby trashcan, he walked up to the classroom. Inside, there were about a dozen students already present, others still arriving. He ignored them as he entered, his attention immediately caught by the large glass cabinets lining the walls of the well equipped training room. Each cabinet held a range of gunblades, different types and models on display, but it was the cabinet across to the entrance, furthest to the left that drew his gaze.

Hyperion, its design sleek and its metal black, retired in a glass case.

He remembered his conversation with Seifer and the blond's halfhearted replies. This was the place where Seifer stored his gunblades, and these were "the kids" he had mentioned. His students. Squall frowned as he walked past the cabinets, his gaze lingering absently on the different models on display. It was clear Seifer hadn't meant him to ever come here, to see this much of his life.

He came to a halt in front of Hyperion, the sight stirring up many old memories. It seemed wrong for such a fine blade to never see battle again, but he could understand the need for a new start. He brought up a finger to trace the scar across his forehead. The more recent memories of Hyperion were painful, so he focused on the good ones. The distant past of their training days had somehow gained sharpness after their spar—it had become real and exciting again, instead of something lost.

Seifer could still push him, drive him to be better and never quit. Mere hours ago he'd been despairing, and although his prospects as a SeeD hadn't necessarily improved, he didn't feel as powerless anymore after their spar. Even if his magic was gone forever, his body's strength wasn't. He would handle what would come next, because the blond wouldn't give him any choice.

When he heard the students' muted conversation die out abruptly, he took his gaze from Hyperion's cabinet to see Seifer enter the classroom. The moment the tall blond closed the doors behind him, the atmosphere in the room changed.

"You know the drill, guys. Get sweating!" Seifer ordered, moving to the center of the room as his students started a warm-up routine. He looked fresh and alert in spite of the intense spar they'd just had. His slightly ruffled hair and the slight cut visible just above his uniform's collar were the only tells.

Squall leaned back against a wall in the back and settled in for the rest of the class. When Seifer walked over to the boy who'd been somewhat halfhearted about his warm-up, Squall suppressed a quirk to his lips when the blond proceeded to loom over the boy and stare down at him until the boy was doing his warm-up at top speed, dripping with sweat.

As the blond moved around the room, Squall tried to look at the students through Seifer's eyes—the weak ones, the strong ones, the ones with potential, the lazy ones. He quickly picked them out himself, but he could do no more than that. He couldn't bond with students and find the right words they needed to hear. He wouldn't even be able to feign interest in their progress, let alone encourage them down the right path. But Seifer kept moving among his students, giving immediate incentive to pick up the pace where needed. None of his curt orders went ignored.
After ten minutes of watching his students exercise rigorously, Seifer walked back to the center of the room.

"Okay," he said as he looked from student to student. "Today we're going to look at different ways to trick your opponent into leaving their left side exposed." He turned to one student in particular, one of the less brawny ones, the kid appearing instantly uncomfortable at the attention.

"Brennan, get your ass in here," he said, pointing to where colored paint demarcated a central fighting area. "Everyone else, stand back."

As he walked the students through the different techniques, he gave Brennan the opportunity to show off some good defensive techniques, the boy's demeanor completely different when the demonstration was over.

"Okay, Matt and Devin, you have the floor," Seifer said, dismissing the first student without a word of praise. "Devin you're on the attack. Repeat the attack I just used on Brennan."

Squall stood quietly impressed. The kid named Brennan now stood among his peers with a straighter back, his hand firmer on his blade. He hadn't needed any praise, only the trust of his instructor not to fuck up. Confidence—it had also been the principal lesson of his spars with Seifer.

As the two new students put everything into the fight, Seifer commented from the sideline and made them repeat their mistakes to show the others more fully what went wrong and how to improve. When the two students started to get sloppy and out of breath, he called in another pair to take over. It was a good way to keep the tension up and have no one slink to the background as a lazy spectator. Everyone came up at least once.

But Squall knew that more than solid teaching methods, it was the command of the classroom that mattered most. Without respect, you were lost. Seeing how every pupil, even the least impressive of all, went out of their way to gain Seifer's regard was more than telling. Under the blond's watchful eye, there was no mocking of the kids who messed up, nor any prideful boasting. Somehow Seifer had transformed a bunch of loud, obnoxious kids into cadets—a little bit of mercenary discipline.

Caught up in the class, Squall didn't notice the newcomer until the man came walking his way. He frowned and kept his gaze ahead, hoping to dishearten Seifer's friend out of conversation, but no such luck.

"You two don't waste much time, do you?" Calder asked as he moved to stand next to him. At the odd remark, Squall glanced sideways to follow the man's gaze to the cut on his arm. Seifer had put it there after a risky move on his own part.

Ignoring the undue familiarity in the man's tone of voice, he returned his attention to Seifer's class. He didn't feel like small talk, the man's easy smile putting him on edge.

"I'm surprised to see you here. After how worried Seifer was, I didn't think he'd let you leave the apartment for at least a week. Maybe longer, considering how stubborn he can be." He met Squall's gaze, that irksome smile still in place. "Guess the urge to fight his old sparring partner won out."

Bristling, Squall looked away. More assumptions. Seifer allowed him to leave the apartment. Seifer caved into granting his discarded sparring partner a fight. "I fight or leave when I want to," he replied evenly, ignoring the glaringly obvious reason for his irritation.

A first crack appeared in Calder's affable expression, his smile stiffening. "Ah, I guess you've
become immune to his ways over the years then."

Recognizing the awkward words for the save it was meant to be, Squall was unable to come up with a reply. This was exactly the sort of situation where Rinoa would have nudged an admonishing elbow into his side. At the unbidden thought, he fought the urge to frown.

"So, how long have you known Seifer?" Calder asked after a moment of stretching silence.

Perhaps answering an innocent enough question would get the man off his back. "For as long as I can remember."

"You know, he never told me he used to be a student at Garden. Until a couple of days ago I didn't know anything about his past at all... I guess you still live there? At one of the Gardens?"

Or perhaps not. Brow crinkling into a frown, he hummed in vague confirmation and kept his eyes ahead on the class. He didn't like questions about his whereabouts, his identity, anything that could make it into a tabloid.

"But you visit Esthar often?"

About to tell Calder he wasn't interested in small talk, Squall straightened from his perch against the wall when Seifer walked their way. The blond had better get him out of this unwanted socializing. He had no desire to befriend Seifer's friends.

"Hey, you up for showing these kiddies how it's done?" Seifer asked, coming to a halt in front of Squall and Calder. He'd noticed Squall's annoyance grow from the moment Calder had entered the room.

"What do you have in mind?" Squall had already done a few demos for cadets at the training camps in G-garden, but those had never involved a partner. There were Seifer's students to consider, their esteem of their instructor's ability, but he wouldn't be kept on the receiving end of the demonstration.

"Just a couple of minutes of sparring," Seifer said, eager at the prospect of fighting Squall so soon again. "I'll work in the offensive moves I taught them earlier and you deal with them the best you can, but apart from that, I want our usual game." He smirked, considering the more unpredictable side Squall had shown in their earlier spar, the side that no longer adhered to the rules. "You'll have to contain your wild urges and stay within the designated area though. Think you can handle that?"

"If you can handle witnesses," Squall replied easily, fully planning on delivering his usual game.

Seifer chuckled at the sharp reply—just like old time. "I'll signal the end of the spar by moving into my usual stance." He turned and walked back towards the center of the room. "Hey guys! Listen up! We've got a bona fide SeeD with us here today," he said, looking around the class before settling his gaze back on Squall. "That's right. First class too. Most likely the finest gunblader you'll ever see."

"Vargha, if you'd care to join me," he said, holding his hand out towards the center of the room in invitation, grinning at the unimpressed glare that now graced Squall's features. "You've all just learned that if executed correctly, the moves I showed you will leave an opponent vulnerable." He moved into his fighting position at one end of the colored square. "Now watch this," he said as Squall entered the fighting area as well, immediately launching into an attack.

The next minutes rushed by in a blur of movement as they fought to come out on top. Integrating
the moves Seifer had taught his students earlier into their spar seamlessly, Seifer tried to drag the spar out as long as possible, but it was over far too soon. Moving back into his fighting stance mid move, he didn't doubt for a moment that Squall would be able to stop his blade in time. Breathing heavily, he felt a soft touch as the edge of Revolver hovered against the fabric of his right thigh. He smiled. Everything had gone exactly according to plan.

Seifer turned to face his class. "On most gunbladers out there the moves you just learned will work. In order to win against the remaining few, you'll have to be in a class of your own. The only way to get there is to practice again and again and again." His words were spoken with passion. "Perfect your moves and only then learn how to outsmart the moves. Know how you can tweak them to your advantage." He looked from student to student. "Unless you're blind, you will have spotted how I altered the moves slightly but even so, Vargha here managed to deflect each one of them perfectly. That's your aim. Know the moves. Know how to read them. Know how to tweak them." He paused. "On Monday I expect to see your own variations on each of these moves. I expect you to be able to see them coming." He gestured around the room with the tip of Kronos. "Now pair up and get back to practice. Show me you aren't complete imbeciles."

As Seifer returned his attention to the class, it cost Squall some effort to keep his equilibrium and not betray the thrum of excitement he felt after the too short fight. Walking back to his previous spot, he ignored Calder and leaned back against the wall.

"Good fight," Calder commented, his tone less chipper than before. "You seem well matched."

Trying not to seem smug, Squall hummed in agreement as he placed Revolver beside him to rest against the wall. When Seifer sent him a quick smile before resuming his teaching, he couldn't help the slight tug at his lips in answer. There was little that beat the thrill of meeting Seifer in battle. Even just five minutes of sparring with Seifer was enough to leave him winded, and he'd loved every second of it.

"I guess he learned from the best," Calder said amicably, apparently still fishing for factoids of Seifer's past.

Squall snorted at the ridiculously flawed assumption. Seifer had always been the one ahead of him, showing him how to really fight, shaping him in ways no instructor had. But that was nothing he felt like sharing with a stranger.

The lack of an immediate follow-up question had Squall hopeful that the man would finally leave. A silence this strained would usually have scared off most people already.

"So hey, did Seifer give you a proper tour of this place yet?" Calder asked instead, having found his toothpaste-add smile again. "If not, I could give you one now... It'll be at least another half an hour before they finish up here and as much as he wants to, I doubt Seifer will be able to sneak in another spar."

Squall didn't have to consider the offer for long. He was fine where he was, observing the class and noting all the different facets to Seifer's methods. He'd recognized the influence of the only good instructor they'd ever had: Peyton, an old grouch of an instructor who was still teaching annual training camps at G-Garden. "I'm fine just watching."

"... All right. I'll go hit the gym then," the man said, pushing away from the wall. "It was good seeing you again."

Squall watched with relief as Calder finally left, briefly wondering at the platitudes of social interaction. He hardly believed it truly had been good to see him again. Squall surely could've done
without seeing him.

Shoulders relaxing at the man's absence, he let himself be drawn in again by the class at hand. It was a peculiar exercise to try and imagine Seifer as these kids saw him—imposing and strict, yet approachable. Who would've thought the blond would make a fine authority figure.

The rest of the lesson passed quickly without any unwanted distractions, and soon the students filed out of the classroom, their gunblades held with trembling arms and with far less attitude than when they'd entered. To create a good soldier, you first had to break them, before you could mold them. Arrogance should only ever come with skill, a rule Seifer had stood by all his life.

Pushing away from the wall, Squall walked over to wait by the door as the last students left the classroom. A few stragglers had gathered around Seifer, asking some last pointers and advice, which the blond answered with surprising patience.

When they were finally alone, Squall felt that same thrill he always did when it was just the two of them, their gunblades in hand. He was tired, his condition taking its toll, but if Seifer would challenge him, he wouldn't be able to say no.

"You're good. Just as good as I remember," Seifer said, walking closer. "But tomorrow, as soon as I finish work, your ass is mine. No more ties."

Squall's eyebrow twitched upward at the overly cocky announcement, his hands itching to take up Revolver and continue their spar right then and there. Exhilarated for the first time in a long while, he simply agreed, "No more ties."

His smile broadening, Seifer turned and left the room. They both remained quiet as they walked back to the changing rooms. Inside the instructor's changing area, he punched in the code for his locker. Grabbing his bag, he walked over to the couple of benches inside the room.

Unable to help himself, he glanced at Squall as they began to undress. They were the only people in the room, yet the brunet's moves seemed measured—no signs of hesitance. Seifer knew they'd been in similar situations countless times before, but this time it would be different. He wouldn't be able to look at Squall without remembering what they'd done during their night of Avalanche.

Letting the rest of his uniform fall to the floor, he hooked his fingers under his boxers and added them to the pile of discarded clothing. Shower cream and towel in hand, he walked to the shower stalls, not waiting for Squall to follow. He let the water heat up before stepping under the spray of water and closing his eyes. The warmth provided a welcome relief to the tension in his sore muscles.

Not far away, he heard another shower being turned on.

Focusing on the flow of hot water, he brought up a hand to comb through his hair. Squeezing out some shower cream, he lathered himself up, but it wasn't long before his gaze traveled to the naked figure by his side.

Brown locks clung to pale skin as water cascaded down the brunet's body. Nothing was left to the imagination as he let his gaze drop to settle between Squall's thighs. When they had changed into their training clothes earlier, Squall's boxers had obscured his view, but now everything was on display… Remembering how Squall's cock had felt when he'd run his tongue against it little over a week ago, how he had swallowed the man's come—

"Pass the soap."
Seifer forced his gaze up and let out the breath he'd been holding. Squall's eyes were still closed. As the brunet wiped wet bangs away from his eyes, Seifer held out the soap.

"Here," he said, handing it over. He kept his gaze unfocused as Squall squeezed out some soap and handed back the bottle.

Returning to his own shower, lathering up once more, he stole a couple of covert glances of Squall. The brunet seemed completely engrossed in his shower.

As his eyes lowered to where Squall's hands were sliding across a firm stomach and pecs, he briefly considered offering to help out, but the likelihood of a broken jaw in return stayed his tongue. Turning slightly so he could eye up Squall's backside instead, he felt the beginnings of arousal. Fuck it, if Squall wasn't the sexiest man he'd ever seen. He'd been one lucky fucker to ram his cock in deep between those firm buttocks—to hear Squall moan in ecstasy.

As Squall washed away the last of the suds, the feeling of eyes on him didn't disappear. Glimpsing sideways, unable to shake the unsettling feeling, Squall froze. Green eyes, slightly narrowed, were fixed on his body in a far too thorough study. Just as quick as the heat that twisted deeper into his gut, Seifer's gaze darted back to meet his eyes, before he looked the other way altogether. As if nothing odd had occurred, the blond stood facing the spray of water.

Squall blinked the water from his eyes and snapped his head back to stare at the white, tiled wall. Going through the motions of showering, his thoughts raced. If not imagining things, he had to be reading too much into things. Seifer's jokes and teasing had simply made him overly sensitive, agitated. Green eyes could just as easily have fallen to the floor or the drain. He'd often offended people himself by his supposed "stare," when they'd been the ones to stray in his line of sight while he was lost to thought.

Your ass didn't stray into his line of sight, his mind provided helpfully. His frown deepened.

During his younger cadet years, the approach to unwanted attention had been straightforward; ridicule was ignored, attempts to get at him physically were met with resistance and fists. This belonged to neither of the locker room situations he was used to.

Overly aware of the blond's proximity, Squall nearly jumped when Seifer turned to him brusquely, his expression steely.

"Okay, so here's the deal. I can't guarantee what just happened won't happen again. In fact, I can more or less guarantee that it will. With you being hot and me being gay, there's just no way to avoid it. So, if it makes you feel uncomfortable or, I dunno," Seifer's eyes darted to the side briefly as he scratched his neck, "...disgusts you," his eyes met Squall's again, "we'll just have to take turns showering... or I can use the student showers."

The matter-of-fact tone to Seifer's voice didn't come close to matching Squall's shock. As if it was a mere practical problem of who showered where. Seifer was still watching him, expecting an answer no doubt, but he found himself incapable of stringing together a single thought.

"...You're gay," he repeated dumbly. "...But the Avalanche. I thought..."

At Squall's unfocused gaze and frown, Seifer grit his teeth. Of course Squall was oblivious enough to have missed the fucking telltale signs.

"Fuck," he let out under his breath and took a step away, turning his side to the man. This was beyond ridiculous. He'd just outing himself to Squall in the fucking showers. There was no way the
man could be so dense. Running a hand through his hair, he steeled himself before turning back around. Squall stood as if in a daze, lost to his own thoughts. Seifer shook his head. "Come on, let's deal with this somewhere else."

Squall looked up at the terse command. Seifer's expression seemed strained as the blond switched off the shower and headed back into the locker room. Blinking as he took in his surroundings again, their state of undress and the inappropriateness of their choice of locale caught up with Squall fast. Only now again feeling the drum of water on his shoulders, he numbly turned off the water before following after Seifer. A few more minutes of awkward exposure and they'd be dressed again, clothes suddenly seeming like a barrier he desperately needed to just think.

As he finally shrugged on his jacket, he felt a little more in control and a little less like he was being taken hostage by the situation. The slam of Seifer's locker drew his eyes to the blond who was already rushing ahead.

...or, I dunno...disgusts you...

Squall frowned at the words replaying in his mind. Things would've been infinitely easier if disgust was what he felt. Picking up his gunblade case, Squall tried to sort through the chaos of his thoughts and feelings. He followed Seifer without a word, and when the blond stopped in the lobby to strike a deal with the receptionist for Squall's membership card, he studied Seifer's back in silence.

In spite of their night spent on Avalanche, Squall would never have guessed Seifer to be gay. In retrospect he supposed the suspicion should at least have surfaced at some point, but then again, he'd carefully avoided to scrutinize his own behavior that night as well. It didn't mesh with the image he'd always had of Seifer. Back at B-Garden that same broad back had drawn the appreciative gazes of most girls, if not all of them. Even though there hadn't been any room for talk of love interests within their rivalry, he'd been sure the blond hadn't let such popularity go to waste. Maybe he hadn't.

Disturbingly clear memories instantly reminded him of Seifer's skill. He hadn't lingered on it much, on the readiness and certainty that had underlined Seifer's every move and touch. After all, he'd surprised himself with his own reactions, but... It seemed obvious now, the reason Seifer had been able to manipulate his body's responses so effortlessly.

When Seifer pushed away from the reception desk, Squall quickly smoothed out his expression and took the access card from the blond's hand with what he hoped was composure. This was not an appropriate time to dwell on the specifics of Seifer's touch. Outside, the crisp cold of the evening air helped soothe the heat he feared was now showing on his cheeks. He tried again, from the start.

Seifer is gay.

Was it ironic? Seifer had never been bothered by other cadets the way he had been. Tall and strong, the blond had been indisputably accepted as an alpha male among his peers. Masculine, while he had ended up with labels like "feminine" and "weak." He knew not to judge in terms like that. He didn't.

Slipping into the passenger's seat, Squall stole a covert glimpse of Seifer and reality started to sink in. Really sink in. Just how much of Seifer's actions had been prompted by Avalanche?

...With you being hot...
Squall frowned. He couldn't really bring himself to consider those words. The only two to have ever commented favorably on his looks were Rinoa and Matron, both women, and he hardly thought Matron calling him "a handsome young man" at the age of eight counted.

To think that Seifer might not have been completely adverse to sex with him to begin with caused his thoughts to stagger in denial. He'd naively assumed that the drug could account for temporary lack of concern with the gender of one's bedmate, obscuring sexual preferences and able to make anyone seem appealing. That had been the go-to theory, giving him an excuse not to examine his own responses to a man's touch. Now all that had changed.

The sudden ring of Seifer's cell phone interrupted his disturbing train of thought.

"Seifer," the blond's gruff voice called in what was supposed to pass for a greeting. So Seifer was angry.

"Nothing," the man continued, his voice not easing up. "Why are you calling?" Seifer's annoyance was palpable as he listened to the reply. "Look, I don't have time to talk right now. I have to go in to work tonight."

"I'll talk to you later." Not giving the caller a chance to prolong the conversation, Seifer hung up and appeared to forget the phone call the moment it ended. It seemed Squall wasn't the only one preoccupied with what had happened in the shower.

Fixing his gaze outside the window, he couldn't fathom how the problems troubling him had changed so drastically since the first time Seifer had brought him home to his apartment. It was as if they were unable to coexist without this tension, these miscommunications. Inwardly, Squall snorted at himself. How were they supposed to understand each other, if he couldn't even figure himself out?

He now had reason to believe that Avalanche wasn't potent enough to change sexual orientation. But that was it. For all he knew, it could still cause people to sleep with someone against their better judgment, or tastes. *Then what are my tastes?* Squall's mind drew a blank at the thought. He'd only ever slept with two people and he really didn't want to compare them right now. Besides, could he even base any conclusions on such diametrically opposed experiences? He doubted pitting Rinoa against an evening on Avalanche was fair. But the question wouldn't leave him alone. *Am I gay?* He tried to consider it, but if anything, he'd been convinced he was asexual—generally disinterested.

At the abrupt stop of the car, Squall was pulled from his thoughts and was greeted with the reflection of his own scowl in the window. Seifer was already out of the car, making his way to a take away restaurant right across the curb. Right then, the horrible thought occurred to him that maybe it was just Seifer that did it for him.

Never had he suppressed a current of thought so quickly and acutely. It simply wasn't an option. At the rising tension knotting his stomach, he decided he was through with pondering his sexual orientation. For the moment it was irrelevant. He wasn't in a relationship and probably wouldn't be in one for a long time to come. He didn't want to be in one, so generally disinterested suited him just fine. Problem solved.

When Seifer reappeared, Squall released the death grip he had on his jacket just in time for the blond to shove a couple of hot containers into his hands. The appetizing smells wafting up from the takeaway boxes reminded him of his empty stomach, but the continued tension between them took away any hope for a relaxed dinner. Just as much as he'd regretted Seifer needing to prioritize work over him earlier, he was grateful for it now.
He glanced sideways, only to be met with Seifer's profile. Fixing his own gaze on the windshield as well, Squall's discomfort took on a new edge. All unwelcome trains of thought rejected, there was nothing left to distract him from the strained silence in the car and the blond's grave expression. Somewhere during his own panicked thoughts, Seifer had gone from angry to dead serious. Squall's frown grew. He hadn't given any reply to the blond's question whether this was going to be a problem—not the most elegant of reactions.

Was this going to be a problem? He snuck another sideway glance, when his eyes fell on a box of takeaway set aside on the dashboard: Seifer's preemptive measure against another awkward meal, no doubt. He turned his gaze back to the by now familiar streets as they entered Seifer's neighborhood, and ignored his sudden misgivings. He wanted the time to himself.

Passing the parking lot by the lift access point, Seifer continued around the block and pulled into a parking space across his apartment building. Squall turned to look at him, but the blond was still favoring the street view over meeting his gaze.

"I'll go to work now," Seifer said, needing time to figure out what the hell had been going on inside Squall's head all this time. He'd acted on the assumption that Squall knew he was gay from the moment they'd had sex. That's why he'd so openly apologized the morning after and why he hadn't even thought twice about flirting with the man. The inappropriate comments had been his way of messing with Squall and making light of the situation.

"Here's my key." He placed the small piece of metal on the dashboard between them.

Squall only now finding out the truth changed everything. Seifer had thought he'd already been forgiven for what had happened, but this would put their night together into a whole new perspective for the brunet. Squall would think he'd offered the man Avalanche purely because of his own selfish reasons. Squall would be disgusted.

"I won't blame you if you leave," he said as he kept his gaze fixed on the empty street outside.

Squall blinked in surprise. The single box of takeaway and Seifer's early retreat to his job started to take on a new meaning: a bow-out. Squall's mood darkened at the assumptions that must have led Seifer to this train of thought. He was not as small-minded as to be unable to share a roof with a gay man, but then he remembered he'd said nothing to that effect after Seifer's confession.

"I'm not leaving."

At the words the rigid set to Seifer's shoulders eased up. He didn't know why Squall would want to stay with him or how Squall could forgive him for what had happened, but he'd accepted it the first time around so he'd accept it again.

"Okay," he said, meeting Squall's gaze briefly. "For what it's worth, I really didn't think us taking Avalanche together would end up like it did." He paused. "I know I shouldn't have offered you Avalanche in the first place, but I thought after everything that had happened there'd be no way you would..." he trailed off, unable to actually say the actual words. "I didn't think the drugs could even do that." He looked out the side window, some of his annoyance with himself slipping into his voice. "And I really thought I'd be able to help myself. I really fucking tried," he added lowly.

"I—" At a loss for words, Squall turned to face the windshield. "...What happened, happened," he said, not sure what he even meant by the words. Apparently he still didn't understand just what exactly had happened.

Watching Squall's averted gaze, Seifer held back a sigh. He knew it wasn't the most pleasant of
topics and Squall's discomfort was clear. At least the man seemed to want to look past it all.

"So we're fine?" he asked, hoping to return to a more relaxed atmosphere between them. He wanted to get back to him not having to tiptoe around his sexuality and it not being a big fucking deal—to how he’d wanted things to be between them in the first place.

"...Yes," Squall found himself saying. It seemed a small offering amidst all the tension and awkward moments, but he needed this confirmation. If he could deal with the war, then he could deal with this, one way or the other.

"Okay," Seifer said with a nod. "I should get going. I'll give you a call when I get back, so you can let me in," he added, not caring to prolong their conversation. Some time apart would hopefully relieve some of the tension between them.

Squall gave a slight nod. Balancing three boxes of takeaway food in one arm, he got out of the car and retrieved his things from the backseat.

"See you, Squall," the blond said as he closed the car door and drove off, leaving Squall more out of his depth than ever.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Thursday, 23rd of October, 00:26 am]

Squall sighed and leaned away from his laptop. He nudged his work glasses up to rub at the bridge of his nose, his eyes stinging from all the fruitless staring at his screen. In dire need of distraction, he'd resorted to his backlog of administrative work, but he'd had little success in the way of putting Seifer out of his mind and even less in getting anything useful done.

As expected, his inbox had been swamped with "urgent" mails, more than half of them sent and forwarded by a very displeased Quistis. He'd plowed through the most important stuff, but his mood had quickly worsened as he'd had to reassign his own upcoming missions to other operatives, while still having to confirm his attendance at the next meeting concerning Esthar Garden. Diplomatic nonsense like that was only barely palatable when balanced out with the thrill of missions. The prospect of sparring and training with Seifer was the only thing that had kept his mood from plummeting completely.

Closing down his mail box and several sensitive SeeD files, he got up from the couch and started to clear the remainders of his takeaway meal from the coffee table. He'd had little appetite. Placing the unfinished containers into the fridge, he made quick work of washing the utensils and leaned back against the sink in thought.

He had no hope of getting any true work done, his mind constantly wandering. Considering the next day, he didn't know what to expect of the proposed "training." After the tests at the lab, he didn't feel very hopeful about quick results. The meds would have to be potent, if they were to fend off the worst of his symptoms. Merely a few spells into Odine's examination and he'd been worse off than when first learning magic. And that had been just him. Was it even advisable for Seifer to try without having been tested first? What if something happened and he would be too incapacitated to help the man?

He shook his head at how his thoughts kept returning to the blond. He was tired, his mind dulled and medicated to keep the migraines at bay. He didn't feel like resuming his administrative work at all. Had Seifer indicated a time of his return? Taking his cell phone from his pocket to check the hour, he noticed he'd received several missed calls and two texts from Rinoa.
Squall scowled at his cell phone, before pressing the texts away. Loire wasn't his main problem—not after Seifer's confession. Just as before his mind was stuck in a loop, once again returning to what the blond had said. He knew he was missing vital information to come to any conclusions; even Seifer had seemed unsure.

*I didn't think the drugs could even do that.*

Sitting back down on the couch, he placed his hands on the keyboard of his laptop. A simple search for the drug Avalanche quickly flooded his screen with countless encyclopedic sites, forums, and dodgy seeming reviews on experimental drug usage.

Having browsed several of the most promising sites, he found no conclusive evidence that Avalanche could distort sexual orientation. More so, the effects listed on most sites seemed disturbingly consistent with his experience. He skimmed the list for the umpteenth time, the sinking feeling in his gut worsening with each read.

Some of the effects—such as diminished fear, euphoria or increased self-acceptance—were acceptable enough, but there were other, less innocent items listed.

*Feelings of intimacy and even love for others.* He'd thought the emotions he'd felt—the warmth and sense of belonging—were a travesty brought on by the drugs. This item on the list seemed to say he was right. But... If it was only the drugs, then those feelings were supposed to pass. In spite of their strained interaction, he found himself wanting to be around Seifer. He cared about Seifer, at least as much as he cared about Rinoa. What he'd felt on Avalanche certainly eclipsed what now seemed like half hearted sentiment for the girl.

*An intensification of perception, particularly tactile sensation or touch, as well as hearing and vision.* Every touch had been intense, the sight of Seifer naked and the sounds of his pleasure etched into Squall's memory. If that had just been the drugs, then why didn't he trust himself to really *look* at Seifer anymore? At the SCTA's showers, he had carefully kept his gaze at point blank, afraid of his own reactions in case he'd linger too long on the sight of Seifer naked. And in bed that morning he hadn't *disliked* the body heat emanating from the blond's body, or the soft sounds of his breathing.

*Stimulation, arousal, and hypersexuality.* Squall's frown deepened at that one. He *still* felt a thrill, a heightening of awareness, whenever Seifer stepped into the room...

*Aphrodisiac effects.* His eyes lingered on the tail-end of the list. Seifer had *known* this, but hadn't expected the outcome with someone he'd considered straight. And clearly the blond had experience.

Squall shut his laptop abruptly, disinclined to parse through yet another site that would tell him the exact same thing. Everything seemed to point in the direction of Avalanche enhancing experiences—not twisting them. It didn't say anywhere that the aftereffects lingered longer than a day. It was a week after the facts now.

It seemed that somehow his night with Seifer had affected him beyond Avalanche's capability. It had triggered something in him that he had no control over, which was more than alarming.
Squall slumped back in the couch, his heart tight in his throat. Nothing could come of these errant feelings, it *had* to pass. It *would* pass. He was confusing his contentedness to have Seifer back in his life with attraction. His body was merely remembering the pleasure of Avalanche, inappropriately so, and his mind was aching for someone to take Rinoa's place. That had to be why he was feeling this way.

It wasn't what he wanted. All he wanted was for things to go back to the way they used to be, to a time when difficult decisions amounted to nothing more than taking Seifer up on a challenge or not. To a time when he didn't need *anybody*.

He wouldn't let it affect him any longer. Whatever Seifer professed to—sexual orientation or otherwise—it had no bearing on him. They would proceed as training partners, and perhaps they could even become friends, but never again would he let someone so dangerously close as to let them have such power over him.

Mind made up, Squall laid back in the couch. The weight of the day came crashing down on him, every moment of stress and uncertainty paid for in tense muscles and a bone deep tiredness. He placed his reading glasses next to his laptop, and stretched out the kinks. He'd rest his eyes for a little while, until Seifer came back. No point in getting too comfortable when he'd still have to let the blond in. He wouldn't think beyond that moment for now.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Thursday, 23rd of October, 03:22 am]

Seifer looked up at the building as he crossed the road. His eyes quickly found his bedroom window, but no lights were on. Squall hadn't said much before he'd left for work but it had been enough to know that the brunet wanted to stay, regardless of the lack of any real reaction to what Seifer had said in the shower.

He didn't know which conclusions Squall had come to. Only one thing was certain: everything was out in the open now. Squall knew how he felt about the war and that he wasn't a true fighter anymore. Squall also knew how fucked up his magic was, that he was gay, and that he used drugs to let loose. Nothing could come as a surprise anymore and the man just had to deal with it or get the fuck out. If Squall were to look down on him because of his sexuality or habits, then he'd tell the man where to shove it. The brunet didn't have much ground to stand on either with how quickly he'd succumbed to an all out gay fest after a single pill of Avalanche.

Watching the number on the display slowly increase, he waited for the lift to reach his floor while Squall's words repeated in his mind. ...*But the Avalanche. I thought...*

It meant Squall thought Avalanche had been enough to cause him to have sex with the brunet even though Squall thought Seifer was straight. An exact mirror of what he'd thought about Squall. If the brunet was straight then it made perfect sense to believe that to be the truth—it would explain the man's obliviousness.

But... he'd assumed the same about Squall even though he wasn't straight himself at all. And out of all the nights he'd been on Avalanche, no woman had ever managed to seduce him—and not for lack of trying. The thought of playing with breasts and pussies had remained just as repulsive to him then as it was when his head was clear. He frowned. Maybe Squall wasn't so innocent after all. Maybe he shouldn't have jumped to his own conclusions so quickly.

Standing in front of his door, he got out his phone and brought up the man's number.
"Hey," he said as a click signalled the line being picked up. "I'm just outside." Only receiving an acknowledging hum in reply, he hung up again. After a few moments, he heard Squall undo the lock and watched as the door opened. This should be interesting.

Stepping aside to let the blond in, Squall took in Seifer's grime state with a raised eyebrow. The man looked as tired as he felt, his face dirtied with smudges of soot. Watching as the blond walked up to the kitchen counter to set down Kronos, he tried not to dwell on the scent of sweat that lingered in the blond's path or its effect on him.

Letting out a sigh, Squall tore his gaze away before the man would notice and returned to the couch. His mind was still fuzzy from sleep, half-remembered dream images of the blond luckily ebbing away.

Seifer's eyes drifted to the coffee table as he took off his jacket. A pair of glasses were lying next to a laptop with Garden's logo on it. "You been up late?"

Squall brought up a kneading hand to where his glasses had pressed into the bridge of his nose. "Catching up on work."

Unable to properly imagine Squall wearing glasses, Seifer walked over to join the brunet on the couch. The man seemed completely unruffled by their earlier conversation—back to his old self, apart from the visible tiredness.

"I finished the dagger I've been working on," he said at the lack of anything else coming to mind. He leaned farther back, relaxing into the cushions. "...You still up for practicing tomorrow morning?"

"If you have the time."

"Like I said, I don't have to be in until ten," Seifer said with a shrug. "If we get up at seven-thirty, we should have plenty of time." The prospect filled him with both excitement and trepidation. "We've managed worse."

Squall hummed in agreement, casting the blond a sideways glance as he got up and stored away his glasses and laptop. "Is the warehouse nearby?"

"15 minutes drive away," Seifer supplied easily, but then regarded Squall closely. "Guess we should be heading to bed."

Squall's eyes flicked to the bedroom, but he quickly looked back, aware of Seifer's scrutiny. He hadn't even considered the sleeping arrangements. The thought of joining Seifer in bed seemed far too intimate—nothing like the mere practical convenience Seifer made it out to be.

At the lack of reaction, the brunet stuck in place, Seifer nodded in the direction of the bedroom. "Scared?"

Reflexively irked at the implication he was a coward, Squall met Seifer's even gaze. "Should I be?"

Seifer huffed. "As far as I know being gay isn't contagious."

Aware the blond was testing him, Squall wasn't certain how to reassure the man without revealing his true reasons for avoiding the bed. "I don't care about that," he replied, hoping Seifer wouldn't call his bluff. "I was sick last night. I'm not now. I can take the couch."

"If you don't care, then there's no reason to break your back," Seifer retorted.
Squall groaned inwardly at the blond's obstinacy. "I've slept in worse places."

"Don't be a dick, Squall. I'm offering to share my bed here," Seifer said, pushing forward in his seat. "Believe me, I know what the couch is like."

Backed into a corner, Squall could no longer refuse without seeming like a blatant homophobe. "Fine."

Having won that round, Seifer got up and walked to the kitchen. "Want a shot of something before heading to bed?"

Squall raised an eyebrow, not about to imbibe right before joining the blond in bed. Even now, the taste and scent of Galbadian Bluewhistle reminded him of sex. He nodded at the brown bag of meds, from which he'd already taken his first helping.

"Better not."

Humming in agreement, Seifer helped himself to a large shot of one of his older whiskeys. He wasn't completely done with Squall yet. The man might have agreed to share a bed with him and thereby showed that he didn't have a problem with Seifer's sexuality, but that didn't mean the topic was closed. He had a question for Squall that he needed answered and the only way to get it was to give the man something in return. "You got any questions for me?" he asked, making an offer he'd never granted anyone else.

Squall frowned, uneasy at the thought of talking about any of it. "It's not my business."

"... Can I ask you something?" Seifer asked when Squall didn't take the bait.

"Within reason," Squall replied cautiously.

"It's not." Seifer poured himself another shot. "If you answer, I'll answer any of your questions—your business or not."

"Quit the sales pitch, Seifer. I don't need to know anything, and neither do you."

"You're such a killjoy, you know that?" Seifer said with a shake of his head. He couldn't believe there wasn't anything Squall wanted to know after finding out he was gay. If it had been the other way around, the questions would never have ceased, but apparently merely the fear of what Seifer might want to know in return was enough to scare the brunet off. "I'm just curious. What's the harm in telling me something?"

Squall rolled his eyes at the blond feigning harmlessness. "You already know more than enough about my private life."

"Alright, suit yourself," Seifer said, placing his empty shot glass on the counter. "All I wanted to know was whether or not you've had sex with other men."

Squall's mind ground to a halt at the bluntness of Seifer's words. "Why does that matter?" he said tersely, fearing the blond's conclusions either way. "Would it stroke your ego to hear me say no?"

"Perhaps," Seifer admitted, annoyed Squall's reaction hadn't given anything away. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened."

"How about we try to forget what happened," Squall suggested, cringing inwardly. Seifer meant he was trying to figure out why Squall had given in, and he wasn't about to tell the man. Wanting the
evening and the discussion to end, he walked towards the bedroom.

Following Squall into the other room, Seifer watched the man closely. Trying to get the answer from Squall was a dead end and attempting to read the man wasn't helping much either. "Sure," he agreed reluctantly, deciding on another approach.

As Seifer started to casually undress a little distance away from him, after the day they'd just had, Squall felt ready to admit defeat and go stay with Loire. With all the self-control he could muster, he feigned composure and started to undress as well. One methodical move after the other, he got down to just his boxers and one of Seifer's shirts, as if nudity around the blond didn't matter. He fixed his eyes on his task and nothing else, not about to risk a repeat of the locker room incident.

With no reaction from Squall whatsoever to his impromptu strip down, Seifer got out a white t-shirt and walked into the bathroom. Deflated at not even catching a single glimpse sent his way, he finished his bedtime ritual in record time. His assumption of Squall being straight seemed the most likely at this point.

Back in the other room, Squall strode past him and entered the bathroom instead. Turning off the lights, he walked over to the bed and got in. Maybe it would be a bit weird to share after all. It'd probably mean he'd spend the first hour or two fantasizing about what they could be doing in bed instead of sleeping and even with the meagre amount of blue light spilling in from the world outside, Squall would easily be able to see his excitement if he got carried away.

Forcing his mind into a blank when the door to the bathroom opened again, Seifer turned to lie on his side. "I've set the alarm," he said and closed his eyes, shutting the brunet out.

Humming his acknowledgment, Squall moved to settle in on the other side of the bed. It was beyond strange. At least the previous night he'd been too out of his mind to be aware of his bed partner most of the time. Now his actions had gained a feel of premeditation, as if his subconscious was hoping for more and was trying to trick him, regardless of his wishes or decisions.

Suppressing a sigh, he turned his back to Seifer and tried to get comfortable. The task seemed impossible, the warmth of the blond's body already seeping into the covers and spreading to Squall's side of the bed. Forcing his eyes closed, he wondered if perhaps he should've accepted that drink after all, side effects be damned.

Morning could not come soon enough.

~ o ~
Squall watched as the increasingly run-down buildings of Esthar's old industrial district sped by the car's window. The high-gloss metal and concrete high-rises had made room for smaller, brick buildings and factories that went all the way back to Esthar's more humble beginnings.

It seemed odd to open a weapon shop so far removed from the city's busiest trade and business districts, but it served their purpose to train their volatile magic in a more remote part of the city. He couldn't afford another incident like the one with Grieaver in a populated area. The warehouse Seifer had mentioned would hardly be as secure as Odine's lab, but at least there would be minimal collateral damage in case something happened.

Impatient to get started, he focused to keep his poise. In spite of their doubtful chance at success, he wanted to find out whether his future as a commander and a SeeD stood any chance at all. Glancing next to him, he took in Seifer's serious expression, the man's hands tight on the wheel. Conversation had been scarce since they left the apartment, the drive to Seifer's workplace passing in silence.

When the blond finally pulled into a small private road next to an unremarkable storefront, Squall sat up straighter. An old sign that said "Weapons" in peeling paint was all that marked the place as a weapon shop, its windows too dirty to assess the quality of the weapons hidden from view. Squall glanced at Seifer with a raised eyebrow, but the man only seemed amused.

The gravel of the driveway extended all the way to the courtyard, grinding beneath the tires when Seifer brought the car to a stop. Getting out, Squall studied Seifer's second place of employment. The u-shaped building that encompassed most of the yard didn't add any luster to his first impression, but Seifer was already waving him over to the large building to the left.

"It's over here."

Following after the blond, Squall stepped over the wall and craned his neck to take in the large hangar constructed from metal plating. It was far larger than the warehouses they'd driven by on their way there, but it wasn't any newer. As they entered, Squall set down his gunblade case by the large entrance doors and walked farther inside, his footsteps echoing along the concrete floor and high-above ceiling. Behind him, Seifer switched on a series of ceiling lights, some of them dying again after a few flickers.

The debris and rust told him the building was abandoned, sunlight peaking through holes where the roof plates had given way, but the hangar's size was considerable. There were only a few crates stored at the far back, the place otherwise completely empty. It would suit their needs perfectly.

"I used to train here," Seifer said as he followed Squall's gaze around the hangar. "No one ever comes here. We won't hear. And if he does, he won't care." He walked over to Squall, the impatience in the brunet's eyes contagious. From the moment Squall had woken him up, the man had been unable to hide his eagerness at getting started with their training. Squall had even put out coffee and Odine's pills for him back at the apartment.
just to speed things up. "You ready?"

Squall nodded. "Who goes first?"

"You," Seifer said and moved to stand at the side, but immediately stopped in his path when he felt Shiva stir in his mind. Squall's eyes were glazed over, a faraway expression on the man's features. "You can draw her."

Quirking an eyebrow at Seifer's astute observation, Squall stepped over to the blond. He didn't want to do this with any other GF, but another invasive draw without the blond's consent had been out of the question.

Seeking out the ice goddess, he found her easily. Restless at his first touch, she settled down quickly when he started to draw her. Remaining calm, she let herself be drawn smoothly. The medication dulled most of the discomfort, but he kept a close eye on Seifer's expression regardless.

His eyes closing on reflex, Seifer waited for the usual pain to manifest itself, but it never came. The cold magic around him was already starting to dissipate, Shiva no longer in his head. Opening his eyes to see if Squall was all right too, he smiled broadly when the brunet gave him an acknowledging nod in return.

Taking a steeling breath, Squall stepped farther into the hangar, a safe distance away from Seifer and any load bearing structures. He pushed away the memories of sharp pain and started to pull Shiva into a junction with him. She followed willingly, soft and gentle as she took root in his brain. There was an immediate pressure pushing against the inside of his skull, but it remained dull and bearable.

Opening his eyes, Squall looked Seifer's way to let him see the color of his eyes—reassurance that he'd achieved a stable junction. At the man's nod, he turned to face the interior of the hangar and brought up his left hand in the focusing gesture he'd been taught at day one of magic training. It'd been a long time since he'd needed to resort to such a novice trick.

*Blizzard first,* he decided, sticking to familiar territory. Projecting the magic's path to collide with a streak of sunlight, he gave Shiva a warning nudge and released the node of energy stored in the recesses of his mind. The pain was instant, but not crippling. When the crystalline shapes of ice materialized right where he'd intended, scattering the dusty beam of light in all directions, he let go of the breath he'd been holding and immediately readied another spell.

The process wasn't without pain, but the medication did its job, allowing him to maintain focus and control. With each new Blizzard that sprang to life, intersecting with different beams of light around the hangar, his head throbbed a bit more insistently, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. He relished the unnatural cold that rushed all the way to where he was standing, the air crisp and laden with the crackling atmosphere of magic.

Feeling bold, he aimed for the exact centre of the hangar and released a Blizzara. Though the casting time was delayed, the accuracy was far better than anything he'd managed at Odine's lab. Shiva began to stir in the junction, judging it safe to move around more freely after his initial success.

As he let go of another Blizzara, she breathed some of her own ice into the spell. Inaudible as her laughter would be to bystanders, he could hear it echo clearly in the cracks and chimes of the materializing crystals. This was how it was *supposed* to be.

Hopeful for the first time in a while, he started into a slow series of Blizzara's, focusing on timing.
The building pain was a small price to pay for the elation of falling back into perfect synchronicity
with his ice goddess. Setting off one spell after the other, well-timed and evenly spaced, he startled
when a burst of Fire erupted against the ice crystals he'd just conjured, creating a hiss of steam.

For an instant his heart dropped at what looked like his magic acting up, but then he remembered
Seifer and looked behind him. The bastard just sent him a cocky smirk, the man's eyes glowing a
dark amber.

Immediately setting off another Fira to try and best Squall, Seifer tugged at the sluggish mental
connection with Bahamut. When the flames lit up close to where Squall had been aiming his spells,
but no ice spells manifested, Seifer jutted out his chin. "Think you can beat me?"

He didn't delay before focusing on his next spell, uncaring he only had nine Firas left. The air
combusted into flames, soon met by sharp ice crystals. As before, the loud hiss of clashing
elements resounded in the hangar, leaving only a thin mist in its wake.

Their timing wasn't perfect. Sometimes the ice appeared first, sometimes the flames. The spells
took longer than usual, but the fact they were able to cast them at all was all that mattered. They
could retrain like this. Mixing up his spells, Seifer focused on thunder and fire based magic. Those
spells had always been his favorite—the louder, the better.

After a while of setting spells off next to each other, Seifer stole a glimpse of the brunet. Squall
didn't look half as affected as the previous day—the difference was amazing. It felt incredible
being able to cast again after so long.

Next time Arc sent him out he'd be able to collect the materials for the weapons himself instead of
just traveling around to buy them. He'd finally get to feel the adrenaline rush of taking on far too
many monsters at once without a shred of fear. There'd always be a GF who had his back in case
things went south. He'd be able to slay monster after monster without carrying endless potions
around.

He couldn't wait to return to the field again, and by the look of things he'd have to hunt down some
monsters very soon. Most of his spells were down to single digit stores. Two years of neglecting
his supply and selling off potent magic to anyone who'd buy it didn't make for an impressive
collection.

Already running low on his favorite low level spells, he decided to tap into another area. He had
tons of Cures, some of the only leftovers from his cadet days. He'd used up the more potent healing
spells during the war and afterwards he'd downed potions instead.

Waiting for the usual healing tingle to suffuse his body, he watched the blue lights flicker around
him. It was a breathtaking experience, just like the first time he'd cast it as a teenager. All aches
disappeared, only a very slight headache returning after the spell completed. Looking Squall's way,
he smiled.

Distracted from his own casting when Seifer's attack spells had ceased, Squall met the man's gaze
and quirked his lips at the dying embers of the Cure spell. The man's elation was understandable
after over two years of magical impotence. He'd only gone without magic for little over a week
himself, but the time spent cut off from Shiva had felt like forever.

The ice goddess clearly felt the same. Her initial consideration had quickly given way to exuberant
participation in every little spell, and although it added a satisfying spice to his magic, it also wore
him down all the faster. He sighed and kneaded at his temples. His headache had gained a vicious
edge that was difficult to ignore, and he wouldn't push himself as far as blacking out.
Whispering an inward apology to the GF for unjunctioning so soon, he swallowed down his pride and withdrew to the side of the hangar for a break. He didn't miss Seifer's frowning glance at his retreat, but the man refrained from comment and turned his attention back to his own training.

Sitting down, Squall leaned back against the metal plated wall and rested his elbows on raised knees. It was annoying to be temporarily benched while the blond continued on, but all things considered, he couldn't complain. He hadn't even expected to complete a simple set of Blizzards, but he'd managed far more than that.

Seifer was faring even better, time perhaps already having healed the most acute damage while his own neural trauma was still recent. It was encouraging to see the blond like that—his eyes glowing, the occasional smile or grin illuminating his expression after a successful spell.

Settling back to watch the blond train while his migraine slowly receded, Squall felt glad for the easy companionship between them. Just the evening before, he wouldn't have thought it possible. Even just that morning, he'd been doubting his decision to stay in the man's apartment, bed or even vicinity for any length of time.

Squall frowned at the memory of how he'd woken up that morning. The blond had managed to sleep right through the alarm, but Squall'd had no such luxury. Seifer had sidled up to him even closer than the night he'd had his nightmare, the man's arm draped all over him, his entire body pressed far too close. And to think Seifer had grilled him for his hesitance the evening previous—homophobic or not, there was nothing innocent or platonic about waking up to someone else's morning wood.

The few seconds of stunned arousal that had delayed his retreat from the bed had been far worse however. Once his brain had woken enough to realize the inappropriateness of his response, he'd darted out of the bed with self-incriminating urgency, but luckily Seifer hadn't woken. Sighing at his body's betrayal, Squall quickly refocused his gaze from Seifer's form to what the man was actually doing.

His frown grew when he realized Seifer's spells had become increasingly... unimpressive. The timing was still as good as was to be expected, the execution flawless, but he'd grown accustomed to Seifer preferring more flashy shows of magic. The boring repetition of supportive spells was only rarely interrupted with an errant Fira or Thundara.

As he watched the blond Dispel a self-cast layer of Protect and Shell yet again, Squall wondered if something was wrong. By now, he would've expected Seifer to have blown out the plated walls already, or to have singed the concrete floor with fire.

Quickly drawing Shiva into junction, Squall cast a perfectly timed Protect spell to intercept the blond's own identical spell. "Predictable doesn't suit you," he called out when the clashing spells died out.

Cursing inwardly, Seifer avoided Squall's gaze. "Then let's see you do better than this," he said, casting his only Tornado in the middle of the hangar, quickly followed by a Quake. Glancing over his shoulder, he knew he hadn't managed to distract Squall when the brunet got up from the floor with a frown.

Waiting until the last tremor of the Quake spell had dissipated, Squall inwardly scoffed at the poor diversion tactic and readied a Scan spell—Seifer really shouldn't be casting high level spells like Tornado if he was having any kind of trouble. When the magic enveloped the blond and drew its information, Squall raised an eyebrow at the feedback from the spell.
Slightly elevated heartbeat indicating mild exertion, prime physical responses, no injury, elemental favor for Fire and Thunder, addled magic abilities, three GFs—everything was as it should be, except for the man's spell stock.

Glar at Squall as the Scan came to an end, Seifer squared his shoulders. "Satisfied?"

Not about to apologize for his misinterpretation of the situation, Squall walked up to the blond. "Draw what you need," he said, opening his mind to the exchange. "Fifty fifty."

Seifer scrutinized the man in front of him. He and Squall had been rivals throughout their teenage years, enemies after that, and now Squall was offering him half of his spells, worth countless hours of field time or loads of Gil. Aside from Ultimcia, no one had ever offered him anything of this magnitude. "What do you want in return?"

"Just draw, Seifer."

Not about to risk the man changing his mind, Seifer started the repetitive process. Beginning with his favorites, he soon had a better supply than he'd ever been patient enough to collect himself. Finishing up with some of the more lethal spells, some of them extremely hard to find, he shook his head at the big numbers he still got from the draw.

"Always prepared, huh?" he said when the tendrils of their connection finally died out. "I owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything."

"How about I take you out for dinner in return?" Seifer asked as he drew up the corners of his lips, still at a loss as to why the brunet would go through so much trouble for him.

Casting Seifer a frowning glance, Squall suspected another bad joke. In his experience being taken out for dinners meant forced bonding, usually ending up with him sitting through Rinoa's strained efforts at creating a "romantic" atmosphere or Loire's well-meaning babble for an entire evening.

"I'd rather spar," he shot back, turning his gaze away to cast a Water.

"It's settled then—first a spar and then dinner." Seifer said, grinning. "Look on the bright side: even if you lose, you won't have to pay." Squall's outraged huff and eyeroll in reply only added to his amusement. If the brunet thought he'd be on the winning side of their spar that evening, the man was dead wrong. There was no way in hell he'd let that happen.

Watching as tendrils of water burst forth from thin air, fusing into a twisting mass at the brunet's command, Seifer was eager to go all out with his newly acquired spells. It wouldn't do to start with anything less than a Firaga. As the ball of fire lit up the room and heated his face, he immediately repeated the spell. He'd forgotten the rush that came with magic.

Time disappeared as spell after spell came to life in the hangar. He loved seeing Squall's ice crystals take form just as much as the sound of his own loud blasts. Casting required much more concentration than he remembered, and a lingering ache still grew with each spell, but it wasn't anything that could stop him from enjoying every second of it. Setting off another Thundara, he imagined he was out in the field. It had been years since he'd attempted fighting a high level monster. There was something uniquely satisfying about bringing down a creature that took over an hour to kill.

Moving on to a series of buffs and debuffs, he smiled at just how different his life would be now. With an Esuna and Cure on hand, nights of debauchery would no longer result in feeling crappy.
He couldn't wait to try it out.

"It's past ten."

Concentration broken, Seifer's Thundara manifested a couple of feet from where he'd planned it. "By how much?" he asked, not waiting for the reply as he cast another spell.

"Twenty minutes."

Seifer nodded, aware he couldn't put off work for much longer. But there was no way he'd be able to slave away at the forge without knowing for sure if the one thing he'd missed the most was still out of reach. Focusing, he felt Bahamut's impatience keenly. It had been far too long.

As the winged creature appeared amidst fog and thunder, its leathery wings spanning wide, Seifer grinned broadly. The large maroon beast looked just as impressive as he remembered. He'd never seen any other Guardian Force that inspired as much respect. Watching it beat its wings, feeling the shifts in the air, he didn't want the moment to end. If only they were out in the open and surrounded by prey.

Witnessing the summon from the sidelines, Squall tried not to be swayed by Shiva's incessant appeals. Seifer's success was promising, the man completely riveted by the powerful GF as it hovered in the air with powerful strokes of its wings. Squall thought with some relief that the compatibility between the two seemed un tarnished by the years spent cut off from each other.

There was something majestic about the creature that commanded awe, and even Seifer's usual cockiness was toned down to a more contained demeanor—anything less than total domination and focus was foolish when in command of a beast like Bahamut.

It was with regret that Squall watched the GF bow its head to Seifer as the man raised his hand to discharge the winged creature. Bahamut beat against the air with its powerful wings, as if to rise through the ceiling, disintegrating into gusts of wind that whipped at Squall's clothes and hair.

Seifer's elation was contagious as the man turned to face him with a beaming smile. "Your turn."

Always having been weak to Seifer's challenges, Squall nodded against his better judgment and stepped into the center. To see his ice goddess in the flesh, not just a specter in his mind, would be a sorely needed relief.

/Be good,/ he warned the playful GF, needing her to compensate for any disorientation he might experience. Drawing her through the junction, he pushed her out into the world. Pain bloomed in his head immediately, but he ignored it and snapped open his eyes to study the large crystal he'd conjured.

Shiva's elegant shape stirred inside, cracking the ice until it gave away in a burst of icy shards. Stepping out from the debris, the ice goddess locked eyes with him and sent him a testing smile.

/I'm fine. Are you?/

Her nod was slow and graceful, her slanted eyes crinkling as her smile broadened. She inclined her head in question, eager to play.

/Next time,/ he promised, sharing the sharpening pain with her. /Need to keep it brief./

Giving another nod in understanding, she walked towards him with beguiling grace, her mere presence an old source of reassurance and comfort. The cold that pierced deeper with each of her
approaching steps was pleasantly numbing, his breath frosting in the air by the time she stood before him.

Lifting her arm to place a gentle hand against his cheek, she chased away some of his headache with her chilling touch.

/Thanks./

He could feel his relief mirrored in the connection they shared. As long as they could still be like this, rooted side by side in the real world, they'd be fine. Next time they'd have more time. When the ice goddess lowered her arm, Squall unraveled the summon and watched as she burst into thousands of icy flecks scattering in the air.

Having followed the interaction from the sidelines, Seifer raised an eyebrow. "She always flirt like that?"

Not even finding it endearing when Squall frowned in what looked like confusion, Seifer couldn't just forget the sway to Shiva's hips or the coy smile she'd sent the man as she had sauntered over to him. No wonder the rumors about her and Squall had started.

When the brunet still didn't reply, his eyes glazed over in their usual fashion when Squall was focused inwards—on his GF—Seifer shook his head. "Don't tell me you didn't catch that."

Squall's frown grew as he refocused his gaze on Seifer. He didn't understand what kind of joke the man was playing, Shiva's growing hilarity suggesting it was indeed a joke. Uninvited flirtation had never been one of his problems, least of all from Shiva.

"Do you ever catch it?" Seifer asked, a suspicion starting to form.

"She wasn't flirting," Squall said tersely, feeling ridiculous having to deny it.

"Just answer the question. Do you ever notice it? People flirting with you," Seifer repeated as he walked closer, keeping his budding amusement to himself.

"They don't."

Smiling lopsidedly, Seifer stopped right in front of the brunet. "So...it never occurred to you that I was flirting with you when I asked for a striptease? ... Or when I joked about the fun only starting after the uniform comes off?"

Uncertain whether Seifer was trying to flirt, tease or get under his skin just to prove he could, Squall had to consciously keep himself from flinching back from the blond's proximity.

"Stop."

"Stop what, Squall?" Seifer asked, feigning ignorance.

"Being an ass," Squall bit out, glaring at the blond as he inwardly tried to diffuse the part of him that was actually responding to the man.

Seifer leaned in closer, while eyeing Squall up lewdly. "You should try it sometime."

Stepping away from the blond, Squall was done with playing games he didn't understand. "Save your flirting for someone who cares."

"Ouch, Princess," Seifer said, holding a hand over his heart, his smile not faltering. "Now if you
don't mind, I think I'll try and mend my broken heart with a bit of physical labor." He nodded towards the courtyard. "You coming?"

Brow twitching at the blond's fickle mood, Squall let out a sigh. He should've gotten used to Seifer toying with him a long time ago, but the man kept catching him off guard. "You need help?" he asked, certain he lacked the necessary skills for any kind of smith work.

"No," Seifer said, shaking his head. "Just thought you might want to check out the place and see a great weapon smith in action," he added with a wink. "Arc's collection of blades is quite the sight too. Some real oddities in there."

"Your boss won't mind?" Squall asked, following the blond out of the hangar.

Seifer shrugged as he crossed the courtyard. "He'll be fine." Arc hadn't cared either way when Seifer had shown Calder around a while back, after the man had kept insisting. Most likely Arc had been too absorbed in his work, and probably would be now too.

The hinges creaked when he pushed open the backdoor to the kitchen, the layer of dust on the floor billowing up into the air with each of his footsteps. He'd never seen Arc clean the damned place and Hyne forbid he'd take on the task himself. Throwing his coat onto the table, he rubbed the stubble on his cheek. If Squall had formed an opinion of the place yet, it didn't show, the man's expression carefully neutral as always.

Walking across the kitchen, he held open the door that led to the workshop. As he waited for the brunet to pass through, he had to curb the urge to smack the man's ass—there were too many lethal weapons within hand's reach.

"Finally decided to turn up?" Arc demanded as Seifer entered the workshop. The old man was standing by the forge, already covered in smudges of soot.

"Hey, no complaining. I stayed up until three last night to finish the dagger," Seifer said, waving off the man.

"After you didn't come in to work all day," Arc muttered under his breath, resuming work on the katar in front of him.

Certain that would be the extent of their interaction, Seifer raised an eyebrow when Arc looked Squall's way.

"Who's this?"

Seifer walked further into the room. "A friend. I'm going to show him the ropes."

The unhurried study of the brunet that followed wasn't entirely reassuring, but then Arc let out a "hmph" and dismissed any further conversation by moving the katar to the anvil.

Seifer shrugged at Squall's quizzical expression. Hell if he knew what was going on in Arc's head—the old smith hadn't shown the slightest bit of interest in Calder.

"This is mine," Seifer said as he gestured at the more messy part of the long counter that lined the entire wall. The wooden surface was covered in random drawings of weapons and old stains, coffee being the worst culprit. The wall behind it was littered with pictures and drawings of gunblades, notes on materials, and welding techniques for different parts. The design for his next blade was among his scribbles. To an outsider it probably looked like a madman's lair.
He reached for the blade lying next to his work area. "One of Arc's latest," he said, handing it over to Squall.

Letting his eyes run along the sharp edge of the exquisite blade, Squall could tell the quality of the forging by the many layers of folded metal that gave the weapon its razor sharp edge. It was an older, elegant design with a classic revolving chamber, the balance perfect when he poised the edge of the hilt on a few fingers.

"I forged the blade."

Glancing up at the blond's statement, Squall raised an eyebrow and turned the blade over in search of Seifer's mark. Each weapon smith wielded their own, and he'd been too distracted by Hyperion to have looked for Seifer's sigil on the other gunblades displayed at the SCTA. When he spotted the familiar but unexpected mark etched into the metal, he looked over at the graying man by the anvil.

"Balios?" he asked, unable to reconcile the humble shop with the mark of the world-renowned smith.

Seifer sent Squall a big smirk. "The one and only," he bragged, nodding at the smith's mark. "He likes to take credit." He spoke the words loud enough for the smith to overhear, but didn't get any reaction.

Impressed, Squall ran his finger over the stylized mark of a falcon with spread wings. Perhaps it was no great wonder to find the famous yet enigmatic smith in a place like this. His work had been published in a multitude of Weapon's Monthly magazines, but there had never been any personal info aside from a phone number and the smith's surname—all no doubt measures intended to filter away curious window shoppers, or broke cadets like he had been at the time.

Sympathetic towards the smith's need for privacy, Squall handed the blade back to Seifer. "What's your mark?" he asked, certain the blond had picked one out already, even if Arc didn't allow him to use it yet.

Seifer pulled up his shirt sleeve enough for Squall to see his tattoo.

Squall let out an amused huff. Seifer's habits when it came to weapons was about the only predictable side to the man, his gunblades named after gods and marked by cross swords. Letting his gaze wander around the cluttered workspace—the controlled chaos very similar to the blond's apartment—Squall was quietly impressed with the sheer amount of weapon parts, sketches, blueprints and tools. He'd seen similar sights in the workshops of FH engineers.

Fingering an oil stain much like the one on Seifer's coffee table, Squall interrupted his study of the blond's workspace when his gaze was caught by sketches of a familiar blade. "Did you make her?" he asked, recognizing Seifer's scrawl on the meticulous drawings.

Following Squall's gaze to sketches of Kronos, Seifer nodded. "Just finished her a couple of months ago."

The blade Squall remembered from their spar had been first-rate—nothing he would've expected from an apprentice who claimed to still have a few years of tutelage to go. But then again, Seifer never did things by halves. As he studied Kronos' different incarnations on paper, he wondered how the same person could have such unsightly handwriting yet produce these kinds of drawings.

"Come on, I'll show you the rest of this place," Seifer said and pushed away from the worktop.
"We do our main work in here," he said as he walked past the anvils and furnace.

"This is where we leave the weapons that are ready to be picked up," he said, gesturing at a random selection of weapons laid off to the side. "That's the dagger I worked on last night."

Leaning in over the table, he lifted up a piece of paper tacked onto the pinboard. "This is our list of commissions. Here's the katar Arc is working on," he said, running his finger along a line of text. "We're behind on these ones—some shuriken and a katana." He rifled through a pile of papers on the desk to get to the technical drawings. "I'm on the shuriken for now," he said, handing the drawing to Squall. "I already did the preliminary work, just have to take them to the anvil for the finish."

Not waiting for the brunet to rifle through the drawings, he opened a door into another room. "This is where we do most of the casting. It's also where we keep most of our tools and materials." He walked over to a cabinet and picked up some tools before returning. "In there is the actual shop," he said with a nod at the door at the other end of the room. "If you can even call it that. Most of the weapons in there aren't even for sale… Arc's a hoarder," he added as they walked past the old man.

Following Seifer back to his workspace, Squall felt the older smith's hawk-eyed gaze on his back and wondered if his presence there was not as tolerated after all. Deciding it was the blond's problem, he perched himself on the corner of the large worktable to watch as Seifer laid out his work tools and pinned the necessary technical drawings on the board in front of him. The throwing stars themselves were procured from a shelf and placed in front of the blond.

"I can't remember how many of these I've made before Arc let me in on the bigger stuff," the man said with a huff, starting to make some measurements on the first of the batch and making notes. "Still a bitch to get right, though. See here? The angles and distances need to be just right, or else they won't cut through shit. These will manage skin or leather fine, but nothing sturdier."

Happy enough to let Seifer talk him through the different processes required, Squall paid attention to the man's contagious enthusiasm just as much as to his words. He'd never seen the brute man do such delicate work before, and with such patience. A tiny difference in measurement meant the difference between good and bad aerodynamics, and so the blond cut no corners as he checked each throwing star for balance and symmetry.

Squall had known that handmade weapons required both force and delicacy, yet he was still surprised to see Seifer turn each item over in his hands with care, making swift and minute marks wherever some of the shurikens needed more work. The man's simple, to-the-point explanations further reminded him of why Seifer also made a great teacher.

"When I'm done with this, I'll need to touch them up at the anvil," the blond continued to explain, picking up the next shuriken. "After that I'll be etching on a simple pattern. It's pretty straightforward—put on a layer of wax, scratch in the design and coat it with acid. Got plenty of nasty burns from—"

Falling quiet when he felt Arc's eyes on them, Seifer straightened his back. Usually nothing drew the man's attention away from his work. He frowned when Arc walked over to the wooden cupboard holding the man's booze and got out three shot glasses.

"Here," Arc said as he handed each of them a glass. Taking the bottle of well-aged spiced rum from underneath his arm, he filled each glass to the brim and clinked his glass against Seifer's, waiting for the blond to down his drink. "Now shut up."

Seifer knocked back the alcohol in his glass and chuckled. So that was what had been bugging the
old coot. Having said his piece, Arc turned his back to them, about to return to work.

"The blue blade. This is the guy."

Turning back around to eye Squall carefully, Arc didn't immediately comment. "Who made it?" he asked after a pregnant pause.

Meeting the man's gaze, Squall knew the smith must already have a few guesses lined up. Only a few places made weapons that were imbued with magic properties. "A smith from the Shumi tribe."

"...And you are?"

"A SeeD," Seifer quickly answered on Squall's behalf.

After another moment of studying the brunet, Arc let out another "hmph." Filling up Squall's shot glass and his own once more, he held up his glass in an invitation to drink together.

Appreciating the smith's no-nonsense approach, Squall tapped his own glass against Arc's. Somehow it felt like an initiation rite, and he could imagine the older man having put Seifer through the same assessing scrutiny in the past. Though probably unwise considering the amount of meds he was on, he downed the second shot glass of burning liquid.

Turning to fill up Seifer's glass, Arc nodded at the blond. "Maybe we should add Trabia to your next trip out," the smith said as he walked past Seifer with a pat to his shoulder.

Emptying his shot glass once again, Seifer watched as Arc returned to his work. He couldn't remember the man ever getting out alcohol for outsiders, not even clients. Baffled by Arc's antics, certain he'd gotten used to them all by now, he considered the man's suggestion instead. It would be amazing to learn how to forge something like Squall's new blade.

Realizing he'd better get going at the forge, he grabbed one of the shurikens. "You wanna stay for lunch?" he asked, looking at Squall. "I better focus until then, but you can see how it's done—feel free to roam around as well."

"Sure," Squall replied. His plans for the day were rather meager whenever Seifer wasn't available. He wasn't any good at keeping himself occupied, never having had as much free time as he did now.

When the blond nodded and walked towards the furnace and anvil, Squall decided on one of the few surfaces near the wall that wasn't completely covered in tools and weapon parts. Lifting himself onto the oak trestle table, he watched as Seifer started to put on several items of protective gear. The leather apron and gloves were well-worn and blackened with soot, the blond's safety glasses and sound deadening headset ruling out any chance of conversation.

Settling in for the "force" part of forging weapons, Squall tried to shake the oddness of sitting idly by while others did all the work—not that he'd be able to do anything useful. Seifer was already fanning the flames of the furnace with a set of large bellows, the glow of red hot coals spilling out into the workshop and casting the blond's face in fiery hues. As the man worked up the heat in the furnace, Squall could feel the hot air all the way to where he was sitting. He smiled when Shiva interrupted his thoughts with a crystalline huff, the ice goddess retreating further into his mind.

The air became dense with heat, the scent of burning coal, soot and metal quickly filling the room. The old chimney didn't manage to draw away all of the smoke, but Squall didn't mind the smell. It was a heavy scent that had always reminded him of the excitement of saving up for Revolver; of
the many walks by the smith shop where the gunblade had been on display. In recent days, he'd started to associate the scent with Seifer.

Watching as Seifer pulled the first heated shuriken out of the furnace with a set of tongs and brought down the hammer with a carefully placed swing, Squall remembered why the man had always been so easy to admire. Seifer was still every bit as ambitious and talented, never one for defeatist attitudes.

As the blond started into a regular rhythm of beats, Squall soon found himself captivated by the display of brute strength and the sheen of sweat that started to form on the man's bared arms. With most of the blond obscured from view by either the anvil or protective gear, Squall's eyes strayed to the sight of bunching muscles that rolled beneath tanned skin with every strike of the blond's hammer. He'd never seen Seifer use his strength in such a controlled, focused manner. Even through the safety glasses, he could see the look of intense concentration in the man's eyes.

Usually Seifer would already have felt his gaze and have looked his way with a cocky remark. The only other time he'd been allowed such an uninterrupted study had been during their night of Avalanche, seated on Seifer's windowsill. The intimacy of the moment felt the same—to be shown a previously unknown side to the man.

Remembering the sight of the prone man tugging at his shirt's collar and baring his chest, Squall let his gaze drop to Seifer's collar bone. The small dip below his Adam's apple glistened with sweat, just above the man's shirt. It clung tightly to his chest, outlining his broad shoulders perfectly each time the man turned to pump the bellows.

The furnace had been brought to a full roar now. One after the other red-hot shuriken was thrown into the dousing tub, releasing a hissing cloud of steam and adding moisture to the heat in the air. The blond worked fast. Inhaling the thick air deeply, Squall leaned back against the wall. He wanted to break Seifer's concentration, to break the tension in himself. He needed to move and spar with the blond—to draw all of that focus to himself.

He imagined picking a fight right then and there—Seifer had never looked more strong and masculine than in that moment. Would he be ordered out of the workshop, or would he be indulged? His pulse quickened when he imagined the blond setting down the hammer and stalking over to him with a predatory gleam to those green eyes. As his gaze dropped to Seifer's lips, he imagined them curling up into a smirk. He was starting to forget how they had tasted—

The sudden sound of his phone's ringtone brought back reality, tearing his attention away from the enticing view and his wildly inappropriate thoughts. Swallowing thickly, he willed his excitement away and fumbled for his phone. Flicking it open, he frowned at the "private number" notice on the display.

"Who is this?" he asked tersely, resentful to whoever had caught him in the act. A soft chuckle sounded from the other side, immediately causing his guard to go up. Quistis rarely called just to catch up.

"It's reassuring to hear you're well enough to still intimidate your callers."

"No caller ID," Squall replied, glancing over to the anvil. Seifer was too engrossed in his work to have noticed his indecent gaze. "Why the secure line?" Looking around the workshop, he was glad to see that Arc had left some time during his... study of the blond. To think the old man's presence hadn't deterred his libido in the slightest...

"I'm at your office right now. It's been my home away from home lately," she replied, laying on the
sarcasm.

He cringed inwardly, well aware that part of his workload would have fallen to Quistis in his absence. "I've been getting through my mail. The schedule updates—"

"I was joking!" she cut in quickly. "You know I'm just as bad a workaholic as you. Leave the schedule updates to me."

"I did them last night."

"Squall! Don't you know the meaning of sick leave?" Quistis chided. "You can trust me at the ship's helm. Just focus on getting better."

He sighed and leaned back. "I trust you—"

"Good."

"—but it's paperwork. I can do that much."

"I'll remember you said that when next year's budget meeting comes along," she said, pausing before her voice took on a more serious tone. "But that isn't why I called."

"You got Odine's report."

"I did and it's worrisome, Squall," the woman replied. "Did you start his suggested treatment yet?"

He didn't answer right away, careful not to betray anything that might point to Seifer's involvement. "This morning."

"And?"

"The pills seem to work, but I'm far from my peak. Time will tell."

"You tell me," Quistis implored. "Next time we talk on the phone, it better be you calling me. Rinoa and Laguna haven't been very forthcoming, and I know it's your doing."

"... I'll call if anything changes," Squall replied noncommittally. The woman was far too astute and would pick apart any other reply.

"You do that," she said with a sigh. "I can't say I'm very happy with any of this. I had to hear from Rinoa that you broke up months ago and severed the bond, and the first real information on your medical status came in a mail from Odine."

Squall had no excuses other than confessing to having avoided the woman on purpose, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Great, back to silence then," Quistis huffed. "We could've helped, Squall. You could've come back to Balamb. The two of you going off to Esthar... I never liked it one bit."

"I told you so," he replied, hoping to diffuse her mood in another way.

"What?"

"I know you want to say it, so get it out of your system."

A stunned silence was followed with a breathy laugh. "Alright then. I told you so."
"Better?"

She laughed again. "Much. But don't think you're out of the woods yet, Commander. I did warn you... I just wish I could do more than just cover your paperwork and meetings."

"You could send me a change of clothes," he offered half in jest, remembering the scant few items he'd taken from the old penthouse.

"...You'll be the death of me," she said in mock exasperation. "Alright. Your clothes. Anything else?"

"No."

She chuckled. "I'm sure Laguna's already got all the rest covered. Does he have that cook on standby all day again? That poor overworked bastard."

"The food's fine," he replied, treading carefully. Seifer had cooked surprisingly good food so far. When no immediate reply came to his comment, Squall was momentarily afraid she'd somehow picked up on the dishonesty in his voice.

"All joking aside," Quistis finally said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Thanks, but not good enough. I'll have the truth please."

Squall sighed, well aware he could no longer callously dismiss her as he would have in the past. "...I'll be fine," he amended.

"Oh Squall," she said softly. "You will be. Anything you need, you call me, okay? Whether it's someone to listen, clothes, or more paperwork, I'll do it."

"...Thanks." Shooting down her offer would only get him into more trouble.

"Come back to Balamb soon, you hear? I'll have a mission ready for you."

"You know me well," he said, his lips quirking at the corners. Quistis always liked to think she did, and in comparison to most, it was the truth.

She chuckled, but paused then. "...What is that sound I've been hearing in the background? Where are you?"

Amusement grinding to a halt, Squall cringed inwardly. Better to keep the lie as close to the truth as possible. "A weapon shop. You're hearing the smith at the anvil."

"Don't tell me you're commissioning another weapon!"

"No, just looking," he reassured, hating how his guilty gaze flitted back to Seifer's sweating form.

"That bored, huh?" Quistis said. "You should ask Kiros for a spar. He's guard captain; he should still have enough game to challenge you."

"I'll think about it."

"Do it," she chided. "The day my Commander goes window-shopping is the day I throw in the towel!" She sighed, the sound of rustling paper traveling over the connection. "I have to go now."
The explosives department demanded a meeting, and it's starting in five."

"Selphie?"

"Don't ask," Quistis said with another suffering sigh. "And don't worry! I'll make sure Balamb Garden is still standing when you return."

"Good luck."

" Appreciate it," the woman replied with a huff. "Talk to you soon, Squall. I'm holding you to that call."

When the line went dead, Squall pocketed his phone and looked back to the blond. The call had gone reasonably well, and Quistis hadn't seemed suspicious. He'd be safe for another few days, but he knew she'd figure out the truth before long.

Deciding a delay of execution was better than nothing, he began to lean back against the wall, but when his gaze was immediately pulled back to Seifer before he could make a conscious decision not to, he quickly hopped off the table.

This was insane—he couldn't even trust himself around the blond anymore when the man was simply doing his job. That morning, Seifer's far too close proximity and morning-wood had hardly been Squall's fault, but this particular lapse into the gutter he couldn't blame on anyone other than himself. Huffing, he walked over to a set of display cases and kept his gaze strictly on the antique pieces the cabinets held.

Figuring Seifer still had a while to go, he wandered towards the area the blond had indicated as the "shop that wasn't an actual shop." The door stood ajar, no noises sounding from within. Wherever Arc had gone, he probably wouldn't mind him perusing the one area of the property that was actually intended for customers.

When solid walls finally separated him from Seifer, Squall released a deep breath and let go of the tight rein he'd held on his wandering gaze. Looking around, he decided that Seifer had been right in his assessment. The shop seemed like it was designed to keep customers at bay rather than invite them in. Having met the enigmatic Balios, he was probably right in that guess. When it came to attracting seasoned fighters, hearsay and recommendations mattered far more than a flashy display.

Running a finger through a thick layer of dust along one of the glass counters, he stirred up even more dust with his every step into the shop. The light that shone through the dirty windows was opaque and yellow, and most of the weapons were old and rusted, creating an almost otherworldly atmosphere. Most items weren't even displayed properly—they were either thrown haphazardly into large crates and boxes or weighed down aged shelves beyond their limit.

It almost felt like one of the make-belief games Seifer used to rope him into back at the orphanage. The neglected shop would've fit one of their favored scenarios perfectly: the discovery of a treasure trove, easily changing from a pirate's lair to a dragon's nest, depending on the blond youth's whims. There had always been treasure to gather and weapons to seize, usually after the defeat of an unfortunate foe.

Flicking on a light, he broke the illusion and wandered from one odd item to the next. Arc had managed to put together a curious collection of both junk and diamonds in the rough. Most familiar with swords and gunblades, Squall bypassed the knock-off, mass-produced blades and singled out the true antiques. Testing their balance and weight, he quickly grew fond of a simple, two-handed broadsword. A hum of fading magic still infused the aged metal, and though the buff charms were
nearly gone, the blade's double edge was still razor sharp.

"Good choice."

Turning to where Seifer stood leaning against the doorway, Squall aborted his stance and lowered the blade. When his gaze was drawn to the small streak of soot along the blond's neck, he quickly stopped his gaze from lingering.

Running a hand through his hair, Seifer nodded towards the kitchen. "Ready for lunch?"

When the brunet let out an agreeing hum and carefully set down the blade onto one of the firmer looking, less cluttered shelves, he suppressed a smile. Reverence like that meant love at first sight. He wasn't surprised to have found Squall in the shop, testing a blade he would've known to pick out for the man himself.

Drying off his soot covered fingers, he waved Squall over and led them back to the kitchen. Getting out some bread and spreads, he set about making his sandwich, letting the brunet make his own food. They didn't say anything as they prepared lunch side by side. Plate in hand, he walked outside and sat down on the edge of the old concrete well with a contented sigh.

Digging into his sandwich, he looked up as Squall approached. Back at Garden he would never have imagined them able to keep the peace long enough to have lunch together, let alone share a quiet moment like this. It even seemed like Squall had enjoyed himself so far. He hadn't seemed impatient or curt like usual. Seifer smiled. Despite the rundown buildings and far from pristine interior, it was the closest thing to a home he knew. "I love it here."

Squall looked up from his food at the contemplative tone, and let out an acknowledging hum. "Now I know where you picked up your taste for hard liquor."

Seifer chuckled. "Arc's a good man, his liquor even better," he confessed, having taken a fair share in emptying many of the man's bottles. He took another bite out of his sandwich. "You know... I used to live here. For about a year after the war," he said, wondering what state his old room was in. It had been cluttered as hell back when he'd lived there. "In a crappy little room in there," he added, inclining his head in the direction of the kitchen.

Following the blond's gaze, Squall realized what Seifer was saying. "He took you in."

"Not at first," Seifer said with a shrug. "I came looking for a job—any job. Arc turned me down flat." He'd visited every single weapon shop in the city in the hope of earning some Gil as a helper—he hadn't even considered the option of becoming an apprentice back then. Any menial job would have sufficed, and weapons were the only thing he understood aside from fighting. As he recalled the weeks that followed, his expression hardened. No one wanted to hire a foreigner without permanent residency. He'd had no Gil to spare, not even enough for a room in the slums—just enough to keep starvation at bay.

After over a month of living on the road without having washed, without a bed to sleep in, he'd smelled like a dead Funguar and had looked even worse. Any hope of a job had vanished. When he hadn't eaten in several days, he'd ended up on the roof of a skyscraper for an entire day, Hyperion in his lap.

"When I came back and tried to sell him Hyperion, he just stared at me like I'd lost my mind and didn't say anything for ages. Kind of like how he stared you down earlier. Just when I was about to leave, he told me to get cleaned up and gave me a key to a room in the back." He chuckled lowly. "Who would've thought the renowned Arc Balios is nothing but a great big softie."
In spite of Seifer making light of the story, Squall looked at the blond with mixed feelings. Things had to have been bad for the man to try and sell off Hyperion. At least he seemed to have bounced back from whatever problems he'd had at first. Squall couldn't imagine pulling the same feat. He'd never really had any money to speak of until he was promoted to the rank of commander, but he'd also never lacked for anything. Ousted from the Garden system however, he realized he'd be in trouble. Apart from fighting, he had no skills. Seifer had made it out here however, had adapted; something he wasn't sure he'd be able to do himself.

"...It's a good place," he acknowledged. "The work suits you."

"It's not bad as far as civilian jobs go," Seifer nodded, having made peace with his place in life. Even if their training that morning had shown other avenues were still open to him, he wouldn't want to stop his path to becoming a weapon smith. There was something satisfying about creating exquisite weapons—to help a fighter gain the extra edge that could mean the difference between life or death. "Doesn't hurt that I'm a natural," he added with a smirk. "Did you check out the upgrade yet?"

"This morning," Squall said with a nod. "Looks good. I'll have to test it in the field."

At the mention of actual fights, Seifer glanced in the direction of the southern city border. The Esthar Wall was all that stood between them and one of the world's richest hunting grounds. "We could head out tomorrow—spend a day killing monsters on the plains."

Squall met the blond's gaze with an agreeing hum. If they went into the wild, away from prying eyes, he could finally get Lionheart out. "North?" he asked, aware from reports that those desert plains still held stray packs of Lunar Cry monsters.

"Sure," Seifer said, eager at the prospect. He hadn't been out that way in a while, too many of the monsters charged with potent magic. It would be the perfect place to train their magic and fill up their stores at the same time.

As they ate in companionable silence, a question from the night he'd brought Squall home from the club resurfaced in his mind. "You know, I always had you pegged as someone who loved the small village life—definitely not the big city." It still confused him. For someone who loved to be on his own, Esthar seemed like an absurd place to move to.

"How come you moved here then?"

Frowning, Squall didn't immediately look up from his sandwich. If it hadn't been for the past few days and Seifer's own candid words, he would've cut off the conversation right there, but it was far too late to turn the man away anymore.

"... Rinoa... She was having trouble keeping in control. Odine could help, so we moved here."

Seifer didn't like Squall's reluctant tone of voice or the man's averted gaze. "What happened?"

"Her powers—they became too much."

Seifer turned to stare at the gravel beneath his feet. The thought of a Sorceress gone rogue, enough so for Squall to seek Odine's aid, was enough to leave him tense. "In what way?"
"... Just mood shifts at first," Squall replied slowly, disinclined to lie when Seifer had shared in the consequences of his failed bond. "Later she was angry all the time. She started to have blackouts... had trouble reining in her powers."

"How is she now?"

"Better... She wears magic wards most of the time." Setting aside his food, appetite gone, Squall still couldn't shake the bitterness of his failure as her knight. "It's better than the meds Odine had her on at first."

Glancing at Squall's half eaten sandwich, Seifer sighed softly. Taking another bite of his own sandwich, he let silence fall between them. He hadn't expected people from his past to become a part of his life again. He hadn't really missed Rinoa, but part of him cared for her all the same. There was even a part of him that missed the place he'd once called home.

"How are things back at B-Garden?"

Looking up at the change of topic, Squall gave a slight shrug. "Getting rid of the Garden Faculty has been the only good change," he replied. "There's more media exposure, more applicants... It was easier when nobody cared about us."

Seifer couldn't suppress the slight quirk to his lips. Most other people at Garden would view that as a positive. "And Cid? How's he?"

"He's preparing Quistis to take over when he retires."

At the thought of his old, prissy instructor making it as far as headmaster, Seifer snorted. "I bet she's loving that."

"She'll make a good Headmistress. She's got the backbone Cid lacks."

"Big words..." Seifer said, quirking an eyebrow. Squall didn't do flattery, so Quistis must have stepped up and proven more capable and professional than she'd ever been when mooning over a student. "She still crushing on you?" he said and grinned at the unimpressed glade he received in return. "Or did you not notice?" The scowl that followed was priceless.

How anyone had managed to gain the interest of the most introverted guy on the planet was beyond him. "Rinoa must've pulled quite a trick on you," he said with a slight shake of his head, before wiping his hands on his trousers. He took a deep breath of fresh air as his eyes scanned the courtyard.

"I'd better get back to work," he said as he stood up. "We still on for sparring tonight?"

Getting up as well, Squall nodded. "What time?"

"I should be done around seven. I'll give you a call when I leave," Seifer said, grabbing their plates. "Meet you there?"

"Sure."

Seifer nodded and started towards the back entrance. "See you later, Princess."

Scowling at Seifer's parting shot, Squall spared the man's retreating back one last look, before he turned around and left the courtyard with Revolver's case in hand.
Letting out a sigh, he didn't look forward to his afternoon. He'd managed all the administrative work that could be done remotely the night earlier, so until the agreed on spar, all that lay before him was boredom. He might as well start training at the SCTA early. He might risk tiring himself out before Seifer got there, but lingering around the blond's apartment all day would be equally detrimental.

Turning left when he came to the abandoned street, he started the long trek back to the apartment. The sun was out and temperatures were mild for the time of year, so he'd purposefully chosen to walk over taking a second car to Seifer's work. At least he'd kill some time like that, and there was something calming about long walks. Whenever life forced him to a standstill, through injury or stress or people, he liked to just go wherever his feet took him. It was a habit born from his orphanage days.

Taking in all the rundown warehouses and factories, he maintained a leisurely pace. The cityscape was a far cry from any beach, but it facilitated quiet thought just as well. Or at least it had in the past. It was as if spending the past few days with Seifer had rendered him incapable of being alone. Before his stay with the blond, he'd been perfectly fine spending entire days alone or longer—in the field, on a stakeout, in nature... Perhaps only Seifer's demanding nature was enough to distract him from all the dark or inappropriate thoughts running through his head. Or perhaps he just really needed a mission.

Huffing at himself, he knew there was more to it than that. Even self-denial had its limits. Something had changed; not only in the way he regarded Seifer, but in the way they acted around each other as well. The change went beyond the attraction he felt. With every passing day, their interactions extended further and further beyond the original boundaries of their rivalry.

Even if their conversation was strained and often brief, it was more than they had ever managed in the past. His father, his failure as a knight, the blond's past and new life—they'd touched on it all. His concern for Seifer's well-being seemed to be returned as well, even if neither of them could admit it out loud. It was discomfiting to talk honestly about things that mattered, to show parts of himself he'd rather keep hidden, but Seifer hadn't given him a choice.

Seifer seemed to have less trouble being true to his cocky self, unapologetic as always, but it did little to simplify things between them. Even if the blond was teasing when saying he'd been flirting with Squall, he'd been serious when accidentally blurtin out the truth in the SCTA showers.

Regardless of whether Seifer's regard for him was platonic or not, there was no question they'd outgrown the limited label of "rivals." After a nightmare he'd found comfort in Seifer's presence, something he still found bizarre and embarrassing to think back on. He wasn't sure what was odder—he having allowed it or Seifer having offered it.

If anything, it reminded Squall more of when they'd been kids, before the rivalry. At the orphanage, Seifer had had a strange way of being involved, managing to insult and pester him while at the same time coming up with some plausible excuse to stay indoors with him whenever Squall had been sick. Disguised kindness like that was the reason he had put up with the bully, and he supposed it was why he was staying now as well.

Startling from his musings when someone jostled his shoulder in passing, Squall snorted at himself. Luckily his sense of orientation was good, his feet remembering the way even when he
was lost to thought. He'd always been good at running on autopilot, allowing his mind free rein.

This time, however, his train of thought was an exercise in futility. It was impossible to define his relationship with Seifer. They had grown up together, but Squall wouldn't call Seifer his brother the way he used to consider Ellone his sister. They'd once admitted to being rivals only, but the label had never fit, unable to capture the passion they invested in every single spar. Even having been enemies, Squall had come out of that war realizing he cared for the man.

Would they become friends now? Squall frowned at the word, uncertain whether they'd be able to mold their troubled relationship into something like that. They had already been treading into murky territory ever since he'd landed in Seifer's bed. On the other hand, Irvine loved to wax poetic on the merits of friends with benefits...

Squall's scowl grew at the unbidden thought. The plan was to keep things as uncomplicated as possible. He'd just have to deal with the lack of a proper label for them and keep focused on what really mattered—reestablishing some kind of balance after everything they'd been through. A fleeting attraction didn't fit into that picture.

Readjusting his hold on Revolver's case, he wound his way through the idling crowd to reach the Fulcura Street access point. As he got onto the passenger lift, he sent Seifer a silent curse, childishly blaming the man for suddenly having sprouted a sense of work ethic. They could've been sparring already, but instead he would be counting the hours.

Settling in for the fifteen minutes long ride, he directed his gaze outside the shimmering force field as the city whizzed by, already looking forward to the coming evening. Tonight's spar couldn't come soon enough.

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[Arc Balios' Weapon Shop, Tiamat District, Friday, 24th of October, 6:42 pm]

Swiping the sweat from his brow, Seifer set down the katana he'd been working on. He wasn't anywhere close to done, and for the last hour, he'd been more focused on checking the time than on the job at hand.

Dropping his work gloves on the wooden counter, he ticked off the shuriken he'd finished earlier on the list of jobs. Arc had disappeared a few hours back without any warning—a usual occurrence. Gathering his things, he walked through the kitchen and down the hall leading to the residential part of the building.

With a knock on the living room door, he opened it and nodded at where Arc was sitting. The man was in his usual spot, only briefly looking up from the technical drawings that covered the worn table in front of him. Despite it still being light out, the room was dark save for a desk lamp aimed at the documents.

"I'm off," Seifer said, unsurprised at the curt hum in reply. When he'd lived there, days could go by without them exchanging more than a handful of sentences.

About to turn around, he was instead pinned into place by Arc's gaze. "Translucent and luminous," the man said slowly—knowingly. "Azure."

Seifer didn't doubt what the old man was implying for even a second. Everyone had heard tales of the SeeD commander's weapon. "And?"

Arc let silence hang between them as he rolled his pen between his fingers and mulled over his
"Keep your focus," he said, moving a finger to tap against the schematics on the table. "You have a gift, son. Don't waste it."

"I'm not," Seifer said with a shrug, not moving from his position in the doorway. A few days of missed work didn't warrant Arc's concern. "He needed help."

"Unlikely," the old man said with a huff, returning his attention to the papers in front of him. He jotted down a correction before swapping the drawing for another one, his eyes skimming the calculations next to the blueprint.

"Don't worry, old man," Seifer said, straightening his pose. "You're stuck with me." At Arc's nod, he turned and left.

Things had been this way from the start. If anything other than blacksmithing caught Seifer's attention, Arc would always point it out. This time was no different, even if it was the SeeD commander causing the commotion. He trusted Arc completely. Nothing changed with Arc knowing who Squall was. It was one of the things he liked about the old coot—nothing could ruffle the man.

Stepping out into the courtyard, he breathed in the fresh air as he got out his cell to check the time. Ten to seven. Just enough time to get to the SCTA in time for his spar with Squall. He frowned at the missed call he'd received from Rinoa two hours ago. Pressing the call button, he walked over to lean against his pick up.

"Hello? Seifer?" the girl asked as she picked up the phone.

"You called," he replied tersely.

Rinoa let out a huff. "I'm calling about Squall. He won't say how he's doing. He just tells me he's fine, to brush me off..." She paused, her voice easing up. "How is he?"

Seifer opened the door to his pickup and got into the driver's seat. "He's better," he said, well aware what it was like to be on Squall's silent end. "How much do you know?"

"Laguna called me. I know about the tests," Rinoa said candidly after a brief pause. "He was really taken aback. He said Squall was in pain just by casting simple spells."

Seifer grimaced. "It wasn't pretty at the labs..." His lips sloped downwards at the memory. "But he's better. The medicine is helping. He was able to cast for a couple of hours this morning with just a few breaks—he managed to summon Shiva as well. With that much improvement in a day, he'll be back to normal in no time."

"Yeah?" Rinoa asked, sounding hopeful. "...Squall said it was too soon to tell."

Seifer chuckled. "You know him. Always the pessimist. It'd take a miracle for him to think things could actually work out."

The girl let out an agreeing hum, not seeming half as enthusiastic as he'd expected. What he'd told her was good news. Hell, it was amazing news.

"I'm just about to meet him for a spar. We sparred last night as well. Physically, he's in great form, as always. Won't be long before he's out there getting his hero fix again."

Silence fell between them, the girl showing no sign of relief or elation at what he'd just said.
"...You should call Laguna. I'm sure he'd want to hear all this. He's never been this worried and Squall talks to him even less than he does to me. Squall never tells him anything."

Seifer frowned, not having expected this turn to the conversation. "I got a feeling that was the case," he said, remembering the president's concern for Squall and the hopeful invitation to the palace. He sighed, not really wanting to get stuck as the middle man, but Laguna had turned out to be a good guy. "Okay, I'll give him a call." The only thing that bugged him was Rinoa calling the shots. "Anything else?"

"Well... Since we're on the subject, it would mean the world to Laguna if Squall would just once take him up on those dinner invitations. We were going to visit during Squall's leave, but now... I know it's a long shot, but Squall might at least hear you out."

Seifer raised an eyebrow. "You think he'd go if I asked him to?"

"You got him to take you along to the tests," she replied matter-of-factly. "Whatever your methods, they seem to work."

Unable to deny as much, Seifer leaned forwards in his seat. "My methods, huh?" The only thing he'd done was to refuse a no. He sighed. "I guess there'd be some way of making him... But why? I mean, sure, his dad seems like a great guy and all, but if Squall doesn't want him in his life, then what's the point?"

"They're family, Seifer. I know that might be hard for you and him to understand, but Laguna would do anything for Squall. Unconditional love like that is a rare thing to come by... Squall has spent his entire life thinking he's on his own. Friends, relationships; none of that is set in stone, but Laguna will always be his dad... This could be really good for them both."

Seifer considered the truth in her words. He'd never had parents himself, so he had nothing to base any assumptions on. Sure, if he had a kid of his own, he'd be there whether the kid wanted him to or not. Laguna seemed to be the same, but the unfortunate bastard happened to have the Lion of Balamb as his offspring—no easy task. "All right, I'll see what I can do. I guess it won't hurt to have a President owe me one either."

"Don't worry. You already got into his good books," Rinoa said dryly.

Chuckling at the good news, Seifer put his keys into the ignition. "Yeah?"

"Protective tendencies and everything."

He smiled. "Well, you know how Squall is... Someone's gotta look out for his ass."

"... I knew I made the right choice," the girl said with confidence, though he could hear the pinched quality to her words.

He ran a hand through his hair. "How're you holding up?"

"... I'm coping," she replied softly.

Imagining how hard things had to be for her, Seifer felt a rare twinge of compassion. "Squall told me why you moved to Esthar."

"He did?" she asked, her voice abrupt, breathless. "I—I swear I'm not like that anymore. You have to believe me, I didn't mean to..."
"Mean to what?" Seifer asked, his frown deepening. He didn't like the rushed edge to her words. Quick, sharp inhales of air told him that whatever it was, it deeply upset her.

"To hurt him. I never wanted to..." She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. "I—how much did he tell you?"

"...That you had trouble with your magic. With keeping in control." He tensed up in his seat. "How did you hurt him?" he demanded, all of his protective instincts kicking in.

When he heard nothing but silence, he cursed under his breath. The girl was lucky he wasn't there to force the truth out of her. "Rinoa."

"...My powers were messing with my mind... I—I attacked him, Seifer. I hurt him badly."

Narrowing his eyes, Seifer had to move the phone away in order not to snap at her. He clenched his jaw firmly before bringing the cell back up. "How?" he asked harshly.

"...We were having a fight. He turned his back to me and I just—I cast this... spell. I still don't know exactly what it was—I wasn't thinking straight..." She paused. "He never saw it coming."

Seifer recalled the raw flesh he'd spotted on Squall's back during their night of Avalanche. "...The scar," he said out loud, waiting for Rinoa to deny his assumption. When no objections came, he grew tense in his seat, his shoulders rigid.

"I can't believe you—" his words were cut short when quiet sobs reached him from the other end of the line. He cursed under his breath. He repeated to himself that it had been an accident, however much he wanted to blame her. Something didn't add up though. "It's the scar on his back, right?"

"...You saw," she said, focusing on the wrong part entirely.

"If that's the scar, then how come it looked fresh just a week ago?"

"It won't close up, just keeps festering," she said, her voice shaking.

Seifer frowned, remembering how different it had looked in the SCTA showers. "It's healing now."

"...It is?" the girl asked incredulously, before sharply drawing in her breath. "Hyne... It didn't heal because of me, because of the bond."

Filled with an anger that had no outlet, Seifer grit his teeth. Why the hell did Squall have to have such rotten luck? Of all the girls to fall for, of course Squall had to choose a fucking sorceress who couldn't control her powers.

Seifer wanted to yell at her for hurting Squall and for letting the bond drag on for far longer than had been healthy for either of them, but Rinoa was already reduced to tears.

"At least it's healing now," he said, as much to himself as to her.

She breathed in deeply. "...He never blamed me. Not once. He just brought me to Esthar, and never mentioned it again," she said dejectedly. "...I don't think I'll ever really understand him."

"He knows you'd never do anything like that on purpose," he said honestly. Squall wasn't one to bear grudges—the fact that the brunet was staying with him was proof enough. But more than that, Rinoa had managed to get Squall hooked in a way no one else had.

"He loves you." There was no longer any doubt about it in his mind. The answer lay in how much
Squall had done for the girl despite how she'd treated him. Squall had moved to Esthar to help her get treatment after she had attacked him. Squall had stayed—

"...Yet he's with you."

Seifer straightened in his seat. He couldn't have heard that fucking right.

"You made sure of that," he bit out, before taking a deep breath. "Listen. What happened, happened... and it's fucked up as hell, but that doesn't mean Squall doesn't care about you. After listening to your voice message that morning, he downed a whole fucking bottle of whiskey because he'd hurt you. If that's not love, then I don't know what is."

"...You don't know the first thing about love then," she countered. "Never, not even when I dumped him, did I feel anything that strong from him. That morning had little to do with me."

"Yeah?! Well, enlighten me then!" he spat, his entire body going rigid at her obstinacy.

"You really want me to say it, huh. Rub it in," she said, getting worked up too. "He felt more for you that one night than he could ever muster for me. That enlightening enough for you? And I know you want him, but you're so dense, you'd sooner screw things up again."

Snorting, Seifer had just about had it with her behavior. "We're back at that? I told you. That was fucking Avalanche. If any of that was real on Squall's side, don't you think I'd be busy fucking his brains out back at the apartment right now?" He'd never let the man fucking leave his bed if that was the case. "I can't believe you keep bringing this up. Get over it," he added harshly. "And why the fuck would he want to knock himself out with a bottle of alcohol if he'd wanted any of what happened that night? He could've just come back to bed for round two. Your logic is flawed as hell."

"Try and think with your brain instead of your dick for once, and consider this: Squall drank him himself into oblivion, because it was real for him."

The world around him ground to a halt at her words.

He'd considered how it could've been his own despicable behavior that had led Squall to downing that bottle of whiskey, but after listening to Rinoa's voice message, he'd chalked Squall's reaction up to that... But Rinoa was implying something else. If Squall had felt something, had wanted it... then why would Squall...

Who'd want to have feelings for someone who'd tortured them? For someone you'd fought as an enemy?

But Squall wouldn't be staying with him if that mattered. Hell, they were spending most of their time together, even shared a bed. The brunet had acted protective of him in a way only Raijin and Fujin had done in the past. Just the night before, he'd wondered if there'd been more to their night of Avalanche, the brunet's actions far from innocent. He really fucking needed to know if any of what they'd done that night had been because of Squall.

"Tell me," he urged, remembering how Squall had looked at him like he meant everything to the brunet, how Squall had wanted to feel every fucking inch of him. "Tell me exactly what you felt from him."

'I—" Rinoa started but quickly fell silent. "...I'm not the one you should be talking to about this. I already said too much," she said, trying to take back her words.
"You know he'd never tell me. You know he'd never say a single word about it... This is important, Rinoa." He paused to let his sincerity sink in. "Tell me."

"... Wasn't it obvious?" the girl asked, her voice tight. "You were there. You—" Her words were cut off by a choked sob. "I can't do this. I'm sorry. I really have to go."

"Rinoa—" Seifer said, but the line went dead.

He let his phone fall into the passenger seat. Staring in front of him, her words repeated over and over in his head. He had trouble believing what she'd said, but the tone of her voice put everything into sharp clarity.

She was certain Squall had feelings for him.

Heart pumping fast, Seifer wanted nothing more than to track down the brunet and get the truth out of him—any method necessary. This wasn't fair. Squall knew everything about his sexuality and how hot he thought Squall was, while he had no fucking clue what went on inside the brunet's head. If Squall wanted to fool around, then why the hell hadn't the man even hinted at it. He'd given him plenty of opportunities. He'd fucking stripped in front of the guy the night before just to get a reaction, and had just been promptly ignored.

If Squall had a thing for him, then the man had obviously decided not to act on it. Seifer got back out of the pickup and slammed the door shut behind him. Squall was fucking toying with him.

He took a deep breath, reminding himself the man wasn't capable of it. Squall might be cynical and cold as ice in some respects, but from what he knew the brunet was stupidly naive when it came to relationships. Hell, Squall had been completely baffled at him calling out Shiva's ostentatious flirting.

Why was Squall pretending he wasn't affected? What harm was there in a bit of fooling around?

He leaned back against the cool metal door. Did it even matter what Squall's reasons were? Shouldn't he respect them either way? But fuck... to imagine Squall hadn't been averse to being fucked like that—to have enjoyed being sucked off and fingerfucked at the same time, and to have wanted it fast and rough... He groaned as all blood rushed south, and wished he was back at his apartment. A quick bit of self-gratification wouldn't have gone amiss. Instead he opened the door to his pickup and got back inside, killing any arousal.

Turning the keys in the ignition, he knew there was nothing else to do but see where Squall led him. He couldn't let his imagination run wild or demand things to be exactly how he wanted them. What mattered was Squall getting some respite. By the sound of it, the man's relationship with Rinoa had been a fuck fest extraordinaire—and not the good kind. If Squall was cured of wanting any sort of relationship, even if it was a purely physical one, he couldn't blame the guy.

He'd have to fucking reel in his hormones and let Squall set the pace. He'd show the guy a good time, and if the man showed an interest in more, he'd be more than willing to oblige. Hell, he should be thanking Hyne to just have his sparring partner back and to be able to cast magic again.

Reversing out of the driveway, he sped up as soon as he was on the main road. It was only a matter of minutes before he'd be at the SCTA and then he could scrutinize Squall properly before beating the brunet's ass into the ground when they sparred. If Squall was going to deny himself a taste of Seifer's goods, then he'd make damned sure the man knew exactly what he was missing.

~ 0 ~
"It's him!"

Pulled from bragging about one of his latest stunts, Nolan looked towards the far end of the training hall, the corners of his mouth plummeting at the sight of the last person he'd expected. His friends had been going on all day about the man with mad skills who'd sparred with Seifer in class the previous evening. It couldn't be the guy he'd met at Seifer's. No way that ladyboy was a better fighter than his brother, than Seifer.

"You sure Seifer said he was a SeeD?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

At his friends' nods, Nolan turned back to study the man his friends had spoken about with respect and awe—the man who'd opened the door to Seifer's apartment wearing nothing but a pair of boxers.

"What was his name?"

"Vargha."

At his friend's reply, Nolan grabbed his gunblade and jumped down the bleachers.

"Hey! Show-off, wait up."

After a beat, the man came to a halt and turned to watch his approach, one eyebrow raised. Squaring his shoulders, Nolan stood tall. The guy seemed even less impressive up close, especially with the few inches he had on him.

"You here to train?" he asked, looking the man over. The slight brunet looked nothing like the strongly built SeeDs he'd seen in the streets just a little over two years ago. The man's gaze traveled to his friends who were gawking at them from the bleachers, before settling back on him.

"Unlike others," the supposed SeeD said dryly.

"Guess some need it more than others. Not everyone can be a natural," Nolan replied with a shrug and curl to his lips.

"And you're a natural?"

"I've taken down monsters," Nolan said with his chin jutted out. "You wanna try me?" he said, twisting his Shear Trigger slightly in preparation for a spar.

Instead of meeting his challenge, the man's eyes traveled the length of his blade. It was new and sharp compared to the man's old excuse for a blade. Scrap metal, more like it. The brunet stood silent, the man's gaze unsettlingly intent as he flexed his hand around the hilt of his gunblade. Nolan held his breath.

"I wouldn't want to put a scratch on that," the brunet finally said, before turning away.

When he started to walk away from him, Nolan firmed the slightly shaky hold he had on his gunblade. "You really a SeeD?"
"I am," the brunet said with hardly a backward glance, striding on with his gunblade hitched high on his shoulder. Biting back a curse, he matched the man's stride. There was no way he would be disregarded like this.

"What, like Rank 2 or 3?" Nolan asked, smirking while nodding to the man's gunblade. "Your weapon kind of gives it away."

The brunet sent him a narrow-eyed gaze. "A weapon's only as good as its wielder."

"Rank 1 then?" Nolan asked, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise. "You know, you don't look like a SeeD."

"And what is a SeeD supposed to look like?"

Nolan shrugged. He had the man's full attention now, but he wasn't quite there yet. "I dunno. Strong. Manly. Not the kind Seifer brings home for a one-night stand."

The brunet's shoulders stiffened, those grey-blue eyes suddenly ice cold. The man stepped closer and lowered the cheap gunblade from his narrow shoulder. When he raised the gunblade to rest against Nolan's bared arm and cocked his head as if in careful study, Nolan tried not to visibly flinch. The outdated gunblade didn't seem so harmless anymore, its sharp edge a nudge away from cutting into his skin. This close, he could easily see several scars that webbed the brunet's pale arms, some faded, some not.

"You're as green as your blade," the man said lowly, lifting his stony gaze.

Knowing there was no way he wouldn't look weak if he let it end there, Nolan took a step back and brought his blade out in front of him. He felt the clash of their blades and a numbing pain jolt through his arm before he'd even registered the man's movement. Stunned, he looked at his outstretched, empty hand, his gunblade having already clattered onto the floor behind him. Cold metal pressed against his neck, its bite threatening to draw blood.

"Some need more training than others," the man said, low enough for only Nolan to hear.

Looking Vargha straight in the eyes, Nolan realized everything the others had said was true. He hadn't even been able to follow the blur of movement, let alone react. Seifer's speed was nothing compared to this. The brunet's strength was on par with Seifer's too.

When the man lowered his gunblade, Nolan brought up a hand to nurse his sprained wrist and scrunched up his eyebrows. "How do you know Seifer?"

"None of your business, Kiddo," a voice Nolan knew all too well spoke from behind him. He managed to turn around just in time to see Seifer pick up his abandoned Shear Trigger, the blond holding it out to him.

Seifer raised an eyebrow as he looked between them. With an amused shake of the head, he met Nolan's gaze. "You really don't want to get on the wrong side of this guy."

"Why?" Nolan asked, taking his gunblade back from Seifer's hands.

"Because he could cut you down to bite sized chunks within a heartbeat."

Nolan huffed. "You mean he's better than you?"

"I'm sure I could do a pretty good job of it too," Seifer said, grinning broadly.
With a snort, Nolan brought his gunblade up to rest on his shoulders. "Who comes out on top then?"

Seeing Squall stiffen, his hand whitening around Revolver's hilt, Seifer beat the man to the punch and stepped right into Nolan's space. "I think it's time for you to scram, Kiddo. Let the grownups talk," he ground out.

"Whatever," Nolan said, his gaze travelling to the narrow-eyed brunet by their side. "You two going to spar?"

"Yes. And no, you're not fucking watching," Seifer said, gesturing exaggeratedly with his gunblade for Nolan to go already.

Not giving any indication of leaving, Nolan narrowed his eyes, his gaze traveling between the two of them. "Why do you have matching scars?"

"Because we're in a fucking league of secret assassins."

"Or you're both just shit at dodging," Nolan said with a raised eyebrow.

"All right, we're fucking going then. Come on," Seifer said, nodding at Squall before striding off.

Rolling his eyes as he heard Nolan's footsteps follow close behind, he turned around and faced the teenager head on. "Beat it."

"Why can't I watch?"

"Because you're a fucking pain in the ass who can't keep his mouth shut."

"... I can stay quiet."

Seifer snorted. "As if."

"I promise."

Quirking an eyebrow at Nolan's unusual compliance, Seifer huffed and looked at Squall. At the intense scowl on the brunet's brow, Seifer chuckled. "Sorry, Sweet-Pea, seems like you outstayed your welcome already."

"Whatever. I've got better things to do anyways," Nolan said with a shake of his head before sparing Squall one last look and heading off in the direction of the bleachers.

Forcefully relaxing his grip on Revolver, Squall suppressed the urge to teach the insolent teen another lesson in humility—one he wouldn't be so quick to shrug off. So far, he'd been more than unimpressed with the company Seifer kept, but his own reactions had left much to be desired as well. One mention of his skewed relationship with Seifer and he'd lost his cool. Turning around, he strode out of the large hall, ready to take his fight with someone who wouldn't drop their blade at the slightest tap.

"Fucking little brat," Seifer spoke under his breath as he followed Squall down the hall that would lead them outside. He had half a mind not to supply Nolan with any more goods from his trips for Arc after the stunts the teenager had pulled this last week. After Rinoa's reluctant admission over the phone he'd been looking forward to meeting up with Squall like a fucking Torama in heat, but the little prick had to go and interfere. "He makes a fucking sport out of riling people up."
Squall snorted at the conveniently oblivious remark. "He takes after his instructor then."

"No way I was ever that obnoxious," Seifer said, shaking his head.

"Close call."

"Is that supposed to be a complaint? Because I know for a fact that you get off on me pestering you."

Refusing to yield, Squall pointed out evenly, "So me telling you to fuck off never struck you as a complaint? That was me getting off on it?"

"It kinda looks that way when you keep coming back for more," Seifer retorted easily. "And hey, you can give as good as you get. It's one of the reasons I let you stick around," he added with a wink.

Squall huffed, not about to admit the kernel of truth to the man's cocky statements. "You're lucky you're good with a gunblade."

"Good? Really, Squall? I'm good with a gunblade?" Seifer asked incredulously. "I'll show you exactly how good I am when your ass hits the ground. I hope you enjoy the taste of dirt."

Pushing open the door to the outside area they'd used the day before, Squall breathed in the evening air and looked Seifer's way. "Well, let me show you why you let me stick around then."

Grinning, Seifer met Squall's gaze. "Go for it, Princess. I'm all yours."

In that moment Squall was caught off guard all over again by how different things were between them, how everything was still changing every moment they spent together. In the past, a spar had always been preceded with barbed remarks, not these good-natured taunts... Even the old, much hated nickname didn't sound the same anymore when it passed Seifer's lips without animosity, his eyes captivated by the blond's easy smile.

Turning his back to Seifer to hide the shift in thoughts that must've been clear on his face, he strode to the middle of the clearing and lowered Revolver from his shoulder. He'd vowed just that afternoon not to waste any more useless thoughts on classifying a man that seemed to defy all labels. Wasted effort. Taking a deep breath to empty his mind, he listened as the blond came to a halt behind him.

A lack of self-control around Seifer wasn't anything new, he told himself. Better to channel all his pent-up energy in beating the man into the ground. Turning around into one of his battle stances, he decided he wasn't in the mood for warm-ups. Hours of boredom, followed by the verbal attacks of a teenager eager to prove himself at his expense, hadn't left him all that patient.

The grin that lit up Seifer's face was exactly as he'd imagined it when he'd been contemplating to disturb the man at his work earlier that day. The blond started to circle around him, Kronos held low with dangerous calculation. It was the sight of great power held in check, advancing on him slowly, all that focus intent on him. It's what he'd been craving all day, his every sense sharpening as the world around them fell away.

As before, Seifer didn't leave himself open, didn't lunge straight into the fight. Not interested in such restraint, Squall darted forward and forced the man into a block, not allowing him to set the pace. He pursued the man with quick steps, landing another attack, this time provoking the blond into a counter. Needing speed, he built up the crescendo, reveling in the quick blows and the sheer strength necessary to keep Kronos at bay. The force of it ran down his arms, down his spine and
brought a quirk to his lips to match Seifer's grin.

As if that had been their signal to quit playing, the blond twisted back, feigned a lunge, only to swivel Kronos round in a low arc. It took all Squall's speed to stop it at his side, his arms straining under the force of it and the odd angle of his own blade. Pushing back, he quickly sidestepped and swung Revolver around, picking up his tempo. Relentless pursuit was the only way he would be able to pick holes in the man's defense and land a blow. It was harder now than it had been in the past.

As Seifer met him blow for blow, their breathing growing harsher with each step, Squall was consumed by heady exhilaration. Riding high on instinct, his sensory awareness shrunk down to the blond's every move, the scent of sweat and metal, the heated look in the man's eyes every time one of them came close to victory. He almost regretted ending their first bout when he finally forced Seifer into a stalemate, Revolver's edge held back right before digging into the blond's torso.

Unfazed, Seifer swung to the side and charged right back in, his gaze narrow with intent. No more smirks, no more banter. Kronos glinted in the faint light, shifting minutely, too swiftly. Squall knew it the instant he'd fallen for the feign, too late to stop the blond from drawing first blood. A warm trickle of red ran down his arm as he darted back and countered yet another blow. His pulse soared as the blond pressed the advantage.

This was what he needed—blade against blade, skill against skill, pure adrenaline thrumming harshly in his veins. Only Seifer could make him feel this alive.

It was a struggle after that to turn the fight around, back in his favor. Seifer was in perfect form, and he'd smelled blood. Some of that old recklessness had seeped back into his moves, pressing Squall harder and harder with each counter and lunge. Only sparring partners as well-matched as they could go on this long without a clear victor emerging. They hadn't had the time to push to the very end of their stamina last time, but Squall was counting on it now.

The setting sun had disappeared completely by the time Squall finally managed to place his own cut on the blond, ruining the man's pants with a wide gash. Given no time to gloat, he dodged Seifer's lunges. The man was following his every step, Kronos biting at his thighs and abdomen with a series of low angled strikes. His features cast in stark shadows by the outdoor spotlights, Seifer looked like power incarnate. A mad flurry of strikes and counters followed, and Squall lost count of who had drawn most blood, who had scored the most blows.

They continuously pushed the boundaries of a friendly spar, never growing too sloppy, but no longer restrained. With the safeguard of a simple Cure, there was no need to hold back. Squall was already beyond feeling the sting of the negligible injuries Seifer had inflicted. His breath ragged, he knew one of them would claim victory soon. His arms were getting tired, the protracted rush of adrenaline and endorphins unsustainable in the long run. He needed to make his move now.

Disregarding his body's complaints, he surged forward, deliberately exposing his right side. Seifer could only counter or yield, and he'd never do the latter. Counting on the man's restraint to keep it at a shallow cut, Squall moved along Kronos' length and brought up Revolver against Seifer's neck. Their breaths rang loudly through the chill air when all movement stopped.

Pain bloomed along the skin-deep cut on his upper right leg, but the blond's chuckle in admitted defeat was more than worth the small cost. The man lowered Kronos to the ground and walked backwards, the blade's tip trailing in the dirt, his gaze alight with a look that promised reprisal. Assuming a wider stance to better ground his weight, Squall tried to catch his breath as best as he could and raised Revolver.
There was no time to form a new strategy, only time to react, when Seifer ran towards him with a speed that caught Squall off guard this far into their fight. He clenched his teeth when the impact of their blades nearly wrenched Revolver from his grip. Only through sheer willpower did he manage to sidestep and force Kronos away with a downwards slide of their blades, but already the blond was on him again, another bone shattering blow jolting through his arms as he caught Kronos' fall.

Seifer was going all out, betting everything on the last of his held-back reserves. The man was going to burn up his strength fast this way, but the resulting blows were near impossible to fend off. Recognizing the familiar strategy well enough, Squall had always been ill-equipped to counter such brute force. The only counter strategy was to try and outlast the blond, but they both knew he wouldn't make it this time. The man hounded him, his every strike as powerful as the last.

Not expecting victory anymore, Squall nearly missed his chance when it presented itself. Seifer had left his left side open, no doubt deeming the move safe because he wouldn't be able to bring Revolver around in time. Abandoning standard tactics, Squall shoved his shoulder into the man's side with all his strength, hoping to stun the man from his momentum.

A low grunt sounded close to his ear, followed by a strong arm that wrapped itself around his waist and dragged him to the ground. Forced to throw Revolver aside to avoid piercing himself on his own blade, Squall wasn't surprised when he heard the accompanying clatter of Kronos to the ground. His move had backfired.

All breath rushed from his lungs when he caught the brunt of their fall, the blond having managed to turn them around mid-fall at the last moment. Already Seifer was yanking him up, moving him into a headlock. Sparing a wry thought to the man's underhanded tactic, forcing the spar into hand-to-hand, Squall struggled to get away. Without a gunblade he was stripped of most advantages he had over Seifer, but that didn't mean he'd give the man an easy victory.

Twisting in Seifer's hold, he managed to force an arm free, but the restricted blood flow to his head made coordination difficult. Looking up at the light-polluted sky, he groped behind him, yanking at the blond's shoulder to try and dislodge him. Needing more purchase, he scrambled against the ground with his feet, until finally he broke free long enough to draw in greedy gulps of air. Seifer was in close pursuit, immediately flipping him onto his stomach. His arms pinned beneath him, his left cheek pressed to the dirt, Squall tried to buck the man off, but Seifer pressed him down with the entire length of his body.

The heartbeats he spent focusing on the way Seifer's groin pressed against his backside nearly cost him his chance to break free. Cursing inwardly at himself, he tried to mask his lapse and jammed a hastily freed elbow into the man's side. A gruff release of air ghosted his neck, lining his skin with goose bumps. Ignoring the sensation, he quickly rolled to the side and raised himself up, ready for the next tackle. This time he managed to keep his limbs free when they fell to the ground in a tangle.

Rolling and kicking, they fought for supremacy. When the blond hooked a leg around his and twisted them together, a hand grabbing his inner thigh for purchase, Squall felt a hot rush jolt to his groin. Suppressing a groan, he quickly maneuvered them into a less compromising position and pressed his knee into Seifer's lower back until he was fully released.

He only had a moment to catch his breath before Seifer barreled into him again. He'd barely hit the ground and already he was being yanked up again by strong hands. As they landed on their sides with a harsh thud, he felt those same hands wrap around him as they rolled sideways. Coming to a still, Seifer's lower arm was pressed firmly against his throat. A little more pressure, and he'd be
Acutely aware of their proximity, Squall stilled in defeat and waited for the blond to move off him. Drawing in a greedy breath when Seifer lifted his arm, Squall became all the more aware of their exertion, the rise and fall of their chests. When the blond's gaze traveled to his lips and lingered there, he had to consciously keep from licking them. They suddenly felt dry, his heart nearly leaping from his chest. He hoped that nothing of what he was thinking was showing on his face. As close as Seifer was studying him now, the man would spot the slightest sign something was off.

Scrutinizing Squall's expression as he moved up from the ground, Seifer held out his hand. He had to hide a smirk at his victory. There'd been no reactions to his daring touches during their scuffle, but the way Squall's eyes had widened along with those parted lips was all he needed to know. Squall had been ready for it—maybe even wanted it. Rinoa had been right and fuck it if he didn't feel like he'd just downed a Hero shot.

"Two to one," he said, taking Squall's hand and pulling the brunet to a stand. "Good fight."

Nodding, Squall fought to keep his composure and started to dust off some of the dirt and grime that had caked all over his clothes. To experience his attraction to the blond so suddenly and acutely was unsettling, especially since he didn't know what he would've done if Seifer hadn't moved. It was maddening not to know whether it had all been just a teasing ploy, the blond testing his boundaries, or... more.

"Come on, let's go grab some food," Seifer said with a jerk of his head in the direction of the building. "I still owe you that dinner."

After another distracted nod from the brunet, he set the course and walked towards the exit. His every muscle ached with a pleasant burn and the slight sting of numerous grazes from Revolver nagged at the back of his mind, but he couldn't stop grinning. It had felt so damned good. He didn't even mind that Squall had beat him two to one—nor that Squall might have won the last round too if it hadn't been for the hand-to-hand combat. In fact it only made his grin broader to know he'd have a proper sparring partner around for a while, with a chance for more—hell, if his libido had anything to say about it—much more.

As they got closer to the lockers, the thought of Squall naked in the showers, of him licking Squall's new cuts while sliding his hands over wet skin completely derailed his thoughts. There was no decency to his thoughts, no trace left of his plan to let Squall set the pace. Fuck it, if there was any way he could've gotten away with it, he would have just pushed Squall up against the nearest wall and started the party.

Stopping when they reached the locker room door, he nodded at it and reeled in his hormones. "Go ahead, I'll join you in a bit." When Squall quirked an eyebrow, he shrugged. "Gotta go deal with that little shithead and his brother." That and there was no way he'd be able to share a shower with the brunet at the SCTA ever again without immediately losing his job for an indecency charge.

Squall nodded, not about to voice any reservations when it meant he could shower alone. "Okay."

Giving Squall's ass one last look-over as the man headed into the locker room, Seifer turned down the hallway with an inward groan and tried to direct his thoughts away from the dangerous ground they'd been treading. Instead he focused on the scene he'd walked in on when arriving at the SCTA. He still wanted to throttle Nolan for being such a little shit. He had no idea what Nolan had done or said to rile Squall up to such an extent, but it didn't matter either way. All the little fucker needed to know was that he had to show Squall some fucking respect or stay the fuck away.
He couldn't find the teen in the main training hall, nor was he hanging out by the entrance. The pool was almost empty and so was the gym, apart from a few stragglers. Spotting Calder on one of the lateral raise machines, Seifer walked over.

"Where's the little shithead?" he asked, stepping into Calder's line of sight. The brunet raised an eyebrow, not immediately replying.

"Hey," Calder said, counting off the last of his reps under his breath. "Left already," he added as he leaned back for a brief pause. He hadn't expected to see the blond around—definitely not without his newly acquired shadow in tow.

Seifer nodded, getting his phone out of his pocket.

- Message to Nolan / 8:50 pm / Show some fucking respect and kiss ass. You want to see a GF don't you? -

"I heard he pissed someone off," Calder said, pretty certain that was Seifer's current beef with his brother. He'd only been at the SCTA for two minutes before someone had told him about the scene Nolan had caused and it wasn't like Squall had needed any more attention drawn to him after the demo during Seifer's class.

"Think he would've been frozen solid if I hadn't arrived when I did."

- Message from Nolan / 8:51 pm / What's a GF? -

- Message to Nolan / 8:52 pm / The huge monsters SeeDs team up with. -

"Where's your friend now?" Calder asked, by now unsurprised by Seifer's lack of attention to his presence. It seemed the only thing that could hold the blond's attention these days was a certain SeeD Commander. No doubt the texts Seifer were engrossed in had to do with the man too.

"The showers," Seifer said, not looking up from his phone.

- Message from Nolan / 8:54 pm / Deal. -

- Message to Nolan / 8:54 pm / Good boy. -

- Message from Nolan / 8:54 pm / Asshole. -

"Got time for another spar?" Calder asked, already guessing the answer.

"We're heading off in a moment," the blond answered, glancing at the exit as he pocketed his phone.

Calder nodded, briefly considering suggesting that he could join, but the prospect of spending his night as a third wheel wasn't as appealing as his other plans: go out, get drunk and get laid. "Feel free to join me at Nexus later."

Seifer chuckled as he imagined Squall's reaction to being taken to a gay club. "Think that'd go down well?" he asked, grinning.

Somewhat impressed with the blond's one-track mind, Calder shrugged instead of pointing out the fact that he hadn't actually mentioned Squall in his invitation. "Would be a way to test the waters."

Seifer shook his head at that piece of disastrous advice and walked to the weight stack to pull out the metal pin. "Twelve more?" he asked, already putting the metal pin back in for the added
weight.

With a nod, Calder adjusted his position to start up his training again. "I'll drop by soon," he said, not about to let the blond off that easily. Regardless of the man's newfound obsession, he wasn't going to let him completely neglect their relationship.

"Sure," Seifer said without much of his usual enthusiasm. He'd much rather spend the time with Squall and he could definitely do without either of the Madar brothers running interference. Rapping his knuckles on the lateral raise machine to announce his departure, he turned on his heels and sent a parting shot over his shoulder. "Give that brother of yours a kick in the ass for me when you see him."

"Will do."

Seifer quickened his stride towards the exit when the sound of weights being lifted off the stack resumed behind him. Things had improved between Calder and himself—almost back to normal even. For once there'd been no incessant questions, just a casual back-and-forth. Part of him wished he could join Calder at Nexus and spend his night fucking some innocent into oblivion. It had been way too fucking long since he'd last bust his nuts and it seemed his hormones were kicking in with a vengeance after all of Squall's cock teasing. He'd just have to have a good old fashioned wank at home as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Right now though, he had to see about a guy waiting to be taken out to dinner. He smirked, a spring in his step as he rushed to the showers.

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[Tiamat District, Friday, 24th of October, 9:21 pm]

Closing the car door behind him, Squall looked around him, the small street deserted. There wasn't any restaurant he could see, but Seifer had promised a spar and dinner. The man had certainly delivered on the former, so he wouldn't start protesting now, his muscles still exquisitely sore from the workout Seifer had given him. The blond had already adapted to most of his new moves, and Squall knew he wouldn't be able to keep up his winning streak for long. If Seifer had been rusty at first, the man's inferior sparring partner was entirely to blame.

"It's just around the corner," Seifer said, gesturing ahead as he led the way. It seemed the defeats hadn't managed to sour the blond's mood in the slightest, and Squall felt in similarly high spirits. There was nothing like a rough spar to relieve stress.

He suppressed a smile as he followed the blond into a dark alley of his own volition. His past self would've been unimpressed with this easy trust, but he'd been far too bored after he'd left Arc's shop, enough so that being taken out to dinner had started to sound like a good idea. And he certainly wasn't bored anymore. Unwelcome as Seifer's teasing was—or flirting if he was to believe the blond—he'd gladly put up with it for food and company.

As they rounded the corner, Seifer came to a halt. "This is it."

Squall would've overlooked the place if Seifer hadn't led him right to the stairs of the establishment. It was a wonder Seifer had found the place, with only a small inconspicuous sign labelling the place as Obel's Alley. As they stepped inside, they were greeted with all sorts of appealing aromas. The restaurant was small and had an informal feel about it, most of its tables occupied—nothing like the upscale places Rinoa used to drag him to.

Choosing a table off to the side, Seifer sat down and leaned back in his seat. He still couldn't believe he was taking Squall out to dinner. Already the vibe of a date was in the air—a fact the
brunet probably wasn't even aware of, while he himself had avoided anything remotely date-like for years. But he'd gladly put up with it if it was Squall. If anything, it made him all the more eager knowing Squall wouldn't normally agree to something like a casual dinner. Hell, to get Squall to enjoy his evening would probably be a real challenge.

Only sparing the menus a half-hearted glance, already knowing what he wanted, he instead indulged in studying the brunet sitting across from him. Squall's hair was still damp from his shower, slight cuts from their spar still visible. Squall hadn't healed them—just like Seifer hadn't healed his own. He'd learned a long time ago that his scars defined him. He remembered what lay behind every single one and his favorite had always been the deep cut between his eyes.

Shaking the more contemplative path his thoughts were trailing down, he put on a smile to get the show running.

"The grilled Balamb steak is the best. Tastiest I've had in Esthar yet. Cheap too. Of course it's not quite as good as when I make it myself," he said with a smirk. "Spares me doing the dishes, though."

Suppressing an eye roll at Seifer's cocky remark, Squall closed his own menu. "I'll have the Balamb steak then."

"Excellent choice," Seifer said, winking, before waving over a waitress and ordering their food. Their dinner would be a walk in the park if Squall was going to be that pliant.

"So, yesterday was your first time at an SCTA?" he asked as soon as the woman left them, curious about Squall's impression of the place.

Meeting Seifer's gaze, Squall nodded. "Very different from Garden."

"It is," Seifer agreed. "Not as great as Garden, but decent enough. At least it means there are gunbladers in Esthar. I hadn't expected that when I first came here. When I found out, I went to all four of the SCTAs and finally settled on the Tiamat one. It seemed like the most advanced one when it comes to gunbladers. Still is. The fighters they train are way inferior to SeeDs though. Don't think a comparison is even appropriate. Laughable really." He paused as he thought of his one-time home.

"Are more gunbladers being trained at Garden now? It's weird to think we were the first at Balamb... Seemed like a rare trade at the time. I bet all the little kids want to follow in your footprint now," he finished with an easy smile. "I'm sure it's why it's so popular over here too."

"A few students are serious about it. The rest moved on to other weapons quickly enough," Squall answered evenly, wishing he could deny the blond's last remark. "But the instructor Quistis hired..." He sighed and trailed off. None of Quistis' gunblade instructors would ever meet his standards. "I don't have the time to teach them myself... At least Peyton still organizes his training camps at Galbadia Garden."

"Still aren't many decent gunbladers around, I guess," Seifer said, glad to hear the name of their old instructor. "So Peyton's still at it?"

"Peyton's the only decent gunblade instructor Garden has. And he knows it." Squall huffed and shook his head. "I've done some demos at his camps."

"And how does he feel about being outdone by his student?" Seifer asked, leaning closer.

"He likes to think it's because of his guidance," Squall replied dryly.
Seifer let out a soft chuckle. "I bet he does," he said, pausing to take a sip of his drink, keeping his eyes on the brunet.

"Shame you can't persuade him to transfer to Balamb Garden if the instructor Quistis got is really that bad..." he trailed off. "They have a crappy instructor at the Tiamat SCTA as well... When I first got there most of the gunbladers were appalling... you should've seen how some of them held their weapons." He frowned at the memory. "Unbelievable," he muttered, shaking his head. "I couldn't help myself from kicking some sense into the little punks... teach them some fucking respect for the blade. Turned out people were paying attention to my... encouragements. Wasn't long before a senior instructor approached me."

He paused, remembering how one thing had just led to another and how quickly the SCTA had become part of his life. "Never saw myself as an instructor... I mean, I love terrorizing the little shits, but I just never saw it coming," he explained with an amused shrug. "Anyways... the other guy still teaches whenever I'm out of town and when I come back it takes fucking forever to get the little shits to fight properly again. I don't know what the hell he does during those lessons, but it sure as hell isn't anything close to useful."

Listening to the blond's lively account, Squall thought back to the class he'd witnessed the day before. Seifer had a way with his students he hadn't seen since Peyton—direct and tough, but loved for it. "You're a good instructor."

"A compliment, huh?" Seifer said with a warm smile. Praise from Squall was one hell of a start to their dinner. "I'm good at it, yeah. So were you. It was good for them to see us spar."

Squall shrugged. Demos were all he'd ever be good for in a class setting. "I wouldn't have the patience for more." He met Seifer's gaze with a slightly raised eyebrow. "I'm surprised you do."

Seifer chuckled. "Beats the hell outta me too." He took another sip of his drink. "A few of the kids have potential, but mostly, they just don't care enough. Not nearly as crazy as we used to be."

Squall silently hummed his concurrence.

"Rinoa told me you mostly train on your own now. I couldn't do that... It gets boring way too quickly." He paused, unable to forget the blame in Rinoa's voice.

"I was doing that at the beginning when I stayed at Arc's—before I learned about the SCTA. After that I sparred with lots of different guys, but none of them were really worth anything." He paused again, remembering when things had changed. "Calder wasn't either. I didn't even know his name until he commissioned a gunblade from Arc. He was persistent though. Kept asking for spars. He showed me a different side to Esthar as well. He's still nowhere close to being a challenge though. Not like you." He looked the brunet straight in the eyes. "You'd better not disappear any time soon, Squall. Sparring with you just feels too damned good."

To have Seifer back as his sparring partner, not temporarily but beyond his stay with the blond, was exactly what Squall wanted. Others simply didn't compare. "I'll be in Esthar a lot," he said. "And you have my number."

Seifer smiled, more than pleased to know Squall wasn't about to disappear from his life anytime soon. "How come you'll be in Esthar?"

Squall considered how much he could say. The plans for Esthar Garden were still in their infancy, and he'd signed the usual gag contract until things were finalized. "...Because of work—talks between Garden and Esthar. There's another meeting on Tuesday."
"What kind of talks?" Seifer asked, furrowing his brow and ignoring the waitress as she served their food.

Deciding he could trust Seifer with the information, Squall waited until the waitress was out of earshot. "We're looking to expand. Esthar Garden."

"Makes sense," Seifer said without pause. He'd been expecting it ever since the Lunar Cry. The Estharian army was way under-equipped for anything beyond its city borders that involved magic. "When will you build it?"

Squall snorted. "Not any time soon. Talks only just started, and there's a lot of resistance." He shook his head, recalling the outcry and paranoia. "The army and SCTA representatives aren't happy."

"I bet," Seifer said, adding a huff. "They should have upped their game then—not spent all their gil on an optical shield to hide behind."

"They're your employers," Squall pointed out, quirking an eyebrow at the blond taking it all in stride. "If we get the go-ahead, the SCTA will be affected."

Seifer shrugged. "There'll always be students to teach," he said, not really sure if it would bother him much even if there weren't. "It's just a bit of money on the side."

Nodding, Squall was glad enough their interests wouldn't clash when it came to the new Garden. And if Seifer ever showed even the slightest hint of wanting a serious teaching job, Quistis would be on his case until the blond reenlisted.

"I've got an appointment with Odine Tuesday morning," Seifer said, already dreading the prospect of seeing the little gnome again. "Yours is on Thursday. Two o'clock."

Squall frowned at the new information. He didn't like the thought of Seifer going in by himself one bit, but Odine had most likely orchestrated it that way on purpose. Seifer was just as unlikely to stick up for himself as during their first visit, and this time he wouldn't be around to interrupt when the mad scientist would inevitably cross a line.

"So you in a meeting, huh? Now there's a sight I'd like to see," Seifer said, grinning at the visual his brain was providing. "I bet you'd be scowling your way through it. Cursing all of the other people there," he said with a low chuckle. "I know I would... And you say you're surprised I have the patience to teach? I wouldn't have the damn patience to sit around listening to people blabber on." He shook his head. "Don't tell me—did those glasses come with the meetings?" he asked, remembering he'd seen them on the coffee table the previous evening.

"With the paperwork," Squall said dryly, cutting a piece of his steak.

"You do a lot of that?"

"It's part of the job."

"...Isn't that what secretaries are for?" Seifer teased, still unable to picture Squall doing any of it—paperwork or meetings. "And besides, aren't you too busy for that anyway? From what I hear, and trust me, I hear a lot from those brats, you pretty much go from one world-saving mission to the next. When the hell do meetings and paperwork fit into that?"

"What you hear is exaggerated," Squall said with a frown. "I'm usually in the field. Xu takes the brunt of the paper mill, but sometimes it's unavoidable."
"Xu's stuck doing paperwork?" Seifer asked, chuckling. She'd always been on his case and to know she was stuck somewhere behind a desk did wonders for his mood. "Now that's what I call good news." He smirked, taking a sip of his water.

"And about your missions..." He held Squall's gaze, deciding to be upfront. "You know, at first I hated it when they talked about you, but after a while... It was good to know you were out there, doing the hero thing, saving the day. Hyne knows I'd be bragging left and right if it was me."

Squall huffed at the implication he was some kind of miracle worker, a one-man show. "There's no such thing as heroes."

"No? You certainly fit the bill."

"People are products of their circumstances," Squall said soberly, not about to take this hero-worship nonsense from Seifer of all people. "I was in a position where I was forced to make decisions, and they haven't all been good ones." He met Seifer's gaze with a quirked eyebrow. "You'd make a better commander."

Seifer swallowed his food and huffed, before moving his lower arms to rest on the table as he regarded Squall carefully. The brunet's expression didn't betray any ill intent, only honesty, yet his offhand comment brought on a myriad of bad memories all the same. He had been a good commander, but on the wrong fucking side of the war. "No thanks. Been there, done that. Trying to take over the world gets a bit old after a while."

Squall stiffened and set down his fork, the man's flippancy far from convincing. "That's not what I meant."

"I know," Seifer said as he picked up his drink and took a big gulp. "How's the steak?"

Scrutinizing Seifer's bland expression, Squall let the blond's need for avoidance slide and looked down at the well-cooked meat. "It's good," he replied, cutting off another piece.

Seifer shook his head. Only Squall would undersell something that tasted so good. "I might treat you to the real deal—the Almasy version—if you keep up that sweet talk of yours," he said with a sly grin, calling Squall out on his uncharacteristic flattery, even if the man hadn't intended it as such. "You know, now that I think about it, there are a few commands I'd be more than happy to give."

At the far from subtle undertone, Squall met Seifer's lewd gaze blankly, by now more taken aback by his own lack of shock. He really shouldn't get used to this kind of behavior. The man flirted as if it was mere sport, flexing his ego whenever the opportunity presented itself.

"No?" Seifer asked, undeterred at the lack of any real reaction. "Perhaps you've got a command or two for me, then?"

"Eat," Squall replied with a pointed look at Seifer's plate. He'd already cleared half of his own, while the blond had been talking away.

Seifer chuckled before cutting off a large chunk of steak. "So your favorite training grounds in Esthar are up north?"

Swallowing his food, Squall shook his head. "I haven't been out in the desert since the Lunar Cry clean-up."

At the more than unlikely statement, Seifer furrowed his brow. "Where do you go to train then? I
mean, if you don't go to any of the SCTAs and don't go to the desert..." Seifer said, trailing off as he remembered how Rinoa had been adamant about Squall not having anywhere particular in Esthar he'd go to.

"I don't take many days off," Squall said with a shrug, not wanting Seifer to get the wrong idea. "Rinoa's plans never left much time for training."

"But you split up five months ago, right?"

Squall frowned at the personal turn the conversation was taking. "...I told you the reason for our move here."

Seifer let out a non-committal hum, remembering his conversation with Rinoa. She'd implied the incident that had caused Squall's scar had been the reason for their move—that she'd hurt Squall. It seemed it hadn't been the only way she'd affected him. Keeping the brunet from training, even for a day, was a bad move. "Okay, so no favorite training spots then. Just means I'll have more to show you," Seifer said, forcing a smile.

"On top of us going out into the desert, I'll have to try and fit in a couple hours of work on a chakram for Fujin over the weekend. I'm going to visit her and Raijin in a couple of weeks time. Every half a year or so, we go on a hunting trip together. Means we actually stay in touch."

"I haven't seen them since the war," Squall said pensively. The two had disappeared along with Seifer, and he'd only recently learned the exact circumstances that had led them to give up their future with SeeD—to get Seifer away from those who meant him harm. "...How are they?"

"They're good. They're in Dollet now. Well, they're still in Dollet—they've lived there since just after the war. They're surviving off any mercenary work they can get their hands on and when the going gets tough, Raijin does a bit of work for the local construction companies... and Fujin—" He paused and smirked as his eyes fell to his drink, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "She becomes a grouch," he said with a chuckle, before looking up again. "So here's to hoping they'll get hired out before I go visit."

"How come you ended up in Esthar?"

"I wanted to go somewhere where I could get lost in the crowd," Seifer replied upfront. "That and I never liked being the third wheel. Listening to those two going at it is not really my idea of fun... Raijin sure knows a trick or two," he mused before cutting off more of his steak.

Smirking as Squall's eyebrows scrunched up at his words, Seifer nodded. "Yeah, I could've done without that too."

"Hn." Squall commiserated wholeheartedly, reminded of the times he'd had to overhear Selphie and Irvine in the room next to his.

"Yeah? Who've you been a naughty boy and listened in on?" Seifer asked, leaning in.

Not having intended this path of inquiry, Squall gave Seifer a weak glare for the blond's phrasing. "Never take a room next to Selphie and Irvine," he replied wryly.

"Don't tell me you've actually been making friends," Seifer joked, having a hard time imagining it. When Squall just frowned, no words forthcoming, Seifer thought back on the names. Flashes of the past came rushing back. *Cowboy and Messenger Girl.*

He'd read their dossiers, had known everything about them—their pasts and fighting techniques—
before he'd even met them in battle, but he hadn't known they were Squall's friends. They'd been there all along. At Deling City, Galbadia Garden and Lunatic Pandora. He'd destroyed their homes. He'd wrecked Galbadia Garden in combat and sent missiles to Trabia Garden, completely obliterating the place. While he'd been off starting a war, Squall had actually found friends, and he'd nearly killed them. He'd nearly killed Squall.

Watching all the good humor leave Seifer's expression, Squall slowly realized his mistake. Seifer'd had to think on the names. Selphie and Irvine had become such an integral part of his life, he hadn't even stopped to consider the possibility that Seifer hadn't regained his memories like the rest of them.

They had both stopped eating, the muted conversation around them making their sudden silence seem all the heavier. Seifer's gaze hadn't moved from the table's surface, his thoughts off somewhere Squall couldn't reach.

"Seifer—"

Seifer shook his head, not about to listen to anything Squall had to say. Them having dinner together was a complete fucking farce. He'd seen the man shake in pain because of his order. He clenched his teeth. He needed to get the fuck out of there. Standing from the table, his thoughts a chaotic mess, he didn't meet the brunet's gaze as he left the table and cut past the other customers that blocked his exit. He couldn't fucking breathe.

His heart was hammering in his chest as he walked down the street. He'd only made it ten feet from the exit when he turned and punched his hand into the nearest wall, deep abrasions cutting into his knuckles.

He hated his past. Hated what he'd done. There was no way he should be forgiven for it. Squall was out of his mind to accept him so easily. How Squall could even look at him and not see the man who had tortured him was beyond him.

Hearing the door to the restaurant open, he turned to see Squall exit and step out onto the curb. The instant their eyes met, he knew it was a lost cause. Squall was right there, regardless of all the painful memories. He couldn't leave the man behind, couldn't let him be, even when every rational part of him told him to.

"Come on," he said, his tone of voice brokering no argument as he turned to walk in the opposite direction of the car. The past was consuming him, filling his head with images of blood, scars, electricity and smoke. He needed to move, to suppress the memories the only way he knew how.

Squall frowned. Clearly Seifer was leading him somewhere, but the blond's behavior was outright forbidding. Keeping a fast pace, Seifer didn't look his way as he led them through the streets. Squall followed in silence, fighting the urge to stop the man and demand an explanation. He'd wait Seifer out for now.

At the next large traffic circle, they left ground level, the blond taking them higher at each junction of walkway levels. The higher they climbed the roads meandering amidst high rise buildings, the more confused Squall got. They weren't taking some detour back to the apartment. They weren't heading for a bar to drown their sorrow either—the latest of his theories. Suddenly Seifer came to a stop in the middle of a deserted bridge, nothing within their near surroundings hinting at the purpose of the seemingly random destination.

"When the goods lift appears, you gotta jump," Seifer announced, walking up to the ledge of the bridge. "Immediately."
Squall's stomach lurched uncomfortably at the sight of the blond climbing onto the railing, the man's gaze fixed intently on what lay below, until the words "goods lift" sank in. Walking closer, he spotted the freight tracks below: one of Esthar's many transport lanes for trade and industrial purposes, its lifts weaving between buildings at dizzying speeds.

"You're serious," he said, catching on to Seifer's plan. The man would be that crazy. Apparently so was he.

Joining Seifer on the railing, he waited for the goods lift to appear. A high pitched whine in the distance announced its arrival only seconds before a series of linked goods containers hurdled along the tracks, giving him only a fraction of a second to react.

The moment he landed onto one of the last containers, he was propelled into the Esthar night at dizzying speeds. The noise of the tracks and the wind was overwhelming. Seifer had landed only a few carts ahead of him, waving him over. Squall quickly ran across, before the tracks lurched to the right at an angle definitely not intended for passengers.

Dropping into a crouch, he grabbed hold of some metal wiring and watched in astonishment as Seifer simply leaned into the motion, bending at the knees with his arms outstretched—but still standing. The moment the tracks righted themselves again, the blond jerked his head to the west.

Trusting the man, Squall let go of his only purchase and straightened himself. He didn't know these tracks, but Seifer did. Ahead of them, a tunnel was quickly drawing closer, too narrow to allow them passage. The blond gestured to his left and counted down with his fingers.

*Three. Two. One.*

"Jump!"

Squall followed after him without hesitance, only seeing their next target once he'd gone over the edge. Before he even had time to think, his feet impacted with another cargo lift that was shooting off to the west. This one moved faster, but steadier.

Pushing himself up, he ran to Seifer's side and let exhilaration take over. They shot between the skyscrapers, winding up higher and dropping lower at speeds that left no time for hesitance. They had to jump tracks every now and then, avoiding obstacles within the nick of time. The city's lights flashed by, the people in the streets below oblivious.

"We're getting off at the next loading point!" Seifer yelled loudly against the wind.

Looking ahead to where Seifer's gaze was directed, Squall's eyebrows climbed a bit higher. A large loading platform loomed ahead, at the top of what was probably the tallest high-rise in the district, a steep ascent preceding it. His muscles tensed in readiness as he mimicked the blond and lowered himself into a squatting position seconds before the transport lift shot upwards, the wind tearing at his unzipped jacket and howling in his ears.

Not scheduled to stop at the loading point, the lift decelerated only slightly, barely enough for its passengers to jump ship. The momentum launched Squall further than he had intended, the metal platform quivering beneath the impact of his heavy boots. Straightening after a precarious moment spent balancing himself, Squall turned round to look at Seifer, the blond having made a much more calculated and graceful landing. The glint of exhilaration in Seifer's eyes mirrored his own feelings of excitement, and he understood. His heart was still racing in his chest, thanks to one of the most potent adrenaline kicks he'd ever experienced outside of battle.
"Good, huh?" Seifer asked, still high from the ride himself.

Squall huffed at the gross understatement, letting his gaze travel the panoramic view stretched out before him. Glancing back at Seifer, he spotted the slight smile on the blond's lips and felt his own mood lift in response. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Since I moved here," Seifer said, breaking his gaze away from Squall to take in the evening skyline instead. "It's a quick and easy way of getting around town when you don't have a car." He walked to the side of the metal platform before sitting down at the edge, letting his feet hang off the edge.

Squall moved to join Seifer on the ledge as he entertained the thought of actually using this method to "get around." It seemed more suited for adrenaline kicks than actual transport—not very practical. But then he was reminded of Seifer's admission earlier that day, how the man had tried to sell Hyperion. Without a car and without money... The passenger lifts weren't free and they didn't cover the entire city, only meant as shortcuts between the business and entertainment hubs in the metropolis.

Sobering from his high, Squall glanced from the view back to Seifer. The man's smile had been short-lived, but at least he didn't seem frantic anymore in his need to get away. How many times had Seifer come here, trying to escape his past?

Seifer remained quiet for a long time as they sat side by side. His thoughts from earlier had returned, but this time he didn't feel the same anger and powerlessness as before. The adrenaline rush had taken the edge off things, the comedown leaving him incapable of returning to that frenzied state of mind. But the guilt still ate away at him. His childhood dream had been to become a valiant knight, not a madman who slaughtered innocents.

Yet it was the faces of the people he knew and had turned against that haunted him the most. The memories of what he'd done to Squall were the worst.

"I hate what I did to you," he said, looking at the horizon. "What I did to everyone." He took a deep breath of cool air. "Things aren't supposed to be just fine. Being around you shouldn't feel so... easy."

Squall considered the words and the dangerous precipice they brought to their conversation. If Seifer wanted to back out, to part ways again… "We could use 'easy' for once."

Reluctant to agree, Seifer kept his gaze averted. "...You definitely deserve it," he said, his eyes growing unfocused as his thoughts returned to his conversation with Rinoa. Even after the war, Squall hadn't been able to catch a break.

Squall frowned at the continued self-flagellating remarks, the man too quick to count himself out. "I don't know what I deserve, but... we're here, now." They so easily could not have been, so he wouldn't waste this opportunity. "The rest doesn't matter."

Letting out a non-committal hum, Seifer refrained from commenting. The rest did matter, but there was nothing to gain from trying to persuade Squall of that; no reason to burden Squall with his darker thoughts. He should just consider himself lucky Squall didn't blame him and wanted to move on. He'd made a promise to himself earlier that evening to do everything he could to show Squall a good time and show the brunet what life could be, and already he had descended into this. He needed to get a grip and figure out how to deal with the past without losing his cool.

"So, never take a room next to Irvine and Selphie, was it?" he said, attempting a smile as he
glanced sideways at Squall.

The sight immediately alleviated some of Squall's unease. It wasn't the relaxed smile he had interrupted during dinner, but it was something.

"Or Zell," he replied, trying to match Seifer with a lighter mood. "He took up drums."

Seifer shook his head. "How's Chicken?"

"He's good," Squall replied. "He's our close combat instructor now."

"Don't tell me Chickie has actually learned how to fight," Seifer remarked jokingly, refraining from commenting on just how bad things must've gotten for Garden to resort to hiring a guy like Zell to be one of their instructors.

"How about your other friends? Selphie and Irvine. What do they do?"

Not that long ago, Squall would have frowned at the term "friends," but now it was the non-inclusive "your" that bothered him. Seifer didn't remember them, and somehow it felt like the blond was being cheated out of something. If it hadn't been for those regained memories, Squall would've still been a loner himself.

"They're stationed at Trabia Garden," he replied. "Selphie's the best demolition expert we've got. And Irvine..." The gunslinger was laidback, not one ambitious bone in his body. "He's refused all promotions and instructor assignments so far. He's in it for the missions only."

"Sounds like an interesting couple," Seifer said, remembering the spunky, little girl and tall, brown-haired cowboy that had been present at most of the attacks against Ultimecia. "I'm sure going out with a demolition expert would spice things up in the bedroom," he added with a smirk.

Sending the man an unimpressed look for his casual lewdness, Squall leaned back on his arms and turned his gaze to the starless sky. "Selphie would like your take on easy transport." He knew she'd need only little explanation to let Seifer back into her life, if the man wanted it. But such an offer of friendship would seem strange to someone who couldn't remember that for a few years they'd had something like a little sister.

"My kind of girl then," Seifer commented, still smirking as he enjoyed the cold evening air against his skin.

Falling into a companionable silence, the two of them seated high above the city, Squall was struck by a sense of déjà vu before he remembered. A vision of the two of them, years younger, up high on the lighthouse with their feet dangling over the precarious ledge at the top. Even the emotions he attached to that particular memory resounded with what he felt now.

Set on top of slippery rock formations and encroached by dangerous tides, the lighthouse had been off-limits to the children at the orphanage. It had been one of their favorite places to sneak off to. Matron had usually managed to keep them away from there, but she'd been gone for weeks and strange men had been coming to the orphanage. In retrospect, Squall suspected they were henchmen sent by NORG to supply Garden with its future mercenaries.

At the time, he and Seifer had barely understood what was about to happen. They only knew they would be taken away from the only world they'd ever known. Most of the younger children had already gone, and a tall woman with an insincere smile had urged them to pack their clothes and come down to the common room.
They had climbed out of the window of their shared room instead and made a run for it. Seifer's plan, of course. Their escape couldn't have lasted much longer than a few hours before they were discovered at the top of the lighthouse. The sun had already set. He still remembered the sight of those grown men grumbling as they fought against the strong currents and waded through the freezing water, their struggle lit up by the lighthouse's beam. For a little while, they had eluded them.

Squall could still taste it; that feeling of uncertainty and fear. Fear that they would be separated and would be sent somewhere bad. They hadn't been good kids, so they didn't get to have families. Nobody had picked them and now they were at the end of the line. Seifer must have been scared too, but the blond boy of Squall's memories was strong and seemingly invincible, that self-assured grin telling his younger self *let's see them try*. They had watched as the two men tried to reach them, Seifer cracking up in hilarity and Squall quietly glad to have the blond with him.

Overwhelmed by a melancholy he'd come to associate with his memories of the orphanage, Squall wanted Seifer to remember as well—that there was more to them than rivalry and war. But... mentioning anything to Seifer about the past seemed delicate at best. He had no way of knowing how the blond would react. Part of him even wondered whether he should just let Seifer be. The man had started a whole new life, with new people in it, and he seemed to be doing fine without his memories intact. What good would it do for Seifer to know just who Edea had been?

Glancing sideways, watching Seifer's profile, a question escaped Squall all the same. "Do you remember where you grew up?"

Looking Squall's way briefly, a slight frown emerged on Seifer's brow. He'd never given his childhood much thought, and didn't really care about his life before Garden. For him to have ended up in such a place... It wasn't the best indication life had been good for him as a child. Back then, Garden had been a place for orphans and unwanteds. It was only in recent years, after their sudden boost in exposure and popularity that kids actually wanted to go there. He knew he hadn't been given the choice himself.

Either his parents had died or they had given him up—a past he didn't want to know about either way. Good riddance too. No president was going to show up and claim him.

"No," he said, his frown deepening as he remembered how Laguna's comment about an orphanage the day before had lead him down a similar train of thought.

"You know, it's funny... If I try really hard, I can imagine exactly what you'd look like as a kid. Kinda like a lost puppy," he said, smirking as he looked at Squall. "I'm seeing eyes red from crying and wet hair clinging to puffy cheeks here." He chuckled, "and that good old sulky pout of yours."

At the unflattering description, Squall blinked in astonishment, before turning his gaze somewhere else. He shouldn't be annoyed at what was essentially a good sign. Seifer seemed to have at least some kind of memory of him, however unfortunately selected, which meant it wasn't too late. But crying? One of the last times he could remember crying was when he'd finally realized Ellone wasn't coming back. It had been pouring rain... Of all the things for Seifer to remember. Squall suppressed a groan.

"I was five then," he said, turning to meet Seifer's gaze.

"Come on," Seifer said in disbelief, the statement too ridiculous to be true.

"You're not imagining anything," Squall explained calmly, remembering his own unwillingness to accept his past. "I remember it too."
"That could've been anyone, or just my imagination," Seifer said dismissively. "Why would it be you?"

"Because we grew up together, at an orphanage."

Frowning, Seifer couldn't make sense of what Squall was saying. Why would Squall have been at an orphanage? "How does your dad fit into this?"

"I already told you. Loire didn't know about me."

Seifer shook his head at all the thoughts swarming his head. "He mentioned an orphanage yesterday. I just thought he'd lost his marbles for a second or two.

Squall scowled at that. For a president, Loire could be remarkably undiplomatic at times. But even with the idiot apparently literally mentioning an orphanage where they'd grown up, Seifer didn't seem to have taken it seriously. And now the blond seemed lost in deep thought, clearly trying to come to grips with the unlikely news. Not wanting to force anything, Squall waited.

Seifer scrunched up his brow. "I can't remember anything apart from that one image of you." It was frustrating as hell. He'd never cared about his past before Garden before… but now…

He'd been abandoned as expected, but he hadn't just been dumped at Garden—he'd been abandoned much earlier than that. At least it meant it was his parents' fault, not his. He sighed as he tried to focus on the image of Squall again, willing himself to remember more, but nothing came. "How come you remember?"

"The memory loss is the price we pay for junctioning GFs," Squall started, unsure of how to continue. The truth was too complicated to tell in one go without seeming outrageous. Too many coincidences and unlikely reunions, too many manipulations through time, to all be taken as fact without proof. He only hoped Seifer wouldn't immediately dismiss what he had to say.

"I didn't remember until Irvine told us," he finally continued. "He only started to junction when the war started. He remembered everything. Remembered us." He studied Seifer closely. "It wasn't just you and me."

"How do you know any of it is real then? If you didn't even remember it by yourself?" Seifer asked.

"I wasn't sure at first either, but once I started to try and remember, I did. One memory at a time."

"So you feel certain about this?"

"I am certain," Squall said in answer to Seifer's continued disbelief. "I know where you got that scar," he said, inclining his head to indicate a faded, old scar on the blond's lower arm. "I know why you hate jellyfish, and I know you're allergic to ragweeds. They make you swell up and break into a rash… Do I need to go on?"

"All that means is that you've got one unhealthy fixation, that's all," Seifer said with an easy grin, before considering Squall's words more seriously. He couldn't deny the truth to what the brunet had said. There was no way Squall could've known about his recent run-in with ragweeds. "...You said Irvine told us. Who else was there?"

This was the part Squall feared Seifer definitely wouldn't accept, but he wouldn't lie or stall once asked. "Selphie, Zell, Quistis and Ellone."
Narrowing his eyes, Seifer tried to figure out if Squall was actually being serious or had suddenly decided to completely and utterly pull his leg. As the brunet held his gaze, not the slightest change to the man's composure, Seifer shook his head. "That's fucked up," he said and looked ahead.

He couldn't really believe it: having grown up with Zell and Quistis. Definitely not Ellone, and he hadn't known Cowboy and Messenger Girl at all before the war. Even if Garden had been rounding up all the orphans in the world, what were the chances they had been at the same orphanage? It didn't make any sense. "You know you're asking a lot here, right?"

"I'm not asking anything," Squall said, frowning. "Do whatever you want with what I've said."

Maybe Squall wasn't asking anything, but if what the brunet was saying was true, it changed a lot. Seifer hadn't just gone against other cadets then—he'd gone against the very people he'd grown up with. "Why are you telling me this?"

"... Because it helped me to know there was more to my past than war and mercenaries," Squall said, realizing he was probably giving away too much. "I've known you for as long as I remember... No one knows me better."

Turning to watch the brunet carefully, Seifer's urge to remember grew exponentially. Maybe it was this past he couldn't even remember that had caused Squall to forgive him for the war—that had made the man weak to him. Squall had already confessed to a string of memories from when they were younger and hinted at many more. "We were friends?"

"It's never been that simple, has it?" Squall said, voicing his thoughts of earlier that day. There'd always been too much competition, too much fear of being left behind, but Seifer had always been there. They hadn't understood anything around them, but they'd understood each other.

Nodding slowly at the words that rang too true, Seifer was struck by how much he wished things had been different. They could have been so much more if they hadn't been caught up in their rivalry. Maybe if they'd been friends, Squall could have stopped him from following Ultimecia. Maybe they could have fought alongside each other.

"We should probably head back," he said, vowing things would be different from now on. Tomorrow he'd show Squall a good time out in the desert. They'd hunt monsters together, side by side.

Squall hummed his agreement. "Back the way we came, or does this place have an exit?"

"The way we came," Seifer said, nodding towards the loading platform. "We'll take a different route, get off at a dropoff point close to where we left the car." He smirked, not having missed just how much Squall had enjoyed their ride up there. "You ready for another kick?"

"Ready if you are," Squall said, pushing up and walking up the ledge. Looking down to the city below, Seifer close behind him, Squall stepped up onto the precipice, a sense of thrill already returning. No, he certainly wasn't bored anymore.

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Shouldering the front door open for Squall to enter after him, Seifer dumped his bags on the floor with a heavy sigh. The familiar scents embraced and grounded him, any last remnants of restlessness leaving him. It was good to be back, and watching Squall head into the bedroom, he couldn't help a small smile at how natural it already felt to have the man rummaging about in his home. Even the drive back hadn't been filled with awkward silence for once. The atmosphere had been practically relaxed, and things had seemed right—not quite the aftermath he would've imagined following one of his lapses into the past. Maybe clearing the air was exactly what they'd needed.

Walking over to the kitchen, he placed Kronos on the counter and headed over to the cupboards to retrieve a glass and a bottle of whiskey. He still had trouble wrapping his head around everything, but maybe the apology he'd given Squall the night they'd bumped into each other simply hadn't cut it, nor the answers Squall had demanded the day after. Somehow the few words they'd exchanged about the war just hours earlier had lifted a lot of weight off his shoulders. Maybe it was Squall choosing to stick with him, or maybe it was the impression he now had that Squall also wished things had gone differently.

Listening out for sounds, he heard water running in the bathroom and wondered whether the man was turning in for the night or staying up with him a while longer. Already it felt routine for them to get up together, go to sleep together. Shaking his head, he thought back to their evening, to the most surreal part of it all. He still couldn't figure out why Squall had told him about their shared childhood. What good did it do to know that he had grown up with the very people he had tried to kill? He filled the tumbler to the brim with the golden liquid before inhaling the sharp scent. Like everything else in his past it was better forgotten. He brought the glass to his lips and took a large sip, relishing the deep burn.

Walking over to the couch, he sank into the cushions. His gaze darted up to meet Squall's when the brunet entered the room. "Want some?" he asked, nodding at the whiskey in his hand before bringing the glass up for another sip.

When Squall walked to the kitchen to grab the whiskey and an additional tumbler, Seifer raised an eyebrow. "Didn't actually think you'd join me, Princess," he said, raising his glass when the man inclined the bottle to top it up.

Squall shrugged as he leaned back, drink in hand. "I already jumped off a bridge today. What's one more bad decision?"

Chuckling, Seifer took in the sight before him. Squall was back in his comfy t-shirt and drawstring pants—laid back clothes he still had trouble connecting to the Ice Prince.

"You still wear those belts of yours?" he asked, before knocking back another sip.

"You still wear trench coats?" Squall shot back, not about to rekindle the man's ridicule of his attire.

"Touché. Though I think you had me beat. Trench coats are not nearly as sexy as the belts you used to wear," Seifer said, a slight smile on his lips as he easily recalled the imagery. "Not nearly as versatile either."
"True," Squall deadpanned, ignoring the hot flash of attraction that assaulted him at the bastard's lewd smile. "Perfect for concealing knives and poisons."

Seifer chuckled, by now used to Squall's less than lukewarm reception of anything resembling flirtation. "You should start wearing them again then," he said, pointedly letting his eyes drop to where Squall used to wear his belts and indulging in a slow appraisal.

Squall snorted as the man met him with a sly gaze, pretending the slow perusal of his thighs and hips hadn't affected him. "Who said I stopped?" he pointed out dismissively, "I wear what I want—doesn't matter who likes it or not."

"Best news in years," Seifer said, taking another sip of his drink. Relaxing further into the couch, he put his feet up on the coffee table. "I settled for a memento of my trench coat—always liked the crosswords the best."

Reminded of Seifer's blacksmith brand, Squall dropped his gaze to the blond's inked arm. "When did you get it?"

"Shortly after I moved in at Arc's—finally had the money for it," Seifer answered, his tattoo reminding him of the idea he'd had after inspecting Squall's blade. "You know, if I knew how, my next gunblade would be like yours: translucent. Only red and I'd etch in a big crossword on each side. It'd look amazing." He was already imagining the details of the technical drawings. "Sucks that you have to hide Lion Heart most of the time."

"She sees more action than Revolver," Squall said, draining his glass and pouring some more whiskey. The old and battered blade was still his favorite, for reasons too sentimental to share.

"Hn. From mission to mission, huh?"

"Pretty much," Squall said with a nod. "I usually train with Revolver when I can."

"Even back at Garden?"

"She's still a good blade," Squall said with a slight frown at the blond's incredulity. Even if secrecy hadn't been an issue, he'd still have chosen Revolver to spar and train at the SCTA.

"No doubt. Plus she's easier on the muscles," Seifer teased.

"You're the one who needs lightweight blades."

"Yet I'm the one with the bulk," Seifer retorted, and chuckled at the darkening expression on Squall's face. "Just be proud you need less muscle to do the same work. More tensile strength or some shit."

"I don't need reassurances. Our spars are proof enough," Squall said with a smug note, not having forgotten he was ahead in their current tally.

Seifer huffed good-naturedly. "For now. Just you wait, Princess," he said as his smile grew more lopsided. "And don't forget who won our last round."

At Squall's snort, Seifer shrugged. "Hey, close combat counts just as much if you leave yourself open like that."

"You still fight dirty," Squall said evenly. "Guess I'll have to fight dirtier."
Seifer let out a low chuckle. "Now that I’d like to see. You used to be all rules and textbook moves. I'll have to get used to this new you."

"There's no honor code out there. I had to adapt fast." Thinking back to his first missions, Squall inwardly cringed at how naive he'd been. He turned to regard Seifer. "You changed as well."

Seifer hummed as he topped up their tumblers. "Can't just always charge in there head first—even if it's the most fun. But it will be different now that I have my magic back," he added with an eager smile.

Tugging a leg up onto the couch, Squall considered the man's words. "I can't imagine going without magic as long as you did."

"It's expensive and a pain in the ass. Too many missed opportunities—monsters that had my fucking name on them," Seifer said, his voice rising. "But fuck it—I'll get my share now. Won't have to pay others to gather materials for Arc anymore either." He grinned and took a big gulp of his drink. "Can't fucking wait."

"Feel like getting reckless again?" Squall said with an answering quirk to his lips.

"Fuck yes, I feel like getting reckless again. And not just a little bit."

Drawn in by the devilish glint to green eyes, Squall raised his glass. "Tomorrow then."

Holding Squall's eager gaze, Seifer brought his glass up to clink against the brunet's. "To letting loose," he said with a grin, impatient to see Squall unleash his new and dirty style in the field.

As the brunet downed the last of his whiskey, Seifer mirrored the motion. "Guess we can't kick back too hard tonight then," he said and placed his empty glass on the coffee table.

Leaning back, he lowered his head to relax fully against the cushions. His muscles still ached after his sparring session with Squall and his eyelids were starting to feel heavy even though he wanted to stay up longer to chat with the usually more taciturn man. But he also wanted to be well rested for their day out in the field tomorrow. They'd already decided to head out early into the Behema Sands. Fuck, it was going to be good. A whole day of hunting monsters with Squall. Just like back at Garden.

"Time to call it a night?" he asked.

Squall rose to his feet with a nod and a brief stretch. "Have to check my emails first," he added, the habit to check them before bed an automatic one by now. Picking up their tumblers, he walked to the kitchen, the alcohol induced buzz spreading a pleasant heaviness throughout his limbs. However lightweight he may be now, he was certain a few more days spent with Seifer would swiftly build up his tolerance for alcohol.

Rinsing one of the glasses and filling it with tap water, he drank deeply to try and clear his head, only to freeze into place when Seifer towered behind him, reaching over his shoulder to return the whiskey bottle to the cupboard. The moment lasted for all of a second—an arm brushing against his shoulder, body heat too close—but it was enough for him to become overly aware of their proximity. Before he could even begin to suspect Seifer of playing games however, the man was already moving away.

"Help yourself to anything."

Turning around, Squall registered Seifer's nod at the fridge just in time to give an acknowledging
hum. There was no telltale smirk, no sign the blond had intended anything more than the routine task of tidying up, which somehow made this worse than when the blond sought to provoke him. He was starting to imagine things all on his own.

It was only when the man's broad back disappeared into the bedroom that he snapped from his close study. Frowning at himself, he grabbed an apple from the counter to fill his stomach. Just as he sank his teeth into the piece of fruit, the rustle of fabric reached his ears. The immediate, vivid imagery that was called to mind had his frown deepening. It was becoming harder every day to ignore the simplest things, such as a lingering gaze, a flirtatious comment, or the subtle but unmistakable sounds of Seifer undressing. Steeling himself, he hoped that checking up on his work would be enough to dissipate the pull the man had on him.

Eyes firmly on his goal, he traversed the room to where he'd placed his laptop near the coffee table, but as his feet carried him past the partly opened bedroom door, a flash of movement drew his eyes to tanned skin and flexing muscles. His lapse lasted only briefly, his stride never faltering, but it was enough to send a flush of heat up his spine even as his shoulders stiffened.

Grabbing his workbag more firmly than intended, he purposefully sat down on the couch within prime view of the bedroom, just to prove to himself that he could do so without looking. Making quick work of starting up his laptop, his fingers beating away at the keys, he kept his gaze on the screen, but unfortunately there were no urgent new emails to distract him. The sound of Seifer clearing his throat forced him to look up. He had to suppress the urge to bring his fingers up to the bridge of his nose at the sight that greeted him. Seifer was standing in the bedroom doorway, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers.

"Lots to do?" Seifer asked.

All effort ruined by the bastard's near naked appearance, Squall suppressed a glare and straightened in the couch. "Nothing new," he replied with a shake of his head, closing his laptop again.

Seifer raised an eyebrow at the quick action. If Squall had been any other man and had looked even slightly guilty, he would have suspected porn.

"Well... I'm off to bed," he said, pushing away from the door frame, his lips quirking upwards before moving further. "If you want a bit of relief before bed, I can recommend a good site or two," he added with a wink.

Needing a moment to catch on to Seifer's meaning, Squall no longer held his frown in check. "Some people actually use their computer for work," he said dryly, rising from the couch and resigning himself to another night spent in uncomfortably close proximity.

"Afraid you might like it?"

Feigning indifference, Squall pushed past him into the bedroom. "I've managed without so far," he supplied evenly, not about to admit he'd been abusing his computer to avoid his libido.

Seifer scratched at the back of his neck. "Sounds like you've had to make do without a lot of things," he commented, as he watched Squall head into the bathroom.

"Suits me fine," Squall replied, turning on the tap. His lifestyle choices had always been more austere than Seifer's.

"Don't you ever want something for yourself?"

Squall glanced at the man through the bathroom door. "The more people want, the more they set
themselves up for disappointment."

As Squall disappeared into the bathroom, Seifer's brow creased at the words that gave away much more than Squall had probably intended. It shed new light on a lot of things. He'd never imagined that something as simple as fear of disappointment was why Squall had denied himself so many things. And one thing was certain, if he and Squall were ever to relieve some tension, then he'd make damned sure it wasn't going to be disappointing.

Turning off the lights, he got under the covers. How the hell was he going to persuade Squall to start taking chances and act on his desires? Not even the thought of porn had affected Squall in the slightest. No avoidant gaze, no slight reddening of the man's cheeks, no guilty pause while the man composed himself. This was one hell of an icicle he'd have to melt.

Turning onto his side, he groaned and tried to empty his mind. He wouldn't catch any sleep with the brunet beside him if he let his imagination run free. Any planning would have to wait until Squall was out of his immediate reach. Instead, he closed his eyes and directed his thoughts to the next day. He couldn't wait to be out in the field, hunting monsters, using magic.

Having nearly fallen asleep remembering their cadet days, he heard the door to the bathroom open, but didn't stir. His every muscle was feeling heavy with the exhaustion that had built up over the day. The bed dipped behind him as Squall got under the covers as well.

"7 o'clock?" he asked, reaching out for his cell phone on the bedside table to set the alarm.

"Sure."

"Night then, Princess," he said, closing his eyes again, this time with a smile on his lips.

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[Behema Sands, Section D, Saturday, 25th of October, 11:32am]

"Fuck," Seifer exclaimed, turning the steering wheel to a hard right before jamming the brakes. Opening the door with a loud complaint from the hinges, he got out and rubbed his face harshly. It was almost noon and they'd only managed to track down a handful of beasts. The biggest pack had consisted of only five monsters—no challenge to a SeeD commander and an ex-knight. And at the moment there wasn't a single monster in sight.

"This is fucking ridiculous," he said, meeting Squall's gaze. Jumping up onto the cargo bed of his pickup, he grabbed the drawstring bag holding their supplies. Throwing the bag to Squall, he jumped back down to the ground again. "Let's eat and figure this shit out."

Humming his agreement, Squall sat down beside the pickup and rummaged through the bag to dig up their lunch. He didn't feel nearly tired enough to warrant such an early break, but at this point it hardly mattered.

Taking the sandwich and water held out to him, Seifer leaned back against the pickup while unscrewing the cap. "We should've gone south. I always go there. Lots of monsters. Even if they have no magic—at least there are loads of 'em." He knew they wouldn't have been a challenge though. They had only kept him busy in the past because of his lack of magic.

"Everyone at the SCTA said the same fucking thing about the northern desert: the place is swamped with monsters of the magic loving kind. Don't fucking go there." He shook his head, finishing a mouthful of sandwich. "They're so fucking sheltered."
"Don't trust Estharian risk assessment," Squall said with a shrug. It was a lesson he'd learned the hard way when the nation's first commissions had started to trickle in.

Seifer snorted. "I guess it'd be too much to ask for them to actually do something right."

"They've got decent goods transport," Squall pointed out.

Chuckling under his breath, Seifer nodded. "Not too shabby a night life either." Taking another sip of his bottle, he scrutinized the man's unenthused expression. "You never go out?"

"Depends on your definition," Squall replied dryly. He had no love for the kind of clubs Seifer probably had in mind. "Beers at the Black Owl, sometimes."

"With your friends?" Seifer asked, remembering the local bar in Balamb.

Squall nodded after finishing a bite of his sandwich. "When they don't take no for an answer."

Seifer smiled at that. At least not everything in Squall's life was shitty. "They never dragged you out to a club?"

"...Once," Squall admitted with a frown. "Deling City."

"And dancing and drinking didn't do it for you?"

Squall snorted. One night he'd rather forget in Deling City and the times he'd picked up Rinoa made up the total sum of his experience with clubs, and so far they hadn't made a good impression. The frantic crowds looking for a hookup, the oppressing heat of too many bodies squeezed together, the deafening music... "Not my thing."

Seifer hadn't really expected it any differently. "Bet Rinoa wasn't too pleased either—must have been a busy night for her, having to keep everyone else's eyes off you," he said with a fond gaze.

Sending the blond an unimpressed look, Squall didn't bother pointing out that Rinoa had always been the one with admirers in those sort of establishments. "I can take care of myself."

Seifer chuckled. "I don't think anyone would ever doubt that. Maybe her real problem was you seeing what's out there. Garden doesn't have the biggest selection after all."

"And clubs do?" Squall intoned with a raised eyebrow. "People there are all flash and no substance. I'm supposed to admire that?"

"Gala dresses or military uniforms more your thing?"

Squall snorted at the blond's continued baiting. In the past he would've honestly stated he had no "thing" at all, but now he wasn't sure he would be able to pull off the lie with a straight face. "People should be themselves. Clubs, galas, it's all fake."

Seifer chuckled to himself, realizing he was getting nowhere fast. Getting Squall to admit he had a libido and would ever stoop down low enough to check anyone out was just like stopping Nolan from being annoying—an exercise in utter futility.

Seifer's lips curled upwards at the corners. *This*—them out in the field together—definitely wasn't fake. Nor was their hunger to constantly better themselves with their blades. If only they could find some monsters, then *this* would be the perfect way to set the mood. He looked out at the horizon. "Where the hell are all the monsters?"
Squall sighed, swallowing the last of his sandwich. "It's a big place. They migrate."

"Tracking them down will be too fucking tedious," Seifer said, frowning. Spending half their day looking for tracks was not what he'd had in mind.

Nodding, Squall leaned back against the pickup. He'd never had this problem before. Once a SeeD, he'd simply been sent to where the monsters were, regular commissions and the latest intel always landing him in the middle of the action. He'd never stopped to consider the convenience.

"I could contact Garden," Squall suggested slowly. It probably wasn't the best idea, but he was desperate for a decent fight.

"They'd know?"

"We have an ongoing contract with Esthar to deal with Lunar Cry remnants," Squall replied, reaching into his pocket to get his phone. "We've got scouts, and Esthar has its satellites. The intel's good."

Seifer nodded eagerly at the phone. "What are you waiting for?"

Checking his phone, Squall had to hand it to Estharian technology for managing reception even this far out. Navigating through his contacts, he wondered how best to ease the conversation into his request. It would no doubt be an unpopular one.

"Squall?" Quistis intoned, picking up after only a few rings of the dial tone. "I can't believe my ears. You do know we talked just yesterday, right?"

"This a bad time?" he replied dryly.

"Of course not. I just didn't expect you to actually call me of your own free will," she said with a soft huff.

Feeling a pang of guilt at the sound of papers rustling in the background, Squall frowned. "Are you still in my office?"

"You say that as if I never left," she tutted, the sound of her typing on a keyboard finally stilling. "I've got Xu sharing the paperwork, and even Cid showed up to pick up his slack."

"Cid?"

"Let's just say I insisted on it," she replied conspiratorially. "He owes you, and besides, things are coming to a head with his retirement anyway. You know how he is with his emails, so this will be a good opportunity to work out the details."

"Sounds like you landed yourself more work. Not less."

Her soft laughter rang across the line. "Ah, he'll do in a pinch. He's capable when he feels like it."

Squall huffed at that. He liked Cid well enough, but he suspected Matron was the only reason the man had gotten as far as he had.

"Oh, about your clothes, did I forget anything? You have everything you need?"

"... ..."
Too slow to remember the request he'd made the day before, Squall inwardly cursed himself for ignoring Laguna's calls that morning.

"You didn't get them yet?" she asked, confusion clear in her voice. "I sent out an express courier last night—first thing after our call. Your things should've arrived this morning."

"I've been out since eight," he quickly replied, grasping the opportunity.

"I see, I'll call Laguna to—Wait, out where?"

Squall steeled himself. "Behema Sands."

"What?! What are you doing out there? It's almost full moon, Squall. I don't need to tell you it's an A-level risk area right now."

Squall huffed. "Not where I am."

"You didn't answer my question. Why are you out there?"

"Training. Hunting," he replied, keeping his voice carefully even.

An ill-boding moment of silence was soon broken by the tight ire in her voice. "Did you sneak out on Laguna? Does he know where you are? Does anyone know where you are apart from me?"

"I don't need permission," he replied curtly, frowning at her tone even though he had expected this reaction.

"You're playing a dangerous game," Quistis said firmly, the sound of her heels clicking against tiles betraying that she was pacing the length of his office. "I get that you need to prove yourself, but shouldn't you give the treatment more time? This is how accidents happen."

"The treatment works. I wouldn't be here otherwise."

"You've only been training for what—two days? I don't want you to push yourself." Her voice was pleading now. She knew she couldn't stop him against his will.

"My magic and junctions have almost returned to normal, but I can't test my summons or higher tier spells in the city. I need to know—I need to go all out."

"Oh... I see where this is going," she trailed off, the sound of her keyboard returning. "You're in section D right now, I see."

Squall frowned. Of course she'd track his cell phone once she thought he was alone, in a place she deemed too dangerous.

"Anything I need. Those were your words," he pointed out.

"I was talking about moral support, Squall, not enabling this ... this self-destructive tendency of yours," she said, a hint of defeat creeping into her voice.

"A hotspot. That's all I want."

"Yesterday you yourself told me that you aren't in top condition yet. Today you're asking me to send you into danger, alone. You've got no one watching your back. I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

Well aware of what Quistis needed to hear, Squall briefly considered whether the admission would
be worth provoking her heightened scrutiny. "I'm not alone."

"...I'm assuming you don't mean any of Laguna's guards?" she replied slowly. Squall knew she was aware that something was going on beneath her radar, and this would only fuel that suspicion.

"No."

"Right... Will you tell me who then?"

"Someone capable enough to back me up."

"And I'm supposed to take your word on that?" she replied, sounding wounded. "Whatever this big secret is that you and Laguna are trying to keep from me, it better be worth shutting me out like this."

"... ..."

"I hope you know the only reason I'm not tagging a team on your ass right now is your father. Whatever you're up to, Laguna must think it's for the better. He wouldn't cover for you if he didn't."

Squall knew she was waiting for a promise, a little more time perhaps before he'd include her in his secret, but he couldn't do that. "Just trust me."

"... I trust you with my life. I'm just not sure if I can trust you with yours."

Squall rolled his eyes at the statement, emphasizing his predicament. "I'm in an empty desert. I'm bored."

"I'll never understand your idea of a good time... Fine. You're absolutely sure your friend can handle it?"

"I'm certain."

"If you don't check in with me tonight, I'll fly Balamb Garden over there myself, do you understand?"

"Of course."

After a long dramatic sigh, he heard the renewed sound of typing. "I've got a nest up in section B. Commission came in yesterday."

"What rank?" he asked, aware of her tricks.

"... B-rank."

"You can do better than that."

"You're impossible!" she exclaimed. "Why can't you ease into things, like normal people."

"Like you did when Kadowaki grounded you last year?" he pointed out the flaw in her statement. Quistis was just as bad a patient and workaholic as he was.

"Fine. There's an A-rank infestation spawning at the crater in section E that falls under our regular Lunar Cry upkeep contract. I was going to deploy a team some time this week..." She drew out a reproaching silence. "Be careful, Squall."
"Always," he replied affably. "Coordinates?"

"I'll send them to your phone," she said with a resigned sigh. "That's it. You've turned me into an enabler."

"Thank you," Squall said. "I'll debrief tomorrow."

"And you'll get in touch tonight. That's non-negotiable," she warned.

"Okay. Talk to you later."

"Yeah yeah, you're eager. I'll leave you and your backup to your fun," she said with fondness to her voice. "You're going to introduce us when I come to Esthar—prove this person is real!"

"Bye Quistis," he intoned.

"Goodbye, Squall. Take care."

Seifer watched as Squallpocketed his phone. "Seems like you've still got our good old instructor wrapped around your finger."

Squall huffed at the very flawed statement. "You up for an A-rank clearing mission?" he asked, pushing up from the ground.

"I thought you'd never ask," Seifer replied with a smirk as he got up as well. The day was definitely looking up.

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[Behema Sands, Section E, Saturday, 25th of October, 7:54pm]

Sighing as he struck down another Grand Mantis, Seifer looked around at the approach of dozens more. After the bigger game they'd killed just moments earlier, this was just too fucking tedious. They were both far too overpowered for this. In the distance, the truly big caliber monsters still weren't showing any interest in them, so they were stuck clearing the field. Not much longer though. Throwing up a Protect, he sidestepped and maneuvered himself away from the centre of the fighting, letting Squall take the brunt of it. The man's silver eyes lacked any real enthusiasm as he decimated the insectoid monsters with routine moves. He'd have to spice things up for the Commander.

Aware of his retreat, the man glanced at him with an eyebrow raised in question. Casting Blind without warning, Seifer grinned at the stutter in motion as Squall's world was plunged into sudden darkness. During their cadet days they'd often resorted to taking on status ailments—a game thought up to bring some challenge to a mundane fight. Squall seemed to catch on quickly, the man immediately starting into a deadly frenzy.

The brunet was a blur of movement as he cut through one beast after another, a trail of carcasses left in his wake. If Seifer hadn't known, there was no way he would have been able to tell Squall was even at a disadvantage. The man's moves were as graceful and precise as always—no frantic moves or telltale signs apart from the occasional cocked head as the man listened out for his next target's approach. A shriek sounded as another Grand Mantis dropped to the ground, its head and front limbs severed from the rest of its body.

It was amazing to see Squall like this. Not once did the man falter or pause as he cut through the horde of Grand Mantises. Definitely not the mundane fight he'd interrupted earlier. More flashy
moves were starting to pepper the fight as well—moves he'd witnessed first hand during their spar. Daring lunges and quick low cuts in wide arches. Fuck, he loved to watch the man fight. It was a shame that he wouldn't have the time to stand around like this and watch once they got to the bigger game. Squall would most certainly put on a show.

Looking ahead, the real fun wasn't far off now: a couple of Behemoths, a Catoblepas, and a Garuda. He couldn't fucking wait. Only two dozen or so of the Grand Mantises were left now. Few enough to warrant getting out Bahamut and prepare for the big game. Fingers itching to start the real fight, he whistled in Squall's direction and landed an Esuna on the guy. Unfazed by the sudden return of his vision, the man smoothly followed through the line of his attack, kicking aside one Mantis while beheading another. Sinking his blade into the monster he'd kicked down, Squall briefly looked up to meet his gaze with a frown. Seifer winked and let the glow in his eyes flare up, signaling to the brunet he was about to summon. The man gave a quick nod, before launching himself into the remaining Grand Mantises.

Locating Bahamut in his mind, the creature as eager as he was, Seifer strengthened their link and started the summon. Tingles traveled up his arms at the familiar surge of energy. The sky turned dark as grey clouds gathered. A circle of lightning radiated out from a dipping center in the clouds. A great roar echoed over the expanse of the desert and drew the attention of every single monster left in the crater. Claws and wings poked through the dark clouds, the impressive bulk of the massive beast soon following. The brunet looked up at the menace swooping directly over him and threw up a Shell, his face illuminated by both the spell and Bahamut's coalescing magic, his hair and jacket whipping about him. A beam of energy shot from Bahamut's jaws and landed only a few feet behind the man. A great ball of light ballooned outward from the impact zone, soon enclosing Squall and the creatures.

Seifer brought up a hand to shield himself from the blinding light. A boom sounded, the white hot dome imploding with a thunderous clap, and then everything went silent. Only Squall remained standing, safe and unharmed amidst a whirl of settling dust and lingering crackles of magic, charred corpses littered all around. He grinned at the dark eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. The brunet was far from impressed by the looks of it, but there was no time to apologize even if he'd felt the slightest inclination to do so. The main show was just about to go down with another wave of small critters hurtling towards them, followed by their not so small friends.

Wasting an uncharitable thought on Seifer's antics, Squall leapt over the blackened carcasses as he ran to assume a more strategically viable position nearer the bastard. Monsters were descending on them from all directions, necessitating a back to back formation. Glancing behind him, he huffed when Seifer flashed him an unrepentant grin, the man's eyes an uncanny dark amber glowing from deep within. Turning back round to face the approaching threat, Squall swung out Lion Heart in front of him and dug in his heels for the first wave of impact. Overhead, Bahamut was circling the outer rim of the battlefield, its powerful wings beating at the air and stirring the winds. No longer content to be benched, Shiva pushed demandingly against his thoughts until he brought up a hand and started to call her out into the world.

A pack of Bandersnatches was already upon them, streaming around Shiva's ice crystal, before he'd even finished the summon. The first canine skidded past him with a loud yelp, its blood spattering to the ground, another two immediately felled by his gunblade. The scent of blood in the air whipped their companions into a frenzy, their dark shapes flitting and circling around them, their howls and snarls drowning out all else. Impatient, Shiva wasted no time, bursting out of her cocoon in a wild flurry of icy shards, killing several of the pack instantly. A cold rush of air swooped over them and monsters alike, eliciting a curse from the blond behind him.

And all at once there was no more time for conscious thought. Whenever they felled a group of
Bandersnatches, two or three more would take their place. Above them, Bahamut had started to pick apart a flock of Alcyones, their maddened shrieks interrupted by the occasional huge bird plummeting down into the battlefield, only to be savaged by the canines. Shiva was a streak of blue ice dancing in and out of view, while Seifer formed a solid presence at his back. His every sense pulled into sharp focus, Squall sliced through the attacking Bandersnatches with manic bursts of energy. At the sight of a Behemoth swiping at anything that got in its way, the ground vibrating with its every step, Squall's pulse surged. This was what he lived for.

A swift hand signal in the corner of his eyes told him Seifer was aware of the changed situation as well. Together they moved slowly eastwards into terrain less littered with carcasses, slaying Bandersnatches as they went. They'd need solid footing for the Behemoth that was lumbering their way, its mate further back still embroiled in its own fight with a group of lizards—Iguions, Squall recognized—before they disappeared from view behind the approaching giant. The glow of a Shell and Protect enveloped him, but there was no time to nod his thanks to Seifer. Ahead, Shiva briefly halted and glanced their way, a thin eyebrow quirked in question.

_Leave the big ones to us._

She huffed at his stinginess, before leaving a trail of ice magic in her wake. Casting a few of his own Blizzaras to make quicker work of clearing the field, he kept his eyes on the Behemoth. It raised its head to release a deafening roar, before throwing its huge mass into an attack charge. A Bandersnatch was trampled beneath its great claws, the remaining ones scattering out of the way with agitated snarls. A wide clearing opened up between them and the rushing giant, the canines knowing better than to get in the way. A flash of Kronos being swung low in his peripheral view drew his gaze to the eager blond beside him. The moment he inclined his head in agreement, Seifer darted off towards the Behemoth, the man's boots pounding away against the desert ground.

Startled and enraged, the giant monster lowered its impressive horns on its approach, intending to either impale or throw its adversary. Seifer didn't flinch from his path, waiting until the very last moment to launch up from the ground and sink Kronos into the Behemoth's skull, right between two horns. The impact of that collision would've thrown any other fighter a good distance into the air, but somehow Seifer had managed to stay atop the roaring beast and swing round to the monster's neck, his muscles bunching with the effort required to hold onto the blade that was jammed deeply into the beast's thick skull. Hungry snarls forced Squall's attention away from Seifer, Bandersnatches closing in all around him, their teeth bared and hackles raised.

Feeling the Behemoth tense beneath him, Seifer let go of where Kronos was lodged into thick bone just in time to grab hold of the beast's red mane as the creature reared onto its hind legs. Used as he was to riding Cerberus and Bahamut, he had little trouble keeping his balance despite the beast's desperate attempts at hurling him off, but he'd managed to lose track of Squall. Scanning his surroundings as best he could between the Behemoth's wild bucks and shakes, he spotted Squall at his eleven o'clock. Three Bandersnatches leapt at the brunet, only to fall to the ground dismembered just as quickly. Squall was one fast motherfucker. They briefly locked gazes, the intense zeal in silver eyes feeding his own battle high.

Hooking one foot behind a horn and planting his other into the enormous skull beneath him for leverage, he pulled at Kronos and tore a roar from the Behemoth's jaws as he wrenched it free. Bringing up the blade with both hands, he aimed for the gaping wound oozing with red blood. With all his strength, he sunk the blade in deeper than before, the Behemoth immediately rearing once more. Grabbing hold of the beast's red mane, he held on tightly as the Behemoth bellowed and jerked violently beneath him, before it finally slumped to the ground.

As the dust settled, he looked beyond the carnage of Bandersnatches surrounding them and spotted
the other Behemoth. Squall had temporarily trapped the creature with a jagged pillar of ice encasing a front leg as he fended off the remaining Bandersnatches. Lion Heart was nothing more than an azure blur slicing through the air with phenomenal speed. Soon only the Alcyones and Garuda would be left above, along with some Iguions and the Catoblepas below. Definitely time for him to get airborne. Calling for Bahamut through their cerebral junction, he watched as the dark creature halted its fight to come to him.

The GF dove low and kept its belly close to the desert ground, speeding towards him with its claws pulled in and its wings stretched out. Holding up an arm to grab hold, Seifer was prepared for the jolt of sudden movement and whipping winds as he pulled himself up onto the scaled wing. Running up to Bahamut's back, he hooked his legs around the thick, black neck and held on tightly. A familiar exhilaration shot through him as the majestic creature beat its wings and pulled up from the ground. Casting Firaga and Thundara left and right, he wreaked havoc among the Iguions below and couldn't help a huge smile at the intense euphoria that surged through him. He'd never felt this amazing before on a battlefield—not back at Garden and definitely not during the war. For the first time ever, he was right where he wanted to be, choosing his own foes, fighting alongside Squall. With a pat to Bahamut's wing, he focused his attention on the Garuda only a couple hundred yards off to his three o'clock, certain the Alcyones would follow.

The very last Bandersnatch slain before his feet, Squall wasted a few moments searching the thinned out battlefield, before directing his gaze upward at the sound of Bahamut overhead. He stared at the absurd sight of Seifer riding atop Bahamut as if the man had been doing it all his life, sending lightning spells crackling through the air and pelting the swarm of Alcyones in pursuit. Huffing, Squall figured that only the blond would be crazy enough to risk such a dangerous stunt. It was a long way down and a lot of faith to put in the stability of a summon, especially when their magical abilities weren't a hundred percent yet.

Angered roars of the trapped Behemoth drew his attention back to the fight at hand, the beast having managed to rend a few cracks in the unnaturally tough ice crystal. Two daring Iguions had clambered onto its back, sinking their sharp teeth and claws into the Behemoth's leathery back, further aggravating the furious Behemoth. In the distance he could see the enormous Catoblepas work its way closer, pulled in by the sounds of the struggling Behemoth. He had to move quickly.

Directing Shiva to deal with the rest of the Iguions that were closing in on them, he rushed the Behemoth with Lion Heart held high. Casting another Blizzaga spell to impact with the existing crystal, he ran at top speed. Just before snapping teeth would be able to rip him to pieces, he dropped to his knees and slid below the beast. With a hard swing of his blade, the still forming ice shattered into a shower of crushed ice and bright red shards. Big chunks of frozen flesh bounced over the ground, freeing the Behemoth from its entrapment. Rolling sideways just in time, Squall barely avoided the wild stomping as the beast tried to balance onto three legs and trample him all at the same time.

Spearing the two Iguions that had been thrown clear of their prey with precise Blizzara spells, he quickly cut down the three nearest ones while the Behemoth rampaged in wounded fury, killing its own share of Iguions as it tried to get at him. Shiva drew even with him again, and together they charged at the beast. They cast Ice spell after Ice spell, the crystalline shapes impacting harshly and burying the Behemoth in ice up to its thick neck. By the time he was upon the beast, the only harm it could do was to snarl angrily and shower him with spittle. As he leapt into the air with Lion Heart raised overhead, Shiva boosted him with a firm gust of icy wind and strengthened his gunblade with her magic. The impact of blade against ice shocked through his arms and jolted through his body, the large monster beneath him shattering into an explosion of crystalline viscera and blood. Landing firmly onto his feet, ice and flesh crunching beneath his boots, Squall watched with satisfaction as the Behemoth's large head thudded and rolled to the side, the rest of the beast
reduced to a gruesomely sparkling field of ice. All around him, the group of Iguions had met a similar fate at Shiva's hand, every last one of them dismembered, violently dispersed or pierced by shards of ice.

The distant roar of the Behemoths' master raised the hairs on his arms and he quickly turned with anticipation, looking up to see whether Seifer would soon join him. The sky that just moments before had been swarming with Alcyones was now empty apart from the large forms of Bahamut and the Garuda, their wings wheeling through the air as they circled each other. The ground below was a veritable graveyard of slain Alcyones, their remains smoldering with flame. Still firmly astride the GF, Seifer was peppering the Garuda with Fira spells, Bahamut aiding the man's assault with Thundagas and Tornados. The Garuda was badly singed, a trail of smoke and feathers left in its wake as it struggled to evade Bahamut's lunges. Deciding Seifer was more than equipped to finish the fight without his aid, Squall commanded Shiva to his side and returned his gaze to the approaching Catoblepas. The beast was far bigger than any Behemoth, and its unhurried gait betrayed just how unfazed it was by its current prey. Readyng Lion Heart, he stalked towards the Catoblepas, eager to provoke the monster into a more frenzied state of mind.

Diving beneath the Garuda, Seifer steered Bahamut into a wide circle around their prey. The monster was struggling to stay in the air, its wings beating frenetically as a golden glow started to spread out from the roots of its wings. When they turned a blinding white, he ducked his head and tightened his hold on Bahamut. Not even Shell and Protect could stave off the pain of a Sonic Boom, the powerful magic hitting them full force and propelling them back. The moment the crippling sound dissipated, he felt Bahamut straighten its neck. Ears still ringing, he struggled to keep their junction intact, a headache blooming as Bahamut opened its jaws to ready its deadly magic. Holding on for dear life, the air whirled around him and grew impossibly hot as a beam of light shot towards the Garuda. A hair raising shriek filled the air, the Garuda starting into convulsions before plummeting from the sky.

Releasing a deep breath, Seifer searched the ground below and let out a wholehearted chuckle at the sight that greeted him. Squall was fucking drawing magic as he ran and ducked around the Catoblepas, the great lumbering beast roaring in frustration. Ordering Bahamut to dive for the brunet, he couldn't wait to be fighting alongside the Commander. Thank Hyne the brunet had been in a sharing mood, otherwise he was certain not much would have been left by now—not with Shiva at the man's side. Almost at ground level, he let go of Bahamut's neck and slid down a bony wing to land only a couple of yards behind Squall. Conveying his gratitude to the massive creature, he dissolved the summon, and jogged towards the brunet.

Squall heard the loud whistle and high pitched whine of gathering magic just in time to abort his draw and dive to the side. A brightly flickering light was followed by the blinding beam of a Meltdown spell rushing past him and impacting with the beast, causing it to stagger and shake its head in confusion. Hearing the fast thud of Seifer's boots behind him, he looked back and met Seifer's gaze, the eager look in the man's eyes chasing a thrill up his spine despite the interruption. Bahamut was nowhere to be seen, even though he'd clearly heard the creature beat its wings just moments before. The message was clear: this fight was theirs alone. Not far off Shiva stopped in place, sensing his excitement. Smiling mischievously, she blew him a kiss, before disappearing in a gust of ice flecks.

Gritting his teeth at the return of Shiva's blatant flirting, Seifer jerked his head to his right when the Catoblepas recovered enough to charge at them, letting Squall know of his intent. The brunet immediately sped off into a wide ambushing arc, while he stood his ground right in the middle of the colossal beast's path, keeping the Catoblepas' attention on him with quick Fire spells. The earth shook beneath him, the beast lowering its enormous red-tipped horns in a show of menace. Unlike the Behemoth, this attack would be impossible to counter, but he knew Squall would intercept in
Catching the blond's vulnerable position from his peripheral view, Squall felt his heart pump with adrenaline. The man was only seconds away from being trampled into a bloody smear. Lion Heart held low, he veered from his path and drew on his every GF to run as fast as his junctions would allow. The wind whipped at his face and clothes, his feet throwing up dust and small rocks as unnatural speed propelled him straight towards the Catoblepas' blind spot. Leaping with all his might, he thrust Lion Heart into the charging beast's side, right between two ribs, and pulled the trigger. A muted blast was followed by the terrible sound of snapping ribs and rent flesh, the beast's momentum forcing his blade in deeper and farther before the beast managed to throw him off and turned around to target him with a Thunder.

The bright clash of lightning impacting against Shell magic drew Seifer's attention for all of a split second, before he rushed in between the Catoblepas' front legs. Slicing through thick skin, the beast quickly withdrew its bleeding paw and leapt backwards only to swipe at him with deadly claws. Dodging, he rolled to the side in time to see Squall place a blow to the very same paw. The colossal beast reared, white jagged bone protruding from where skin had been covering its knuckles moments before. Jumping to his feet, he sidestepped a thick splash of gore that gushed from the laceration at the Catoblepas' side.

Briefly meeting Seifer's gaze as the man joined his side, Squall looked up as the beast roared and showered them with speckles of saliva. They needed a different strategy. All of the Catoblepas' vital areas were out of their reach, and without any momentum he wouldn't manage a high enough leap. When Seifer jerked his head towards the top of the beast, he nodded his agreement. They needed to get up there if they were to bring the Catoblepas down. Slashing at its legs and paws would simply take too long. Gathering Ice magic, he focused and manipulated the spell into a slow, controlled path.

Raising his eyebrow in question at the sheet of smooth ice that formed at his feet, Seifer chuckled as the ice shot up towards the Catoblepas. Breaking into a run, he trusted Squall to form the makeshift path quick enough to catch up with his every footfall. Between that and the translucency of the ice, it felt like he was running on thin air. The Catoblepas swiped at him wildly, but even when he dodged and changed course, the icy path never failed to follow. The beast's eyes narrowed and this time it hurled a Thundaga right into the path behind him, shattering the winding construction and spraying his back with tiny flecks of ice. He only just managed enough momentum and leverage to jump the final distance to the beast's back.

Trying desperately to keep his balance while Squall placed distracting attacks at the beast's paws below, he sank his blade into thick muscle to anchor himself. As soon as he found his footing, he heaved out the blade only to ram it back in a small distance further down the beast's back, just in time to hold on as it shook itself wildly. Repeating the move in a crude approximation of a walking stick, he gripped at thick fur with his free hand and stumbled his way towards the beast's hind legs, running whenever the Catoblepas remained stationary long enough. Below, he could hear the clash of spells as Squall continued to try and distract the beast from its bucking attempts. Finally drawing even with the Catoblepas' hip joint, he tried to swipe his blade when he saw his chance, but another wild buck nearly had him flying off the beast. Sinking the blade back into the tensing muscles for purchase, he waited for another opportunity.

Having caught a glimpse of Seifer's precarious trek, Squall considered his options as he jumped back from yet another angry swipe of claws. The sliced flesh that hung in ribbons from the Catoblepas' lower legs and paws had done little to deter its wild moves, leaving Seifer with no opening to do any real damage. Glancing up to the man squatted down at the beast's hip, just out of reach of the Catoblepas' lashing tail, he launched into a quick run and started to blast the claws
directly beneath Seifer with Blizagga after Blizagga, until three twitching claws were pierced to the ground. Growling, the Catoblepas curled in on itself to start clawing at the impeding ice.

Seeing his chance, Seifer thrust Kronos deep into the beast's right hip joint and twisted it harshly, a thunderous howl tearing from the creature. The muscles beneath his boots twitched and jerked as the beast desperately tried to pull itself free. The sharp sound of ice breaking hastened Seifer's moves even as he could hear the ringing blasts of new Blizzagas. Slashing and stabbing, he worked at the joint until it finally unhinged and dropped at least a foot in height—telltale that he'd finally succeeded. One down. If he could incapacitate the front leg on the same side as well, then the beast was as good as dead.

Setting off into a sprint up the Catoblepas' back, he felt his adrenaline surge at the sight of the beast's frenzied jaws. Avoiding a lashing tail was a lot easier than those teeth. Trusting Squall to follow his moves from below, he swiped at the beast's left flank, hoping to temporarily draw the creature's attention to the wrong side. Sinking Kronos back down into bunching muscles just in time to stay atop the Catoblepas, he waited until the return of another series of Blizzaras stilled the beast's wild shakes. It was a lot easier to hold on now, the beast already severely hampered in its moves. Enraged, it stopped trying to stomp below and twisted about its head. Not a second too late, he dropped down low, red teeth closing in just above.

Squall cursed inwardly at the near miss. The beast was not as easily distracted as he'd assumed. Diverting his Blizzaras towards the large snapping jaws, he dodged the ensuing Thundaga just in time. The Catoblepas had abandoned all lower spells and was now fighting for its life. Matching its ferocity, Squall switched solely to Blizzagas and kept up the barrage long enough for Seifer to find an opening and hack into the front shoulder with brutal strength. The man stood tall and was no longer dodging, relying solely on Squall's spells to avoid certain death.

Sweat pearled on Squall's forehead at the strain of keeping the Catoblepas' jaws and leg locked in place, the ice paralyzing its neck continuously cracking and splintering before he could strengthen it with more layers of magic. Sharp, man-sized teeth were slowly but surely inching closer to what the beast now realized was the real threat, its white eyes wide and blazing as Seifer sank Kronos one final time into sinew and flesh. A snapping sound was followed by a whimpering howl, beast and man crashing to the ground.

Sand and shattered ice whirled up under the impact, the ground shaking beneath Squall's feet. Freed from its constraints, the Catoblepas was trying desperately to scramble to its feet. Spotting movement atop the beast, Seifer already moving in to deliver the final blow, Squall let out a quick breath before his gaze fell to the bright glow building in wildly rolling eyes. The Catoblepas' sides heaved with panicked breaths, the carrion stench filling Squall's nostrils as he launched into a run. The sky above them turned an eerie red as the beast called upon the last of its strength, the distant whistle of incoming missiles setting his hairs on end. There was no stopping it now.

Working his way towards one of the massive black horns as the beast jerked beneath him, Seifer felt the whir of strong magic in the air. All light dimmed apart from the bright red glowing veins of the beast below him. Above him enormous flaming rocks hurtled towards them, less than half a mile off now. Crouching down low, holding on to the beast's white mane, he was spared the need to cast a protective spell when a great sphere of pink magic enveloped him. Looking over his shoulder at the appearance of the abnormally large Shell, he saw Squall squatting behind him. The man was out of breath, having hurried to protect them both. About to wink at the man, he stumbled as the first meteor hit their shield.

The sound of impact after impact rang in his ears, and he looked down from the flashing shield to see the pained set to the brunet's brow. Squall's magic was having trouble holding up under the
continuous barrage. He needed to hurry. Staying within the magic bounds of Squall's Shell, Seifer climbed up the horn and raised Kronos just as a white glowing eye stared right back at him. Taking a few rushed steps, he jumped with Kronos held high and sank it deep into the beast's eye socket, before pulling the trigger and holding on the best he could.

The Catoblepas' massive head was thrown back by the force of the loud blast. A wheezing rush of air left the beast's large body, its neck arching high into the air before the monster slumped down lifelessly. Renewing his footing at the sudden drop, a final few twitches racking the already dead monster, Squall waited for the last meteor to crash into his shield before he lifted it with a soft grunt. It was the first time he'd had to bend his magic like that since the broken bond, and it had required more effort than he was used to, but at least it had worked. The entire area outside his shield was pockmarked with blackened craters, smoke rising from their centers.

Finding his bearings, he looked over to where the Catoblepas' great head was jerking mildly with Seifer's efforts to dislodge Kronos. Jogging over along the beast's back, he fought a smile at the sight of Seifer balancing both his feet on the large eye socket that looked more like a gaping pool of flesh than anything resembling an eye. Chunks of brains and flesh covered the man's clothes, the inside of the beast's skull no doubt reduced to pulp.

Giving Kronos a final yank, Seifer lost his footing and hit the ground with slightly less grace than he'd hoped for. With a chuckle, he pushed onto his feet, his body thrumming with adrenaline. They'd finally managed to kill the impressive Catoblepas and clear the entire crater Quistis had sent them to. Watching as Squall jumped down and wiped his blade clean on the Catoblepas' fur, he grinned at the state the brunet was in. Squall was covered in gore, the man's training gear almost unrecognizable beneath blood and grime, yet he knew it was nothing compared to himself.

Turning his gaze to the crater, he took a moment to revel in the sight of the countless carcasses they'd left in their wake. Some had been easy—too easy, but some had proven a welcome challenge. He'd never thought he'd get to fight enemies like that again. The rush of fighting them would keep him going for days.

As Squall came to stand next to him, their eyes caught for a second, enough for him to see his own satisfaction mirrored in the brunet's eyes. And there was a certain knowledge there: they made one hell of a team. They hadn't even spoken throughout the carnage—they'd just worked together flawlessly, using only gestures and telling looks.

"You think we set a record clearing this crater?" Seifer asked with a grin, walking over to the Catoblepas to cut off the pulsing, magic imbued ends. Arc would pay a decent price for those.

"Maybe," Squall said with quirked lips. "Good thing we don't get paid by the hour."

"You saying there's more money in this for us than what these horns will net us?"


"And here I thought the day couldn't get any better," Seifer said as he planted his feet firmly on the ground and raised his blade over the beast's left horn.

Watching the blond bring down his blade with a carefully aimed swing, Squall felt elated in a way that only the battlefield could make him feel. Dust and sand were shifting in eddies with the rising evening wind, carrying with it the rich scent of blood. The silence that had suddenly fallen over the expanse of the large crater was broken only by their faintly labored breathing and Seifer's efforts to work through bone. A silence hard fought for. It was perfect. Feeling his lips quirk even further, he leaned back against the cooling beast and wiped at something wet that was stuck in his hair. Next
to him, the Catoblepas' second horn fell to the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust.

"We'll have to drop these off at Arc's on our way back," Seifer said, grabbing hold of one of the red horn ends and setting off to where they'd entered the crater.

Lifting the remaining horn, Squall started after the blond. "He won't ask questions?"

"Not sure it'll come as much of a surprise after meeting you," Seifer said as he glanced over his shoulder, letting Squall catch up.

"What does that mean?"

"He saw your blade. Doesn't take much to put two and two together," Seifer said, sidestepping another carcass. "He doesn't give a shit about any of that though. Rank is meaningless to him. So is fame and wealth." He grinned. "He really isn't much of a businessman."

Taking in the unexpected news, Squall fell silent. Apart from pouring him a drink and giving him a once over, the older man had shown no outward reaction whatsoever—the most positive reaction he'd received to date. "Glad he and I agree," he finally said, deciding to trust the private man who had taken Seifer off the streets.

Seifer nodded, kicking the remains of a Grand Mantis to the side to clear a path. "We should celebrate how awesome we are. Drinks out or back home?"

"Your place," Squall replied, changing grip on his heavy load. He'd come to appreciate the benefits of winding down after the intensity of battle, as long as he could do so privately.

"Let's kick back with a good old fashioned drinking game then," Seifer said, picking up his pace. Remembering some of the antics his friends had gotten up to thanks to exactly such games, Squall raised an eyebrow. "As long as we don't end up playing truth or dare," he commented with a huff.

"Don't worry, it'd be too easy to get you drunk that way—you'd be wasted within an hour with all the things you'd have to skip. I've got some Triple Triad cards lying around."

"Haven't played in a while," Squall commented, glad for the tamer alternative to some of Selphie's games.

"Guess you might still end up on the floor then," Seifer said with a grin.

"Don't be so sure," Squall retorted, hoisting the horn further up onto his shoulder. "Last time I played, I cleaned out everyone's wallet."

"I like it when you brag. It makes victory all the sweeter."

"In my experience, nobody wins at drinking games," Squall pointed out dryly.

"Really?" Seifer replied with a raised eyebrow. "In my experience everyone wins," he added, unable to keep the innuendo from his voice. A little bit of liquor could go a long way in lowering inhibitions.

"You've been playing different games than I have then," Squall said, quickly silencing the guilty part of him that started to contemplate the kind of drinking games a hedonist might favor. "I know for a fact Zell wouldn't agree."

Seifer couldn't hold back a chuckle at the thought of Zell looking sheepish and mortified—
whatever the idiot had been up to. "What did Chickie do?"

"His birthday last year," Squall said with a shake of the head. "Somehow skinny-dipping ended up in a challenge that he couldn't pull off his Mach Kick whilst drunk. And naked. Selphie's been using the pictures for blackmail."

Seifer cringed. "Shit Squall, warn a guy before you try and turn him straight. I feel like I've just been castrated," he said as he tried to literally shake off the imagery.

"Like I said, no winners," Squall replied, amused by the blond's exaggerations. "At least you weren't there."

"Did you take part in the skinny dipping?"

Squall sent Seifer an even look. "You know the answer to that."

"Shame… and I can even imagine it so vividly too," Seifer said with a wink.

Squall sent an unimpressed glare, curbing the thought that they were far past imagination at this point. He could still recall far too many details of the blond's body, naked and reposed—"Maybe I should ask for those pictures. Do some blackmailing of my own."

"That's not even funny, Squall, I think I'd have to gouge out my eyes then."

Letting his lips quirk upward, Squall looked ahead to where the edge of the crater was drawing close.

Mirroring Squall's smile, Seifer held his tongue that a naked photo of the brunet would be far more effective in getting him to do whatever the hell Squall wanted and instead let the man win that round. He inclined his head in the direction of Lion Heart. "Good upgrade, huh?"

"It gives an edge," Squall agreed, glad to have had a chance to test Seifer's handiwork in the field. "You do a lot of customization work?"

"Yeah. I like figuring out how to improve blades. Nothing beats making a whole gunblade from scratch though," Seifer said, as they made it to the edge of the crater. "It was good to finally use Kronos properly, but I doubt I'll be able to stick with it for long. I've already got plans for the next one."

"...I couldn't do that," Squall said, for the first time in his life wondering whether his loyalty to his blades was strange. "Even using Lion Heart for the first time felt wrong."

"Good thing most people don't see it that way. I'd be out of a job then," Seifer said, unsurprised by Squall's sentiment. The moment Squall had gotten Revolver, it had been rare to see the younger cadet go anywhere without the blade, giving rise to rumors that the boy even shared a bed with his blade—rumors Seifer had helped instigate. "If you reconsider, you'll know where to go."

Squall nodded as they started up the slope at the edge of the crater. Even if he might never take the man up on the offer, the thought of Seifer making him a blade intrigued him. At the very least, it would be good to have a regular smith he trusted implicitly, someone to handle his customization and repair work. The upgrade Seifer had implemented was high quality craftsmanship, and the man wasn't even halfway through his apprenticeship yet.

"You'll have to thank Quistis for this," Seifer said with a smirk, putting his back into the steep climb. "From your mystery friend."
"Not sure it's wise to remind her," Squall replied. "She doesn't like mysteries."

"I bet," Seifer said with a shake of the head. "Even when we were cadets, she was always up in our business."

Flexing his shoulders, Squall settled in for the last haul up the slope. "She's... intense."

Reaching the edge of the crater, Seifer stopped to take in the panorama of the crater that now lay below them. "It's probably for the best you aren't telling her. I think her mind would implode if she found out that you were out here with me, having the time of your life."

Squall raised an eyebrow at the cocky statement, but didn't bother denying it. "She'd want to know about you," he commented, wiping the sweat off his brow as he came to a stand next to the blond. "She can handle anything you throw at her... I just can't always handle her."

Seifer chuckled. It sounded exhausting to befriend someone as controlling as their former Instructor—something he definitely wasn't interested in, especially considering the fact she'd probably kill him if she ever laid eyes on him again. Better not to stir that hornet's nest.

Turning to face the other direction, away from the crater, Seifer directed his gaze toward his pickup just under half a mile away. It was bathed in red-golden hues from the setting desert sun. "Come on. Let's go."

Nodding, Squall took advantage of the silence that fell between them to take in the desolate landscape that stretched as far as the eye could see. Seifer's pickup ahead and the ancient crater behind them were all that contrasted against miles of cracked earth and rock formations. The last time he'd been in the Estharian desert, the place had been overrun with SeeDs and Estharian task forces in order to deal with the Lunar Cry aftermath. The loud roaring of engines, the clash and bangs of weapons, the pained cries coming from the emergency tents. Those weeks had been tough, and he'd had no time to stand still and look around.

Alone with Seifer, it was a different place entirely. During the day it was beautiful in a severe sort of way, but under the golden caress of the setting sun the desert came alive and showed its true colors. Small animals started to skitter from rock to rock, scurrying into hiding when he and Seifer passed by. Distant and strange calls pierced the air now and then as nocturnal creatures started to wake and venture outside. He wondered how many of them would brave the small pool of water at the centre of the crater now that they had cleared it of monsters.

Letting the last of his battle high flow from his body, he let himself become inundated with the kind of calm he only ever experienced in nature. The entire sky was a riot of colors as the sun became a bright red disc that sank below the horizon. No city lights impeded the first stars that started to appear to the darkening east. Nothing humans built would ever compare to this.

Glancing next to him, he couldn't muster the usual annoyance with himself when his stomach made yet another predictable backflip. He'd lost count already that day. Under the red sun, Seifer's golden hair and tanned skin were set aglow, the blood, dirt and sweat only adding to the aesthetic.

Catching Squall's study of him, Seifer met the man's gaze with a smirk. When Squall immediately looked away, he almost wanted to call the brunet out on it. There'd been several instances like that throughout the day, fueling his resolve to act sooner rather than later. Not out here though, in the desert. Not when he couldn't follow it up with anything more than a kiss. There was a right place and a right time for everything, and this definitely wouldn't be it. For what he had in mind, they'd need a bed and lots of lube.
Watching as Squall jumped up onto the cargo bed of his pickup, Seifer picked up one of the horns and shoved it upwards, waiting for Squall to take hold of it. Once they’d hoisted up the first one, the other one followed quickly. When both horns were safely stowed away, Seifer got out a towel, needing to get out of his sticky clothes and get cleaned up. Pouring water onto the towel, he thoroughly wiped down his face and hair, before changing his clothes. Next to him, he could hear Squall go about his own cleaning, but he firmly kept his gaze under control. As he looked out over the desert it was getting darker by the minute, but the view wasn't any less impressive. "Fucking stunning out here."

"It is," Squall agreed next to him.

Standing this close to Squall, Seifer no longer cared about the view. He'd never been very patient, and having made the decision to take things further with Squall, the how and when of it wouldn't leave him alone. To talk someone at a club into a quick fuck was a piece of cake compared to this. Squall was tense, reluctant and withdrawn most of the time. Not the best recipe for ending up in bed with someone. But hell, if he could get the reticent brunet to give in… He'd be the luckiest son of a bitch on the whole fucking planet. "Ready to head back?" he asked, more than ready to get comfortable and kick back with the Commander.

Nodding, Squall looked around one last time and jumped off the cargo bed. After a final check on his gunblade case, satisfied that it was securely in place, he closed up the back of the pickup and followed after the blond who was already at the front. Drawing in a last breath of the desert air, he climbed into the passenger's seat. As Seifer switched on the ignition and drove the pickup south, back towards the city, Squall turned his gaze from the man to watch the darkening desert rush by the windows. With the sun well below the horizon, the moon managed to cast an eerie light over the rocky expanse. In the distance he could make out some slow moving shadows, creatures out on the prowl, until the sudden bright illumination of the headlights drowned them out. All at once the wide vastness of the desert shrunk down to the pinprick of light that was Seifer's pickup, cleaving through the dark.

Settling back in his seat, Squall examined the contentment he felt, even as he fought to keep the smile off his expression. It had been a long time since life had been this good and simple. No war, no crisis, no responsibilities, everything back at Garden in the hands of capable people. Was this what a vacation felt like?

He'd have to thank Quistis when he got back to Garden. Every moment he was free to do as he pleased was an added burden to the woman, and he couldn't help but feel he was taking advantage. With none of the actual titles or credit, she had stepped up to pick up the slack for both her Commander and Headmaster. The thought that he might resemble the old flake of a Headmaster in any way left a bad aftertaste.

"I should call in our mission," he said, looking to Seifer. At the blond's nod, he got out his cell phone and dialed Quistis' number.

"You know, I'm going to get used to these phone calls," Quistis greeted after only a few rings. "I guess you made it out of Behema Sands in one piece?"

"On our way out," Squall replied. "The crater is cleared."

"The entire crater? You got all of the monsters, in one afternoon?" She sounded equal parts suspicious and hopeful, putting him on his guard.

"You sound surprised," he said carefully.
"Well, I didn't know what to expect, to be honest." He could envision her placating expression well, the slight adjustment to her glasses while she considered her next words. "It was an A-rank infestation, right? Or did the intel guys botch their job?"

"Now you're just insulting," Squall retorted, picking up on the ill-disguised humor in her voice.

"Well, I'm happy to enter it into the system: Behema Sands, sector E, cleared," she replied, not missing a beat. "I'm glad your recovery is going so well. Either that, or your sidekick packs a serious punch."

Having suspected the baiting, Squall didn't stumble. "Those aren't mutually exclusive," he pointed out dryly.

"Mm, I'm sure... At first I thought you were out there with Rinoa. She's the only one in Esthar I could think of with the potential power to back you up, the only one you might try to hide from me —"

"I'm not—" he tried to interrupt.

"—that stupid, luckily. I know. I called Rinoa to ask her myself, considering the two of you going out there, using her magic, would be disastrous. And guess what, she sounded really nervous."

"Quistis," he intoned in vain. Once she was focused on something, she was like a dog with a bone.

"She knows. Whoever you're out and about with, she knows, and it makes her very uncomfortable to be grilled about it... So first Laguna lies to me, and now Rinoa. I'm starting to think all this cloak and dagger isn't about you and her at all."

"We got the job done," he stated curtly. "That's all that matters."

"It's definitely not a SeeD either—all our operatives in Esthar are checked and accounted for," she barged on, ignoring his statement. "So then it begs the question. Who else out there can keep up with the SeeD Commander? Hell, who else would you entrust your current condition with? There's no way this person doesn't know what you can do, who you are, after fighting alongside you. Oh, and then there's the interesting fact that whoever it is, I don't think Rinoa likes them very much."

"... ..." Squall held his breath at the heavy silence Quistis let fall. It was disconcerting how astute her line of questioning was, and he was almost certain that the answer was glaringly obvious—that she would demand to speak to Seifer next.

"Alright then. Don't say anything," Quistis finally interrupted the silence. "I guess it's hard not to take this personally. But maybe Cid's right...maybe a stranger is exactly what you need right now. Someone impartial."

Squall blinked at that. "Why is he talking about any of this?"

She gave an incredulous huff. "Who else am I going to run this by? I haven't dared tell Selphie yet, especially with Irvine out on his undercover mission. You know how she gets when he isn't around to calm her down. Zell is a restless mess ever since I broke the news to him. He's climbing up the walls, ready to come pull you out of Esthar at a moment's notice. I've managed to talk him down, but he's like a little kid when it comes to these kind of things. So it's up to me to be calm and reasonable."

"... So you confide in Cid," he said drolly, certain she had to see the flaw in that as well. "You must be desperate."
A stifled laugh sounded on the other end of the phone. "Hyne, yes," she exclaimed, letting out another small laugh. "You're right, of course. The man's never been a very good confidante. I blame you entirely." She took a deep breath, a pause. "Letting go really isn't my forte here, but... I'll back off if that's what you really need from me right now. I can't pretend that I understand... Just promise me that whatever you're doing, you're looking after yourself properly? That you'll call me the moment you need me?"

Squall rolled his eyes at having to reassure her yet again. "I thought that's what I was doing."

"How sly of you," she reprimanded, sounding somewhat mollified. "I'm letting the matter rest... for now. I can't have you waste all your energy on subterfuge instead of recovery."

"Like I said, I'm much better."

"Your GFs?"

"I junctioned Shiva without problem. High tier spells too. It's just endurance at this point."

"That's great to hear," she said, with the first real enthusiasm since their conversation started. "If you need any other Esthar based missions sent your way, just let me know... Or better yet, I can tell the quartermaster to find you some appropriate rooms here, put you up on the officer's floor with the rest of us?"

Squall wasn't fooled by her phrasing the statement as a question. The moment she'd learned of his breakup, she would've looked into new quarters, he was certain of it.

"The former, for now," he hedged, painfully aware of the reason he wasn't quite ready yet to defect to Balamb. If not for Seifer, he'd have already been on his way. "I'll send in a mission report tomorrow."

"...There's no rush," she said, thankfully deciding not to press the issue. "I'll have Xu deposit your pay once she gets it."

"Thanks."

"One more thing. I saw that you confirmed your attendance for the next Esthar Garden meeting. You sure you don't want a rain check on that?"

"We can't afford for them to see my absence as weakness."

"You're not wrong about that, but I just hate the thought of you prioritizing work over your health," she said uselessly. "We all do it."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it," she replied tartly. "...Well, at least we'll finally get the chance to catch up properly. Let's have lunch together after the meeting. It's too depressing when all our conversations involve me nagging and you avoiding me. We can do better than that."

"All right," he said, happy enough with the peace offer.

"Squall, I have to go," Quistis said, the background suddenly filled with urgent voices. Her own voice had already clipped back to her professional tone, the one that kept people in line or else. "I can't keep the department heads waiting forever."
"Bye."

"Goodbye, Squall. Talk to you soon."

Quietly impressed by just how well Squall had steered that conversation, Seifer adjusted his hold on the steering wheel. "She appeased for now?"

Glancing at Seifer, Squall offered a small nod. "For now," he emphasized with a sigh.

"I can just see her beady little eyes all focused as she tries to figure out this little mystery," he said in amusement.

Squall rolled his eyes. "Her eyes are hardly beady," he commented. "The cadets call it the *homing laser* when she gets that look."

Seifer chuckled loudly. "Fuck, I don't envy you."

"Her tenacity has helped me out more often than not," Squall said with a shrug. "And it helps to outrank her."

"Do you have to sign a membership charter when you become a Trepie?" Seifer asked, but at Squall's unimpressed look, he shook his head. "Shit Squall, it's just hard to imagine. I'm glad you've got Her Tenaciousness to look out for your ass." He paused, unable to help himself from the slight tease. "I bet that's not all she's looking out for either."

Squall snorted but refrained from commenting Seifer had been far more guilty in that regard.

"So just what did Miss Prim-And-Proper get grounded for last year?" Seifer asked, remembering the previous phone call.

Squall frowned at the memory. "The usual. Line of duty," he said, remembering the nasty acid burns that had refused to yield to a magical healing at first. "A rookie was standing in the path of a Malboro. She pushed him out of the way, took the brunt of it. Thought she could handle it with her buffs." He glanced at Seifer. "Turned out to be a new species. Much nastier than a Malboro. The acid worked faster than any healings. Took a week before she could use her right arm again."

Seifer whistled lowly. "Sometimes you really have to wonder what offspring between Mr Go-Talk-To-A-Wall and Miss Whips-A-Lot would be like. One thing's for sure—the kid sure as hell would be heroic."

Squall's eyebrows climbed at the bizarre line of thought, unsure he wanted to even imagine it. "Trust me, only you would wonder about that."

Seifer chuckled. "Don't shoot it down so quickly. Maybe you two were meant to be."

Scowling, Squall wished Seifer had never found out about Quistis' unfortunate confession. "Maybe you should try and run that theory by her, see how much she likes it."

"If she wouldn't ignite my ass on sight, then I might," Seifer said good-naturedly.

Rolling his eyes, Squall almost hoped the man would. If anyone stood a chance of putting this nonsense to bed, it would be Quistis. Watching Seifer redirect his gaze back to the desert in front of them, a lazy grin on the man's lips, he found however that he didn't begrudge the blond his moment of fun at his expense. If anything, it made him hopeful that not all conversation of past acquaintances had to end on a sour note.
Or perhaps he simply felt too content to mind. There was something to be said about Seifer's take on a day out. Straightening the small lift to his lips, he tried to focus on the dark landscape speeding by, inexplicably eager for something as trivial as drinks and cards.

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Broken Lines

[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Saturday, 25th of October, 11:12 pm]

Grinning, Seifer brought his bottle of beer to his lips and leaned back against the couch. "Come on. Put them on."

"Why? They're just glasses," Squall said, sending the man a distrustful look. Laying down a Triple Triad card onto the coffee table, he prevented Seifer from taking over his weaker corner card.

"I just want to see what you look like with them on," Seifer said, shifting his position on the floor and picking a card from his hand. He held it up in the air, not yet revealing it. "Even if I win this game, I'll drink that shot instead of you," he said, nodding at the Cortego waiting in a small shot glass on the coffee table. "But you'll have to wear your glasses for the next game," he added, pretty certain this would finally end up as one of his wins.

Narrowing his eyes, Squall considered the man's angle and the evening's endgame. Even though Seifer had already downed far more shots than himself, he still seemed mostly unaffected. The ridiculous request seemed like a cheap enough price to nudge the blond closer to inebriation, and himself to victory—assuming victory meant being the last one standing.

"Suit yourself," Squall finally said with a shrug.

Seifer placed his card on the table, winning over two of Squall's cards in the process. "Might as well go get them, Princess. This won't take long."

Squall snorted, throwing down his counter move, recovering only one of his lost cards. He would never understand other people's fascination with what he did or didn't wear.

"Let's see you top this," Seifer said, placing his last card on the board.

Squall put down his own last card, eyeing the expected outcome. He was only one card short in the end, but Seifer was grinning as if he'd been the one on a winning streak. Getting up before the man could order him to do so, he rounded the couch to retrieve his glasses from his work bag. Sitting back down, he leveled the childish man next to him with an unimpressed look before putting on his glasses.

"Drink up," he reminded, gesturing at the shot that still sat untouched on the coffee table.

Grabbing the glass, Seifer smirked broadly. Not only had he just won his second game of the evening, but he finally got to see Squall wear his glasses—not a bad sight by any stretch of the imagination. Definitely a new image to add to his repertoire of fantasies. "To secretary Squall," he said, before downing the black liquid. "I can see why they're restricted to paperwork. They don't really complete the deadly assassin look."

"Appearances can deceive," Squall said dryly, dealing the blond a new hand of cards. "Fortunately I'm neither."

"Garden not getting many assassination assignments anymore?"

"We get more requests than ever," Squall replied with a huff, moving his gaze to his new hand of cards. "Few actually get carried out these days and never by me."
"How come?"

"We take missions for money, but not indiscriminately. If we accepted every assassination, the world would be leaderless by now," Squall supplied evenly, meeting the blond's gaze.

Seifer chuckled lightly. "And how come you've decided to skip out on them?"

"I prefer to look my opponents in the eye, fight them fairly."

"I hear that," Seifer agreed and scratched at his cheek. He'd gone much further himself after the war and had made a vow to never kill another human. Enough innocents had lost their lives at his hands and there was always a way to incapacitate an opponent without using lethal force.

"What kind of missions do you do then?" he asked as he threw down a card to start their next game.

"After the war it was mostly conflict resolution—the Galbadian civil war, the Timber warlord. These days I fight more monsters than I do people."

Going by Squall's tone, Seifer figured the man preferred it that way. Just like he did himself. He leaned over to refill his shot glass. "You looking forward to getting back out there?"

"Always," Squall replied, watching with satisfaction as the blond failed to circumvent his strong central card. "I'm not good at being idle."

"Me neither," Seifer agreed. He was always busy either at the SCTA, at Arc's, or out on the road. He'd spent more time in his apartment since Squall was staying with him than he had the entire month before that. Shaking his head at their unlikely situation, at them actually playing a drinking game together, he couldn't believe how normal it felt. Even more unbelievable was how comfortable the brunet seemed around him—dressed down to drawstring pants and a comfy shirt, relaxing on his couch, in his home. As if they'd always been able to hang out like this.

Watching as the game unfolded and Squall took over almost all of his cards, Seifer snorted and shook his head. "When the fuck did you get this good?"

"It's a way to pass the time," Squall said with a shrug. "A lot of missions involve more waiting than action."

"If you're that sure, then let's up the stakes," Seifer said, a smirk curving his lips. "Three shots for the loser."

Wondering at what point in their shared history it had become impossible for either of them to back down, Squall set down his pair of glasses and shuffled the deck against his better judgment. "It's your funeral."

"It's going to take more than three shots to do much damage," Seifer said with a grin. "Besides, you've got some catching up to do." When Squall met his gaze evenly, he chuckled. "Come on, Princess, let's roll."

"With this newfound reckless side to you, should I be worried about foul play, Sunshine?"

Squall glanced up from his hand at the equally ridiculous accusation and nickname. "Is that an attempt to bluff, or are you admitting defeat already?"

"Neither," Seifer said, desperately trying to form a plan of attack. "I have no fucking clue where to take it with these cards, but I've won with worse."
"Not against me," Squall goaded, a smile threatening to ruin his straight expression. In spite of his words, he didn't let himself be baited into opening with his strongest card. He hadn't quite discounted the possibility yet that the blond was trying to throw him off.

"Then you won't mind a more interesting bet. The loser has to answer a question."

Looking up at the challenge, Squall knew he only had himself to blame for provoking the man. He remembered well enough what kind of questions Seifer was likely to ask. "That's assuming I want to ask one," he said with a quirked brow.

"I'm sure you can think of something," Seifer said through a smirk. "Or I can down the shots."

Squall huffed, still not interested in any of the man's personal business. "Bottoms up," he said dryly, throwing down his next card to signal his agreement. He felt fairly confident he'd win, but more than that, he refused to be rattled by whatever questions the man might cook up.

Having his answer, Seifer plucked a card from his hand and put it down next to Squall's. He really did have fuck all chance to win with these cards, but he would have had a hell of a lot more chance if Squall hadn't just blocked off that corner. Watching as the game unfolded, it became more and more apparent that Squall was the one in control.

A smug smile stole onto Squall's lips as Seifer ended the game with his weakest card yet. Leaning back, he was inordinately pleased when the cocky bastard filled his first shot glass unprompted. "Practice helps," he pointed out helpfully.

"Save practice for those who need it," Seifer said with a shake of his head before downing the three shots in quick succession.

"I've heard that before," Squall replied dryly. "From a truant who can't hold onto his blade."

Seifer chuckled at the memory of Nolan's dumbstruck expression the day before, the boy's blade flying from his hand. Squall had never been one for mercy. "Alright... You win." He started shuffling the cards. "Same bet? Or two questions versus six shots?"

Figuring two questions weren't all that riskier than just the one, Squall regarded the steadiness to Seifer's hands. Six shots would go a long way in remedying that. "Double the stakes," he agreed, moving forward in his seat.

Dealing the cards faster than he had previously, Seifer kept his eyes trained on Squall. Just like earlier there wasn't the slightest hint whether the brunet's cards were good or bad. He'd hoped the higher stakes would make the man reveal something, but his expression was set in stone. As he picked up his own cards, he tried his best to suppress the curl twisting the edge of his lips.

He put down his opening card. "If you win this, I swear I'll down that entire fucking bottle."

Squall limited his response to a level look out of principle. No amount of bluff would get him out of his predicament with the cards he currently held. Mostly low level creature cards, no hard hitters. Realizing he'd just given Seifer free rein to ask him two questions—any questions at all—he quickly quelled the thought and played one of his stronger cards.

Easily winning over Squall's first card, Seifer flipped it over. His smile broadened and turned into a boastful smirk as he kept turning Squall's cards over one by one as soon as they came into play. By the end of it, he'd taken over all of them. Not yet looking up from the thorough thrashing he'd just dealt, he chuckled. "How the mighty have fallen," he teased.
Giving up on his pointless scrutiny of the disaster in front of him, Squall suppressed the reflexive need to pinch the bridge of his nose and got up from the couch. He needed a moment, something to drink that wasn't alcohol. He could feel Seifer's impatient gaze as he filled a glass of water, and when he turned around, Seifer had moved around to lean against the end of the couch closest to him, ignoring his need for distance.

"Done stalling?"

Meeting Seifer's smug expression head on, Squall willed his face to remain blank. "Whatever," he said evenly, not about to bail out on his end of the deal.

"I think you can guess the first question," Seifer said, holding Squall's gaze as a slight frown grew on the man's brow. Squall's refusal two nights earlier to tell him whether or not he had slept with other men had caused his stubbornness to kick in full force. Even though he could guess the most likely answer, he wanted to hear Squall say it out loud. "So have you?"

Predictable as the question was, Squall still felt a flash of defensive anger, however misplaced. He'd dug this hole all by himself. "...No," he finally ground out, glancing away before he could check the urge. "You're such an asshole," he added for good measure.

"Then you're going to like my second question even more," Seifer said, unable to quell the immense satisfaction at Squall's answer. He'd thought he would have been all right with a 'yes', because it would have meant Squall was open to sleeping with men, but his relief told another story. "How many have you had sex with?"

At the equally invasive question, Squall glared at the bastard. "Why does—" Cutting himself short, reminding himself that his reply shouldn't matter one way or the other, he steeled himself for the sting of humiliation all the same at having to share something so private. "...Two."

"Including me?"

"Yes," Squall said testily, wanting the topic over with. "Satisfied?"

"Very," Seifer said after a pregnant pause, his hands gripping hold of the couch behind him. He was so fucking turned on by Squall's answer, he'd thought he would have been all right with a 'yes', because it would have meant Squall was open to sleeping with men, but his relief told another story. "I guess you won't play me for another question?" he asked, a hint of a smile on his lips.

"I'm done pandering to your ego for the night," Squall said resentfully.

"My ego?" Seifer said with a raised eyebrow. "How is this about my ego? It's not a fucking competition. I hate to break it to you, but there's no way you would come close to winning. I asked because it makes me hot to know you haven't fucked more people."

Brow twisting at the conversation spiraling out of his control, Squall ignored the dangerous part of Seifer's statement and chose instead to focus on the infuriating double standard. "You say it's not a competition," he said with tight control, his eyes intent. "A conquest then?"

Letting out a disbelieving chuckle, Seifer shook his head. "Didn't need the extra notch on my bedpost, Leonhart." At the glare that met him, he stood up straighter. "I fucked you that night because I've been fantasizing about you for years. You made me come harder than anyone else. And yes, I want to fuck you again and no I don't like the thought of anyone else ever seeing you like that. If that's ego, then fuck it."

Squall stood speechless, unable to process the stream of vulgarity. His grip on the glass of water
had become shaky and he quickly set the drink aside on the counter. His pulse quickened when intent green eyes refused to break away, the bastard's knowing gaze picking him apart. He imagined walking away while he still had the presence of mind to do so, but slowly the damning realization settled in that he wouldn't. Part of him had been waiting for Seifer to do something like this ever since he'd realized he'd wanted the bastard to kiss him after their spar.

Watching Squall's reaction closely, Seifer could see the instinct to fight or flee warring in the brunet, but Hyne help him, he wasn't about to pull any punches. This was it. Time to go for broke.

"Shit, let's play for what we really want. If I win, I get to fuck you and if you win, I give you the blowjob of your life."

Squall blinked, remembering the forgotten cards, the game. His pulse spiked at a bet he couldn't possibly accept. The thought of turning the attraction between them into a game left a bad taste, bringing to mind the more toxic aspects of their past rivalry. "You've lost your mind."

Refusing to break eye contact, Seifer felt his hands itch to get closer. Action over words had always been his forte. But this time he needed to hear Squall admit it out loud. Or agree. He couldn't be the only one to blame for what was about to happen—not after the Avalanche. "Nope. Not even a little bit. Let's do this, Leonhart."

Fingers clenching around the counter's edge, Squall felt his mouth go dry. Even now, on the cusp of a potentially disastrous mistake, he couldn't make up his mind. He knew what he wanted, knew how dangerous it was. He hated this indecision, hated how Seifer was staring him down, no grin, no smirk, no action to take the choice out of his hands. The bastard was making him complicit in his own downfall.

"No games," he managed, the counter offer forced past his lips. For a second he thought he had been misunderstood when Seifer simply stared at him, and he despaired at the thought of making himself any clearer, but then the blond moved.

Crossing the distance between them, Seifer was struggling to believe the words had actually left the brunet's mouth. No terms were the best terms—no fucking pretense needed. The implied 'yes, I want you to fuck me' had his heart beating loudly against his chest.

He stopped right in front of Squall. His gaze bored directly into grey-blue eyes, then dropped to the man's lips. They were slightly parted. Waiting. Just like they had been after their spar. Licking his lips, he placed one hand against the cupboards behind Squall and brought up his other hand to caress the side of Squall's neck.

Inhaling deeply, he relished the familiar scent of the man. He'd been wanting to touch Squall like this for years—long before they took Avalanche. Closing his eyes, he leaned in and pressed his lips to Squall's gently. He could feel Squall swallow hard against him, the man standing stock-still as he broke away again. The look in Squall's eyes said it all. This wasn't Avalanche. This wasn't alcohol. This was them. After tonight there'd be no going back—no more sweeping things under the rug or pretending this wasn't what they both wanted. Burying his fingers in brown locks, he moved his thumb against Squall's jawline. He tilted his head and leaned in once more to press his lips against softer ones—much softer than anything he'd ever associated with the brunet.

Stiffening at the unfamiliar sensations Seifer stirred in him, Squall somehow still managed to be unprepared when warm lips touched his own again. Letting go of the tight breath that had been caught in his lungs, he tentatively slotted his lips closer against Seifer's. The grip on his hair tightened in an immediate reaction, the blond's lips roving his more insistently. Suddenly it seemed like insanity he'd been able to deny the man this long.
It was different from what he remembered, slower than expected. He had absolutely no defenses against the unhurried confidence to Seifer's every move. Their closeness, the deep irresistible musk that rose to his nose, the prickling touch of five o'clock shadow against his skin—all of it slowly chipped away at his restraint. He tried to follow the more experienced man's lead, foregoing the need for air and breathing through their kiss, leaving him lightheaded despite the slow pace.

When his bottom lip was drawn into Seifer's mouth, released only after a firm nibble and a parting lick, Squall felt his spine go weak and he only barely stopped himself from molding himself against the man towering over him. Instead he held onto the counter more firmly. He struggled to keep up with all the exploring moves, failing miserably at coordinating his responses. His neck ached at the angle of their kiss, but he ceased to care when Seifer's tongue pushed past his teeth.

Eager for more, Seifer ran his tongue against Squall's and enjoyed the man's hot breath mingling with his own. He was still unable to believe that this was actually happening—that he had finally managed to break through the brunet's feigned indifference. Sliding his tongue against teeth and lips, ending with a hard suck to the man's bottom lip, he received a heavy sigh as a reward. Placing a more gentle kiss against reddened lips, he stared straight into Squall's eyes and brought a hand down to grab Squall's waist, before forcing the brunet's body flush against his. With only soft fabric between them, little was left to the imagination as he moved against the man, Squall's erection pressing into him. Groaning, he watched as dark eyebrows scrunched in pleasure.

Pressing his lips to Squall's again, he fucking loved the telltale signs of the man's lack of experience—the crude way Squall was returning his kisses. This was his and no one else's. Smirking at another of the man's slip-ups, he rolled his hips against Squall's and relished the stifled sound that left the man. With a playful nibble to soft lips, he snaked his arm around the man and cradled the back of Squall's neck. Fuck, this was addictive.

Pausing their kiss to grind more firmly against the man, he felt a pulse of arousal surge through him at every hitch to Squall's breath. As he licked along Squall's neck, he faltered briefly when Squall began to return his grinding motions. He let out a low groan and tightened his grip on the man's hip. It was too fucking sexy to feel Squall's erection slide against his own like this. Biting down on Squall's jugular, he sucked hard and ground himself faster into the man. Squall was matching him push for push, until suddenly the brunet arched back with parted lips. It took all of his willpower to stop himself from letting Squall come then and there. Instead he leaned in to place a forceful kiss on Squall's lips, before looking the man straight in the eye.

"Not here."

Dazed, Squall frowned as Seifer withdrew all touch and headed to the bedroom. Awareness was slow to return as he blinked and took in his disheveled state, every attempt at thought distracted by the aching throb between his legs. Somehow he'd expected for this to be less... less than Avalanche, but there was no control. He'd been mindless with need, rutting against the blond, so very close and completely uncaring of what he must've looked like. Suppressing the unhelpful stab of panic, he took a shaky breath and tried to calm the wild drumming of his heart.

This was madness. He'd never experienced anything like this before. Not with Rinoa. Not ever. The way Seifer had looked at him when walking over... He'd been hard even before the first touch. Swallowing thickly, he glanced at the open bedroom door, the bastard just out of view. Was Seifer giving him a chance to bail out? The frisson of panic returned at the thought of stopping things here. It was too late now, too late for second guessing. He'd made his choices every step of the way, from foolishly agreeing to drinking games to allowing the man his dangerous questions. He'd ended up right where he'd both feared and wanted to be.
Pushing away from the counter, Squall walked to the bedroom and paused in the doorway, the room bathed in blue neon light spilling in from the street, just like it had been during their night of Avalanche. By the bed, Seifer was pulling his shirt over his head, exposing a well-defined chest. Scars lined tan skin, the largest one a long mark that cut all the way from a strong shoulder down across firm pecs. A few of the scars he'd put there himself, but most he didn't recognize. Snapping from his study when the shirt fell to the floor, he met Seifer's intent gaze. Wrestling his nerves into submission, he stepped forward.

At Squall's approach Seifer felt his lips split in a grin. It was a powerful fucking rush to make Squall wait for it—to make Squall come to him, but he hadn't anticipated just how badly his own patience would be put to the test. It had only made him even more eager to touch and lick the man all over and make him writhe and moan in pleasure. He wanted to turn Squall into a sex addict, and get to know every fucking inch of the man in the process.

Pulling the man in for a hungry kiss, he tugged Squall's shirt upwards. Watching impatiently as Squall took it off and dropped it to the floor, Seifer ran the tips of his fingers down the man's side before sliding his hand up a toned back and pulling Squall closer still. As their bodies melded together, skin against skin, he leaned in for another kiss, but he couldn't focus on it—not when he could feel Squall still hard against him. They needed the bed for what he had in mind.

Squall held back a frustrated sigh when Seifer broke off their kiss again. He resented Seifer's composure, while he couldn't even think straight every time the man touched him. Trying to calm the rise and fall of his chest, already missing the feel of heated skin against his own, he watched Seifer climb onto the bed and recline on his side. When Seifer jerked his head in response to his hesitation, he moved onto the mattress and lay down to face the man, unable to do anything other than follow Seifer's lead.

Smirking at Squall's awkwardness, Seifer held the man's gaze as he brought his hand down to touch the soft skin just above the hem of Squall's drawstring pants. His smirk grew wider at the quick tensing of muscles and Squall's sharp inhale. Slowly running his hand up firm abs and pecs, he lingered to tweak a nipple before tracing the outline of Squall's collarbones with his index finger. He didn't want to rush this, not when Squall wasn't protesting even the most teasing of touches. He could feel the mad race of Squall's heartbeat as he explored firm pecs, could see all the little ways Squall was failing to stay motionless underneath his touch. It was too fucking addictive to take Squall slowly apart like this.

Letting his fingers follow the scars that crisscrossed most of the man's torso and arms, he took his time mapping every last inch of Squall's upper body. When his touch reached hard metal, Seifer traced the pendant he'd seen Squall wear without fail since the man had gotten it as a teenager. He could feel Squall's gaze as he ran his finger along the pendant, and knew he was being allowed much more than he'd ever imagined. It kindled an unfamiliar greed in him, a need to push the man's boundaries even further.

Trapped underneath Seifer's light touch, Squall struggled to control his breathing when the exploring hand abandoned his pendant and started to travel down his chest, his abs, further down still. He couldn't bring himself to relax, his every muscle twitching in response to the caress. Hot fingertips teased his skin, inching closer to his groin. His entire mind and body were intent on the single point of contact, tracking its maddeningly slow progression. When the touch reached the hem of his drawstring pant, lingering briefly, he let out a low hiss of anticipation. He would make the bastard pay if he dared to stop now.

A shock of sensation jolted through him when Seifer's hand moved again and ran across his erection, the feather light touch quickly growing bold, forcing a near moan from his lips. Strong
fingers curled around his length, as if getting a feel for him, before stroking him through the fabric of his pants. The leisurely caress drove the breath from his lungs, his whole body tensing with the need for Seifer to stroke him faster.

Looking down at the aroused brunet, Seifer forced his fingers underneath the man's pants and pushed at them impatiently. The slight hesitance to Squall's fingers when the man moved to take off the rest of his clothes told him all he needed to know. Squall couldn't hide his inexperience and, fuck, it only made him all the harder. Maybe it did stroke his ego to know that Squall was letting him look and touch where others had been denied. Reveling in the unlikely privilege, he kept his eyes glued to every inch of the man finally lying naked before him. *Shit.* He wanted to see that cock bob with excitement and glisten with precome, without ever touching it.

As yet another caress along his side set his skin alive with goose bumps, Squall kept himself from biting down on his lower lip. He struggled to lie still underneath the blond's touches and shameless gaze. He was being laid bare, his body's every reaction studied and catalogued, his neglected erection starting to ache with need. It was torture. It wasn't even close to being enough. He needed mad grappling, fast action, *anything* that would blow every last thought from his mind, but he didn't know how to ask for more, couldn't even imagine the words leaving him. His hands twitched idly at his sides, and he became increasingly aware of everywhere they weren't touching. He wanted to press his entire body against Seifer, feel every inch of him. He wanted Seifer's boxers gone—

He gasped softly when hot fingers suddenly closed around his straining cock. His balls tightened instantly, his hand shooting up to press against Seifer's chest. Letting go of a tremulous sigh, he closed his eyes to shut out the man's gaze. It was too overwhelming to be studied so closely while Seifer stroked him to the brink of orgasm, the man's face close enough to feel his breath.

Working his hand up and down Squall's erection, Seifer gripped more tightly and sped up his touch. Squall's eyelids twitched in an immediate response as the man bit down on his lower lip. This was it. A few more strokes and Squall would come. He needed to remember every single fucking detail. Continuing his rhythm, he felt Squall arch into his hold and firmly gripped his thumb over the head of Squall's cock. A string of shallow breaths escaped Squall's lips before the man's entire body tensed, hot white come shooting from Squall's cock, coating Seifer's hand. His own cock throbbed at the sight. He'd just made Squall fucking Leonhart come and fuck him if he wasn't going to lick up the mess.

His heart thudding loudly against his chest, Squall let himself go limp and didn't bother suppressing the lazy shudder that rose up from the base of his spine. Relaxing his hold on Seifer's chest, he only had a brief moment to wonder when his hand had traveled there, before the blond placed a kiss on his lips and broke free. He cracked open his eyes at the sudden distance, only to start when wet heat enveloped the tip of his highly sensitized manhood.

Hands clenching, he fought to keep still under the disturbingly intimate feel of Seifer's tongue against his length. Holding his breath, he only managed to release it when Seifer moved on to lick his stomach. Looking down, his eyes widened when he realized just what the blond was doing. It couldn't possibly taste good, yet Seifer proceeded to lick him clean with quick, adept moves, not seeming to mind one bit. He'd never been comfortable with such acts in the past, but to his own surprise he could already feel a faint rousing in his groin at the sight of Seifer lapping up every last spill as if hungry for more.

"Turn over."

Startling at the first words spoken since they'd entered the bedroom, Squall felt his pulse spike in
response to the deep, raspy quality to Seifer's voice. He remembered all too well what such an order entailed, and glanced down Seifer's tented boxers.

His eyes flickered back to the blond's expectant gaze, before he turned around onto his stomach. Ears straining for any sound behind him, he jolted a second time when a firm, wet touch lapped against his right buttock—Seifer's tongue. Sucking in a breath at the far too intimate touch, Squall battled the urge to clench his cheeks. A hand stroked along his left buttock and lower back, the blond's tongue returning to lick and nip at his back this time.

Unsure of the unfamiliar touch, Squall brought up his arms to better steady himself and hide his expressions. He wouldn't be able to control them—not when Seifer was starting to firmly grope his ass and place messy, eager licks, nips and bites all along his thighs and cheeks. His body seemed to have a mind of its own, slowly melting into the touches, even when his sense of propriety cringed at letting Seifer do this.

When a thumb suddenly ran along the length of his crack, Squall gripped the sheets for purchase. He could feel Seifer's breath ghosting his skin, the man's hands now roughly groping his ass. Just as he started to feel self-conscious at the close study, he was utterly unprepared when Seifer's tongue dove down his crack and over his anus. A sharp gasp flew from his lips before he could reel it in, his cock jolting to full hardness even as his mind cried alarm at the invasive touch.

Another strangled sound escaped him when Seifer spread his buttocks and started to lick all along the sensitive skin, the man's tongue lapping around and over his entrance. Fisting the bedding tightly, he felt he should protest the wet intrusion, but he feared that if he attempted speech, he'd only manage a series of embarrassing cries. Unable to focus on anything other than Seifer's hot tongue doing the unimaginable, Squall fought to stifle all sounds. Who actually did something like this?

Hanging his head, he swallowed thickly. He didn't understand how such a questionable act could feel so good, but clearly Seifer understood it perfectly well, the bastard playing his body's reactions expertly with every probing touch and wet lick. His every nerve end throbbed with an unsettling but growing need for Seifer to lick him more firmly, more deeply, causing a pinched sound of complaint to tear free from his throat the moment Seifer's tongue retreated to his buttocks.

Freezing in place at the sound of Seifer's chuckling, Squall was mortified at his utter lack of self-control, but he only had a second to steel himself before a finger pressed against his entrance and started a leisurely slide in and out of him, slowly inching deeper. The slight discomfort was quickly smoothed away with deft licks swirling around his anus, the mild one-fingered stretch alternated with unabashed strokes of Seifer's tongue. He was helpless to stop his body from reaching for orgasm as Seifer slowly worked him open, his breath unraveling into quick panting.

The second he succumbed and pushed back against Seifer's touch, his hips were roughly pulled up into the air until he found himself prostrated on his knees. The sudden rush of cool air against his erection was immediately replaced with a firm grip stroking his length, drawing a startled gasp from his lips. All the while, Seifer's tongue and probing finger continued their pleasurable assault.

A brief moment of rushed activity and the rustle of fabric behind him was followed by hot, velvet hardness sliding along his crack. His breath caught in his throat, anticipation warring with uncertainty. Squall couldn't remember exactly how many fingers Seifer had used while on Avalanche, but it had been more than one. His cock hardly cared, leaking precome at the feel of Seifer's erection rubbing against him.
His whole length lined up just right, Seifer let out a low groan as the tip of his cock touched Squall's entrance. It would be so easy to just slide inside, so easy to feel that tight heat around him and fuck the man raw. His breath hitched as he repeated the move. Squall was too fucking sexy like this—ass in the air, cock hard and panting. The man was close to coming again—close to coming from being fingerfucked and rimmed and now enjoying the feel of Seifer's cock sliding against him. Firming his hold on Squall's hips, he sucked in a breath when they gave a soft push back, the man's puffed ring just slightly giving way and causing a throbbing sensation to ignite at the base of his cock. Quickly pulling back, he wrenched his eyes shut, but all consideration and tact left him as the heat fused into an unstoppable pulse. Ramming himself into Squall just in time, his cock erupted the moment his reddened head made impact with Squall's tight entrance.

"Shit—" he cursed, feeling Squall's buttocks pressed up tight against him. He'd fucking torn right in there in one thrust. Riding out the aftershocks of his orgasm, completely powerless to stop himself, he pushed again even though he was already buried to the hilt. A faraway grunt and sharp intake of air reached his ears, but he couldn't focus on anything but the blinding pleasure at the contact.

"Fuck—" he ground out, having lost all sense of composure, his whole body tight with the orgasm that had charged through him. And then just as sudden as it had come on, he started to take in his surroundings again; the creak of the bed, the feel of Squall's tense muscles beneath his unforgiving grip. Squall's eyes were scrunched closed and his jaw clenched. He could feel the immense stretch around him, the all encompassing heat. It had to hurt like hell.

"Shit Squall..." he said, relaxing his upper body and lowering his head as he ran a hand along Squall's side. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to the crook of Squall's neck, and for the first time in such a setting, he wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to pull out and lose contact, but he couldn't fuck Squall without more preparation—without lube. Shit, for all he knew the man wanted him to pull out right away. Needing to know how Squall was holding up, he snaked his hand around to Squall's front and grabbed hold of the man's cock.

A thrill of disbelief shot through him. Squall was still hard and the moment he gave the man's cock a tug he felt tight muscles clamp around him. Thanking Hyne he was still hard himself, he felt his cock twitch in anticipation. There was no way he wasn't going to fuck Squall into oblivion now. He wanted to watch Squall come while being impaled on his cock. And for that he most definitely needed lube.

Keeping his body stiffly in place, Squall let out a soft hiss when Seifer finally moved and slid free of him. An echo of the earlier pain stabbed through his lower body, but the friction and movement caused him to clench around the retreating hardness all the same, sending a new rush of blood to his groin. It was a strange, dual sensation—not a bad one by a long shot—but he didn't have any breath left in his lungs to voice his need. He desperately hoped this wouldn't be the end of their tryst.

At the soft but insistent tug at his hips, he turned onto his back with bent knees, moving gingerly at first to test the extent of the damage. The first pain had been the worst, he decided, since he hadn't known to expect it. Forcing himself to relax, the feat not made any easier by the distracting feel of come trickling down his crack, he looked up to find Seifer still positioned between his legs. Unsurprisingly, the bastard's expression lacked any and all signs of apology, but he didn't stand a chance of mustering annoyance when all his focus was immediately drawn to the impressive sight of a fully naked Seifer, the man's erection still very much undiminished.

Squall's arousal throbbed as Seifer reached over to fill his hand with a royal helping of lubrication, and he reclined fully onto his back in anticipation, needing the return of Seifer's touch. His pulse
jumped hungrily, his eyes roving over dark blond curls and the thick girth of a proudly jutting cock. As he met the blond's gaze, something about his actions caused the man to grin, but the devious expression only served to incense him further. He was beyond caring, beyond pride. When Seifer coated himself with lubrication, Squall looked down and followed every brisk motion, relieved at the man's haste. Hanging back his head, his breath hitched as Seifer leaned in and smeared cold lube around his anus. His cock twitched in anticipation.

When Seifer gripped him by the back of his knees, better positioning him for penetration, a thrill ran up his back. He should've felt exposed with his legs propped up like this, his lower body bared and locked into place, but it was exactly what he wanted. Recalling the force Seifer had used when on Avalanche, he brought up a steadying hand against the bed's headboard, wordlessly signaling his readiness.

An approving growl was followed by the feel of Seifer pressing his rock hard erection against his entrance. Drawing in a steadying breath, Squall let the naked need in green eyes anchor him as Seifer sank into him with one slow, unrelenting push. He felt himself stretch impossibly, the forgotten pain flaring back to life. His sides heaved with the tight pleasure of it, his mind flung to pieces and soaring. Wrenching his eyes shut, he vaguely registered the sound of a low grunt when Seifer finally came to a stop, pressed close to him. He could feel every twitch of the hot, hard member sheathed inside him. Already he felt close to coming.

When Seifer started to move again, Squall forced himself to relax into the aching spasms that threatened to ripple through his backside. His body keened for release with every slide into him, but the edge of pain kept him from the brink of orgasm. He desperately needed something to centre himself amidst the whirlwind of contradicting sensations. Opening his eyes, he sought out and immediately found Seifer's gaze. He wanted to kiss the man. He wanted to be fucked harder.

Seeing the impatience plain in grey-blue eyes, Seifer firmed his grip on the back of Squall's legs and rammed himself in deeper. The first unadulterated moan that tore from Squall's mouth had him cursing and sliding back out only to pound his cock right back in. The fucking ice prince of his teenage years was splayed before him, wanting it fast and rough, aroused as hell despite minimal preparation. The fast thrusts were causing Squall's defenses to crumble, more moans leaving the man as Seifer pushed in faster and harder. He was stretching Squall wide, pushing in all the way to the hilt every single time, and still Squall's cock was rock hard between them, bobbing in time with his plunges.

To see Squall like this—to feel him like this, it was a fucking dream come true. No drugs, battle high or casual fuck had ever come close to what he was feeling now. The intensity to Squall's eyes, the shimmer of the familiar pendant out of the corner of his eyes, the smell of Squall and sex—it all fused into mind blowing pleasure. Grinding the brunet into the bedding, the bed creaking loudly beneath them, Seifer held the man's gaze until grey-blue eyes disappeared behind tightly shut lids.

Relishing the twitches to Squall's expression, he couldn't stop himself from leaning down. Catching Squall's lips in a hot kiss, he moved in closer to the man, unable to keep up the pace in their changed position, but the added closeness more than made up for it. A low rumble left him as Squall stiffened beneath him, hot liquid landing against his stomach. Apparently that was all he fucking needed to get his own rocks off, his whole body thrumming with his impending orgasm. One more thrust and he'd be fucking coming inside Squall. Again. Tightening his hold, he pressed closer still and emptied himself into the man with a groan. Their bodies convulsed together as he rode out his orgasm, slick come leaking out from the tight seal between them with each harsh thrust. Fucking perfect.

Squall arched into the feel of Seifer's spurring length with a stifled moan. The man speared into...
him with a last brutal plunge, impossibly deep and causing the arm he had propped against the headboard to buckle under the impact, until finally all movement stuttered to a halt and Seifer promptly collapsed onto him. His lower back complained at the man's heavy weight pressing him down into the mattress, but he hardly cared as echoing pangs of pleasure surged through his body.

"Fuck, that was good," Seifer said, resting his head next to Squall's, his breath heavy against pale skin. He didn't want to move yet. They hadn't lasted long, but it had been the most intense sex he'd ever had. Just like everything else that involved Squall, it left him wanting more.

Leaning down, he trailed his teeth along Squall's collarbone before pressing his lips down and sucking hard. He wanted to mark the man. Swapping between biting, nipping, and sucking, he claimed as much of Squall as he could get. Biting down harder on an earlobe, he smirked at the way Squall drew in a keening breath and shifted to better accommodate him.

His mind slow to clear, Squall's stomach flipped with belated embarrassment when he felt the curl of hot lips against his skin. Several times he'd noticed the bastard's amusement, but he'd been too mindless to care. Even now he couldn't help the small twitches and sighs the man coaxed from him. Starting to feel uncomfortable with the man's softening length still buried within him, needing to stretch out his legs, he brought up a hand to push against Seifer's chest.

He could feel some trickling from him when Seifer pulled out, but the man just lowered his legs to the bed unceremoniously without any care for the bed linen that were quickly being soiled. The blond collapsed next to him with a satisfied groan, jostling him with the dip of the mattress.

Freed of the man's weight, Squall closed his eyes and drew in a deep, unobstructed breath. Between the fast-paced sex and the heavy press of Seifer's body, his heart was still racing as he slowly came down from the intense high. Next to him, Seifer's heavy breathing was familiar enough, mirroring his own and sounding much as if they'd just had a rough spar. There was an unsettling intimacy however to the heat radiating off the body lying so close to him, almost touching. His every inhale was thick with the smell of sex. Already, the slick sweat that had collected between the tight press of their bodies was starting to cool, chasing a brief shiver down his chest.

Moving his lower arm to rest against his forehead, Seifer relaxed more fully against the bed. His entire body was still tingling with the remnants of ecstasy and his mind was burning with images of Squall. He hadn't expected sex between them to be like this at all—not even after their night of Avalanche. His first mistake had been to assume the brunet to be like everybody else—to need slow preparation, to want to avoid pain. Instead Squall had been impatient and the man's body had eagerly shown him exactly how he wanted to be fucked—rough and fast. The same way Squall had wanted it when strung out on Avalanche. His second mistake had been to think he'd last more than five minutes in bed with the sexiest man on the planet. He should've fucking seen that one coming. They both had the fucking stamina of virgin teenagers.

Needing to see Squall again, he opened his eyes and turned to lie on his side. Propping his head up with his hand, he smiled at the sight that greeted him. One well-fucked brunet, reclining naked on his bed. Definitely a view he could get used to.

"So drinking games always end badly, was it?" he asked through a smirk.

At Seifer's smug question, Squall opened heavy-lidded eyes and glanced next to him. The bastard seemed totally at ease with their situation, unabashed in his nakedness and his study of Squall. Feeling some of his earlier self-consciousness return, he averted his gaze. Adjusting his back and hips with a soft wince, he let himself sink more comfortably into the soft bedding, his entire body thrumming with satisfaction. He was sore all over, from everywhere Seifer had roughly gripped
and maneuvered him, to the tenderness of his backside.

For the aftermath of sex to feel like this... After the first time they'd slept together he'd fallen asleep almost instantly, and afterwards he'd been quick to heal away all evidence, too panicked to stop and let himself linger on any of it. But this—this felt good. He was well acquainted with the kind of pain that brought satisfaction: the result of a hard day of training, of a difficult fight, the proof of survival. This was similar. It made him feel rooted in the moment. Alive. Avalanche couldn't compare to this, and the thought that what they'd just done was better than their night on Avalanche was more than troubling.

If anything, the drugs had stripped the experience from its sharp edges—the unenhanced, real sensation of Seifer thrusting into him and deriving pleasure from his body instead of some chemical. His mind uninfluenced, the choice to do this his own, there was no room for doubt or blame anymore. The sex had been amazing because of Seifer. A terrifying thought pushed to the forefront then. He'd never stop wanting this now. The beginnings of regret started to tie his stomach into a knot. He would have been better off never finding out sex could be like this. To get entangled with someone, to need something that most likely only Seifer could give him... He didn't want anyone to have that kind of power over him, yet at the same time he was utterly powerless to change his predicament. Now that the last of his denial had been stripped from him, he was at a loss to understand how it had happened. Before the war there had never been any attraction between them, nothing to suggest any kind of compatibility beyond their spars. Now... Now it—

"Stay here," Seifer said, wanting to dispel the distance in grey-blue eyes. It had been building slowly, the brunet's eyes turning more and more unfocused as the minutes had passed.

When Squall's gaze returned to him, he eyed the man carefully as an all too familiar feeling grew in him. He wanted to know exactly what Squall was thinking—wanted to stop the man from drawing all the wrong conclusions. All that mattered was how fucking amazing this was. All that mattered was now.

Sidling up close to the man, he guided the brunet to lie on his side and ran a hand up Squall's ribs. He had to show Squall again, had to make him stay in this moment for a while longer. Placing a gentle kiss on soft lips, he was relieved at just how readily Squall allowed it. No hesitance. No withdrawal. Pressing his body closer, he caressed Squall's back unhurriedly. It was both sexy and absurdly intimate to feel Squall like this—all languid and pliable.

Nibbling at Squall's upper lip, he trailed a hand down to squeeze a lean buttock and brought their groins even closer together. He could get used to slow intimacy like this—something he'd never cared for in the past. It being Squall made all the fucking difference. He slid his tongue past parted lips and locked their lips together, their tongues intertwining. Pulling at the buttock still grasped tightly in his hold, he relished the slight moan that spilled into their kiss, before running a firm hand up the man's side. Pushing against solid pecs, he guided the brunet onto his back and immediately covered Squall's body with his own, chasing away any space between them.

Grateful for the return of distracting touches, Squall let himself melt into the mattress, the man's weight not as oppressive as when he'd been struggling for breath. Instead, he welcomed Seifer's body heat, the wandering caresses. He was slowly growing accustomed to the feel of Seifer's tongue delving deeply into his mouth, but at the same time little shocks of surprise kept rolling through him at every curl and twist and lick. After the satisfyingly rough touches of intercourse, this languid kissing felt too intimate, too dangerous to savor, but when Seifer moved away slightly to look him in the eyes, he arched up his head and pressed his lips to Seifer's all the same. His heart
leapt at the unintended move and refused to settle down even when Seifer fervently returned his kiss, the man's gentle touch escalating into rough groping.

Squall readily allowed it all, his head swimming with the exhilaration of getting Seifer to react like that. Drawing in Seifer's roving tongue more deeply, he was drowning in the sensation of kissing the man so hungrily. Feeling emboldened, he brought up a tentative hand to Seifer's ribs and slid his fingers against heated skin. Again he was rewarded, this time with a throaty rumble and a firm grind of Seifer's hard length against his own. Quickly becoming greedy, he stroked his hand up to Seifer's chest, his fingertips trailing along firm muscle, hot skin, a smooth scar—

His exploring hand was grasped into a coaxing hold, the man interlacing their fingers and pushing his hand to the bedding in a manner that reminded Squall of Seifer's possessive hold on him during Avalanche. His momentum lost, he felt torn. He wanted to continue touching Seifer, but it seemed the blond had other things in mind. After a last stroking of tongues and a firm grind, the man broke their kiss and started a wet trail of licks, bites, and kisses down his body.

Mapping a line down Squall's stomach with the tip of his tongue, his teeth caressing the man's soft skin, Seifer smirked at the push of the man's hips against his hold. Moving down to press his lips against the skin just above Squall's dark pubic hair, he inhaled deeply and couldn't fucking wait to feel the man's stiff length in his mouth. He wanted to get Squall hooked on this—on him. He was going to make Squall fucking fantasize about this.

Pushing at firm muscles to spread the man's legs, he ran his teeth along Squall's hard length before licking his way back to the juncture between Squall's thigh and groin. Getting onto his knees, he firmly stroked the brunet's inner thighs and massaged his way upward, slowly inching towards the man's groin. Staring unabashedly at the cock jolting with yet another rush of blood, he grinned before locking eyes with Squall one final time. Bending down, he spread his lips.

Unable to stifle his voice, Squall scrunched his eyes closed, his hands jerking down to grab hold of the sheets. Even though he'd been prepared for the intimate touch this time, it felt completely different when he was hard and yearning for it. His eyes rolled back at the feel of Seifer's lips closing around the tip of his erection, giving a brief suck before bobbing up and down once. Curling his fingers into the sheets, it was all he could do not to grab onto blond locks when Seifer moved off him and switched to firm licks up and down his length.

Already his groin was tightening with sharp arousal, precome starting to leak from him. He would've felt self-conscious if it hadn't been for Seifer's eager sampling of his come earlier, and the man greedily inhaling his scent. Seifer's enthusiasm was evident in every unabashed stroke, up and down his shaft, teasing the rim of his head. Letting out a tremulous breath, he felt his limbs start to weaken. He couldn't hold his voice back any longer, an unchecked moan escaping him when Seifer's grip firmed around the base of his erection and hot lips returned to suck at the tip of his cock, taking in more of his length with each repeated slide down. Unable to help himself, his hips arched off the mattress. Answering his need, Seifer sped up and let out a deep hum that vibrated against his skin, wringing another moan from his throat.

Too spent for anything more than complete surrender, he let his legs fall wider and yielded to the sound and feel of Seifer sucking him off, the air a cool contrast against wet skin whenever Seifer's mouth retreated, only to plunge down all over again. Between the man's firm grip and mouth, it felt as if Seifer was taking in all of him, his entire cock enveloped in slick heat. His hips moved of their own accord, thrusting up shallowly to meet each slide of warm lips. Straining for release, his cock flushed to full hardness at the thought of coming into Seifer's mouth, just like he had while on Avalanche.
Remembering the arousing sight of Seifer giving him a blowjob, he suddenly needed to see. Opening his eyes, he looked down, straight into green eyes. Lips slick with saliva pulled off him before the bastard smirked and made a show of slowly licking up his entire cock, all the while never breaking his gaze. A groan built in his chest as Seifer shamelessly repeated the move, before tonguing his slit and lapping up any precome that had dribbled free. The sight proved too much, causing his balls to draw up tightly, the tide of his release irreversible now.

As if prescient, Seifer's tongue swirled around his cock before hot wetness wrapped all around him once more, quickening into a fast pace. His balls were grasped into an almost painful squeeze, knuckles massaging firmly into the sensitized skin below, while the blond's other hand closed tightly around him and worked him into slick warmth. Jerking up into a taut wire, Squall let out a breathless cry as his climax pulsed from him in waves, the blond's mouth coaxing him through the eruption until he was wrung dry. When his hips collapsed back to the bed, Seifer's tongue started to lap gently at his spent cock, his overly sensitized body twitching in response. Every part of him tingled, a pleasant lethargy taking hold of him.

Sucking in a shuddering breath when Seifer's tongue finally retreated, Squall opened his eyes in time to watch Seifer move in on top of him, the man's gaze heavy-lidded with raw need. He only had a few seconds to take in the eager bob of the blond's reddened cock, the glistening shine to parted lips, the hot rush of their clashing breaths before Seifer's mouth descended on his, infusing their kiss with an unfamiliar flavor he belatedly realized was his own.

Whatever patience Seifer had mustered seemed to have vanished, filling him with anticipation. Seifer's tongue delved hungrily into his mouth, making it hard to breathe. Up close like this, his every inhale was joined with the blond's musk. Starting to feel light-headed, Squall had barely enough presence of mind to register the harsh movements of Seifer's arm brushing against him, along with the unmistakable sounds of mounting pleasure. All at once alerted, Squall's heart burst into a rapid tattoo, but before the desire to touch and participate had even fully formed, Seifer wrenched their mouths apart and buried his face into Squall's neck. A deep groan rumbled against Squall's skin, the man tensing above him as hot liquid landed onto his stomach. Stunned and unmoving, Squall glanced down to watch Seifer jerk out the last of his orgasm, a few choice obscenities leaving the blond's mouth.

As before, Seifer moved off him without any ceremony or words, jostling the bed as the man let himself fall back onto the mattress with a drawn-out, raspy exhale. Every plane to Seifer's face was relaxed, all tension leaving the man's body as he once more caught his breath, his arms and legs splayed languidly without a shred of self-consciousness. The only movement that followed was a lazy hand patting the bed in search for and locating the man's discarded boxers, which Seifer promptly used to clean himself. It seemed their evening had come to a close then.

Though thoroughly sated and exhausted, Squall's heart still pounded against his ribs, the end having come all too abruptly and without much involvement on his part. He'd only just started to gather enough courage to try and reciprocate more fully, but Seifer had outmaneuvered him with mind-numbing pleasure at every turn, effortlessly smoothing over his own glaring lack of experience. Watching the unperturbed display next to him, Squall suddenly felt the difference between them keenly now that the haze of arousal was slowly lifting.

When it became clear Seifer wasn't inclined to deal with the mess he'd left on his stomach, nor with what they'd just done, Squall glanced down at himself and the state he was in. Needing more than a halfhearted wipe of boxers in the way of cleaning, he pushed up from the bed and forced himself to maintain a normal stride in spite of the renewed aches that assaulted his backside. After all his uncensored exclamations, all the exposure, he felt far more vulnerable now as he tried not to visibly hasten towards the temporary sanctuary of the bathroom.
Cracking open an eye to watch Squall's naked back retreat into the bathroom, Seifer smirked at the sight. Not only had he just had sex with the hottest fucking man on the planet, but the brunet wore his marks all over. If he wasn't so fucking spent, he'd be pouncing on the man all over again. He'd get his energy up for the morning he was already planning instead.

Forcing himself to get out of bed and put on a clean pair of boxers, Seifer hastened back. Laying back down, he pulled up the duvet and relished the feel of the cool fabric against his hot skin. Listening to the clatter of water coming from the bathroom, he couldn't help a stupid smile from spreading across his lips. This felt fucking good. Natural even. Squall in his bathroom, cleaning up after a rough night of sex while he lay spent on the bed himself. He could get used to it. Hell, he wanted to get used to it. There was no way he'd let Squall retreat from this and return to just sparring with him. No fucking way.

Looking up just in time to lock gazes with Squall as the man exited the bathroom and walked over, he suppressed an eyeroll at the brunet's far too pensive expression. He knew the man well enough to know Squall was already overthinking things again. He'd just have to stick with the only countermeasure that had ever worked with the stubborn man, the same one that had worked earlier—action. Intertwining his fingers behind his head, he watched as Squall put on his boxer briefs and a shirt and couldn't help a wide grin. The brunet hadn't healed himself and was still carrying every last mark he'd put on the man. Convinced it had been a deliberate choice, he tried to temper his grin and pulled the duvet aside for Squall to climb under.

"7 o'clock again?" he asked as he watched Squall get into the bed and lie down next to him. At Squall's slight nod, Seifer crossed the small but noticeable distance the brunet had left between them. Sidling close, he placed his hand at Squall's waist, forcing the man to get used to this. This was how it was going to be from now on. No needless distance. No space for Squall to get lost in.

Leaning in, he pressed his lips to Squall's and inhaled deeply. He tightened his hold and pulled Squall in close. Trailing his fingers up Squall's chest, he deepened their kiss and felt a thrill course through him when Squall's tongue darted out to meet his, the man's body melting into his touch once more. Bringing his hand up to caress the crook of Squall's neck, he curled his fingers into soft brown locks. It felt so good to be doing this, to kiss Squall slowly, to taste him and touch him like this.

Placing another kiss against soft lips, he ended it with a playful nibble to the man's lower lip—a move he'd already used many times that night to great effect. "Sweet dreams, Princess," he said with a wink, before getting comfortable in his close press against Squall. Yawning widely, he stretched out the kinks in his shoulder and lowered his arm to rest across the brunet.

Squall stared at Seifer's closed eyes, the man's face slack with relaxation, and belatedly frowned at his reflexive acquiescence. He'd been spellbound by the bastard's unhurried lips, a single touch able to send all fear of unwarranted intimacy flying from his head, but this time his unease returned quickly and tenfold. He knew better than to read anything into the persistent closeness Seifer was forcing on him, but it left him feeling uncomfortable all the same.

Seifer's easy acceptance and apparent plan to just call it a night contrasted jarringly with his own need to make sense of it all. There was no way he'd be able to fall asleep just like that, but the blond seemed to have no trouble. Seifer's breathing was already slowing down, a slight twitch to the otherwise still body telling Squall the man was dozing off. The bastard had just upended his entire world a second time around, but it didn't seem likely the reverse was true.

Waiting a few beats until he was certain Seifer was asleep, he slowly turned underneath the heavy arm draped across his waist, careful not to jostle the man as he disentangled himself from the close
press of their bodies. Turning his back to Seifer and moving towards the edge of the bed, he
directed his gaze at the wall, but there was no escaping the man. Seifer’s breathing hadn't hitched or
faltered during his careful maneuvering, and if he concentrated closely, he imagined he could feel
the puffs of air against the back of his neck. Soon they'd turn into soft snores.

Frowning at actually knowing just how deeply Seifer was lost in sleep from the sound of the man's
breathing alone, he feared he was already getting far too used to sleeping in the man's bed. The
sheets were warm with their shared heat, the air redolent with a heady musk that was neither solely
Seifer's or his own. His sated body relished in the sensations, but no matter how tired, he couldn't
get the thoughts in his head to stop.

So quickly after realizing his attraction and vowing never to act on it, he'd done the exact opposite.
It was ridiculous how easily Seifer had managed to ensnare him. He had known he was in trouble,
but only now did he realize just how crippling this attraction between them was. The moment
Seifer had chosen to follow up his relatively harmless flirting with initiative, he'd been incapable of
saying no. In fact, refusal seemed impossible whenever Seifer had his hands and lips on him. He'd
allowed Seifer everything.

A flush of heat reached his cheeks as he recalled the depth of his body's response to the bastard's
every touch, some of which he'd never even imagined. He was absolutely powerless against this
lust he felt for Seifer. There was no other word for the raw need the man stirred in him. After years
of indifference towards sex, it was shocking to discover he was capable of such a thing. Nothing in
his relationship with Rinoa had even hinted at the possibility. Sex had been an unfortunate
obligation—one he had avoided more often than fulfilled. But with Seifer he'd cried out in
pleasure, craving every touch, both rough and gentle. He wasn't sure he liked such total lack of
control.

As a warrior it was his business to know his body down to every urge and reflex, to make sure that
he was in control. Mind over body—that was how he survived wars, how he fought, how he
approached life in general. There was nothing too painful or intense for him to handle. He was used
to sensory overload, to falling into the instincts of his body, to navigating overwhelming
battlefields that required his attention everywhere all at once. And yet Seifer was able to render
him blind and deaf to the world around him with a single touch.

He didn't know himself at all.

Frowning, Squall pushed away the unsettling thought. A less damning explanation was that he'd
simply never experienced the true nature of sex until now, the way it was supposed to be. Unlike
Avalanche, he'd chosen it. Unlike Rinoa, he'd wanted it. He'd wanted it with every fiber of his
being. He still did. Seifer stirred something inside of him that was impossible to ignore. The man
had been beyond erotic—the supple, smooth expanse of tanned skin, the thick muscles that
bunched and released in motion, the hot breaths and scent of his skin, the sound of his release... But
it went beyond the physical. It was Seifer's effortless confidence and skill, the man's knowing
smirk as he fine-tuned Squall's body, the unapologetic way he indulged his every instinct.

This was what people called sex appeal, Squall thought numbly. It was the first time in his life he'd
experienced the concept so acutely, and at the same time he realized just how much he paled in
comparison. He'd only managed a few touches towards the end, too overwhelmed and
inexperienced to do much more than lie back and react for most of it. The sex probably hadn't been
the experience Seifer had come to expect when remembering their night on Avalanche. He knew
that this time he'd been awkward and much more restrained. He didn't have anything to offer in the
way of skills or techniques, nor did he have the blond's build. Seifer on the other hand... After
Avalanche, he had erroneously thought Seifer had shown him everything. Now, he couldn't help
but wonder what else the blond had in his repertoire.

Frowning, Squall found he disliked being at such a distinct disadvantage. How long would Seifer's interest last, with him being so utterly inexperienced? All he had done was follow the man's lead with uncharacteristic passivity. He knew this was where years of sexual indifference came back to bite him in the ass, and all the frustration Rinoa had felt toward him gained new meaning. She hadn't been satisfied with him, some days patiently trying to get him to let go and other days accusing him of being frigid. He had gladly accepted the latter as fact, not needing to take a closer look at himself if he could just blame everything on a lack of libido. Now, he wished he would have tried harder. If he had just cared a little more, allowed Rinoa a little more, he might not have been so ...inadequate in the present. He didn't understand why it felt so different with Seifer.

It was obvious Seifer had noticed his inexperience. The bastard had been amused. No doubt it stroked his ego to know he bested his one-time rival in this. But soon the novelty would wear off, and then Seifer would only see the sexually stunted man in his bed who froze up the moment he was asked to voice his desires or act them out. There was little chance of Seifer continuing to find satisfaction in only his body, without any substantial reciprocation. It was what had driven Rinoa away, the girl resorting to a string of one-night stands to find what he had been unable to offer. And she had still felt some measure of love for him at the time. Seifer wasn't tied down by such attachments.

Huffing at the pointless thoughts about a past he couldn't change, he turned on his back and glanced at the sleeping man. He'd always disliked it whenever he lagged behind. It hadn't been ambition to become a great SeeD that had driven him as a cadet, but the need to catch up and prove himself Seifer's equal, a worthy sparring partner. Back then, Seifer had guided him as well, even if the arrogant cadet would never have admitted to such a kindly inclination. The whole thing had a strange feel of inevitability about it. Seifer had always been more experienced than him, more talented, a natural. His gaze lingered on naked skin, and he wondered what it would be like to mark Seifer the way he'd been marked himself.

Starting when Seifer let out a soft snore as predicted, Squall frowned at himself and looked away. It was unwise to make any assumptions at this point. He didn't entertain the delusion that this thing between them was about anything other than sex, but even so it seemed inadvisable to add attraction to their already volatile relationship. Between his own pride and Seifer's ego, it couldn't lead to anything good, but such thoughts were too little too late at this point.

He couldn't help but wonder what Seifer wanted from it all. The blond's eager participation and goodnight kiss suggested this would not be their last time together, the man still seeming interested, but the thought wasn't necessarily a reassuring one. He had no idea what kind of unspoken social contract he'd agreed to by letting Seifer take him to bed a second time, and Seifer's earlier crude statements hadn't shed much light on the man's expectations for any future dealings. If this wasn't about staking a claim or making some conquest, as Seifer had insisted, then why? If it truly was nothing more sinister than honest lust, then how long would it be until the man would grow bored with him? How could he trust Seifer's motives, when he didn't even understand his own? His best hope was that all of this was just as inexplicable and unexpected for Seifer as it was for him. It was the only scenario that left his pride somewhat intact. If that was the case, then perhaps...

If he was to believe Irvine, casual sex was all good and easy, without strings attached, but Squall couldn't imagine this being without consequences. He didn't understand the concept of fuck buddies, of using people and being used, all for the sake of fleeting release. It seemed beyond naive to think an arrangement like that wouldn't affect their relationship in other areas. They'd only just started to explore what it might mean to be friends, and he wasn't sure he was interested in the 'benefits' without the friendship. He also wasn't sure how to feel about being just another addition
to the blond's obviously long list of bed partners. Nothing more, nothing less. Casual. Inconsequential.

Scowling, Squall knew he'd arrived at the crux of the matter. There was nothing casual or inconsequential about the way his heart seemed to leap into his throat whenever Seifer smiled at him or stood too close. His feelings refused to be hammered down, intruding on his every thought, informing his behavior at every turn. Anybody else, Rinoa included, and he would already have been on his way back to Garden, having grown weary of their prolonged company. Instead he was ruled by sentiment, urging Seifer to remember his past, to remember them. He'd gone to dinner with the man, had spent several nights now in close proximity, intimacy even. All of it pointed to a deep-seated need to establish a lasting connection with the man. In the neon blue darkness of the small bedroom, safe from Seifer's discerning gaze, Squall couldn't hide from the truth that presented itself.

It had never been just about sex for him. Not when they'd taken the Avalanche, and not since. Already he was more invested in this thing between them than was safe. He'd end up hurt.

Recoiling from the budding realizations, he dreaded the next day. He already knew he probably wouldn't be able to muster Seifer's level of nonchalance, but he would have to deal somehow. No matter how difficult, he would try not to let this ruin the careful balance they had reestablished. If he didn't make this personal or harbor any expectations, then he might just yet make things work somehow.

Unconvinced of his chances of success, Squall rubbed his tired eyes and let out a sigh. Next to him Seifer was stirring quietly, gradually taking over more of the bed. Glancing over, Squall let out an amused snort in spite of himself at the sight that greeted him, the unguarded display soothing some of his frayed nerves. The blond had managed to sprawl out onto his back indecorously, having lost all cover in the process. The man's lips were parted, his usually carefully groomed hair already sticking every which way.

The observation that Seifer was devastatingly handsome, even in sleep, was a reflexive one by now, and Squall couldn't muster any anger over it anymore. It had simply become another one of those immutable facts of life, however inconvenient. Turning back to face the wall, Squall forced his eyes closed. The next day would be difficult enough without sleep deprivation. It was pointless to pick apart all that happened, all that had or hadn't been said, especially knowing the man would probably just ignore his conclusions anyway.

Bastard.

~ o ~
Beyond Restraint

[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Sunday, 26th of October, 7:00 am]

A distant beep and an aching shoulder. Warmth, softness. A body pressed close to his. Another beep, louder this time. Scrunching his eyes at the intrusive sound, Seifer rolled onto his back and kneaded his forehead. When the high-pitched noise blared at him again, he let out a curse and grabbed his phone at the bedside table, quickly switching off the alarm. And then he remembered. Squall. Everything they had done. Everything he was now allowed to do. A huge grin spread on his lips.

Turning onto his back within the space Seifer just vacated, Squall sighed at the predictable turn his mornings were starting to take—locked in a tangle of limbs and inappropriate closeness. Glancing beside him, he frowned at the look on Seifer's face before the duvet was yanked off him in a wild flurry of movement. A rush of breath left him as the bastard pounced on him, his arms suddenly pinned down beside his shoulders. Looking up at the gleeful grin on Seifer's face, Squall furrowed his brow and pushed against the quickly tightening hold on his wrists.

"Try it."

The words spoken with a smirk had Squall still for all of a second at the man's audacity. Fine then. It wasn't his fault if the idiot wanted to earn himself a black eye before breakfast. Putting his entire body into the effort, he bucked hard underneath the man.

Chuckling at the amount of strength Squall managed to muster in such a restrained position, Seifer lost his tight hold on the brunet's arms and fought to regain his balance. He immediately pressed back in response to the hard shove against his side, not allowing Squall to get the upper hand. Seizing Squall's midriff, he curled his fingers into the man's t-shirt and forced him back down, but Squall still managed to roll them onto their side. He had to scramble to fend off a few well-angled jabs, one managing to make it past his defenses and landing a sharp blow to his ribs. Wincing in pain, he grinned and grabbed the offending arm.

His renewed grip did nothing to deter Squall, the man struggling against his hold with fierce resistance. A leg hooked around the back of his knee, the move forcing his own leg into an awkward angle with a hard yank. The moment his abused leg was released from between firm thighs, Seifer found himself flipped onto his back with Squall straddling him in one fluid movement. Before he could try and throw the man off, Squall pressed down against him, the man's lower arm digging harshly into his throat. His cock gave an eager twitch as he stared straight into intense grey-blue eyes, the man's buttocks positioned just right.

Slightly winded from his efforts, Squall didn't let up even though Seifer had stilled beneath him. Frowning at the uncharacteristic surrender, he froze when Seifer gave a slight buck that was clearly not intended to throw him off. His pulse quickened at the feel of the man's hard bulge pressing up against him, his attention all at once drawn to the daring nature of his position atop the man. The bastard's lips split into a lewd grin, his gaze expectant. At a loss for what Seifer wanted him to do, Squall glanced down at those smirking lips.

The sudden force to Seifer's next buck caught him off guard, and before he could muster enough presence of mind to retaliate, the bastard had him immobilized with his stomach pressed against the mattress and his wrists pinned down in an unyielding grip. Cursing inwardly at how quickly he'd let his guard down, he scrunched his eyes closed and bit his lips when Seifer leaned down against him, the man's erection rubbing against his buttocks. Within seconds, he felt himself harden in
response to Seifer's manhandling. Unable to process the abrupt shift to seduction, Squall startled at the feel of Seifer's breath rushing against the back of his neck, followed by nips and kisses that trailed down to his shoulder. A shiver ran through him at the pleasurable touch, his body's reactions quickly spiraling out of his control.

Easing his hold the moment Squall's defensive posture slackened, Seifer slid his fingers along the man's arms as he leaned back up. Moving down the bed, he hooked his fingers under the hem of Squall's boxer briefs and smirked when Squall lifted his hips to aid the move. At the eager sign of consent, he pulled off the man's underwear before getting rid of his own as well. Adrenaline still pumped through his veins from the rather unorthodox foreplay, bringing even more of an edge to what they were doing. The perfect start to a perfect fuck.

He quickly leaned in over Squall's body again, pressing himself closer and sliding his cock along Squall's crack. Lowering one arm to grab a handful of the world's finest ass, he rubbed his length against the man with increasing need. He was more than ready to sink into Squall's slick heat. Reining himself in with a groan, he barely stopped himself short of repeating last night's mistake.

"How many fingers do you need?" he spoke throatily next to Squall's ear, before hissing out a curse. Squall chose that exact moment to start grinding back up against him, hurrying along his already tenuous control. "Three? Two?" he added curtly, staying his movements to better focus.

Unable to muster the breath to speak, Squall drew in a slow lungful of air as he tried to parse Seifer's question. The hot erection pressing against him, skin to skin, made it impossible to feel anything but the urgency between them. He couldn't think. He wanted Seifer to enter him now.

"None," he replied hoarsely, just about managing the one-word command that would hasten them towards ecstasy.

Seifer's appreciative groan quickly devolved into another curse when Squall's hips pushed up against him, punctuating the man's impatience. Not about to complain, he grabbed the lube and lathered himself up while eyeing up Squall's backside. Despite the man's bold declaration, he knew he couldn't just tear into Squall the way he had the night before, no matter how much he wanted to. He'd have to go slow, give the inexperienced brunet time to adjust. Pulling at the man's hips, he nearly forgot his resolve the moment Squall moved onto his knees obligingly. It took all his restraint to first coat Squall's anus with lube, his cock swelling at the eager sigh that left the brunet. Calming himself with a final look, he positioned the tip of his cock right up against the man.

The feel of Seifer's steady hands grasping his hips, without an ounce of hesitation, helped Squall to ground himself. At least one of them knew what they were doing. He tried to keep his muscles relaxed when Seifer's erection nudged against him and let out a controlled breath as Seifer started to push into him, the thick head of the man's length slowly stretching him open. It was far from painless, but something about feeling Seifer's rock hard erection pushing him open was incredibly arousing. He let out a stifled sound when the head slid past his tight ring of muscle, the rest of Seifer's length following more smoothly.

The myriad of sensations were starting to become dizzying in their intensity, but somehow Seifer was keeping him poised just right on the razor-sharp edge between pleasure and pain, never giving him more than he could handle. When the last inch of Seifer's cock sank into him, the man's groin and balls pressed tightly to his buttocks, Squall could feel the throbbing need of Seifer's length buried within him, mirroring his own urgency.

Cursing lowly, Seifer had to still for a moment. He had no clue how the man managed to make anything a million times sexier than anyone else, but the simple act of pushing inside Squall had his cock burning with pleasure. Keeping Squall in place, he began the slow slide back out, his eyes
riveted on the sight of Squall's ring stretched wide around his cock. Stopping just before the head of his cock could stretch Squall even further, he pushed back in slightly faster this time. Repeating the slow moves, he closed his eyes and focused on what his hands and cock were telling him. Gradually, the tense muscles started to relax under his fingers and the incredible tightness eased. When he pulled out completely, a muffled hiss was followed by a confused gaze directed his way. Grinning, he grabbed the lube and smeared another good helping along his length before plunging right back into the warm slick heat.

Hanging his head, Squall squared his shoulders to try and keep himself from collapsing to the bed. All thoughts scattered as Seifer started into a series of quickening thrusts. The rough, tightly controlled quality to Seifer's panting filled his ears, a gruff exhale accompanying every thrust back into him. His own voice reached its breaking point when Seifer's cock stroked him just right, a bright burst of pleasure following the aching stretch. Certain he could take more, he pushed back to meet Seifer's next thrust into him, the resulting sting repaid with equal measures of ecstasy. Seifer's grip on him tightened, each finger digging harshly into his hips as the man pulled out all the way and rammed into him with enough speed and force to drive him down to his elbows.

Sheer bliss ignited inside him as Seifer began to fuck him with deep, unbridled thrusts, forcing his breath out in poorly stifled moans. He could no longer distinguish pleasure from pain. His entire body was rocking back and forth under the brunt of Seifer's thrusts, his cock bouncing with every plunge and slapping against his lower stomach, but instead of embarrassment he could only feel mounting exhilaration at being fucked so hard and thoroughly. The squelch of lubrication, the surrender of his own voice, the vigorous creaking of the bed—all of it was just white noise, his body lost to the brutal honesty of sex. His every muscle pulled taut as Seifer kept hitting the perfect spot within him, again and again, his cock jerking in a plea for the orgasm that was lingering just outside his grasp.

Unrelenting in his forceful moves, Seifer pulled Squall back by the hips to meet his every thrust. He'd never been this rough before, had never dared go this far with anyone. Squall's moans were becoming increasingly unrestrained, urging him on. Focusing all his strength on driving himself faster and deeper, he felt Squall stiffen in his hold just as a drawn out moan left the man. Squall's shoulders slumped down to the bed, the man's head dropping to Seifer's sheets. Squall had fucking come. Without him ever touching Squall's cock. All the man had needed was the roughest fuck ever.

Unable to believe his luck, Seifer let out a breathless chuckle that faltered with the force of his thrusts. Squall's moans were becoming increasingly unrestrained, urging him on. Focusing all his strength on driving himself faster and deeper, he felt Squall stiffen in his hold just as a drawn out moan left the man. Squall's shoulders slumped down to the bed, the man's head dropping to Seifer's sheets. Squall had fucking come. Without him ever touching Squall's cock. All the man had needed was the roughest fuck ever.

Unable to believe his luck, Seifer let out a breathless chuckle that faltered with the force of his thrusts. Squall was still taking his cock with sweet moans, apparently more than willing to let him coat the man's insides with his come. It felt like branding; like he was making Squall his and the thought alone was enough to make him lose his mind. That he could reduce Squall to this. That he could make Squall moan like this and make the man prop up his ass just for him to fuck—

Grunting deeply, he thrust in one last time, his cock erupting inside Squall. Keeping the brunet pressed tight, he felt his length twitch inside the man as more come spilled from him. Pulling back before plunging in once more, he moaned loudly as his orgasm surged through him. "Fuck," he cursed. Nothing was better than this.

Turning a cheek to the bedding, Squall let his body rock freely with the man's slowing thrusts, too pleasantly sore and languid to do anything other than listen to Seifer's satisfyingly ragged breaths. When the grip on his hips finally loosened, he steadied himself with a soft hiss as Seifer pulled free. Spurred into action by the jostle of the mattress and the feel of eyes on his backside, he turned and lowered himself onto his back, careful to avoid the wet mess he'd left on the bedding. Pulling down the t-shirt that had managed to ride all the way up to his armpits, he tried not to look self-conscious when he raised his gaze. Seifer was standing by the foot of the bed, fully naked and
looking far less disheveled than he felt.

"Come on," the man said with a nod to the bathroom, a smirk widening the bastard's lips. "Let's get cleaned up."

Seifer's gaze swept over him a final time, before the man turned and disappeared into the bathroom. Letting his head fall back to the bedding, Squall closed his eyes for a few beats, needing a moment to collect himself and catch his breath. All the vestiges of last night's aches reasserted themselves along with new, sharper twinges. Running a hand along his hip, he could feel clearly where Seifer's hands had grasped him. With thoughts of their later training and perhaps a spar, he briefly wondered whether a Cure might be in order, only to immediately scowl at the thought.

Fearing the beginning of another bad habit, he sighed and pushed up from the bed at the alluring sound of water clattering from the shower. After a quick wipe of his thighs and groin with his discarded underwear, he glanced back at the bed with some astonishment. The duvet and pillows had ended up on the floor, and the bed's headboard had dug into the wall, small chips of plaster littered below. A collection of stains, both wet and dry, adorned the bed sheet along with a bottle of lubrication, providing further evidence of their swift descent into lust. It looked very much like the aftermath of their night on Avalanche, but this time around he only felt a heady sense of satisfaction at the sight.

Recognizing the stray thought for the dangerous sentiment that it was, Squall straightened his back despite the pangs of pain and forced himself to view what came next as just any other locker room situation. Even so, he entered the tiny bathroom with an entirely involuntary glance to the blond standing under the spray of water. Tearing his eyes away from the titillating sight behind fogged up glass, he pulled off Seifer's crumpled t-shirt and turned on the sink tap in wait of his turn.

"Get your ass in here."

Unsure he'd heard the demand right, Squall turned to find Seifer looking at him expectantly. Realizing the man wasn't joking, he cast the small shower stall a doubtful look. It was barely big enough to accommodate the large blond, let alone fit the two of them comfortably.

"I'll make it worth your while," Seifer said with a wink.

"It's too small," Squall replied, feeling ridiculous for even having to point out the flaw in Seifer's plan.

"Which is the point. Nowhere for you to escape."

Squall snorted, ignoring the blond's lecherous grin. "You can't confine me."

"I'm very motivated to try," Seifer said, licking his lips as he held the shower door open. "Now do you want to come again or not?"

Stunned for a brief moment, Squall vowed not to underestimate Seifer's capacity for making blunt propositions ever again, nor his own susceptibility to them. Already his groin was rousing to the man's invitation and against his better judgment he found himself walking up to the shower stall.

"Good choice," Seifer said with a smug smile, relishing the annoyed twitch to dark eyebrows. Taking a step back, he made space for Squall to enter the shower before placing a finger under Squall's chin. Applying gentle pressure, he guided the man to arch back his head and dropped his gaze to pale lips before leaning in.

At the feel of Seifer's lips slowly meshing against his, Squall resented the ease with which Seifer
could make him need every little touch; the casual dominance of that finger tipping his chin to the
man's liking. His resentment was short-lived however. Water dripped from the bastard's wet hair,
trickling onto his face as they kissed, heightening his senses. A hand appeared at his side, pulling
him into the hot spray of water before lingering against his skin in a leisurely caress. Even
through the scent of soap he could discern the musk that was entirely Seifer's, causing him to lean
in before he could stay the movement.

Deepening their kiss, Seifer couldn't believe just how much sway he had over Squall. To think
Squall wanted him this badly, after days of watching the man for even the smallest sign… Running
his hands freely along Squall's wet skin, disrupting the flow of water wherever he touched, he
swirled his tongue against Squall's. The air was growing thick with steam, enclosing them in a
world of their own. He'd had this fantasy a million times; Squall and himself naked in the shower,
doing anything and everything he wanted to.

His cock started to swell again at the feel of Squall's erection against him, drawing an appreciative
hum from his lips. Stroking Squall's sides with both hands, he kissed and caressed the man while
sliding his cock against Squall's, languid and slow.

Ending their kiss with a heavy sigh, Seifer grabbed the bath oil on the shower rack. Looking into
grey-blue eyes filled with need, he squeezed a good amount into the palm of his hand before
enveloping the head of Squall's cock in the cool liquid. Leaning back slightly, he made sure the
spray of hot water landed against the man's chest, rivulets running down to mix with his fingers at
the base of Squall's cock. Working his hand up and down the hard length, he licked his lips and
watched. Any little detail was worth ten fucking one night stands.

Lost to Seifer's gaze and touch, Squall pushed down the distant fear that he might just do anything
Seifer asked of him, as long as the bastard looked at him like that. Having abandoned all cocky or
lewd grins, Seifer was studying every inch of him, much like the night before. It both excited and
unsettled him, but the man's calloused hands were proving a powerful distraction, coaxing him
leisurely without the promise of a quick release.

Seifer's tall frame quickly became overwhelming as the man leaned over him, one gently groping
hand never leaving his skin as the other worked him unhurriedly towards orgasm. Presented with
the sight of an aroused, wet Seifer, Squall couldn't help himself from looking down the man
chest, following the path of water as it streamed along ridged abs, further down still to Seifer's
errection, flushed and larger than anything he could've imagined breaching him. Gritting his teeth at
the immediate jolt surging through his own length, he drew in a sharp breath when Seifer squeezed
him more firmly. Even as he thrust up into Seifer's hand, he couldn't forget the feel of that hard
length moving against his, moving inside him.

Glancing up to meet intense green eyes, he knew at once his perusal hadn't gone unnoticed. The
 beginnings of orgasm rose up from the base of his cock, further weakening his legs, and he
stumbled back against the cold, tiled wall. Seifer followed smoothly, the bastard's touch finally
speeding up. Biting down on his lower lip, Squall convulsed with the strength of his release, his
breath rushing from him with a shudder. After a few lasts strokes, Seifer's hand fell away from him,
but he could still feel the man's shadow. He opened his eyes, unable to remember when he'd closed
them.

Aroused as hell from watching Squall come so hard in his hand, the man now regarding him with
expectant eyes, Seifer almost growled as he surged forward to capture the man's lips. Settling both
hands on Squall's hips, he drew closer to the brunet until his cock brushed against the taut skin of
Squall's stomach. The eager way Squall pressed up against him, a tentative touch raising to his
sides, had him cursing. He needed to come. Now.
His cock twitched when Squall needed only the slightest of guiding touches before catching on and turning around into position. Pulling the man's hips closer to him, he groaned when Squall placed his arms against the wall to steady himself. So fucking willing. He ran his fingers along Squall's sides, before moving them down to pull the man's buttocks apart. Placing his cock just right, he stroked himself once and let out a low moan as he forced himself inside.

The pressure was still mind-bending, but not nearly as tight as when he'd first entered Squall. Returning his hands to Squall's hips, he didn't bother with restraint. His moans quickly turned into fast paced grunts as he thrust into Squall without reserve. It felt fucking perfect. This was exactly what he'd fantasized about at the SCTA. He really was the luckiest son of a bitch on the whole Hyne-damned planet. Squall wasn't even doing this to get off himself. The man was letting Seifer fuck him, just to please Seifer.

Snaking an arm around Squall's midriff, he leaned in closer and placed a hand against the cold tiles to steady himself. He thrust as hard as he could manage in their position, wanting to leave the deepest possible mark on the man. His frenzied pace was unsustainable for much longer, but the scent of Squall's skin—the feel of Squall pressed close— He dropped his head to rest against the back of Squall's neck and cursed, his lips moving against wet skin.

Leaning heavily into the tiled wall, Squall closed his eyes to better feel every little sensation. Seifer's arm was wrapped around him tightly, locking him in place, as if they couldn't get close enough, as if he might've tried to shy away from the man's deep rutting. A shiver ran through him in response to the mindless grunts and profanity mumbled into his skin, punctuated with sharp, domineering thrusts. Despite his own lack of immediate arousal, he liked it more than he felt he should. There was something irresistible about giving himself over to Seifer's lust like this.

Jutting out his hips farther to anchor the man's thrusts, to invite more, he no longer bothered to stifle his gasps at the aching intrusion. Hot water sluiced down their bodies, exacerbating the slapping sounds of Seifer's flesh against his. The tiled walls echoed their exclamations into an arousing din that filled his ears, setting his every hair on end with how good it felt. He could tell the moment Seifer was close when the man's hold on him turned rigid, strong hips snapping into a punishing pace that rocked him against the wall more urgently. His every sense tuned in sharply, memorizing everything from the swell of Seifer's cock inside him to the gruff moan that joined the man's release.

Seifer slowed with a final curse, panting heavily into his ear, and somehow Squall found himself breathless as well. He dropped his forehead to his arms, not yet ready when Seifer slid out of him. His legs were wobbly, but he managed to remain standing without the support of Seifer's strong grip. One hand had traveled down to his left buttock, while the other was pulling at his right cheek. Biting down on his lower lip, Squall exhaled sharply when Seifer traced a finger against his sore anus before pushing in. Slick with Seifer's come, his body gave no resistance as Seifer slowly slid his finger in and out of him, the touch seemingly intent on making as much of a mess as possible.

"You're too fucking sexy, Leonhart."

The husky quality to Seifer's voice rang pleasantly in Squall's ears, even when the words were too surreal to really process. Apparently content with his brief exploration, Seifer withdrew his finger and slid his hand back up to rest at Squall's side. Needing to ease his lower back from its position, Squall pushed away from the shower wall and turned around, only to be drawn into the man's arms, into another scalding kiss. He wondered numbly whether they'd ever do anything else again, whether he even wanted to.

Breathing deeply into their kiss, Seifer swirled his tongue against Squall's. Wherever he touched,
solid muscles lay just beneath, reminding him of just whom he was with; a seasoned fighter, a **commander**. The one man who could challenge him easily, but had chosen instead to submit to his every touch. He still couldn't believe Squall could come just from being fucked—that the edge of pain only spurred the brunet on. He needed to get a mirror in the bedroom so he could watch Squall come from taking his cock, no matter the angle. Squall Leonhart; a masochist. He should have known with the man's belt collection and all. Shit, he couldn't wait for the next round.

Squall wasn't helping his impatience at all either. Shy fingertips were ghosting against his sides, almost ticklish in their indecisiveness. A deep rumble spilled from Seifer's throat when those hands grew bolder and settled against his skin in a firmer hold. Wanting to encourage any sign of initiative, he guided Squall against the shower wall and eagerly sought out Squall's tongue. He groaned into their kiss when Squall's arms closed around his lower back in an immediate response, a clever tongue darting out to stroke his own. The commander was turning out to be a damned quick study.

All thought fled from Squall's mind as he gave his body free rein to act on his desires. He couldn't get enough of the smooth expanse of skin as he slid his hands up tight muscles and broad shoulders, his touch guided by the rich texture of old and new scars. He let his fingers trail each and every one, mapping every sign of Seifer's battle-hardened past. So much like himself, but different. **Better.**

Squall scrunched his brow and let out a tremulous breath when Seifer started to suck and lick at his neck with slow but devastating determination. Holding on tight, he slid his hands along heated skin, his fingers following a thin and slanted scar that trailed all the way up the slope of Seifer's back, to the man's shoulder. The flow of water rippled along it, inviting his touch to linger and follow the long scar.

Muscles stiffened beneath his hands for all of a heartbeat before Seifer stopped the pleasurable attack on his neck and gently nudged his right arm away. Seifer's fingers entwined tightly with his as his hand was guided up against the shower wall in a dominant manner, his breath instantly taken away by a deep kiss. After rendering him both mindless and breathless in the space of seconds, Seifer resumed the exploration of his neck, the man's breath caressing his ear, the nips of sharp teeth just this side of painful. Squall tilted his head and melted into the embrace, his thoughts sinking down under the pleasant haze of thick steam and streaming water, the feel of skin against skin.

Satisfied for now with the dark red marks on Squall's neck and collar, Seifer dove in for a forceful kiss and plunged his tongue into the slick heat of Squall's mouth. He could do this all day—kiss and fuck Squall right into oblivion, until the commander knew nothing but the feel of his cock, tongue and fingers.

The only thing they **had** to do, the only thing that they couldn't put off was their training. No way he'd let Squall's training regime slip—not even for this. A spar wouldn't be amiss either. It would be a great way to work up their lust. Nothing like a rough fuck post sparring. They'd be able to start the fun all over again.

He nipped at Squall's lips playfully. "The water's going to go cold soon," he said with a lopsided smirk before placing another kiss on soft lips. "Let's finish up." Grabbing the shower gel, he distanced himself from the far too tempting brunet, before handing the bottle to Squall.

Taking the soap, Squall straightened from his perch against the shower wall and tried to match Seifer's casual manner. As if he hadn't just forgotten all about the world around them, as if his heart wasn't still pounding against his ribs. His fingers had wrinkled with moisture, his skin turned pink
from the hot spray of water, begging the question just how long they'd stood there wrapped up in each other without any arousal to justify the time spent simply touching and kissing. Suppressing a frown, Squall drew in a steadying lungful of the steamy air and tried to focus on the simple task of washing down.

There was little room to maneuver without touching, leading to the occasional clash of elbows, and more than once Seifer's gaze and lopsided smirk turned his way, following the path of his hands as he tried to wash himself despite the distraction. It was an awkward affair, but Seifer didn't seem the least bit put out. Turning underneath the spray of water as best he could, he tried to rinse his hair without further entanglements when a slight touch brushed against his shoulder blade.

"It's healing." Seifer's voice sounded thoughtful as the man ran his thumb over Squall's largest scar.

Squall stilled at the observation. Seifer's touch didn't cause any discomfort, nor was there any of the usual raw tightness that sometimes plagued his back. Amidst all the distractions he hadn't really taken a closer look at the troublesome wound lately. It seemed obvious in retrospect; the connection between his wound only healing properly now and the recent breaking of his bond. In a warped way it made sense. It had been Rinoa's powers that had caused the injury to begin with. Unwilling to linger on the unhappy memory, he focused on the gentle path of Seifer's thumb and the thrum of tension it created in his body.

The feather light touch was withdrawn all too quickly and Squall belatedly remembered to continue rinsing the suds from his hair. He still had trouble getting used to the arresting sense of familiarity that fell over them whenever the urgency between them subsided. Looking back over his shoulder, he was met with a lopsided smile and a kiss before Seifer got out of the shower. A rush of cold air streamed into the shower cabin, helpfully clearing the newly budding daydreams from his head.

Rushing through the remainder of his shower, Squall cast a glance towards the bedroom where he could hear Seifer moving about, out of sight. He moved his shoulder and arm, but felt nothing. Safe from prying eyes, he wiped at the fogged up mirror and twisted his back to try and catch a glimpse of his scar. A dark but healthy pink spanned the length of the wound, smooth to the touch. He could still feel the ghost of Seifer's touch against the healing flesh, and wondered how the man had known to single in on the most personal of all his scars.

Remembering the feel of Seifer's scars beneath his own fingers, Squall frowned when he realized that both times his touch had been redirected he'd been touching scar tissue. Turning to lean against the sink, he towelled down his wet hair absentmindedly. Perhaps it was mere coincidence, but he understood better than most that some scars were too fraught with memories to share. Tracing a finger along the thin cut between his eyes, he started when Seifer's voice sounded from outside the bathroom.

"You can quit your primping and come out now."

Rolling his eyes, Squall tied the towel around his waist and headed for the bedroom. "Some people care more about cleanliness than you," he said dryly, his gaze traveling to where Seifer was leaning against the doorway to the living room. Drops of water still clung to the man's skin as he stood clad only in boxers and a towel slung haphazardly over his shoulder.

"You might be onto something," Seifer said playfully. "You can help out next time."

Ignoring the return of Seifer's easy flirtation, Squall could feel the man's intent gaze as he sidestepped the wet trail Seifer had left along the floor and made his way to the side of the bed he'd claimed as his own. It was strange having everything out in the open between them like this. The reflex to hide his attraction was a hard one to shake. It quickly became apparent however that
Seifer wasn't going to bother with restraint whatsoever, a wolf whistle sounding from behind him the moment he leaned over to grab his duffel bag.

Sending a glare over his shoulder, he watched warily as Seifer raised his hands in mock capitulation and chuckled. "Not my fault if you're going to bend over like that."

Relaxing when the man simply went about his routine and started to look through a drawer, Squall opened his duffel bag but his gaze was drawn to Seifer's naked back and the scar that had most likely elicited the man's evasive maneuvering. Amongst a multitude of marks, there was a long cut that ran from the juncture between Seifer's neck and left shoulder, slanting all the way down to the man's spine. If he remembered correctly, it was an exact mirror of the scar on Seifer's chest, most likely the other one he'd inadvertently touched. Squall frowned at the puzzling sight, but realized his mistake when Seifer turned around to grab a shirt laid out on the bed.

There weren't two scars, but one. The scar on Seifer's back continued onto his chest uninterrupted, wrapping around the man's upper body. Briefly Squall entertained the hope that the wound had been a superficial one, skin-deep only as its thinness suggested, but the scar lined up too perfectly back and front, flawlessly parallel. It looked like something had cut through Seifer's torso, starting at the man's neck and rending through lungs and heart.

Sharp cold flooded him, only to be followed by doubt. He'd seen such wounds throughout his career, but he'd never seen anyone survive it. Even the strongest restorative magic would struggle to heal such a horrendous wound in time, before death, and Squall didn't know of any spells that would manage such a smooth, thin scar. His stomach sank at the unsettling sight all the same. Superficial or not, however old or well-healed, Seifer didn't want it touched. A clear sign of trauma.

His view of the deceptively thin and paled scar was suddenly obscured when Seifer put on a t-shirt, the man nearly fully dressed while he stood lost in thought, still clad in nothing but a towel. Reminded of his surroundings, it was with considerable effort that Squall managed to direct his gaze away. This wasn't the time or place. Keeping his face carefully blank, he returned his attention to his duffel bag and its disappointing contents. He'd quickly gone through what few clothes he'd gathered at the penthouse, leaving him with a pile of dirty items. Ruining his training gear with copious amounts of monster gore hadn't helped. "I'm out of clothes."

Looking over to where Squall was regarding his clothes, Seifer smirked. "I don't mind you walking around naked." At yet another glare directed his way, he chuckled. "Laundry time then, Leonhart," he said, amused at the imagery.

Squall couldn't suppress a slight frown at the prospect. "You don't have a washing machine," he stated, not about to admit he had no clue how to do laundry.

"There's a laundromat a couple of blocks down."

Vaguely aware of what a laundromat was, Squall tried not to look visibly disheartened. Between Rinoa's housekeeper and Garden's cleaning staff, he'd never had to bother with such tasks before. "Right..."

Seifer grinned at Squall's poorly hidden hesitation, realization dawning that he was dealing with one very spoiled commander. "Not used to doing laundry, Princess?"

"It never came up," Squall said with a feeble shrug.

"I guess you're out of luck then..." Seifer said, more than happy to drag out Squall's misfortune.
"Unless…” he said, doing his best to pretend he wasn't going to milk the opportunity for all it was worth. "You can think of some kind of… compensation."

Unsure how he felt about the blatant sexual nature of Seifer's suggestion, Squall quickly looked back at his pile of dirty clothes. It was entirely too likely he'd find himself agreeing if he held that lecherous gaze for too long. "Can't be that hard."

"Let me save you from yourself," Seifer said, certain Squall's first battle against laundry would come with casualties. "I have to swing by there anyway. Gotta deal with those sheets and run some errands. I'm sure we can think of a way for you to thank me later."

Letting out a soft huff, Squall moved to where he'd dropped the t-shirt he'd slept in and pulled it on after a halfhearted inspection. He really did need fresh clothes. If anything, his morning had shown him how little chance he stood of refusing Seifer anyway, so he might as well get the bastard to do his laundry in return. Looking Seifer's way, he nodded at the tightly sealed plastic bag that contained yesterday's bloodied training gear.

"Good luck with those," he said, his own lips curling at the corners.

Chuckling, Seifer walked over to stand right in front of the brunet. He loved the way Squall was watching him closely and didn't step away even when mere inches separated them. He stole a kiss and dragged it out.

"Believe me, I'll do my best—" he said, placing another kiss against pliant lips, "—to save your combat pants. You look sexy as hell in those." He smirked when a mystified frown tugged at Squall's brow, just like every other time he'd called the man hot or sexy. It was exactly the kind of clueless expression that begged for a very hands-on approach. Suddenly laundry was very far from his mind.

"I think I'll be taking my compensation upfront after all," he added lowly, guiding Squall onto the bed.

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Estranged Friends

[Laundromat, Chimera District, Sunday, 26th of October, 10:27 am]

Checking the time on the dryer yet again, Seifer felt his whole body itch with impatience. Two weeks ago he'd never imagined seeing Squall again and now he loathed being away from the man for even one minute. He knew they had to pace themselves, that they couldn't just fuck continuously, but his body really hadn't caught on. Being allowed to fuck Squall and then having to do mundane chores was testing his patience like nothing else. Doing laundry definitely wasn't enough of a distraction. He wanted to be back at his apartment now.

He turned his back to the dryer and leaned against it. The numbers on the display were mocking him with the agonizingly slow passage of time. Every single fucking moment felt like an eternity. And then his phone buzzed in his pocket. He reached down quickly, hoping it was Squall.

- Message from Calder / 10:35 am / Where are you? -

Rolling his eyes, he swiped away the message only to spot seven missed calls from the man. Seven. And that was just since Friday. Calder wasn't exactly keeping it a secret that he felt neglected. Or that the man had been outright worried for him. Seifer huffed. Like hell anyone ever needed to worry about him. He'd been busy with Squall and everyone else would just have to wait. If anything, it reminded him of Rinoa when they'd started going out. It had driven him nuts. All that clinginess and constant attention seeking. He needed to draw a line. A spar or two and maybe a couple of hours of hanging out, but that would be it. As long as Squall was around, Calder would have to deal.

Moving on from his list of missed calls to recent calls instead, he spotted Rinoa's name at the top the list, reminding him of their talk just that Friday. So much had happened since then. His smile couldn't grow any wider. Squall was his now and he was allowed to touch, lick, and feel everywhere others could only dream of. His every fucking fantasy come true. Squall looked so fucking sexy when shooting his load. He felt his pants tighten. Not the fucking place, Almasy.

Quelling his straying thoughts, he instead scratched at his chin. He'd promised Rinoa to phone Squall's dad and while he was stuck in the laundromat, there wasn't really anything better to do. Any more daydreaming and he'd be in one hell of an awkward situation as well. He pushed away from the dryer. A Sunday morning would probably be the best time to disturb a president. Bringing up the man's contact information, he smirked at actually having the president's private number. It was beyond surreal. Almost as surreal as the man taking a liking to him. Not once had the man seemed reluctant or offhand when they'd met at the lab. None of Seifer's past had mattered. And it went both ways. He'd definitely taken a liking to the president as well. The only one who didn't seem keen on the man was his own son.

Seifer tapped his fingers against his thigh. It would be difficult to persuade Squall to have dinner at the palace. Squall didn't seem to have an interest in establishing any lasting connection with the man. But what Rinoa had said made sense. Family was a rare thing to come by for someone who'd grown up at Garden and Laguna seemed to genuinely care for Squall. It could be good for Squall and it would definitely be good for Seifer. Having the president owe him one was just the icing on the cake. It would be fun to watch father and son stumble through awkward social interactions and to get to know more about the president. Without doubt worth the hassle of setting it up. He pressed a button and waited for the call to go through.

A couple of seconds passed before the line was picked up. "Seifer? ...Is everything okay?"
Seifer grinned at Laguna's concern. "Squall's fine. We're both fine."

"Ah? That's a relief to hear. Training's going well then?"

"Very," Seifer confirmed. "We were out in the field most of yesterday. Lots of monsters. Lots of magic. We even got to summon our GFs," he said, wandering away from the drier to look out into the street. "I'm sure it won't be long until Squall's out doing missions again."

"Out in the field already? That's—that's wonderful news!" the president exclaimed, a relieved sigh leaving the man. "Truth be told, I wasn't expecting such promising results after Odine's tests."

"The pills are making one hell of a difference," Seifer said with a smile.

"There's a reason why I keep Odine around, despite his faults," Laguna replied knowingly. "His ethics are problematic, but he usually gets the job done." His voice grew stronger as he continued. "I've made it quite clear to him that you and Squall are to receive top priority treatment. If you need anything, just give him a call."

"Will do," Seifer said, hoping it wouldn't come to that. He had a short fuse to start with, but that bloody imp made it virtually non-existent. "Can't say I'm looking forward to going back there... But if there's a chance it'll help Squall, I'll deal."

"Don't leave yourself out of the equation. The doctor's there for the both of you," the president admonished gently. "So, monsters and GFs. It's good to hear you've made so much progress in so little time. There were no incidents with the GFs? Squall wasn't in pain like at the lab?"

"Nothing like at the lab at all. It was all great. Amazing in fact."

Seifer smile grew at the president's light laughter. "Anyway, that's actually not the reason I'm calling."

"No? What else is on your mind?"

"Dinner. If your offer still stands."

A brief pause was followed by a quick, excited rush of words. "Of course! I'll get Gabriel to cook up some wild game for us. You have to try his roast. Gabriel is my chef," Laguna added in a quick explanation. "When would you be able to make it? I don't have anything scheduled for tonight, if that would be possible? I know it's short notice, but I imagine Squall would want to pick up the package from Quistis sooner rather than later."

Seifer furrowed his brows, wondering what was in said package. "Tonight should work, sure," he said, unsurprised by how keen Laguna was. From what he'd seen at Odine's lab, the man would take anything and everything Squall would offer. "What time?"

"Would seven o'clock work? I'll let the guards and staff know to expect you," Laguna replied excitedly.

"We'll be there," Seifer said, half expecting Squall to throw a fit and refuse. Luckily, he could be just as stubborn as the Ice Prince and after last night he had a whole new range of tricks to resort to.

"Wonderful!" Laguna exclaimed. "Squall will know where to go."

"All right. See you then,"
"See you tonight!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Seifer couldn't believe he was going to be dining with the president of fucking Esthar. Trust Squall to land him in the most impossible of situations. And it would be impossible. He had no clue how the hell he'd manage to go a whole evening without fondling a certain brunet. He'd have to though. Trying to destroy the president's country was one thing, but sleeping with his son a different thing entirely. He'd have to tread carefully not to end up in a small cell at the bottom of the palace. He and Squall would just have to fuck like bunnies all afternoon to wear out their libidos. He couldn't fucking wait.

One issue remained, however. He'd have to persuade Mr. Unsociable himself to have dinner with his dad. Without seeming too much like a Rinoa wannabe. At least there was the excuse of the bag Squall had to pick up. And Seifer's inability to refuse a gourmet meal. Or just any free meal for that matter. He chuckled to himself as he checked the timer on the dryer and then his watch. Time to run one last errand while the dryer cycle finished up. And then it was finally time to head back and seduce Squall all over again.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Sunday, 26th of October, 10:42 am]

Kneading his left temple absentmindedly, Squall stared at his laptop screen. His eyes kept lingering on sentences he'd read several times before without taking in their meaning, forcing him to backtrack more than once. Writing out the previous day's mission report had taken more time than usual, not just because of his distracted state of mind, but also because he needed to somehow include Seifer's presence that day without betraying the man's identity. It wasn't unheard of for SeeDs to temporarily cooperate with non-Garden field operatives and informants if the mission required it, or to even redact their true identities from official documents for protection, but he knew Quistis would be pouring over his every word and phrasing, trying to puzzle together what he wasn't telling her.

So he'd tried to stay as vague as possible without breaking any rules that would cost them their bonus. He owed as much to Seifer. For days now he'd been staying at the man's place, eating his food, wearing his clothes even. There was a limit to hospitality, but he didn't need to ask to know that Seifer would never accept an outright offer of money. A mission bonus would go some way in making up for his disruptive presence.

His efforts had done little however to distract himself. Without fail, his thoughts seemed intent on picking apart every little detail of all that had happened since last night. Part of him had trouble reconciling the things he'd done with how he saw himself. He'd never sought out sex in the past. He'd never imagined anything even remotely like this for himself. His own acquiescence astounded him; the uncanny ease with which he'd accepted adding a sexual aspect to his relationship with Seifer.

Between his unsatisfying experiences with Rinoa and this lust he felt for Seifer, it seemed to him that he should be more conflicted about his sexuality, only he wasn't. He doubted any of it had much to do with gender, nor was he in a hurry to label his proclivities one way or the other. Far more startling was the sudden discovery that he had a sexual appetite at all, let alone one of this intensity. He knew now that he could easily fall into a physical relationship that explored everything there was to explore if it was with Seifer.

Even worse. He wanted to.

Though he hadn't been a virgin, he'd come to fully appreciate how little he knew of sex. Was it like
this for most people? Even though he had little experience to base much comparison on, it didn't seem possible. Were his responses normal? Was it normal to still be thinking of the way Seifer had touched him? He'd barely just left the bastard's bed and already he was longing to return to it. He hadn't even healed himself yet. He could still feel every painful twinge that stood testimony to their more recent activities, reminding him of just how much pleasure Seifer was capable of inflicting.

Hyne help him, he liked the way Seifer had taken ownership of his body. He'd accepted every new thing the man had introduced with utter abandon. When Seifer touched him, all sense of propriety went out the window. His carefully assembled shields shattered, leaving him bared and vulnerable. Yet at the same time, he couldn't remember when he'd felt more alive, more strong and in touch with his primal self than when Seifer was fucking him, pushing him past pain into ecstasy.

Sex with Seifer was like a battlefield. Like the most intense of their spars. It was rough, powerful and intoxicating. It was apparently also the only thing he was able to think about anymore.

Shaking his head, Squall sat straighter and glared at his laptop, as if it were to blame for not being as interesting as Seifer. Having already written the bulk of the mission report, all he had to look forward to until the man's return was more inane paperwork that wasn't even all that pressing. He let out a sigh and took a big gulp from his lukewarm cup of coffee. He was hopeless. Whenever his mind wasn't descending into the gutter, it seemed intent on returning to the puzzle of Seifer's scar.

How anyone could survive an injury like that was beyond him. He was certain the scar didn't predate the war and it wasn't likely to have happened after either, with Seifer avoiding dangerous encounters due to his magic. It had to be from during the war. It had to have been bad.

He'd never ask about the story behind it. The last thing he wanted was to bring up potentially harrowing memories that would send the man running again. There was also no point in worrying about something long past and done. There was only one thing he could do and that was to respect the boundaries Seifer set for him. From now on he'd simply avoid touching the scar during any of their future encounters.

An odd anticipation surged through him at the prospect despite his concern. It had been like that ever since Seifer had left the apartment, his mind flung between worry and an ever persistent desire that refused to loosen its grip. At least he felt fairly certain now that this attraction between them hadn't run its course yet for Seifer either, the man still seeming very much interested. Thinking ahead to their day, he was impatient to get on with their training. And maybe...

He groaned, dropping his head back against the couch. His mind hadn't hesitated in the slightest with offering up suggestions of what they might do after their training. This was insane. If he'd had any clean training gear left, he would've already been out the door to work off this pent-up energy. Better that than to be a slave to his own libido.

Back during his cadet days he'd never understood how some of his peers had let their grades and performance slide because of something as idiotic as infatuation; because they'd spent all of their waking hours with a fling. Now it seemed like a very real and immediate danger. He refused to go down the same path. The moment Seifer returned, they'd go training. He wouldn't let Seifer get them off track. And for now he resigned himself to finishing his report. He wasn't going to become any more of a burden to Quistis than he already was.

Leaning in to double-check the mission data in the file, it took Squall a formidable amount of effort to keep himself focused on the task at hand, but in the end he managed it through sheer willpower. Every time his mind strayed, he dragged it right back to the dull world of SeeD operative reviews and mission request forms. No one even expected him to do most of this, not since Quistis had gotten him an assistant to keep him from losing his mind. But at the moment it was all he had; all
that stood between him and unacceptable loss of self-discipline. With a singleness of mind he rarely applied to paperwork, he became so absorbed that he actually managed to startle when a knock sounded at the door.

"Seifer, if you're in there, open up right now."

Recognizing the demanding voice as Calder's, Squall let out a sigh and closed his laptop to protect the sensitive Garden files from prying eyes. It seemed that whenever he was left alone at Seifer's place, people inevitably showed up to disrupt his peace. He pushed up from the couch and walked to the front door that was still being assaulted with insistent knocks. Opening the door, he met Calder's quizzical gaze without greeting.

"Hey," Calder said, before temporarily losing his ability to speak at the sight that greeted him. The SeeD Commander was clad in only boxers and a shirt, the man's neckline displaying a couple of prominent hickeys. And he knew exactly who'd put them there.

"Is he here?" he asked, trying hard not to betray his shock. From what Seifer had told him, he hadn't expected for anything to happen between Seifer and Squall despite how much the two obviously cared for each other. For things to have turned sexual so quickly... Squall definitely wasn't as straight as Seifer had assumed. At least he knew why he'd been ignored now.

"He's out."

Calder persisted despite the curt reply. "Where did he go?"

"Groceries and laundry."

"Guess he shouldn't be long then. Mind if I come in?"

Sorely tempted to reply he would in fact mind, Squall reined in the urge to frown and wordlessly stepped out of the way, allowing Seifer's friend entry.

Entering the apartment despite Squall's rather lukewarm reception, Calder spotted Garden's logo on a laptop on the coffee table along with a half eaten breakfast. Maybe he'd interrupted important garden work and that was why Squall seemed less than pleased? Or maybe he still hadn't been forgiven for the poor first impression he'd made. Either that, or Squall really was as appalling at dealing with strangers as Seifer had said.

Walking over to the kitchen, he grabbed a glass from one of the cupboards and poured himself some water. Turning around, he shifted into a comfortable lean against the kitchen counter. He wouldn't let the Commander deter him. If the brunet was going to be part of Seifer's life, then he needed to get to know the man. "So what've you guys been up to? I haven't been able to reach Seifer for days."

Setting himself back down at the coffee table, Squall glanced at Calder. "Training," he said after a moment. "When he's off work." He wasn't sure what Calder knew about Seifer's past and magic abilities, and he wouldn't be the one to unintentionally disclose secrets.

"And he didn't even find the time to call me back?" Calder said, rolling his eyes, certain the hickeys on Squall's neck had one or two things to do with Seifer's apparent distraction. At least they were both okay, despite how grim Seifer had sounded the last time they'd spoken. "Have you been training at the SCTA?"

Thinking better of mentioning the warehouse, lest he bring up the topic of why they chose such a place, Squall simply nodded. "Hunting too," he added in afterthought, figuring Seifer might need
the alibi to avoid any nagging.

"Hunting?" Calder said, raising an eyebrow. He'd never gone hunting with Seifer himself. Apart from Seifer's apparent excitement at the prospect of taking Nolan out for a hunt the other day, he'd never known it was something Seifer enjoyed. They'd always stuck to sparring. "Where did you go?"

"Behema Sands."

Calder looked at the man more closely. Behema Sands was a high-risk location well known for its infestation of ridiculously strong monsters. "Were you hunting anything in particular?"

Squall shrugged. "Whatever put up a good fight."

Calder raised an eyebrow again. He wouldn't happily go slaying monsters for a whole day without a care himself. "Did he use his GFs?"

Squall cast Calder a wary look at that. So the man knew that much. "The desert's a good place for it," he said noncommittally, hoping the man wasn't just baiting him for answers.

"I never knew he had any of those magical beings. Or that he could even use magic," Calder said, somewhat regretful that Seifer had never felt he could confide in him about his past. Despite their easy going relationship and their heavy focus on the physical side of things, he considered Seifer his closest friend. Maybe Seifer still saw him as one of those sheltered Estharians the man always liked to complain about, and he couldn't even really blame the man.

"I have to admit all the stuff I've learned this last week has been quite a ride. I thought Sorceresses were a thing of the past. Dealt with. I didn't even know knights existed," he said, still not really having come to terms with it all. How could someone so normal looking be a Sorceress? "Never thought I'd meet the SeeD Commander either," he added, sending the man in question a disbelieving smile.

Stilling at the unexpected stream of knowledge, Squall studied Calder intently. The words implied Calder knew about Rinoa, and possibly about Seifer's time as a knight. If so, then the relaxed stance and smile suggested the man didn't realize just what such information could do in the wrong hands. Both Seifer and Rinoa's safety in Esthar hinged solely on the fact that nobody knew who or what they were.

"None of this can get out," Squall said, his voice hard as he stared the other man down stonily.

Calder straightened from his relaxed position. The threat beneath Squall's words hung heavy in the air. Goosebumps lined his arms as he remembered the brunet in front of him commanded an army. The man's authority was clear. "It won't," he promised.

"Good," Squall said without a trace of easing up.

Rooted in place for a moment, Calder was slow to nod his understanding. When Squall broke their locked gaze and leaned back, apparently satisfied for the moment, Calder breathed a silent sigh of relief and turned to rinse the glass he'd been drinking from. Leaving it by the side of the sink to dry, he pushed away thoughts of just how Squall would exact his revenge if he was to betray the man's trust.

Where the hell could they go from here? Squall obviously didn't like him, the man not very good at hiding his annoyance with him. He recalled the words Seifer had spoken less than a week ago. _He doesn't play well with others_. He hadn't understood at the time how a commander could
afford to be this bad with people, but he was starting to understand it now. Squall didn't need to make friends to keep people in line.

But Calder wasn't a Garden subordinate. He was Seifer's friend. Trying to quell any instinct to view Squall as a high-ranking officer and instead treat him as someone he wanted to get to know, social ineptitude and all, he relaxed his stance and turned back around. Walking across the room, he sat down on the couch as well, leaving a decent bit of space between them. "Has Seifer shown you any of the gunblades he's made?"

Swallowing down a mouthful of lukewarm coffee, Squall glanced at Calder with a raised eyebrow. The man was more tenacious than he'd anticipated. "Only Kronos."

"It's a beautiful blade," Calder said, remembering just how taken away he'd been when Seifer had first shown it to him. He settled into the couch a bit more. "He made my blade as well," he said, wishing he'd brought it along so he could've shown it. "Arc probably had a hand in it though... Seifer hadn't been there that long when I commissioned it." He seemed to have finally caught the Commander's attention. "The one in the gunblade room at the SCTA, just to the right of Hyperion, is Seifer's too. Kronos's precursor. You can really see the progression."

When Squall didn't say anything in return, Calder realized he'd have to end everything with a question. At least he had a ton of questions he wanted to ask. "Did he ever think about becoming a weaponsmith back at Garden?"

Accepting he wouldn't get any more work done while Calder was around, Squall leaned back and gave a slight shake of the head. "Not that I know of." He highly doubted it in fact. In hindsight it was obvious that Seifer's ambitions had outgrown the goal of becoming an ordinary SeeD operative, but he didn't think forging weapons had ever been part of Seifer's plans.

"I still can't imagine him as a Garden cadet," Calder said, the concept of strict order and obedience just not meshing with the Seifer he knew. "Did he actually manage to follow the rules?"

Squall let out a soft huff as he thought back to their cadet days. "Those he agreed with." Seifer had made an art out of evading punishment and bending the rules to his benefit. To this day he didn't understand how the man had managed to convince the faculty to make him head of the Disciplinary Committee.

"That sounds about right," Calder said with a light chuckle. "And scarily similar to my brother," he continued. Nolan always knew exactly how to finagle his way out of tight spots. "You know, the brat you had to deal with in the main training hall Friday eve. He's one of Seifer's students."

"I didn't see him in Seifer's class."

"Yeah, he's quite bad when it comes to that," Calder said, unable to quell a wave of embarrassment on his brother's behalf. "He thinks he's beyond the need of classes or at least good enough to not need all of them. I'm kind of hoping he'll end up dropping out. I never liked him taking up the gunblade in the first place. Guess you always want to look out for your loved ones."

Squall frowned at Calder's interpretation of protecting someone. To deny someone proper training could only be detrimental to their safety, keeping them weak and defenseless. Incomplete training was even worse. It led to a false sense of competence that more often than not ended up in accidents. "Half-assed skills are the real danger," he said evenly. He was surprised Seifer let the kid get away with such disrespect.

"True. Though if my brother quit and got a normal job, his skills with a gunblade wouldn't matter
at all and I'd sleep much better at night. I guess the odds of that actually happening are quite low with him being unable to sit still, huh?” Calder said, not expecting a reply. "Hey, how did you realize you wanted to be a gunblader?"

Squall considered the question, thinking back to those simpler days. He'd lacked ambition and direction back then, something Seifer had had in spades. Taking up the gunblade had been a way to try and catch up with the older boy, to prove himself Seifer's equal. It was only much later he could admit to himself that the choice had been informed by equal parts admiration and fear of being left behind.

"Cadets choose their weapon at age ten," Squall replied. "The gunblade was Seifer's idea. He was a year ahead of me."

Studying Squall closely, Calder couldn't believe his own ears. "You chose to specialize in gunblades because of Seifer?" he asked, both of his eyebrows raised high. It was mind boggling to learn that Seifer had had such an impact on the famous commander. Squall had told him they went far back, but he hadn't realized just how close they'd been. "How come you guys lost contact?"

The brunet didn't answer right away, regarding him with a cool gaze. "That's not for me to share."

Sighing inwardly, Calder realized he shouldn't have asked the question, however curious he was. Seifer was extremely loyal to Squall and he shouldn't have expected the brunet to be any different. "You're right," he admitted.

Squall relaxed when Calder finally fell silent. The man was overly familiar and nosy, having drained him of his patience rather quickly. Leaning over to take his laptop, he hoped against hope for the man to stay quiet until Seifer's return. Then he'd be Seifer's problem.

Turning his eyes to his report, Squall tried to pick up his work despite the slight fidgeting that interrupted the silence every now and then along with his focus. After days of close companionship with Seifer, Calder's proximity felt like an intrusion in comparison, making him realize just how utterly Seifer had inserted himself into his personal space. In any other situation he would've left to be by himself, but he could hardly lock himself into the bedroom or leave the apartment without any clothes to speak of.

The ring tone of his cell phone cut through his thoughts, stilling his fingers against the keyboard. Suppressing a sigh, he pushed up from the couch and moved to where he'd hung his leather jacket by the door. Retrieving his phone from the left pocket, he glanced at the display.

"Rinoa," he greeted, steeling himself for another wearisome conversation.

"Hi, Squall." Unlike their previous calls, the girl sounded almost calm, nothing hinting at her state of mind. "...How have you been?"

At the mandatory inquiry, he supplied an even, "Okay." Not wanting Calder to overhear what Rinoa said, he walked to the kitchen and leaned back against the counter. "You?"

A brief silence fell before Rinoa answered with light humor in her tone. "Okay." Another hesitation, before she continued, "I'm not the one coping with having to retrain. Laguna called me. He said you're training with Seifer every morning?"

Hardly surprised anymore that those three were keeping each other in the loop, with or without his agreement, he resigned himself to forced honesty. "So far, yes."

"I'm not interrupting your training now, am I?" came the apologetic reply.
"No. We're running late today."

"I see... Is he around?"

"Not right now." When no reply came, his brow scrunched in slight confusion. "Rinoa?"

"Yes, sorry... So, uh, the reason I called... Unless you're running really late with your training, maybe you could come by the penthouse this afternoon? There's a few things I'd like to talk over with you and I have some papers for you to sign."

"What papers?"

"To end the lease of the penthouse," Rinoa replied, a firmness entering her voice. "The landlord brought them by for you to sign."

"You're moving," Squall concluded, unsure what to think of the new development. She had spent weeks looking for just the right place and nearly as long to adjust it to her taste.

"Looks like it. It's one of the things I'd like to discuss with you. I'll be at the penthouse all day today. You think you'll have some time to drop by?"

"This afternoon should be fine," he replied, hoping she had decided to take him up on his offer to help. Either way, Seifer had already mentioned he'd have to go in to work on the chakram for Fujin in the afternoon, so he'd have the time.

"...Good. Just send me a message when you're on your way." After his agreeing hum, he was certain the girl would continue with a meddling question, but Rinoa simply added, "I won't keep you any longer then. Good luck with your training."

Not having expected such an easy conversation, Squall frowned in suspicion.

"Bye Squall."

When the line went dead, he stared at his cell before placing it on the counter. There was no point in trying to guess what she had to say, or where she would move to. He'd hear it that afternoon.

Watching Squall by the kitchen counter, Calder gave the brunet a short while to gather his thoughts before speaking the question that had been on his mind since he'd last seen the girl. "How is she?"

At the question, Squall realized he didn't know. He could repeat her claim that she was okay, but he knew well enough from experience that such a reply usually meant bigger issues were being skirted. Not that he had tried to find out more. Pushing back from the counter to collect his dirty dishes on the coffee table, Squall replied evenly, "I'll find out."

"You going to see her this afternoon? Was that why she called?"

Straightening with his breakfast leftovers in hand, Squall looked at Calder. Giving a hum of confirmation, he turned round and made for the kitchen sink.

Calder pondered whether to say anything or not, but it was obvious Seifer hadn't yet, so chances were the blond wouldn't. "Piece of advice... You might want to take a look in the mirror before you go. I doubt she'd appreciate what Seifer's been busy doing to your neck."

Only through great effort did Squall manage to keep his stride from faltering as mortification washed over him. Setting down the dishes in the sink with a forced calm he didn't feel, he wast
an inward curse on the bastard who had landed him in this predicament, before reminding himself of his own eager participation in receiving the marks. Not used to having to hide such things, he'd forgotten all about them.

Junctioning Shiva, he ignored her amusement and cast a Cure to remove all signs of his morning's debauchery. The magic coursed through him in a quick flash, taking with it the dull throb along his neckline. The damage was done however. He hadn't counted on anyone finding out about this, let alone a stranger he hardly knew. He didn't like the unsurprised nature of Calder's remark either, as if it was a common occurrence. Quelling any uncharitable thoughts towards the man who knew entirely too much about his personal life, he turned on the tap and started to wash his plate and mug.

Eyes trained on where he'd just watched the glow of magic, Calder forced his body to relax. It had been ingrained in him since childhood just how unnatural magic and its practitioners were. He still couldn't get his head around Seifer being able to use magic and here he was, watching the most dangerous man on the planet use magic to get rid of hicckeys. It was all too surreal.

"How long are you staying for?" he asked, wondering just how used to this he would have to get.

Squall's brow twitched at yet another question the man had little business asking. "I'm not sure."

"No missions lined up?"

Setting away the dishes, Squall cast Calder a sideward glance and wondered whether the man wanted him gone. Most Estharians would. "No," he replied evenly.

Calder was fairly certain that was a completely new experience for the Commander, with how busy the man sounded from all the rumors. "Sick leave?"

"Something like it," Squall replied, frowning in distaste.

"Bet you're itching to get back," Calder said as he tried to read the brunet's expression. "I'm sure Seifer will be happy to provide lots of distraction though," he added with a smile he didn't feel. Met with a steely gaze, he sighed softly and leaned back to relax against the couch. Things had changed so much in just little over a week. Seifer hadn't really had time for him and when they'd actually been together, all the man's thoughts had been focused on the commander.

When Seifer had been out on a long trip to collect smithing materials, he'd looked forward to Seifer's return so much. Weeks had passed without a word from the blond and when he'd finally heard from him and had been promised a night of sex Squall had shown up. Since then everything had changed. The smile on his lips faltered. He hadn't even been granted as much as a kiss. Not that they'd kissed much before, but he could admit that he missed Seifer's hands and lips on him. The realization that Seifer could actually be so focused on someone had hit him hard just days previous. He'd thought he'd known Seifer. That the man was all about sex, never about relationships. And as long as he got some of what Seifer had to offer, he was happy. That, and he'd been safe in the position as Seifer's preferred choice for a night of sex. Not anymore.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to stay indifferent. He was no longer Seifer's first choice. In fact he wasn't even really considered an option anymore. And the man who had taken his place left him perplexed. How could anyone start something with someone so socially inept? How could Seifer prefer Squall? He couldn't help the slowly building wish for Squall to leave. For things to go back to the way they had been. But he knew that if he wanted to stay in Seifer's life, he'd have to tread carefully. If he voiced any of these emerging thoughts, he'd immediately be shown the door. Already, Seifer hadn't replied to his messages or phone calls. He was on precarious ground.
Relieved when Calder fell into a thoughtful silence, Squall let out an inaudible sigh. Maneuvering his way through social conventions and unwanted conversations like this always left him weary. He'd gotten used to his friends understanding him, their easy acceptance of his nature and his need for space. Even Loire had learned to tone things down after a while. At least it seemed like Calder was refraining from any further attempts at conversation for the time being.

Not about to complain, he glanced to where his laptop was sitting. Seifer might still be a while and with Calder around it wasn't likely they'd leave for training soon. Deciding to get his second-in-command off his back, he retrieved his laptop and glasses to go over the newly proposed mission roster Xu had sent him for November. Sitting himself at the other end of the couch, he nudged his glasses into place and quickly assumed a properly engrossed expression to deter any more questions from the man next to him.

Xu's emails however were far from engrossing, each and every one of them labeled 'URGENT'. At least Quistis had the sense to be a bit more nuanced. His determination plummeted when he opened the new mission roster and realized his name wouldn't be on it. The occasional hour of administrative work had become all the more boring since Seifer was back in his life, as if he'd come to expect the man to interrupt and suggest something infinitely more interesting.

Catching his thoughts wandering to Seifer again, Squall frowned. If someone ever asked how he'd gotten himself into this mess, 'I couldn't help myself' would apparently be the useless reply. As his eyes skimmed over the new mission requests, he tried to shake the return of his unease... But then a new email announced its arrival with a flickering icon, the subject line's abundant use of exclamation marks and capital letters betraying its sender.

Selphie. He should've known the girl would get back to him quickly.

—

You remembered email is a thing now?! SO PSYCHED!

—

Hello stranger! You know I had to pinch myself, right? An email? From my elusive Commander?

Here I was, ready to come and kidnap you out of B-Garden's overprotective clutches! Way to leave a girl in the dark, man. What's all this I've been hearing about you and Rinnie and sick leave? I can sooo imagine Quistis popping a fuse after what you've been up to. So sneaky…

WAIT! Before you click me away!

I'm not gonna nag your head off to tell me all about it. I'll leave that to Quistie :3 All I have to say is this. Don't you dare hole up in Esthar to go find yourself or something stupid like that! Shit happens, and hey, it's Rinnie's loss, right? Don't make me come bust you out of there! Or better even, get the gang together and haul your ass back to Garden. It's been a while since our last reunion party after all. Remember Irvine's face when Zell threw up in his new hat?

Now that was priceless.

But, I digress!

I added the stuff you asked for in an attachment to this mail. The pics are all numbered in order, chronologically. I just had to add the pictures of Zell's birthday party. XD That picture of Zell with the hat was my wallpaper for over a month! I also put up my journal as a joint online document for
all of us. So, we can all add whatever we want, whenever we feel like it. Don't worry! I've got this motherfucker encrypted to hell and back, so it's our eyes only. The link is at the end of the email. I'll keep an eye out for your eloquent entries. :P

That's all, I guess.

Stay on top of your game, Squall, and we'll stay on top of ours. Hang in there!

*** BEAR HUG ***

—

After a moment of fondness for Selphie's far from coddling ways and a thanks to Hyne that the girl was all the way in Trabia for the moment, Squall downloaded the folder with pictures onto his laptop. A small collection of photographs had survived the orphanage's years of vacancy, which Selphie had supplemented with a handful of archived Garden class pictures and a steady stream of pictures that chronicled their more recent activities, along with her journal entries. As their self-appointed archivist, Selphie was determined not to let their past slip into forgotten memories a second time.

It had been a while since he'd seen those pictures himself. After the war he'd used them as triggers to help recover his memory, but later he'd refused Selphie's offer to print some out for him. Quickly, he'd become unable to let his gaze linger on any of the pictures that had Seifer in them. But things were different now. After Seifer's mixed reaction to learning about the orphanage, he'd contacted Selphie. He'd decided to keep the pictures on hand for when the man might need them.

His fingers flew over the keyboard as he typed his thanks to Selphie and clicked on 'send'. He knew the girl wouldn't tell the others about his odd request, let alone pry herself. Talkative and exuberant as she was, Selphie was the most likely of their gang to keep confidence. She had little patience with drama that didn't involve a stage and even less with gossip; two traits he greatly appreciated.

A series of footsteps and the jangle of keys pulled Squall from his thoughts. Next to him, Calder stirred as well, putting a damper on the anticipation that surged through him. Frowning at his rising heartbeat, he forced his gaze onto his laptop screen.

Entering his apartment, Seifer froze into place. He almost wanted to step back out and make sure he hadn't just walked into an alternate reality where Squall and Calder were actually sitting on the same couch. One lost to work, the other staring straight at him.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, readjusting his precarious hold on the several bags of groceries. He'd completely forgotten to return Calder's calls after his conversation with Laguna. He should've fucking figured Calder would turn up when the man didn't get a reply. Leading to this. Calder and Squall. Alone. Together. Hyne knew Squall would be in a pissy mood by now, leaving any chances of fooling around in the near future very slim.

"I'm fine," Seifer said with an eyeroll, shouldering the door closed behind him. At least he assumed that was why Calder was there.

"I know," Calder replied, raising an eyebrow. "It's easy enough to put two and two together."

Seifer chuckled but refrained from making light of the situation when he spotted the ominous twitch to Squall's brow. He hadn't missed how Squall had healed all evidence of what they'd been doing. Not the best of signs, but he wasn't about to make any excuses to either man when he felt no guilt whatsoever.
"Why are you here then?" he asked, handing over the groceries when Calder got up to help.

"Had to make sure. That and I thought I'd try and persuade you for a spar or to hang out some."

"Sorry, Buttercup, but we've got plans all day," Seifer said, more than eager for it to be just him and Squall again.

"Seriously?" Calder demanded, annoyed to be pushed aside again. His patience was finally wearing thin. He set down the groceries on the counter with a sigh.

Seifer shrugged. "If you want, you can make yourself useful and stay for lunch. Those grocery bags have everything needed for sandwiches," he said, nodding at the bags. "I need to dump these in the bedroom," he added, jostling the duffle bags slung across his shoulder.

"Sure, whatever," Calder said without much enthusiasm. It was obvious Seifer was just throwing him a bone, but he couldn't help himself from seizing the chance to be with the blond.

Seifer turned to look at Squall. Anticipation charged through him when their gazes met, strengthening his resolve to get their day back on track; the way he'd intended. No more interruptions after this, and no more fucking chores.

"Come on. I've got some clean clothes for you," he said, gesturing for Squall to follow him.

Entering the bedroom, he dropped the bags at the end of the bed and started to empty them. The door behind him gave a slight creak as Squall entered as well, but the brunet only spared him a fleeting look before heading straight for his own duffel bag. Seifer walked over and nudged the door shut.

If Squall had noticed the door closing, the man wasn't letting on as he continued to lay out his clothes at the end of the bed. Stopping right behind Squall, Seifer breathed in slowly before placing his hands on Squall's hips. Leaning in so their bodies were touching, he placed his cheek against Squall's. "Would've been more fun if it was just you and me."

Finding himself agreeing wholeheartedly, Squall fought the urge to lean back in Seifer's hold. This hadn't been his intention when joining Seifer in the bedroom. He needed to get dressed; not whatever this was. Unfortunately his self-control was no match for Seifer, their brief separation filled with heated fantasies not helping one bit. He bit back a groan when Seifer started to slowly run his hands up and down his thighs, just close enough to his groin to titillate, but not nearly enough to satisfy.

"Seifer," he hissed out in a feeble attempt at dissuasion, but unable to move away.

"Mmm?" Seifer intoned, moving his right hand closer and running the side of his thumb along Squall's length. "I could suck you off," he whispered against Squall's ear. "Right here," he added and nipped at Squall's earlobe. "If you dare."

Squall cursed inwardly as Seifer started to kiss down his neck. He really wasn't ready to find out whether the bastard could actually entice him into a tryst with the man's friend right next door. "Don't you dare."

Letting out a brief chuckle against the nape of Squall's neck, Seifer tightened his grip on Squall's hips and placed a slow lick against taut skin before he let go. "He won't stay long."

Turning around, Squall managed a weak glare as he slowly regained his senses. The pleased grin on Seifer's face told him this little game had been entirely intentional, but the realization did little to
alleviate his arousal. There was no hiding from Seifer's knowing gaze as it swept over the slight tenting of his boxers. To Squall's dismay, the bastard himself looked far too unaffected. His frown deepened when Seifer leaned in for a kiss he had no hope of denying. He would've completely lost himself to the sensation of licks and nibbles, if it hadn't been for the maddening grin he could still feel on Seifer's lips.

Well aware that if he spent another second kissing Squall he'd never make it out of there, Seifer pulled back. The breathless sigh that left Squall in response was far too sexy, making it the feat of the century when he turned around and left the aroused lion hanging. Shit, only Squall could make a withering glare look like foreplay. Would it even be that bad if Calder overheard them? If the man walked in on them? Yes, his mind supplied immediately. He wouldn't share Squall with anyone. Only he was allowed to see Squall's when the man's cock was jerking in ecstasy.

Stamping out any remains of arousal, Seifer entered the living room. He couldn't quite hide his satisfaction at just how pliant Squall had been when he joined Calder in the kitchen however.

"Dare I ask what you guys were up to in there?" Calder asked, regarding the enormous smirk plastered on the blond's lips.

"Not much," Seifer replied as he started chopping some vegetables, but his smirk didn't abate. "Kept it perfectly respectable."

Calder rolled his eyes. "That sounds unlikely."

"Hey, come on. The man's just getting dressed."

"And he needed help with that?" Calder asked, raising an eyebrow.

Smiling, Seifer shrugged. "He travels light. Had to make a run to the laundromat."

Calder huffed as he folded the paper bags for recycling. "I'm sure that's the only reason he's wearing your underwear."

Seifer chuckled. "You know I've always loved your dirty mind."

Feeling at ease for all of a moment, lured into their usual relaxed conversation, Calder felt a twinge of loneliness. What he wouldn't give to draw the blond into the bedroom later on for a bout of uninhibited sex. No cares, no worries, just sex. Instead Seifer would lure Squall in there and the man probably wouldn't even appreciate it half as much.

"You okay?" Seifer asked, pulling Calder out of his straying thoughts.

Calder gave a brief nod. "Yeah, you know..." he said as he put the leftovers they wouldn't need back into the fridge. He'd have to get used to it. He'd already tried. Friday evening had been spent with a drugged up mind and mad sex. It had been fine without Seifer. It had been fine when Seifer had been out on the road too. He just missed it.

"So, what've you been up to?" Seifer asked, unused to Calder being so reticent.

"Not much. I've been pretty bored to be perfectly honest," Calder answered. "Spent all of yesterday with Nolan and all he could talk about was your promise to go on that trip out of Esthar."

"And all you could think about was calling me, apparently."

"I'm never going to hear the end of that, am I?" Calder said, sighing in mock exasperation.
"No," Seifer said with a chuckle. "You gotta admit, seven times is pretty needy."

"Yeah, well, it's your own damn fault for making me worry," Calder said, getting some glasses out to pour their drinks. "So, Squall said you two have been busy training and hunting?"

"Hn. Yeah. That and work. Been pretty hectic."

Calder raised an eyebrow at the lazy explanation. "You could've invited me to tag along, you know."

Seifer suppressed a frown, realizing just how true Calder's words were. He was saved from coming up with an immediate reply however when Squall entered the living room and spared them both a glance. If the man had overheard, he clearly didn't care. Left to fend for himself, Seifer failed to come up with a good excuse. Even if the thought to invite Calder had actually occurred to him, he never would have. Yesterday had been for Squall and himself only.

"Think you could have handled it?" he asked instead, attempting to sidetrack Calder.

"Handle it?" Calder repeated with a raised eyebrow. "First you completely forget about me, but now you're questioning my skills? You're lucky I'm not a jealous man, Almasy."

Seifer laughed as he placed some cartons of milk in the fridge. "Jealous? You do realize that if you were jealous you'd have to take it up with the guy over there," he said cocking his head in Squall's direction. "And that wouldn't be very wise now, would it?"

Huffing at the ridiculous conversation, Squall headed over to the couch to sit down and resume his work. As if he would ever fight anyone for the privilege to hang out with Seifer. He tuned out their inane conversation and left the two men to the task of preparing lunch. Turning on his laptop, he keyed in the password only to immediately spot the eagerly flashing icon of a newly received email, labeled with the promising subject title of "I'm booooooored!" There was only one person who would send him a message like that.

*I know you're there! I'm bored and you must be too if you've got your laptop on. Open a chat link! Like, now.***

Squall contemplated his options. He wasn't in a particularly sociable mood after having endured the two idiots in the room, but if anyone could distract him it would be Selphie; not mission rosters. He cast a glance towards the kitchen. Seifer and Calder stood with their backs turned to him, working side by side companionably and talking about inconsequential things that luckily didn't involve him.

A third email from Selphie flashed on his screen then, labeled "Don't make me hack your laptop!"

*I know for a fact that Garden administration can't possibly be more interesting than me.*

Squall decided he might as well. It didn't look like Calder was going anywhere soon. Huffing at Seifer's earlier statement that the man wouldn't stay long, Squall looked back to his laptop and opened a chat window. He raised an eyebrow at Selphie's choice of handle.

S.L. I think I missed the wedding.

Miss Kinneas Oh, the name? That's just to rattle Irvine's cage. My sweet revenge for those twins' asses he's been ogling. Nothing makes that man sweat like the sound of wedding bells.

S.L. You said this would be interesting.
Miss Kinneas Love you too, meanie :D Good to know you can still tell boring from fun! There's hope for you yet.

Sooo... What are you up to?

Looking up at Seifer's back, he didn't dare imagine Selphie's reaction should he tell her the truth. Even he couldn't quite believe what he'd been up to these past few days.

S.L. November's mission roster.

Miss Kinneas You owe me then for my divine intervention!
You know, I've had my eyes on this new set of explosives. Pretty high tech.

S.L. I don't negotiate with terrorists.

Miss Kinneas Funny. I swear Irvine said the same thing this morning. Well, be stingy then if you dare ;P

Guess what! The picture I put up on Garden's forum of Zell and Irvine's hat already got 53 hits!

link address

Bored cadets and their classroom consoles; the best combo ever! This is gonna spread like wildfire!

Aren't you going to ask?

S.L. Why did you post the picture?

Miss Kinneas The budget of the explosives department got cut back because he requested the development of humanoid holos to add to the training centers! That costs tons! It's not my fault his students can't throw a decent punch.

Good thing I have lots of embarrassing pictures :D

Deciding to help Zell out before the situation got out of hand, Squall quickly typed his answer. He knew from experience that Selphie never made idle threats.

S.L. I'll talk to Quistis.

Miss Kinneas I knew you were the right man to talk to!

So, anyone you have a pickle with? Like, evil exes for instance. I'm sure I can help you out!

Squall sighed at the unavoidable topic and the pang of guilt he felt for misleading his friends like this. He could only surmise they all thought he was heartbroken, going by what little he'd heard from Quistis. The truth was less flattering. Ever since he'd started to take Odine's pills, he hadn't really felt the absence of the bond at all anymore. Without the pain or distress of the broken bond, his thoughts about Rinoa were fleeting at best. He'd moved on far more quickly than he'd thought himself capable of. If anything, it was Seifer that posed the problem now and not Rinoa. Trusting his friend not to pry too deeply, he hoped a lighter tone would appease the woman.

S.L. I'm fine on the revenge front.

Miss Kinneas Ah, I hear ya. Let's be friends, right? Good for you. Not so good for my plans... I'll store away my C-4 charges then.
And the blackmail pictures.

S.L. It's not Rinoa's fault.

Miss Kinneas I know. Hell, I threaten to blow up Irvie on a daily basis. That man is exasperating!

I was just trying to cheer you up.

Did it work?

S.L. You forget blowing things up only works for you.

Miss Kinneas Whatever you say :D I know I made the corners of those lips twitch. Don't you dare deny it.

Suppressing the curl of his lips, Squall felt a small burden lift from his shoulders when he realized Selphie wasn't going to blame him. Not for being a distant friend. Not for lying. Not even for getting involved with Seifer, should the unlikely turn of events ever get out. She'd just as easily accept Seifer back into her life, he realized. If Seifer would ever be interested in getting to know the people he'd grown up with at the orphanage, Selphie would be the best first step down that road.

As Seifer finished up making the last sandwich, a ping sounded once more. Pausing, he looked over his shoulder to where Squall was sitting. The sound was coming from Squall's laptop. While he had no computer of his own, he recognized the familiar sound well enough from the many times he'd interrupted Doreen slacking off in her office at the SCTA. "Don't tell me you're actually chatting," he said in disbelief.

"I'll turn the sound off," was Squall's simple answer.

At the lack of a denial or explanation, Seifer turned around to better study the brunet. He knew Squall had friends now, but he still couldn't quite reconcile Squall's taciturn nature with the man actually chatting. "Who is it?"

Squall looked up and considered his reply. "...Selphie," he said after a moment.

Seifer frowned at the name. Just two nights ago he'd been told he'd shared his childhood with this girl, but his only memories of her were from the war. All he could see was her intense expression as she'd caught Hyperion's blow with her nunchaku.

Calder watched as Seifer turned back around to finish putting the sandwiches together. Seifer's deeply pensive expression was closed off before the man tried to assume an unfazed air that was wholly unconvincing. Looking over at Squall, he quirked an eyebrow at the intense way Squall was studying Seifer. The tension in the room had grown palpable.

"How is she?" Seifer finally asked.

Squall hadn't missed the lapse in Seifer's nonchalance. How much thought had the man given to their conversation about the orphanage, if any? Seifer's question obviously wasn't inspired by any real need to know, but by the scrutinizing eyes of his friend.

"Energetic," he answered all the same. "As usual."

Lifting his gaze from what he was doing, Seifer looked blankly ahead. He didn't remember Selphie enough to know her usual behavior, but Squall's words made him long to understand. The feeling
that something was missing, that some part of him was missing, wouldn't let go. He frowned. Ever since the war he hadn't allowed himself to consider his past, not even the innocent days at Garden or the time before that. But now... Squall had assured him that if he tried hard enough, the memories would be right there.

At first, the only thing he could remember was that image of a crying toddler. Squall. He still couldn't quite believe any of it, but he quelled the part of him that balked at remembering anything at all and forced his mind towards the vague memories of a lighthouse. The beach. The sound of seagulls and crashing waves. Days spent in the sun and sand. Then something gave way and the image of a tiny brunette appeared in his mind. His chest constricted, his breath stuck in his lungs.

She had freckles, two prominent pigtails that weren't doing much to keep her hair in place and one missing front tooth. She was smiling mischievously as she eyed a demolished sandcastle not far away. They were hiding behind a dune on the beach. The girl was wriggling with excitement. He couldn't suppress the fondness he felt then, a soft smile emerging on his lips as he put a slice of bread on top of the sandwich. They had been partners in crime.

And just as quickly as the fond memory had appeared it was washed away by heavy thoughts of the war. Selphie, Irvine, Zell, Quistis and Ellone. Those were the people Squall had told him he'd grown up with... and he'd turned against them all; had fought them. His hands clenched as he shut his eyes, his head tilting forwards. He couldn't face Calder right now. He couldn't face Squall.

He'd read Selphie's file. The others' too. But unlike the others, it had read Trabia Garden under her affiliation. He hadn't physically pressed the button that had launched the missiles that led to Trabia Garden's obliteration, but he'd been the one to relay the order. Hundreds had lost their lives that day.

Watching Seifer's body language become more alarming by the second, Squall's concern grew. The white-knuckled grip on the knife in Seifer's hand, the tight set to those shoulders... He had to stop whatever destructive train of thought was going through Seifer's head, but Calder was inconveniently in the way for him to say what needed to be said.

"You okay?" Calder asked. Seifer's posture was outright forbidding and the heavy silence reminded him entirely too much of those few nights Seifer had spent at his place, unspeaking and absent in every way that counted.

"Yeah," Seifer said without meeting his gaze, as if from a distance. "I gotta take a leak."

Calder was pushed aside as Seifer walked to the bedroom door with brisk strides, hastening away from them. Calder furrowed his brow, unable to fathom how the mention of a single name could have led to this. He looked over at Squall. "What just happened?"

"Estranged friends," Squall prevaricated. The statement was true enough in a sense. Typing a quick goodbye to Selphie, he set aside his laptop and got up from the couch with a frown. He continuously underestimated the effect the war had on Seifer. Their conversation about the past and the orphanage had apparently done nothing to lighten the man's burden. He'd have to try harder, whether Seifer wanted his help or not.

Before Calder could utter any objection, he walked into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Seifer was standing by the window. The man met his gaze only briefly before looking outside again. Squall walked a few steps closer, lingering just outside Seifer's personal space. The crossed arms and deep frown weren't exactly inviting and he wouldn't risk Seifer bailing. An uncomfortable length of silence passed as he waited the man out.
"She could've died," the blond finally offered, his voice stern and distant. "Along with all her friends. Along with you."

Having his answer as to what was bothering Seifer, Squall stepped past the blond to lean with his back against the window frame. Even if Seifer didn't want to look him in the eye, he at least wanted to see the man's face when talking about these things.

"You nearly died yourself," Squall said evenly. Seifer's scar reappeared in his mind's eye, bringing with it all the imagined ways in which the man could've received the injury.

"I didn't deserve to live," Seifer said harshly, unable to keep the anger at himself and his past out of his voice.

Hearing the sentiment voiced for the second time now, Squall was still caught off guard by the words. The self-loathing had dug in deep with Seifer; too deep for him to know where to start. What the hell did you say to someone who didn't think they should be alive? Someone who had actively taken steps to try and make that a reality? ...Someone he cared about.

Frustrated, he tried to keep his gaze unwavering. "I'm glad you didn't get the final say."

Seifer almost snorted at the ridiculousness of their situation. Two years ago they'd been at opposite sides of a war, had attempted to kill each other and now Squall was saying he deserved to live. He had killed people, tortured them, burned them. "...Then you don't know what happened."

"I know enough," Squall said evenly, unwilling to condemn the man for events beyond his control. "By your line of thinking I'm not exactly deserving myself. I've killed people who didn't deserve to die. I could have killed you." He paused, looking at Seifer intently, needing the man to understand. "Only difference is, I didn't have anyone in my head making me do it."

Seifer's voice was grim and forbidding when he spoke his next words. "You haven't slaughtered kids. You haven't made their parents watch," he said, his posture rigid and anger stirring at having to share something so horrible and intimate with the person he cared about the most. "You haven't tortured," he added, his words seething with all the pent up emotions he'd managed to keep down deep enough to continue on with his life these past few years.

At the harsh confessions, Squall remembered the villages that had been raided in Ultimecia's search for Ellone. It hadn't been pretty and nobody had ever been able to put names to the culprits. For Ultimecia to let her knight do even the dirtiest of work... Growing more desperate by the second to bring his point home, he used his anger to shake himself out of his stupor.

"That wasn't you. None of that was you," he said firmly. "How many people did you hurt when she wasn't forcing your hand? In all the time you weren't her knight?"

"It was me," Seifer said, unable to cast aside the guilt. "It was my hands. My blade. I made the decision to follow her."

"That doesn't answer my question," Squall replied, regarding the blond levelly. "Not one, I think is the answer." He moved out of his leaning pose and drew closer to Seifer. "When did you first regret following her?"

"I don't know… At D-District, I guess," Seifer said. Torturing Squall had been the breaking point.

"That was right at the start," Squall pointed out. "You told me yourself. You didn't know her plans at first, what she was going to use you for."
"That doesn't mean I shouldn't have fought her harder," Seifer said, briefly meeting Squall's gaze. For the millionth time he wished that somehow he'd found a way out of it. "And it doesn't matter how many I hurt before or after the war, when I know what I did during... I don't know what was her and what was me. It wasn't like a switch. It wasn't like one moment I was in control and the next moment I wasn't. It all felt like me."

"No," Squall said, shaking his head. "You might have been arrogant, but you were never cruel. That wasn't your nature; that was hers. No matter what she made it seem like."

"How do you know?" Seifer demanded, wanting to believe Squall but unable to. "I want to know, but no matter how much I think about it, I won't ever know the truth. War twists people; makes them do things they wouldn't normally."

"Not the way it changed you," Squall persisted. But even as he said the words, he could tell Seifer wasn't taking them to heart. None of what he was trying to say meant a thing in the face of the man's self-loathing. Contemplating his options, he decided to repay honesty with honesty and braced himself for the consequences of what he would say next. "None of it made sense. I needed to know for sure, but you were gone, so... I went to see Ellone."

At the name, Seifer's eyes widened for a fraction of a second, before his hands clenched into fists and his eyes narrowed in anger. He couldn't escape the intense feeling of being violated and exposed, the knowledge that Squall had seen what he'd done rendering him speechless.

When he had apologized to Squall just over a week ago, when he'd bared himself to the man, Squall had known everything. And Squall hadn't said a word. Unbridled anger consumed him as he swung his hand forward and grabbed hold of the brunet's shirt. About to bodily slam the man into the wall, he stopped himself just in time, the move becoming a forceful push instead, his knuckles white and muscles bunching.

"She didn't show me anything."

Seifer's eyes only narrowed further. "Then what the fuck is your point," Seifer demanded, his voice dangerously low.

"I didn't see anything," Squall reiterated calmly, relieved to at least have drawn Seifer's attention instead of a punch to the gut. With conscious effort, he ignored the instinct to fight back against the firm hold pressing him into the wall. "Neither did Ellone," he reassured further. "That's what I wanted to tell you... When she reached out, she couldn't find anything. Not one memory." Trying to instill the importance of what he was saying, Squall continued more firmly, "She said she felt something strange, something wrong pushing back at her."

A frown of confusion grew on Seifer's brow. No memories. How could that be? He didn't know how Ellone's powers worked, but he assumed she somehow created a connection between herself and the person whose past she wanted to watch. So how come she couldn't see his?

The soft touch of Squall's hand on his wrist pulled Seifer back into the present. As his eyes focused on Squall's, he became aware of his continued hold on the man's shirt. Letting go of the crumpled fabric, he turned around and stepped away, needing space.

Spurred on by Seifer's obvious contemplation of his words, Squall followed Seifer with his eyes. He'd let the man have his distance for now, as long as he could explain. "She said something like that had never happened before. That it should be impossible. You didn't just disappear from the grid." He'd been too conflicted and confused at the time to draw the right conclusions, but now he was certain. "Something else took your place. Someone else."
Seifer turned to look at Squall, surprised by the words. Squall was claiming Ultimecia had taken his place, had somehow interfered with his memories. If that was the case, only one thing could prove it. "Did you see anything before? Or after?"

Realizing all too well how little he himself would appreciate his own memories being looked into, Squall shook his head. "No. Before or after wasn't my concern." His guilty conscience made itself known at the sight of Seifer's piercing gaze, and not just because of the breach of privacy. "It was enough to confirm my doubts."

The corners of Seifer's lips sloped downwards. Squall had needed the truth so much that he'd sought out Ellone and asked her to use her powers for him. He'd hurt Squall. What he'd done did matter. With how Squall had seemingly forgiven him for everything, he'd been lulled into the fantasy that Squall had believed it hadn't been him all along. But he'd been fooling himself. Badly.

To this day I don't know what possessed you to do what you did... Why you...

How could he have forgotten those words? It hadn't been much more than a week ago. Squall hadn't even been able to finish the sentence. No matter what Squall was saying now, about what Squall now thought to be the truth, just a week ago Squall hadn't been certain. A sense of overpowering defeat began to take its toll. He knew this, so why did it still hurt?

"Seifer, it wasn't you," Squall pressed, hating how powerless he felt. "I couldn't believe it was you. It's why I went to her in the first place. It's why I came with you that night at the club." He hated seeing Seifer so withdrawn and nothing like the man was supposed to be. No matter what he said, there didn't seem to be a way to convince him. Either Seifer didn't believe him, or still didn't think it proof enough. But then he realized the meaning of Seifer's earlier words. Before or after...

"We can prove it. With Ellone's help."

When no reaction came, not even a sign that the blond had heard him, Squall was torn between annoyance and concern. Seifer was shutting him out deliberately. Deciding he would just have to make himself be heard, he walked up to Seifer and placed himself directly in the man's line of sight.

"Seifer."

The moment Seifer looked up to meet his gaze, his half-formed plan rolled from his lips and took shape. "If you don't believe me—if it's proof you need, I can call Ellone," he said imploringly. "We can go see her and you can see for yourself. Your memories from before and after the war; I'm sure they'll be unaffected"

Furrowing his brows, Seifer eyed the brunet carefully. "You'd do that? he asked, part of him wanting to believe what Squall was saying even though he knew he shouldn't. "You think she'd do that?"

"Yes," Squall answered immediately, encouraged by Seifer considering his offer seriously. He'd do anything within his power to right some of his wrongs, to lift some of Seifer's burden. And Ellone, she would understand. "She lives in Galbadia, so it would take a few days," he added, already thinking ahead. There was the meeting on Tuesday to keep in mind, but other than that, he had nothing keeping him in Esthar. The sooner they did this, the better.

"Where in Galbadia?"
"Winhill. South Galbadia."

Seifer brought up a hand to knead at his forehead. "What if she couldn't see the memories because of the bond?"

Squall contemplated the comment briefly, but quickly shook his head. "Even so, Ellone said it felt wrong. Maybe the extent of the distortion reflects the extent of the sorceress's manipulation." And the moment he voiced those thoughts, he knew where this was heading. He steeled himself for the inevitable. No matter how unpleasant, he owed this to Seifer.

"We can use my memories."

Raising an eyebrow at the offer, Seifer was starting to understand just how important this was to Squall. Privacy had always been paramount to the man. Hell, it had only been a week since his jaw had been reminded of said fact. "So we compare? See if it's the same for both of us?"

At Squall's nod, Seifer felt some of his tension leave him. They were actually going to do this.

"How does it work?" he asked, unable to picture it at all. Ultimecia had never told him any of the specifics regarding Ellone's powers, only that the girl could bring you into the past. Maybe Ultimecia hadn't even known the specifics herself.

"She can only use her powers with people she knows personally," Squall started, hoping Seifer wouldn't be deterred by the inevitability of seeing each other's memories. "She's... a catalyst. She sends the consciousness of one person into the past of the other." Guessing that Seifer would also want to know about the experience itself, he elaborated. "You see things from the eyes of the other. You're in their head, hear their thoughts." He paused then, remembering those first forced experiences. "It's disorientating at first. You can't influence what happens. You just watch."

Trying to picture what it would be like peeking out from Squall's eyes, hearing Squall's thoughts, perceiving things as Squall would, Seifer realized just how intimate the whole thing would be. But before he could ponder it any further, something else became apparent as well. "You've done it before," he commented, wanting to know who else's past Squall had looked into.

Squall nodded. "A few times without my consent, into Loire's past. And once, to find out what happened to Rinoa."

"Does Ellone see the memories as well?"

"Only when she's the one going into the past." Pausing, Squall figured he had to warn Seifer about the trial and error that usually accompanied the woman's powers. "She can't see where she sends someone. It's no exact science, so it can take a few times before she gets it right."

Some of Seifer's apprehension returned with Squall's warning. What if there was still a chance Squall would see something from the war? "But you just experience one memory at a time? In real-time?"

"One at a time. No choice but to let them run their course. You can give her directions in between attempts if necessary."

Even though he knew he was in no position to set any ground rules when the whole thing was for his benefit, Seifer had to make one exception. "If you see anything from the war, we stop."

Squall nodded, agreeing to Seifer's terms. The point would be moot anyway if that happened. "And no hiding what we see," he continued, adding his own prerequisite.
"Hn," Seifer agreed, watching Squall carefully. This was going to be one weird and extremely fucked up experiment. But if it worked, if he could access Squall's memories as a knight and Squall couldn't access his... then...

He couldn't believe Squall was doing this for him. But he sure as hell wasn't about to question whether Squall knew what he was getting into. If there was anything Seifer could be absolutely certain of, it was that Squall knew exactly what he was getting into. So instead Seifer took a step forward, leaned in and placed a soft kiss on Squall's lips.

"Thank you," he said as he looked into gray-blue eyes.

At the two simple words he hadn't ever heard Seifer say before, Squall was too stunned to react to either the thanks or the kiss. The latter was apparently becoming a frequent occurrence, but it still caught him off guard. Forcing his attention back to the matter at hand, he asked, "When can we make the trip?"

Seifer considered the question. He wanted to go as soon as possible, but he had a feeling Arc would hunt his ass down if he left again any time soon. He had the trip with Fujin and Raijin coming up though... They were going to meet at Obel Lake. If Fu and Rai agreed to an earlier trip, then they could combine the two. Maybe then Arc would agree to it. "How do you feel about going hunting with Raijin and Fujin?"

Squall raised an eyebrow in surprise, unsure how hunting with Seifer's friends figured into things. He highly doubted they would appreciate him tagging along for that matter. "Since when does the DC take on outsiders?" he commented doubtfully.

"Since their leader told them to," Seifer said arrogantly with a smile on his lips. "C'mon. It'll be fun. You can have the chocobo that always tries to eat me."

Squall's eyebrow only quirked further at the visual that last sentence invoked. The sudden change in Seifer's demeanor was almost whiplash inducing, leading Squall to suspect the man had become worrisomely good at emotional compartmentalization. But maybe seeing his friends would help the man deal with confronting his past, so Squall simply asked, "What kind of hunting are we talking about?"

"We usually choose a creature that's hard to find and tough to bring down. Then we track it down and hunt anything else that might catch our interest along the way." Seifer smiled, imagining Squall out there with them. He'd been looking forward to the trip for ages, but he almost couldn't contain his eagerness at the possibility of Squall joining as well. No responsibilities, no chores, just them out on a hunt together. The prospect of surprising the shit out of Raijin and Fujin was just the icing on the cake. A very, very tasty icing. "You'll love it."

At Seifer's obvious enthusiasm, Squall found it difficult to voice his hesitance. He would be intruding, no matter what Seifer said. "It's in a few weeks, right?" By then he might already be back in the field, which would complicate things. "You want to go see Ellone in the same trip?"

"Yeah. Our plan was to meet up at Obel Lake. It'd fit in perfectly on the way to see Ellone or on our way back," Seifer answered, hoping Squall's questions might mean he was actually considering it. "I could try and move it up. Arc's going to have to let me go for the days I'd already booked anyways. It shouldn't matter if I take them off now or then. And Healy was going to take over for my classes. He doesn't have anything better to do. The only unknown is Rai and Fu. But they're usually easy. We could pack up tonight and leave tomorrow if they're up for it."

Squall frowned, shaking his head in thought. "I can't get out of the meeting on Tuesday." He
looked up to meet Seifer's gaze. "We can leave right after. It's in the morning, so we should still have enough time to get to Galbadia."

Seifer nodded, having forgotten about Squall's meeting. And their appointments with Odine. "That'd work better with my classes as well. Then I can still teach tomorrow. You'll have to cancel with Odine though."

Squall hummed in agreement. He didn't mind cancelling with Odine one bit. He'd have a tough time explaining it to Quistis though. Especially if he wanted to avoid telling her the real reason.

"I guess we'd better get calling then," Seifer said, unable to hide his excitement. "Ellone first? … See when's best for her?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. I just have to let her know we're coming," Squall assured. "She might not be able to close the pub on such short notice though. Be prepared to help out." He'd learned that from the one time he'd visited her before. The curious and bored townspeople had flocked together at the pub to see what kind of outsider Ellone was having over.

Chuckling at the added information, Seifer's easy smile returned. "Sounds like a fair deal." At least that way he wouldn't feel like he was imposing as much. He'd be able to pour drinks and entertain the locals no problem.

"I'll call Fujin then," he said, but looked over to where the shut door had kept their conversation from traveling to the living room. "After I deal with Calder."

"I'll call Ellone in here," Squall said, reaching for the cell phone in his pocket.

"Alright," Seifer said with a nod, drawing out the moment. He didn't really want to leave Squall's side. What the brunet was doing for him was huge. Much bigger than the man giving him half of his magic and even that had been insanely generous. This was the second time Squall was going above and beyond for him and it both unsettled and pleased him to no end. He really wanted to show his appreciation, but for now they had to start planning. That and he wanted Squall all to himself when he was going to thank the man. After one last brief kiss, he walked to the door and steeled himself for having to face his neglected friend.

Watching Seifer leave, Squall leaned back against the nearest wall and closed his eyes. He'd kept a calm front throughout the confrontation, belying his feelings of unease and inadequacy. He hated adversaries that couldn't be charged head-on or beaten into submission and heart-to-hearts were mostly wasted on him, but he would do whatever it took to help Seifer, no matter how far he'd have to wade outside his comfort zone.

He waited until the rapping of his heartbeat slowed down before opening his eyes again. In the other room, he could hear Seifer and Calder's muted voices. Staring down at his cell phone, he spent a moment's thought on how he seemed to get himself in deeper and deeper with each day spent in Seifer's presence. He'd offered his own memories without hesitance, just like that. Because Seifer had been distressed.

He was a sentimental fool, letting the blond tug on his heartstrings like this, but that didn't make his decision to go to Winhill any less right. He owed Seifer at least this much. Pushing all else from his mind, he flipped open his phone and dialed Ellone's number.

"The Sleeping Lion, Ellone speaking."

"Hey. It's Squall."
"Squall?" the young woman exclaimed in surprise. "Wait, let me set down these glasses. I was just doing the dishes." The sound of clinking glass and quick footsteps told him she was relocating somewhere more private than the pub.

"I've been hearing some things about you through the grapevine. I didn't think you'd call me yourself," she finally said, her voice unable to hide her concern.

"The grapevine, or Loire?"

"That, and a strange phone call from Rinoa a few days back. She didn't know where you'd gone off to. She must've been running out of options, calling here of all places." Misinterpreting his surprised silence for annoyance, she said admonishingly, "At least Laguna had the sense to reassure me you hadn't gone missing in action or something worse, so don't blame him."

Letting his continued lack of input slide, she cut to the point. "So why are you calling? Is it about what happened? With Rinoa?"

"No... It's something different," Squall replied, hesitating for a beat. "I need your help."

The woman didn't answer right away, no doubt catching on to his meaning. "The kind only I can give, I assume?"

"I can trust you not to tell anyone?" he asked, needing to be absolutely certain of her confidence.

"Of course. You know that," Ellone replied, once more sounding concerned. "What is it?"

"It's Seifer. I want you to show him what you showed me."

A stunned silence followed his request. "Show Seifer?" she said, sounding incredulous. "Should I even ask how you two are in touch again?"

"I'm staying with him. He's helping me out," Squall explained in a matter-of-fact tone. "I want to help him too."

"You know this sounds crazy, right?"

"I need you to trust me on this one," he implored, needing Ellone to take him seriously. "You know what you saw last time. What you couldn't see. I have a theory I need you to confirm."

"...The void." He could almost hear the woman shiver at the memory. "You think it was Ultimecia after all?"

"I do. But we need to exclude the possibility that the distortion just comes with being a knight."

Taking a moment to parse his request, she didn't answer right away. "You want to let him into your memories? Are you sure you want to do that?"

Not about to tell her he'd only just made the decision, he firmed his voice. "There's no other way. I trust him. He needs this."

"What do you think you can prove with this? ...It's not going to be easy."

"It'll prove Seifer was being manipulated. It'll give him peace of mind." Pausing for emphasis, he added, "Please, Ellone."

Sighing softly in response, she relented. "I never said I wouldn't do it," she chided gently. "You can
bring him here. I just want you to realize what you're getting yourself into."

"I'm aware," he said, determined to see things through.

"Are you?" she asked doubtfully. "I can tell how much this matters to you, but if you don't keep the proper distance to the things you might see... It can be painful; wanting to change things, but being unable to."

At the words that cut too close to home, Squall failed to keep his voice even. "I know I can't change anything." Taking a deep breath, he added more calmly, "You won't be able to show me anything from the war anyway."

"Probably. But what about Seifer? He might see himself through your eyes. During the war."

Squall grimaced. He hadn't even thought of that possibility. There were several instances that would be bad, his memories of D-District in particular. The hours spent chained to that electric wall had been some of his darkest. With the passage of time they had dulled into a messy blur of disconcerting impressions, but it wouldn't be like that for Seifer if the man ended up in those memories. Each second would replay in vivid detail. Every stab of pain, every thought of despair—Seifer would feel it all.

"I'm just warning you, Squall. Both of you. Consider the worst case scenarios," Ellone continued when he remained silent. "You also need to know it's been a long time since I did this. The last time I used my powers was for you, and that was over two years ago. I'm bound to be rusty."

Shaking the thoughts of D-District, Squall reminded himself of the ultimate goal. "We have to do this... If we don't—" He didn't even want to consider the possibility that they might not be able to help. "Seifer needs to know it wasn't his fault."

"Okay. Then we'll do it," Ellone replied earnestly, sensing his disquiet and matching it with calm. "When should I expect you to visit?"

"Soon. We'll be leaving for Galbadia on Tuesday, but Seifer has some friends he wants to see. Could be before or after we visit you."

"So, somewhere this coming week?"

"Yes. You have the room to put us up?" he asked, some of his tension lifting. His plan was taking shape.

"The guest room is all yours," Ellone offered easily. "Will you be able to stay a few days? I haven't seen you in ages."

None too eager to turn the necessary trip into an extended stay, Squall hedged. "Maybe. We still have to make arrangements with Seifer's friends."

Ellone hummed in understanding, choosing not to comment on his reluctance for once. "Well, just know that you're welcome to stay as long as you like." Not waiting for a promise she knew he wouldn't give, she added, "What will you tell Laguna? And Garden? ...I'm pretty sure they're keeping tabs on you with everything that's happened."

"Loire knows I'm staying with Seifer. It's Garden I don't want to find out. Not yet."

"Better let Laguna know about your plans then," she said, not sounding overly impressed. "Until now, I thought you were staying with him. I knew something was fishy. You've got the man
covering for you, don't you?"

Squall winced at the unflattering but true statement. "I'll tell him."

"Okay then. Just give me a call once you know when I have to pick you up at the station. The buses still don't drive out this way."

"Thank you," he said, impressing his sincerity.

"No problem. I'm glad I can help. It'll be good to see you again. Seifer too. ...Is he doing okay?"

Not wanting to lie or embellish, Squall answered after a moment's thought, "He's got a good life here."

"Tell him he's welcome here. That we'll figure things out."

Relieved at Ellone's ready acceptance, he nodded. "I will. See you, Ellone."

"Bye Squall. Keep me posted."

Hanging up, Squall pocketed his phone and glanced at the door. With some luck, Seifer's end of things would fall into place as well, and they'd put their plans into motion before the week was up. Not wanting to dwell on the reality of sharing their memories, he pushed away from the wall and moved to join the other two men in the living room. No matter the cost or loss of privacy, it would be worth it, he told himself. He would make sure of it.

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[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Sunday, 26th of October, 12:19 pm]

Entering the living room, Seifer spotted Calder on the couch. The man had almost finished eating his sandwich, only a couple of bites left.

"Hey," Seifer said, walking over to join the man.

"Hey," Calder repeated, looking up to regard the blond. He'd been able to follow the change in pitch of the argument that had unfolded next door. No words had been discernible, but the exchange between Seifer and Squall had definitely been heated, to then mellow out. Seifer even looked unburdened now; a stark contrast to the blond's expression when he'd fled the kitchen.

"I should probably head home soon," Calder said. So many questions were swarming in his head, but he was too reluctant to ask any of them. It scared him that someone he knew so well could change in an instant and look so hollow. He knew the secret lay somewhere in Seifer and Squall's shared past. That's why Squall had been the one to go after the blond. Squall had been able to do something about it. He sighed.

"When can we spar?" he asked, not yet getting up from the couch. If Seifer was cutting him off from everything else, then at least he'd still have that.

Seifer scratched at the back of his neck. "I—" he looked over at the door, to where he knew Squall was on the phone with Ellone. "Squall and I are going to Galbadia for a while."

Calder raised an eyebrow. "When?"

"We'll leave on Tuesday. I don't know how long we'll be away for."

"What will Arc say?"

"Nothing," Seifer shrugged. "There's nothing he can do. I'm going." He took a sip of one of the glasses Calder had placed on the coffee table. "I'll move up the trip to see Fujin and Raijin."

"Is he coming for that too?" At Seifer's nod, Calder resisted the urge to shake his head. He couldn't make sense of it. Despite Squall's cold and aloof nature, Seifer and Squall had become inseparable. Despite Squall having just ended his bond with his girlfriend. "Okay. Then we're sparring tomorrow evening when you finish work. Before your class," he demanded. When Seifer began to speak, he shook his head. "I'm not taking no for an answer."

Seifer held up his hands in resignation. "Alright. Fine," he agreed. "I'm all yours tomorrow evening." He'd much prefer Squall's company but he knew he had to relent. He'd hardly spared Calder a second thought after he'd returned to Esthar and now he was already on his way back out.

"Good," Calder said, finally feeling somewhat appeased. He took a last bite of his sandwich. "I have to say… This really puzzles me," he started, not daring to look at Seifer as he spoke the words. "What the hell do you see in him? I mean, yes, he's the SeeD Commander and you've told me how amazing he is with a gunblade, but don't you get frostbite?" he asked, not hiding the underlying humor in his question. He wasn't trying to be damning or hurtful, he just wanted to understand. A proper laugh left Seifer this time and Calder smiled.

"You've actually laid eyes on the guy, right?" Seifer asked in disbelief. It was a ridiculous question
Calder emptied his glass of water. "Looks can't make up for everything."

"Perhaps not," Seifer agreed, his mirth still plain. It wasn't like he'd ever sat down and considered just what made Squall so fucking irresistible. Yet the answer came surprisingly easy. "...I guess he gives as good as he gets," he said. In all his life he'd never viewed anyone as his equal. Be it arrogance or hubris, he'd never considered anyone capable of matching his strength, wit or cunning. Apart from Squall.

"In the bedroom too?" Calder asked, raising an eyebrow. He couldn't imagine Squall pressing himself up lustfully against Seifer. In fact, he couldn't even imagine Squall initiating a kiss.

Unsure whether Calder was trying to insult Squall or if the man was just curious, Seifer narrowed his eyes. "I can tell you one thing for sure. No threesomes," he stated firmly. Whenever Calder had asked about a man's behavior in the bedroom in the past it had always been with that in mind.

"My dick would shrivel at just one glare from that guy," Calder said with a light chuckle, pushing the wholly unsatisfying scenario out of his mind. "I'd prefer something else..." he added slowly. Locking his eyes with Seifer's, he opened his mouth ever so slightly and drew the blond's gaze to his lips. Licking them, he stared straight into green eyes. "Come home with me tomorrow night," he said with a coy smile. His eyes briefly travelled to Seifer's groin. "I'll suck you just as dry as on our first night," he added, deliberately forcing Seifer to remember the man's first homosexual experience.

For a moment everything went quiet. Calder almost had to laugh at the taken aback expression on the blond's face.

"As tempting as the offer is—" Seifer started.

"Listen to yourself," Calder said and rolled his eyes. "That wasn't a business proposition," he emphasized, his point so clearly demonstrated by Seifer's response. "When have you ever said no to sex?" Before Seifer had a chance to reply, he plowed on. "He's got you wrapped so tightly around his little finger that you can't even see what's right in front of you. You're Hyne-damned housebroken," he accused. The Seifer he knew was light-years away. "When should I expect the wedding bells?"

Seifer wanted to smack the man, but then started to chuckle instead. "So you are getting jealous," he said. It was only to be expected. "Don't worry. He'll move on to his missions, back to Garden. Things will return to the way they were," Seifer said even if he couldn't quite imagine it. In fact he resented the mere thought of being separated from Squall. If he had any say in it, nothing would ever change.

"I'd like to see that before I believe it," Calder said plainly. There was no way things would go back to the way they'd been, but Calder had little to gain from convincing the man of as much. "I'll keep busy," he said, shrugging in resignation.

"Sounds like a good plan," Seifer agreed, then raised an eyebrow. "In fact... hasn't that always been our plan?" They'd never complained about each other's promiscuity before.

Calder nodded softly. "That's why I never saw this coming," he added, shaking his head slightly in disbelief. He would've sooner thought the world would come to an end than Seifer giving up one-night stands and frivolous sex."Okay, this time I really am going," he said as he stood up from the couch. Enough of being a third wheel for one day. "Let me know if you need anything," he added,
attempting his best impression of one of Squall's icy looks, "but do not cancel tomorrow."

Seifer grinned, not missing the poorly executed impersonation. "I won't," he promised, and got up from the couch as well to walk Calder to the door. "See you."

"See you, Seif," Calder said, before shutting the door behind him.

Staring at the closed door for a moment, Seifer felt baffled at everything that had just happened. For a moment he'd felt hot when Calder had reminded him of their first night together; of how he'd discovered what truly turned him on. But he hadn't wanted to do anything. Not with Calder. Not anymore. But... If it hadn't been for Calder he might never have found out about his preferences. He wouldn't have gone out of his way to experiment. Not after his unsatisfying experiences with Fu and Rinoa. The way Calder had gotten down to his knees and looked up at him... Something had clicked into place. And the rest was history. A whirlwind of debauchery. Calder eagerly showing him everything and anything the Estharian nightlife had to offer, from carnal to psychedelic or both.

And now the man had shown him something else too. That his hunger for sex was no longer indiscriminate. Only one person would do. It was crazy, but if anything, it strengthened his resolve to make Squall just as addicted to this thing between them.

He smiled, eager for the brunet to return from the bedroom. Sitting back down on the couch, he took a big bite of his sandwich. The day really hadn't ended up anything like he'd expected and what they had lined up for the days to come was even more surreal.

Dinner with the President. Packing for a trip with Squall. An appointment with Odine and then Squall and himself leaving for Galbadia. Just a week ago and he would never have guessed any of this. It was so different from how his life had fallen into place. Squall's reappearance had upended everything. But not for the worse, not anymore. He wouldn't trade what had happened between them for anything. He still couldn't believe he was allowed to touch Squall, that a lingering touch or flirting remark wouldn't earn him a scar. He chuckled softly, not actually certain that was the case. Squall was still as fierce as ever.

Even so... Squall was willing to give up his own memories for Seifer. The man's most prized possession; his privacy. It made his head spin. No one had ever shown such faith in him. How the hell was Squall going to persuade Ellone, though? He ran a hand through his hair. It would be hard to face her if Squall was successful.

He heard the door to the bedroom open and immediately looked up at Squall. "She up for it?"

Nodding an affirmative, Squall looked around the room before sitting down next to Seifer. It seemed the blond had finally been able to get rid of his friend, so they'd be able to speak freely.

"Did she say when would be best?" Seifer asked, before taking another bite from his sandwich. He couldn't believe Ellone had actually agreed; that they were doing this.

"Whenever we can get there," Squall answered, picking up the sandwich Seifer had set out for him on the coffee table.

"Alright," Seifer said, preferring to get it over and done with. "Tuesday evening then? Go straight there?"

"I'll let her know," Squall agreed. "She'll need to pick us up at the station."

"That far out into the country?" Seifer asked. "What's she doing out there?"
"...She wants a quiet life," Squall replied after some hesitance, glossing over why Ellone had picked Winhill of all places.

"How long are we staying for?"

"We should be able to leave Winhill Thursday morning," Squall replied after a moment's thought. "If things go as planned."

"Okay," Seifer said, nodding, before taking another bite. "I'll give Fu a call once I'm done with this." A soft smile played on his lips then. "Who'd have thought we'd be going on holiday together?" he asked, genuinely amused.

"You didn't tell me how the chocobo fits into the picture," Squall replied affably, meeting Seifer's gaze. The man's cheer was infectious, making him almost forget how ill advised their whole plan really was.

Huffing at Squall's remark and the memory of the annoying chocobo, Seifer relented to an explanation. "Rai and Fu always rent three chocobos when we go. From the same damned place. And they always make sure to get the exact same ones, because they know one of them has some sort of fetish for making my life miserable. It never follows my orders, it continually tries to eat me, and they think it's amusing. So yeah, you being the newcomer, you get the honor of that particular joy." Seifer said, delivering the last line with a satisfied grin at his brilliant ploy.

Finishing a bite of his sandwich, Squall rolled his eyes. He didn't feel too threatened by the proposed initiation rite. "Your authority as the DC's leader has been waning, I see," he said, choosing to comment only on the embarrassing part of Seifer's explanation.

"You just wait till it's your ass being chewed on. We'll see who's laughing then," Seifer said, still smiling. This was going to be one strange trip, but as long as he mentally skipped the part where they had to visit Ellone, then he couldn't wait. "We always go survival style. No luxury goods or anything. We eat what we catch, sleep in the wild and stay clear of civilization. So be prepared for roughing it."

Interest piqued at the information, Squall didn't mind the prospect of venturing off the beaten track. "What do you hunt with? For the food?" He wasn't a bad shot, but he'd never hunted down wildlife before. He doubted a firing range posed the same challenges.

"Rifles mostly, some fishing nets and then we just keep our eyes out for wild edible plants," he said, looking Squall up and down, sizing him up. "If you don't pull your weight, you get cleaning or cooking duty. Those are the rules, so the competition is tough..." He couldn't help but grin at the image of Squall wearing an apron while cooking a fish over a bonfire for them. "I'll make sure Raijin brings a rifle for you, so you won't be relegated to dinner chores every night."

Regarding the grin and easy wink with another roll of his eyes, Squall doubted Seifer would still find the thought of him cooking amusing once the blond had tasted one of his meals. Toast and eggs was the most sophisticated meal he'd ever managed, and the eggs had been too salty.

"Tents, or out in the open?" he asked, thinking back to the few field trips they'd been on as cadets. Thanks to those, he felt confident he could at least set up a tent in record time. Seifer on the other hand had always disappeared the moment they'd reached the camping grounds.

"Tents," Seifer said, his mind already running away with fantasies of him and Squall getting up and close in the confines of his small tent. "I've got one that should fit both of us," he said, enjoying the prospect all too much. "You'll need a sleeping bag though... unless you'd prefer to share." His smile
changed into a lopsided smirk. "It could be cold this time of year."

Blinking at the return of Seifer's shameless flirtation, something he now recognized as thus, Squall ignored the way his stomach flipped. "I'll buy a sleeping bag."

Already thinking up countless excuses to get into Squall's sleeping bag, Seifer reminded himself to get a new bottle of lube. He definitely didn't want to run out of that in the wild. "So yeah, a tent, sleeping bags, blankets, clothes, basic cooking utensils and weapons. That's about everything."

Getting up from the couch, he brought his empty plate to the kitchen sink. He couldn't believe how eager he was getting. He hadn't looked forward to something as badly as this in years. "I'll give Fu a call," he said, getting out his phone. Dialing the number of his friend, he waited for the woman to pick up.

"YES?"

Upon hearing the stern voice he knew so well, a huge smile appeared on his face. "Hey Fu," he said, warmth entering his voice.

"SEIFER!"

The greeting he received only made his smile grow larger. "Good to hear your voice too," he said, amused. "So, how's my favorite mercenary?"

"GOOD."

"And Rai?"

"SAME."

"You guys driving each other nuts at home at the moment?"

"RAIJIN... PEST," Fujin said. He could hear Raijin mumbling a complaint in the background.

"Same old tough love as always, huh?"

"ALWAYS," his friend said, her tone light with amusement.

"So listen, I'm calling—"

"SEIFER, HOW?" Fujin never had been good at patience.

"I'm good Fu, great in fact—"

"WHY?" the woman asked. Trust her to immediately get to the core of things.

Leaning back against the counter, he held Squall's gaze as he tried to formulate a reply. "I... Well —" he stalled, wondering how much he could get away with saying in front of Squall. He also wanted Squall coming along to be the surprise of the century.

"TELL," the woman demanded without any hesitation.

"You guys up for going hunting this week?" he asked, deciding to try and change the conversation around. "Meet up on Thursday?"

"CHEAT!" Fujin exclaimed, immediately calling him out on his ploy, but apparently letting it slide. "THURSDAY, FINE." She was probably just as eager to hang out as he was.
"Great," Seifer said, excited that their plan was coming together.

"EXPLAIN, NOW," Fujin ordered, quickly getting back to business.

"...I'm bringing someone along," he said, hedging. He had to get Fujin to read between the lines.

"BOYFRIEND?" she asked and he couldn't help but grin. Fuck, if the brunet knew what he was about to say, the man would skewer him with Lion Heart.

"Got it in one," he said, looking straight into Squall's eyes as he spoke the words. "So bring another chocobo and rifle, 'kay?"

"YOUNG?"

Seifer chuckled before he answered. "Yup."

"CUTE?"

"Mhm." Yup. Squall would definitely kill him if he knew what the hell he was saying.

"SEXY?"

"Very."

"NAME?"

"You'll find out."

"...SUSPICIOUS."

"No need to be."

"...OKAY." Fujin paused, evidently trying to puzzle things together, then quickly spoke up again. This time with more resolve. "NO SEX. TENTS."

He had to chuckle again, unable to concede the point. "You say that now. I'm pretty sure you'll change your mind once you meet him."

"BET?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, I'm willing to bet," he said. Who wouldn't want to hear Squall fucking Leonhart's moans echoing through the forest?

"PRIZE?"

"A bottle of Galbadian Bluewhistle." It only seemed fitting after Squall had emptied his last one.

"DEAL."

"THURSDAY, WHEN?"

"Probably early afternoon."

"OBEL LAKE?"

He hummed in agreement. "Let's meet in Wendel, at the pub. The first round will be on me." His friends would definitely need a stiff drink in order to process the surprise he had in store for them.
"ACCEPTABLE."

"Well, then, Sweet Cheeks, I guess that's all for now."

"RAGE."

"Yeah, yeah... I know you love it."

"NEGATIVE."

"Guess you'll just have to kick me on the shins when you see me then, Baby Cakes."

"AFFIRMATIVE."

"I'll see you soon, Fu."

"BYE, SEIFER."

Hanging up the phone, he turned around to face Squall. "All sorted," he said, his mind getting distracted when he laid eyes on Squall. With all the interruptions and Calder's presence, he hadn't been able to get in much seduction since getting back, and the prospect of an afternoon and evening without being able to touch the lion wasn't appealing at all. He didn't necessarily need to fuck Squall. But he definitely needed to see Squall come again.

"What bet did you make?" Squall asked warily, trying his best to ignore Seifer's shameless gaze. From what he'd overheard, the man was intending to bring him along as a surprise guest, something he didn't think was particularly wise.

"She seemed certain whoever I'd bring along would hold us back," Seifer replied. "I'm not so sure," he said with a playful smile, sitting back down next to Squall.

Squall suppressed a sigh. Already the man's friends were protesting the presence of a nameless stranger. If worse came to worst, he could always simply leave the group of friends to their reunion. What mattered was them getting to Winhill. Finishing the last of his quick lunch, he opened his laptop and got to work.

"What're you up to?" Seifer asked, casting a quick glance at the laptop.

"Booking train tickets," Squall answered, entering his search and scanning over the results. "There's only one connection that fits a transfer from Fisherman's Horizon to Timber. It leaves at 12:30." Entering the number of passengers he wanted to book for, he continued, "In Timber we take a train southwest."

Seifer shook his head as he watched Squall's hands fly over the keyboard. Using the Garden consoles during their cadet days had seemed like cutting edge at the time, but here the brunet was, using a piece of technology ten times smaller to buy train tickets online. The world had changed radically since the fall of Adel's tomb and Esthar's opening. Despite being an Estharian citizen now, the technological revolution had mostly passed him by. He'd simply never had any cash to spare on something like that.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

Squall glanced at Seifer. "Nothing. I still have to repay you for your expenses."

"What expenses?" Seifer asked. "It's not exactly like you eat lots. Definitely not enough to pay for a
trip to Galbadia... or should I be expecting empty cupboards here?"

Squall gave a slight shrug. Food hadn't been the only cost to him staying at Seifer's place. "You missed work because of me," he pointed out. "I could've gotten us into a SeeD compartment, but I don't need Garden to know about this." Free transport wasn't worth the trouble. "Quistis is breathing down my neck enough as is."

"You'd think she'd have better things to do," Seifer commented, wondering if it'd really be so bad for Quistis to know. "You think she'd call in the SeeD cavalry if she found out?"

Squall quirked an eyebrow as he glanced Seifer's way. "Not a chance," he replied, slightly bemused as he considered the lengths the woman would go to. "You are one of the few reasons she'd leave her post for herself."

Slightly dubious, Seifer raised an eyebrow in reply. "Really?"

Concluding the man had to be dumb if he didn't think Quistis would hunt him down in person, Squall was reminded of a phrase Selphie had used. "You're the one that got away," he said with a shrug. "You know her. She'd chew you out and set you straight. Probably try to reenlist you."

"You really think she'd try to reenlist me?" Seifer asked, looking at Squall as if the brunet had lost his mind.

Finalizing the purchase of the train tickets, Squall looked Seifer's way. He had no doubt at all that once Quistis understood the truth, she'd waste no time in reaching out. "Yes."

"Did you hit your head recently?" Seifer asked. "Might explain a thing or two," he commented with a raised eyebrow.

At Seifer's continued disbelief, Squall realized the man didn't know about the sense of loyalty that tied their group together; a group that ultimately included Seifer, whether the man knew it or not. "Don't underestimate her," he said simply, regarding Seifer levelly. "She'd want to know about you. They all would." He glanced at his laptop, remembering the folder of pictures. "But it's better they find out on your terms. If you want them to."

"My terms?" Seifer asked, thinking more and more he'd landed in some alternate universe. "You do realize just how insane this sounds, right?" he added with a raised voice. "I tried to kill them, fought on the opposite side of a war, and you make it sound like we simply lost touch."

"I didn't say it would be simple," Squall replied, placing his closed laptop onto the coffee table. He knew there was little point in discussing this. Seifer would either find out firsthand or not. His choice.

"But you're saying you think they'd want to know," Seifer commented, studying Squall closely. "I don't mind them knowing. It's not like I've been hiding from anyone. I thought you'd be the one loath to have to explain our situation. You could definitely do without the association."

Squall frowned at the way Seifer made them spending time together sound like a bad thing. "I associate with whoever I want," he deadpanned. "People can think what they like."

"True," Seifer agreed, realizing he shouldn't have expected any other attitude from Squall. Back at garden Squall had never cared about other people's opinions either. "How come you haven't just told Quistis then? Got her off your case?"

"Had I done that, she'd be on both our cases now," Squall replied, wondering at the blond's
obtuseness. "Here, in Esthar, to try and drag us both back to Garden."

"You wouldn't have to tell her my address," Seifer stated with the beginnings of a smirk. He liked the thought of getting under Quistis's skin and at the same time solving Squall's problem. "Just tell her we'll meet up with her once we get back."

Squall rolled his eyes. "If you're that hard up for trouble, she'll be here for that meeting." As he said the words, he grimaced at having forgotten his promise to have lunch with her after the meeting.

"Would we have time for that?"

"...No," Squall let out, already dreading the prospect of standing Quistis up. "I was supposed to have lunch with her."

"So she's going to love you even more, huh?" Seifer pointed out. "Just get it over with. Tell her what is going on and to back the hell off."

"Tell her that I'm standing her up to go on holiday with you?" Squall asked as he turned to meet Seifer's gaze, already imagining the ill-boding twitch to Quistis' brow.

"Or better yet, go for broke and really mess with her head. Tell her that we're fucking now," Seifer laughed, already imagining Quistis's heart attack. "With any luck she'll be stuck in a brain loop, trying to process that for years."

Glaring at Seifer for the crude joke, Squall hoped he'd never have to explain to the woman why sleeping with Seifer had seemed like a good idea at the time. Seifer was right about one thing though; she probably wouldn't believe him.

"Come on, you've gotta admit that's hilarious," Seifer said with a widening grin. "I'm not sure what our good old prim and proper instructor would say to the image of her two favorite students doing the nasty, but I sure wouldn't mind finding out," he added, laughing.

Squall huffed at the less than amusing scenario. "You're an idiot."

"An attractive idiot... a sexy idiot... or just someone you like to fuck?" Seifer asked, smirking. When Squall seemed to have lost his ability to speak, he moved closer on the couch and placed his head right in Squall's lap. Stretching out languidly, he grinned at the brief moment of what the fuck that crossed Squall's expression. "Sorry about interrupting your chat with Selphie earlier."

Squall failed to reply immediately, Seifer's remark unintentionally reminding him of how Selphie was the only other person to have flopped their heads down in his lap like that. Because it's comfy and it annoys you! Double win!

"I'm sure she already found another victim to entertain her," he said dryly, looking down at his lap full of idiot blond. There was no point in trying to keep up with the man. At least by taking things in stride he hoped to maintain some poise.

Letting out a low hum in agreement, Seifer eyed Squall fondly. "I remembered her earlier. Us teaming up in destroying some poor bastard's sand castle."

At the remark and the light-hearted way in which Seifer shared it, Squall felt hopeful. Maybe reminiscing about their time at the orphanage didn't always have to end up in difficult conversation. "Quistis's sandcastle," he corrected, remembering the impressive fallout. There was no doubt Selphie and Seifer had helped hone the woman's lecturing skills from an early age on.
"Just makes the memory even better." Seifer said, grinning. The surreal nature of him lying with his head in Squall's lap was doing wonders for his mood. Squall hadn't moved an inch to try and displace him, hadn't even done anything to indicate that he'd intruded on his personal space. The man's initial tenseness had faded, and now Squall was simply watching him. Another pleasant surprise was how comfy this was. He'd never had the impulse to get into this particular position before.

He took his time watching Squall. He still loved the way Squall looked more hardened; how the brunet had aged subtly. The longer locks were nice to touch and mess with. But the eyes were still his favorite, the scar he'd placed on Squall's forehead a close second. He still wore his own with pride.

He couldn't believe how relaxed and comfortable he felt. How good he felt. How good Squall made him feel.

Compelled to catalog the brunet's every feature, he didn't hide his close study. A small twitch to Squall's brow told him that the man was starting to grow self-conscious under his prolonged stare, but the brunet never looked away, giving him tacit permission. Dropping his eyes to Squall's lips, he followed the lines of the delicately curved cupid's bow, continuing down to a full lower lip. He'd been surprised by how soft Squall's lips were, and how uncertain and unskilled Squall's kisses had been at first. Squall had gotten the hang of it fairly quickly, but there'd been a newness there that betrayed how rarely the man must have kissed before. Surely Squall couldn't have been denying Rinoa something as simple as that. But if there'd been no attraction...

Sitting up, he steadied himself and leaned in for a kiss, keeping his eyes fixed on Squall's. Their lips meshed together as Squall returned his soft kiss readily. He pulled back ever so slightly, lingering a teasing distance away before moving in for another slow sampling of Squall's lips. He couldn't help himself, mesmerized by how amazing such an innocent act could feel.

For once Squall had expected to be kissed, but it hadn't made him any more prepared to deal with the depth of his own response. His head swam with unformed thoughts and new feelings he was too afraid to put a name to. His heart sped up when Seifer started to kiss him more deeply. Their tongues stroked in a languid rhythm that seemed to electrify every synapse in his body. He'd never realized the sheer variety of ways in which people could kiss, nor had he ever wanted to learn each and every single one.

When Seifer guided him to lie down on the couch, Squall followed the man's lead without thought. He exhaled unsteadily at the feel of Seifer's body covering his own, his lips immediately recaptured in a deep kiss. Seifer brought their groins together with exquisitely slow grinds, matching the unhurried pace of their tongues. A large, warm hand stole underneath his shirt with wandering caresses, their every kiss infused with sounds of pleasure, most of them unabashedly Seifer's.

Wrapping his arms around Seifer's back, he drew his entire body flush against Seifer's to better meet the man's achingly slow grinding, move for move. They were both aroused, but there was no hurry, no fumbled rush to completion. Something about the moment dissuaded crude lust, the air between them charged in a way it hadn't been before.

Inhaling deeply as he broke away for air, Seifer relished the clean, heady scent that was entirely Squall's. He'd forever associate it with this now; warmth, comfort, and the slow burn of building arousal. Tracing the curves of Squall's lips with his own, he pulled back and lowered his gaze to
the brunet's parted lips. Running a hand along Squall's ribs, he watched as the man's breath hitched. He lowered his groin back against Squall's and moaned as he slid his own hardness along the stiff bulge between the man's legs. His eyes travelled up on their own accord, drawn to the man's heavy lidded gaze. He couldn't stop himself from staring.

He was fucked.

So utterly fucked.

Closing his eyes slowly, he pressed his lips against Squall's again and felt a wholeness spread throughout him. Almost as if the brunet had cast a Cure on him, a tingle spreading from their point of contact and suffusing his entire being whilst everything else disappeared from existence. It was too much. Just one fucking kiss and his world was upended. He'd never thought just one man would be enough for him. That something like this could be so insanely intoxicating. *Fuck.*

Feeling Seifer's gaze, the man's lips withdrawing just out of reach, Squall opened his eyes to find an inscrutable expression on Seifer's face. The intensity of it was almost alarming, those green eyes boring into his. As if they could see right through him, to the core of him.

When Squall was certain he couldn't bear another second of it, his heart nearly thudding out of his chest, Seifer suddenly pressed the entire length of his body down against his own. Seifer's nose burrowed into his hair, those warm lips playing with the sensitive skin beneath his ear. Tightening his arms around the blond, he arched his neck into the pleasurable ministrations, unable to stop the soft moan that escaped him.

Needing more, he twisted in the man's hold to meet Seifer's lips, drawing them into a hungry kiss. Hyne, it felt good to give himself over like this. To let himself want this. Emphasizing his need with a roll of his hips, he jerked in surprise when Seifer proceeded to grind into him forcefully, the man's tongue roving along his own with enough fervor to steal his breath away. Kissing Seifer back *hard*, he wasn't entirely sure when his hand had snuck lower to grasp the man's ass cheek. He gripped more firmly when Seifer inexplicably distanced himself, breaking their kiss just enough to leave their lips brushing against one another.

"Want me to suck you off?"

Squall held in a breath at the bluntly stated offer. His length twitched with need when the man moved down a hand between them, cupping him and coaxing an eager roll from his hips. He knew what he wanted, but the offer seemed too easy, too surreal. If he would ever have wondered what Seifer would be like in a situation like this, he'd sooner have expected the man to demand a blow job than to offer one. A frisson of excitement stole through him at the daring thought. Feeling Seifer's erection press against him, the man for once not dashing ahead where he could barely follow, Squall realized the opportunity that had presented itself. Steeling himself before he could change his mind, he met Seifer's gaze.

"What about you?"

A hot flush of arousal shot straight to Seifer's cock. He closed his eyes. *Fuck.* He couldn't have heard that leaked from his cock, leaving a wet patch in his boxers.

"After," he forced himself to mumble gruffly against Squall's ear. First he wanted to hear Squall moan in abandon. It would be the best Hyne-damned foreplay *ever.* His cock would be solid rock by the time he was through with Squall.

Moving to sit between the brunet's legs, he lowered his head and popped open the buttons of the
man's fly. Pulling down the man's boxer briefs just enough for Squall's hard cock to spring free, he eyed it up hungrily. He couldn't wait to feast on it and to memorize every single detail from its tangy taste to its hot firmness against his tongue.

Blowing against the velvety tip, Seifer smirked as it swelled in response. Running his lips along the man's shaft, he inhaled deeply before repeating the move with the tip of his tongue, all the while refusing to break eye contact with the brunet.

Lapping at the ridge of Squall's erection before sliding his tongue over the head, he listened keenly as the man's breathing started to falter. Grinning, he brought the whole of Squall's tip into his mouth and swirled his tongue while applying firm suction. Squall's hips immediately jerked up and he had to chuckle.

Taking a deep breath, he drew the entirety of Squall's length into his mouth until his lips were wrapped firmly against the base of Squall's cock and he could feel the man's tip press into the back of his throat. Pulling back up, he inhaled through his nose before plunging Squall's cock all the way back into his throat again. The deep moan that left Squall had his cock throbbing. Repeating the move again and again, he loved the way Squall was growing increasingly tense beneath him, how pale fingers were starting to clutch onto the couch.

Continuing to deep-throat the man, he knew it was only a matter of moments before Squall would come. He sucked harder. He moved faster. He wanted Squall to shoot his come down his throat. He wanted to render the man speechless, to repay the fucking spell Squall had cast on him earlier. If he was Squall's, then he'd make damned sure Squall was his as well.

And there it was. Squall's hips shot up just as the man's expression seized up, hot rivulets of sharp-tasting come spurting down the back of his throat. He took it all, swallowed it greedily and then pulled back ever so slightly, just far enough to keep the head of Squall's cock inside the warmth of his mouth. With his lips still wrapped tightly around the man's shaft, he swirled his tongue around, cleaning any remnants of come while relishing the twitches it brought to the man below.

When Squall finally came to a still beneath him, he removed his mouth entirely, leaving Squall's cock to slap wetly against the man's stomach. Moving up to fill up as much of Squall's personal space as possible, he pressed his lips to the unblemished skin at the crook of Squall's neck and sucked hard.

"Fuck, I love making you come like that," he confessed against the brunet's hot skin, before trailing his teeth further up and settling on a new place to mar.

Through the haze of satisfaction, Seifer's admission was slow to register with Squall. The man was saying he liked giving him blow jobs by the mere merit that it made him come. It seemed implausibly generous, but... wasn't this what sex was supposed to be like? Making each other feel good? Drawing in a ragged breath, he bit his lip when Seifer started to grind against him, the man clearly not done with him yet. The urge to touch and explore returned tenfold.

He had tried to pay attention this time, had tried to catalog how Seifer had pleased him, but he'd failed spectacularly. The moment Seifer had swallowed down his entire length, he'd been lost to one mind-blowing sensation after the other. He hadn't stood a chance. One thing he was certain of however. He wanted to try. He wouldn't be able to deliver the kind of skill Seifer was probably used to, but he was determined to make the attempt. If he could make Seifer feel even a fraction of what he had been given himself, then he decided it would be worth the potential embarrassment.

Mustering himself to the task he'd set himself, he pulled up his boxers and broke free from Seifer's hold on him. The growl of protest was cut short when he pushed to move on top. Seifer was quick
to accommodate and turn in place beneath him, but that was where the man's compliance ended.

Insistent hands grabbed his hips, locking him into place for Seifer to grind up against, hard and urgent. His window of opportunity was closing fast.

*Stop thinking. Just do.* Drawing in a steadying breath, he seized Seifer's wrists and forced them down against the couch.

Seifer grinned. The determined look to Squall's eyes immediately dissuaded any urge to resist. If Squall wanted to call the shots, then Seifer would be more than willing to obey. A few seconds passed as they regarded each other before Squall moved back slightly to sit further down on Seifer's legs. Squall began pulling at the hem of his pants, undoing the top button. Then the zip. Seifer lifted his hips when Squall hooked his fingers beneath the fabric, cold air rushing against his cock as it jutted out. Seifer held his breath. He couldn't fucking believe it, but he had heard Squall right earlier. The way gray-blue eyes were sizing up his cock left no doubt in his mind.

He let out a groan and threw his head back. He couldn't look or he'd shoot his load the instant Squall wrapped his lips around him. Gritting his teeth, he immediately regretted his choice and quickly looked back down. There was no fucking way he was going to miss the moment those soft lips made impact.

_Shit Squall, just do it already_, his mind begged, but instead of heeding his wish, Squall traced Seifer's hipline with slow caresses. And then Squall's fingers singled in, only to stop briefly at the edge of Seifer's groin. The man's hand ghosted along his erection and _fuck_ it felt good to have those combat-hardened fingers run along his shaft.

He had to give it to the man. Squall was a natural fucking cocktease. Whether it was instinct or curiosity, the man was doing one hell of a job of teasing him all the way to the edge of no return. The man hadn't even looked up to meet his gaze since he'd started, all attention focused on his cock. The way he was being studied was fucking unbearable.

But then Squall lowered his head, a pink tongue darting out between those tantalizing lips. Seifer's eyes went wide as the moist tip pressed against the base of his cock before trailing slowly to his tip. A strangled noise left him, followed by a curse. He couldn't suppress the small frown wrinkling his brow.

Eyes darting up, Squall drew confidence from the clear approval he saw on Seifer's face. The nervous flutter in his stomach still refused to settle down, but he was beginning to think he could actually pull this off. Repeating the move with a little more pressure, he applied the entire flat of his tongue. The salty tang that flooded his senses wasn't new. He'd already tasted something like it on Seifer's kisses; his own taste. This was better. More pungent and better suited to the musk of Seifer's scent. Meeting intense green eyes again, the taste intensified as precome hit his tongue.

Pulling back, he played the substance around on his tongue. Concluding it wasn't anything he couldn't get used to, he slowly returned his lips to the tip of Seifer's length and drew his tongue along the slit and around the head. Encouraged by the deep groan that left the blond and the muscles tensing beneath his fingers, he took hold of the base of Seifer's cock, needing more control over what he was doing.

Angling the rock hard erection towards him, he took a second to steel himself before he wrapped his lips around hot, smooth skin. Limiting himself to the tip, not yet daring to tackle the full extent of Seifer's girth, he bobbed his head up and down once. The breathless "fuck" that left the blond's lips confirmed he was at least on the right track. Less hesitant, he continued, but he quickly stopped at the slightly too dry feel hindering his moves.
Realizing he'd have to accept some level of sloppiness, he backed off slightly and moistened his lips. Bending down again, he laved Seifer's cock with a few strategic licks, before wrapping his lips around the head once more. This time his lips slid wetly against heated skin. Closing his eyes, he didn't bother pondering the easy transition he'd made into going down on a man. Instead he focused on the sensations and sounds of the act as he moved his mouth along the heavy cock in his hand. The scent that hit his nose wasn't exactly pleasant, but it in his mind he already associated it with sex. When on Avalanche, he'd *loved* it.

Taking heed of every encouraging groan and twitch, Squall caught on to Seifer's bias for a rougher approach. Increasing the pressure of his lips and fingers, he sped up and gave a testing suck to the tip of Seifer's length. And then another, slightly harder. A trickle of saliva reached the hand he had wrapped around the base of Seifer's cock, but he ignored it, too entranced by the way Seifer was rolling his hips to meet his mouth and tongue a bit faster every time.

He could feel his own cheeks heating at what he was doing. Seifer was bucking beneath his mouth, groaning out curses, and all he could taste and smell in return was Seifer. He hadn't anticipated how sexy the blond would be; how exhilarating it would feel to be the one to bring it out. His jaw ached and the further he moved down on Seifer's length, the more difficult it became to breathe, but he didn't care. Briefly, he wondered whether he should try more things, but he didn't want to risk making the wrong move when Seifer was actually enjoying himself. Trying to regulate his breathing through his nose, he went as far down as he could without gagging and stuck with the fastest pace he could manage. When another strangled noise left the blond, he tried to remember to massage the flat of his tongue against the base of Seifer's cock with each hard suck, even though it left him breathless.

Between his own stunted breaths and Seifer's harsh panting, he almost didn't make out the blond's warning.

"I'm close."

The low grunt-like quality of the words wrapped around Squall's brain, imprinting a heady sense of accomplishment. He was doing this the right way. He could feel Seifer *reaching*, those hips seeking and arching, and in that moment he realized this would have aroused him if it wasn't for the fact he'd only just come himself.

Slightly lightheaded, he accepted all of the blond's bucks and grunts. Keeping up his fast sucking motions, he glanced up to watch Seifer's expression. He wanted to see. Greeted by smoldering eyes, their gazes only held for all of a few seconds before the blond wrenched his eyes shut and went rigid, hot pulses of come flooding Squall's mouth with the man's every shudder.

Not having anticipated the lack of control that went with the messy event, Squall didn't quite manage to swallow all of the sharp tasting liquid right away. He rode out the blond's orgasm, unable to prevent a trickle of come escaping the corner of his mouth. When Seifer stilled and went limp, he eased off the man's length and worked down the remaining thick fluid with an awkward swallow.

Drawing in a greedy breath, he straightened and ran the back of his hand along his mouth and chin to wipe away what he hadn't been able to keep in. His chest rose and fell in rapid succession as he looked down at Seifer, slightly apprehensive of what the man would say.

Unable to move his eyes off Squall, wanting to remember every single fucking detail, Seifer felt his entire body hum with ecstasy. He'd just had the single most amazing blow job of his life. Not because of skill but because of *who* had done it: the fucking ice prince of Balamb Garden. The
sexiest mother-fucking guy on the planet had just sucked him dry and swallowed his come.

There was no way he'd ever forget this. No drugs. No alcohol. Nothing had made Squall do it but the man's own fucking will. He groaned softly as he tucking himself away.

"C'mere," he said, his voice gruff with the same need he'd felt earlier when they'd been making out slowly, the same need that was both foreign and new.

Settling close beside the satisfyingly dazed blond, Squall wasn't entirely ready yet to relinquish control. Besting Seifer in the past had always brought him a particular kind of rush, but this was better. A different kind of control. Moving half atop the man, he claimed the blond's lips, heedless of the taste that still lingered on his tongue. Seifer didn't seem to mind in the slightest, the man's arms tightening around him when Squall deepened their kiss until he could no longer distinguish who tasted of who. The part of him that felt like he was spinning out of control ever since their night on Avalanche quieted for the first time as he imposed his own pace on the blond.

A grin pulled at the corners of Seifer's lips. This was definitely the commander coming out to play. A man who took what he wanted, when he wanted it. A contented groan left Seifer as Squall pulled back for air. He looked up at the man, unable to hide his mirth.

"We should have done this years ago," he said with a sly smile as he looked up into gray-blue eyes. "Imagine that. Us sneaking off in between spars to exchange blow jobs." He chuckled lowly at the slight frown that appeared on Squall's brow. "Fuck, it makes me horny just thinking about it," he said, pressing his groin to Squall's. "I mean, sparring with you is amazing and all, but getting blow jobs from the hottest guy in Garden would've been pretty amazing too."

Quirking an eyebrow at being called 'the hottest guy' when most cadets had called him scrawny, Squall didn't reply. He figured he should count himself lucky they hadn't done this years ago. They were only one day into this... thing, and already they were neglecting their training. They would probably have failed their SeeD exams together then. Squall wrinkled his brow at the ridiculous visual of them in the 'secret area'; Garden's not quite so secret make-out spot. If anything, he would most likely just have punched Seifer for trying anything back then.

"All right... There's gotta be a rule against frowning post blowjobs," Seifer commented lightly as he regarded Squall.

Bemused, Squall met Seifer's gaze. "That wasn't the rule Garden applied," he commented dryly. Back then, the Garden Faculty had been particularly strict about fraternization and promiscuity amongst cadets. Not that sneaking into the blond's dormitory room would have posed any real challenge.

"Would've been a better rule," Seifer added, grinning. "And if it's broken the penalty is one blow job. So better watch out there, Leonhart. Could get costly."

Squall rolled his eyes. He'd like to see the man try and enforce that opportunistic rule. "I see you still make or break the rules as you like."

"Of course," Seifer said with an amused smile. "And this one I particularly like."

As the absurdity of their conversation caught up with him, Squall huffed quietly, again wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into. Here he was, letting Seifer bargain with him over blow jobs. And he was idling around on the man's couch. Two situations that needed remedying.

"We should go," he said, shifting slightly onto his elbow. They had already stalled their training
for far too long.

"Mmm, we should," Seifer agreed, yet he didn't move an inch from his relaxed position. This was far too comfortable and he knew that when they got up, he'd have to actually try and focus on training. He wanted to get better with his magic, he really did, but this was too fucking addictive. That, and he'd have to drop the bomb he'd avoided thus far.

For one more moment he savored Squall's attention and the way the man was stretched languidly against him.

"I talked with your dad," he said, watching Squall intently, not missing how the man's eyes immediately narrowed. "We're having dinner at the palace tonight."

Growing very still, Squall was instantly cured of his conflicting desire to spend the rest of the day in Seifer's bed or on the man's couch. Apparently Seifer was arrogant enough to think he could make those kind of decisions on his behalf. It was one thing to discuss his recovery behind his back, but this... He had expressly told Seifer how he felt about Loire, and of all people, he'd expected Seifer to understand.

"Have fun," he deadpanned in reply, pushing away from the meddlesome blond.

Grabbing hold of Squall before the brunet could make it off the couch, Seifer sat up. "Come on. Free food. Fancy food," he said, unable to feel sorry about it when it meant he'd get to experience the high life for once. "Laguna told me you've got something to pick up as well."

Squall frowned and pulled free from Seifer's grip. The man was most likely referring to the items he'd asked Quistis to send him. "That wasn't your call to make," he said, his words clipped with anger.

"We can skip out early. Go spar. It's just dinner."

"This is Loire," Squall said, pointing out the man's naive mistake. Fancy food, as Seifer called it, happened to come in several, lengthy courses and the president made a habit of drawing things out unnecessarily. "You don't get to skip out early."

Seifer wagged an eyebrow. "We can always work in a bit of fun whilst there."

Squall's frown deepened at the mere thought of being caught in a compromising situation by one of the palace guards. "We won't."

"Guess I'll just have to go on my own then," Seifer said, fully aware of how much Squall would loathe the prospect.

Alerted by the unconvincing nonchalance, Squall narrowed his eyes and gauged the man's intentions. The ploy was transparent enough, but that didn't change the fact that his predicament was now reduced to figuring out the lesser evil: chaperoning Seifer's visit or not. Letting out a frustrated sigh, he pushed up from the couch. "After dinner, we leave. He'll talk all night if you let him."

"Deal," Seifer agreed, fighting his grin into submission. Most likely Squall would make him pay for this stunt, but he'd gladly pay the price if it earned him the favor of the president. That, and he actually wanted to get to know Squall's dad. "You can take it out on me afterwards," he said, getting up from the couch as well.

Squall held the man's gaze sharply, still far from appeased. "I'll hold you to that." At least there
was nothing like defeating Seifer in battle to vent his frustration with the arrogant blond. "What time is Loire expecting us?"

"Seven," Seifer said, before leaning in to steal one last kiss.

Letting himself savor the brief contact before Seifer moved away, Squall let out a sigh as he considered his radically changed schedule for the day. On top of already having fielded Calder's many questions, he'd also have to deal with Loire and Rinoa. His patience was starting to wear thin.

"I have to drop by Rinoa later," he told Seifer, already regretting how it would cut their training short.

Unable to keep a frown off his own expression, Seifer stopped in place. The thought of Rinoa and Squall alone together was enough to put a damper on his mood. "Sure," he said, feigning indifference.

Watching as Seifer moved away to grab his gear, Squall considered the blond's sudden frown. It seemed that despite the many phone calls behind his back, Seifer and Rinoa still weren't on the best of terms.

"Looks like we're even," he said, joining Seifer's side to grab his jacket. When he was met with nothing but a confused look, he clarified. "Your rule."

Taking a moment to catch on, Seifer grinned. "I'll pay up after the spar," he said with a wink. Hoisting his duffel bag over his shoulder, he walked to the front door.

His own gear in hand within moments, Squall was eager to get their day on track. Spirit lifting at the thought, he followed Seifer out the apartment and fell in stride beside him. The sooner they fulfilled their duties, the sooner he'd have Seifer on the other end of Lion Heart again.

~ o ~
Free Fall

[Rinoa Heartilly and Squall Leonhart's Apartment, Layon Tower, Sunday, 26th of October, 5:57 pm]

Pulling into the parking space that was still labeled as his own, Squall let his gaze travel to where Rinoa's sedan was parked to his left. The sleek, luxury car was filled to capacity with cardboard boxes. Clearly Rinoa had been busy. Killing the engine, he leaned back in the driver's seat. He'd agreed to the visit readily enough, but now that he was actually here he felt less than prepared.

He hadn't thought about her much. He'd kept their phone calls short, their interaction nearly nonexistent since they'd broken the bond. This was the first time they'd meet unbonded.

All this time Seifer had proved a powerful distraction. He hadn't really had any time or opportunity to miss Rinoa or contemplate the loss of their bond. Even on his way here all his thoughts had gone to Seifer. The man had made sure of that, aggressively pinning him against the warehouse wall and searing his touch into Squall's skin before letting him go after their training.

Breaking his gaze away from Rinoa's car, he closed his eyes and reclined his head against the headrest. The visit could easily turn awkward. Of all the consequences he'd imagined for getting involved with Seifer, he hadn't really thought as far as Rinoa's opinion.

Not that any of the undesirable consequences he had foreseen had deterred him much in the end either. Whenever he was around Seifer they simply ceased to matter and the pursuit of pleasure became all he could think about. Whatever hesitance he'd felt at first was vanishing with alarming speed. It was only now, when he no longer had Seifer around to addle his thought process with lopsided grins and warm lips, that he began to remember why this was a dangerous thing to do. There was no way this could end well.

He didn't believe in sex without entanglements. There were always consequences. At some point, expectancies were bound to diverge. Even if sex was the only stake in a relationship, then boredom was the inevitable follow-up. The only scenario that spared both parties was when boredom struck at the same time for those involved.

And he could no longer maintain this would be a fleeting attraction. If anything, acting on it had made things far worse. As if a blindfold had been taken off and now he'd never be able to look at Seifer in a purely platonic way again. His track record suggested he wouldn't soon run into someone who affected him the same way either. Seifer on the other hand…

It wouldn't be a clean cut when it ended. It couldn't be. He knew he was already getting too close. Training together, sparring together, sharing a bed together, traveling together. Seifer wasn't keeping any of it separate from their newfound attraction. Anything goes. That seemed to be Seifer's approach. A training session was easily interspersed with flirtation and kisses, a conversation interrupted by more intimacy than should feel comfortable… Did Seifer lay down other men on his couch the same way he had with him?

He frowned, unable to shake the foreboding thoughts. Only a week ago he had sworn to never set himself up like that again. Dependency debilitated, whatever form it came in. It meant exposing himself to disappointment and hurt. Soon, he would have to leave Esthar and Seifer along with it. They'd meet sporadically at best, with no guarantee of continuing what they'd started.

He'd never been in a position before where he was attracted to someone, but couldn't have them.
That was probably in the cards now.

He had no defenses when it came to things like this. His go-to-method had always been to keep people at a distance. Once actually involved with someone on a too personal level, he had no idea of how to behave or what to expect. It had meant the end of his relationship with Rinoa.

*Rinoa.*

He kneaded at his temple and opened his eyes again. Flashing a look into the rearview mirror, he made sure Seifer hadn't left behind any more hickeys, at the same time realizing just how messed up everything was. The girl's two exes, *doing the nasty,* as Seifer had eloquently called it. He'd avoid the topic, not confirm anything. She didn't have to know.

Telling himself he'd get in, sign the papers and leave, Squall got out of the car and made for the elevators. No longer bonded, Rinoa couldn't gauge his thoughts anymore in a way that was beyond his control. He would be fine.

But when he found himself outside the penthouse's front door, he still hesitated. Angelo outmaneuvered him, barking excitedly as she raced to the other side of the door before he could even think to ring the bell. In an immediate response, he heard light footsteps traveling down the stairs.

"Coming," Rinoa's voice sounded from the other side, unbothered with the fact he hadn't actually knocked or rung the doorbell. "Angelo! Stop that!" A soft whine followed the woman's command as the excited dog stopped bouncing up against the door.

And then the door swung open, Rinoa appearing in its stead, her long hair tied up in a high ponytail and a black smudge staining her left cheek. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but no words came. She looked just as unprepared as he felt.

Taking advantage of their inattention, Angelo squirmed past her owner and jumped up happily against his legs, her tail swishing back and forth. Squall distractedly brought down a hand to pet the dog's head, his eyes on his one-time sorceress. He hadn't anticipated how strange it would be to see her, to be this close, but not *feel* her. He felt a queasy tug at the center of his chest, a dull echo of something inside him that was reaching for her.

Rinoa fought back the urge to throw her arms around Squall, drawn to him by more than just her feelings. She had feared this; the effect of a broken bond that hadn't healed yet. Swallowing thickly, she decided that relief was a safe enough emotion to allow and drank in the brunet's appearance. There were no dark circles beneath gray-blue eyes like that day at the lab. The deadly pallor that haunted her dreams since finding Squall at the Skyway Inn was absent.

She released a trembling breath. Hearing reassurances over the phone was one thing; confirming with her own eyes that Squall was doing better another entirely. Unable to take the small distance that remained anymore, she threw caution to the wind and drew the man into a crushing hug.

"You look good." Breathing out into his leather jacket unsteadily, she wished she could nuzzle his neck instead. The moment an uncertain touch ghosted her right shoulder, she reluctantly stepped back again, restoring Squall's personal space.

"You have ink on your cheek," he replied belatedly, inclining his head to the afflicted area.

Raising a hand to her cheek as if to feel the stain, Rinoa grimaced in mild embarrassment. Pulling the thick, black marker from her makeshift utility belt, she waved it in explanation. "At least I
didn't accidentally chew off the end this time."

Squall could still remember her embarrassed blush as he had pointed out her inky lips. She had sat down with him to help out with paperwork, well over a year ago now. It was strange to recall a time when their bond had still been new and benign, before the downsides had started to surface.

"Come in. I'll make you some coffee."

Not giving Squall time to refuse the offer, Rinoa walked to the kitchen, gesturing to the chaos that was the living area as they passed through. "I'm trying to organize all our stuff." Not that she thought Squall considered any of these things as his. "I think I'll need more boxes," she managed to say lightly, glancing back over her shoulder.

Squall's gaze traveled over the haphazard arrangement of cardboard boxes, sporting vague labels like 'stuff I found in the pantry' or 'mementos' and a seemingly arbitrary color coding system. There was definitely such a thing as owning too much stuff.

Putting the lavish espresso machine to work, Rinoa retrieved a green sticker from her belt pocket and slapped it on the gurgling machine. This was one piece of luxury she wasn't willing to part with. She'd need her daily cup of perfect coffee in the days to come. Watching Squall eye the boxes and piles of belongings critically, she almost succumbed to a smile. He had always indulged her despite his own austere lifestyle. Squall had the right idea, though.

She would downsize her life, get rid of the unnecessary luxury she had tried to fill an empty life with. It was sad how she had rebelled against being a daddy's girl, to then easily allow Squall to pay for all her expenses. Compensation for leaving her alone all the time. Like the expensive gowns and jewelry added to her mother's collection every time her father had been away for longer times. Such a self-pitying and unproductive attitude had to stop. Moving out of the penthouse was the first step.

Setting the two cups of perfectly brewed coffee on the breakfast bar, she sat down on the bar stool across from where Squall occupied his usual seat.

"If you want to keep anything—" she started, nodding at the mayhem of things in the living area, "—now's the time to say. Anything without a green sticker is going, like most of the furniture. I'll sell what I can and send the rest off to charity."

Pulling the cup of coffee towards him, Squall let its warmth seep into his fingers. At his feet, Angelo circled a few times before curling up against him. The domestic setting felt like a strange backdrop for a conversation that spoke of endings.

"You're moving soon then?"

"The moment I have everything sorted out," Rinoa confirmed, mimicking Squall's move and wrapping her fingers around hot porcelain. "Cecilia has been looking for a roommate for a while now. She said I can move right in." Looking up from the steaming black liquid, she met Squall's gaze. "I know the contract for the penthouse runs until the end of December, but… I need a fresh start,"

Squall simply nodded in understanding. "It's just two months of rent."

Rinoa softly shook her head in disbelief at how easily the man downplayed an amount like that. Those two months of rent would've paid for nearly a year at Cecilia's place.

"...If you're sure you don't mind," she said slowly. "I guess I won't need to rent storage room at
least. And I'll have some time to get a good price for the big pieces."

No reply came to her statement, which didn't surprise her in the slightest. She suspected she could
throw the furniture out of the window for all he cared. Still, it was a matter of principle. "You'll get
back what I can get for it."

Squall frowned. "They're your things," he dissuaded firmly.

"You paid for them. That makes it your money." Getting up from her stool before Squall could
comment, she walked to the large dresser and got out what she needed from the top drawer. As she
sat back down across from Squall, the brunet studied her with a narrow-eyed gaze.

"These are the papers you need to sign to end the contract after this year's term," she started,
placing the thin stack in front of Squall. "And here are my cards."

Looking at the three plastic debit cards Rinoa placed on top of the papers, Squall's frown grew into
a scowl. "Are you moving because of this?"

"No," Rinoa answered, her voice sharp in reaction to Squall's tone. But as soon as the denial left
her, she faltered. "I mean—yes and no... This place is too big for just me, Squall. I really do think
I'll be better off with a roommate. Somewhere smaller."

"But you don't want my help."

At the words that sounded as if Squall was offended, Rinoa frowned. She knew the man would
make this difficult.

"Where's the new place?"

Rinoa looked at Squall in suspicion. There was no way he'd accepted it this fast. "Chimera district,
central location. It's a nice place. A busy neighborhood."

"What's the rent?"

And there it was. "Squall—" she started, ready to dissuade, but she was immediately cut off.

"How will you pay for it?" Squall was looking at her intently now, his misgivings badly hidden.

"I'll get a job!" Rinoa burst out angrily. "Like everyone else! Or am I just that incompetent in your
eyes?"

Surprised by the vehemence to Rinoa's reply, Squall regarded the frowning girl. "I didn't say that,"
he replied more calmly, suppressing his frustration. "I don't want you stuck doing something you
don't want to do because of bills. There's no rush."

The heartfelt reasoning deflated Rinoa's anger as quickly as it had risen. She slumped back on her
stool, glancing at her coffee before taking a slow sip. Without any education to speak of, she knew
it would be difficult to find a job. She wouldn't earn much. But anything was better than what she'd
been doing for the past two years. As long as she got herself back onto her feet, she told herself
she'd be fine.

Mistaking her silence for acquiescence, Squall interrupted her thoughts. "Keep the cards. Give me
some peace of mind."

She huffed as she met his sincere gaze. "You know, few guys would give their ex access to their
"I set it up for you. Use it as long as you need it."

"I am getting a job," she replied defiantly, not promising anything.

Squall studied Rinoa thoughtfully. The girl had never spoken of any ambitions or plans for the future. He'd never asked her about what she did with her time when he was away either. "...If that's what you want."

Rinoa sighed. She didn't really know what to do with her life. Somehow her identity and path had seemed sealed the moment she had become a sorceress. The sudden powers, no matter how hard to adapt to at first, had actually given her her purpose. No longer a spoilt daddy's girl, she had easily fallen into the role of the woman behind the commander; the sorceress to her knight. It had made it unnecessary to look at herself and do something with her life that was her own choice.

"I'm not sure about much these days, Squall, but... I forgot how to be independent." She met Squall's gaze firmly. "I want that back."

Squall contemplated the reply that hit too close to home. He understood a need like that better than anyone. Financial independence. He hadn't really looked at it that way.

"What kind of work?"

Rinoa shrugged. "What I can get. I didn't finish high school, remember?" Instead she had run off to run the Timber Owls in a moment of inspired naivety. It hadn't been belief in her cause that had earned her the pathetic involvement of three rookie SeeDs, but Seifer's good word, all of her savings and the promise to get Cid in touch with her father. And in the end, she hadn't made a single difference. Squall had.

"You still can."

Rinoa looked up from recalling bitter memories. "Hm?"

"You can still finish high school. Get an education."

Rinoa laughed hollowly not really convinced by the opinion of a man who knew nothing about regular education. For Squall, school equated to learning how to kill someone. "You really think I could?"

"You're smart," came the simple reply.

"What would I even study?" she asked, unable to really contemplate the option. Ever since the war she'd lacked the confidence and self-knowledge to tackle a possibility like that, but she did only have her senior year to go... Would she be able to further her education after that?

"Whatever you want," Squall answered sincerely, looking at her intently. "You have a choice."

Rinoa instantly understood what Squall meant; how he'd had no choice himself. Reveling in his firm belief in her, Rinoa felt a painful warmth fill her heart as she returned his gaze. For someone who most people considered cold and uncaring, he was the most loyal person she'd ever met. His friendship was priceless, no matter the taciturnity and heavy moods that came with it. Almost reaching out to place her hand over his, she thought better of the unwarranted show of affection. If it was his friendship she wanted to ensure, she'd have to let go of her feelings.
"I never really thought about it," she finally said. School hadn't even entered her mind when considering her future. It changed a lot. An education cost money, for one. She frowned at the thought.

"Then think about it. Choose what you really want." Tapping on the bank cards to draw her attention to them, Squall added, "Use these if you need them."

"That simple?"

"Not everything has to be difficult," Squall answered, reminded of telling Seifer something similar when they'd been up on that tower. *We could use easy for once.*

Rinoa huffed softly at that statement, but she didn't try to retort. "And here I thought I had it all figured out..." She gave Squall a small smile. "Always coming to my rescue, even when I don't think I need it."

"You did the same for me."

Rinoa blinked at that. Realizing he was talking about the Skyway Inn, she didn't dare question the implied gratitude in that statement. "So it's a deal then? We keep looking out for each other?" She knew the request betrayed her feelings, her need to keep Squall in her life come what may.

Even though his agreement to such a deal was bound to be interpreted as a right to meddle, Squall found himself nodding all the same. Rinoa's widening smile cemented the promise they'd just made, filling him with a sense of relief that took him by surprise. After everything that had happened between them, he hadn't expected anything to be salvaged from their failed relationship.

"I guess you have some papers to sign, then."

Accepting the pen she handed him, Squall skimmed over the papers that luckily lacked the density and complexity of SeeD contracts, and signed them off one by one. Watching as Rinoa put the papers into a large envelope, he glanced at his watch. He still had some time before he'd have to leave. His thoughts wandered ahead to dinner. How had Seifer managed to convince him again?

"A Gil for your thoughts."

At the prompt, they met each other's gaze, both realizing at the same time Rinoa hadn't needed to ask that question in a long time.

"I—" Rinoa looked stricken. "Sorry."

Squall shook his head. "It's fine." He preferred the question greatly over the girl poking around in his head and finding the answers for herself. "I'm going to the Palace later—"

"For dinner, I know," Rinoa cut in. She could still remember Laguna's excitement over the phone when he'd called her that morning. She had asked Seifer to arrange it herself, but now that he had succeeded, she felt usurped. It didn't help that Laguna already loved the man to bits; the next great thing to have happened to his stubborn son. Even though the president didn't know the entire story, it still felt as if he was welcoming his son's new lover with open arms. And telling her all about it.

"He's really taken with Seifer."

Squall snorted at that, but no denial followed. Watching the brunet closely, she wished she could ask what she wanted to know, but she knew well enough that he'd never give her a straight answer.

"How's the training going?" she asked, getting up from her stool again to refill their coffee cups and
give Squall the feeling she wasn't paying undue attention to his reply.

"Promising," Squall answered. He couldn't maintain his pessimism when he hadn't had a single hallucination since taking the pills and his junctioning and casting abilities were improving rapidly. "I just came from there."

"And where's there?"

"An empty warehouse, at Seifer's work."

Rinoa paused mid-pouring ground coffee into the espresso machine. She didn't know anything about Seifer's life in Esthar, but clearly the man had no qualms about involving Squall. "What does he do anyway?" she said, shaking the remainder of the coffee into its slot.

"He's Balios's only apprentice."

Rinoa frowned when the name was mentioned as if it should mean something to her; as if it was a big deal. She'd heard admiration in Squall's voice, she was sure of it. "Who's Balios?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder with a slight frown.

"One of the best weapon smiths there is," Squall replied incredulously. Especially the man's blades. Only the Shumi up north could produce blades of better quality, aided by magic.

Rinoa suppressed the sting of envy she felt towards Seifer for having the perfect skills and job to earn Squall's reverence like that. It was simply unfair; the advantage the blond had over her. Reminding herself she wasn't actually competing, not anymore anyway, she forced another question past her lips. "So he's making weapons?"

Squall nodded. "He's also a gunblade instructor at the SCTA."

"Of course he is." Rinoa cursed inwardly. She really hadn't intended for that reply to sound so bitter. Taking the new cups of coffee after spiking hers with too much sugar, she returned to the breakfast bar. "Here you go," she said, trying to pick up the conversation. "So... Balios is letting you guys use his warehouse?"

Squall frowned at the assumption. He wasn't entirely sure what Seifer had told the man. It would only spell trouble, he suddenly realized, should Arc find out about Seifer's past by walking in on them using magic. On the other hand, Arc had figured out his identity and the man hadn't treated him badly for being a magic user. Maybe the man truly wouldn't care.

"He doesn't know?" Rinoa guessed at Squall's hesitance. "Are you sure that's a good idea, with Estharian's paranoia about magic?"

Meeting Rinoa's gaze, Squall shrugged. "The place is empty and big enough. Away from civilians."

Rinoa wasn't so convinced, but she let the issue go. "When you say your training is promising," she changed the topic, "what does that mean exactly?"

"My junction time is almost back to normal when I'm on the meds. So are my spells and summons."

"You think you'll recover completely?"
"If things keep improving at this rate."

Relieved, Rinoa nodded. There were no certainties, she knew that, but this was so much more than she had dared hope for when they'd first found Squall.

"That's wonderful news," she said warmly, meeting Squall's gaze. "How about Seifer? How's he doing?"

"Also better." That was an understatement, Squall thought. Between the two of them, Seifer was the most excited and motivated. No longer suffering pain as punishment for using magic, the man couldn't get enough of even the simpler spells. Squall couldn't imagine going without for over two years.

Rinoa studied Squall as he drank from his coffee, his thoughts most likely on Seifer. He didn't look particularly smitten, but there was none of the sadness or frustration that used to mar his expression at the mention of the man either. Hyne, even Squall's annoyance at ending up in Seifer's care seemed to have vanished. He just sipped his coffee, clearly content that Seifer was doing well too.

"So, when do you think you'll return to Balamb?" she asked next, carefully studying Squall's reaction.

Squall set down his cup as he was forced to think about the question he'd been avoiding. He could partly fulfill his bureaucratic and commanding functions from his laptop for a little while longer, as long as there wasn't an emergency. As for his missions... The rank he usually accepted required full time junctioning and his absolute best when it came to spells and summoning. Anything less would cost lives.

"When I can take missions again. Top rank." He would not return to low level missions; to the likes of taking out a pathetically weak monster infestation or escorting a VIP. He tried to tell himself that was his only reason for stalling. That and avoiding the scrutiny of his friends.

"Hm. So you won't be staying with Seifer for that much longer then? I mean, with how quickly both of you are getting better."

Squall glanced up to meet Rinoa's gaze, but she just looked at him openly, clearly not realizing the sore spot she was hitting. "Seems like it," he answered, gulping down a mouthful of coffee.

Rinoa's heart twinged as the truth presented itself; the slight delay in his reply, the brief frown that was quickly smoothed away.. He didn't want to leave. He wanted to stay with Seifer. "Promise me to drop by before you leave Esthar," she asked, forcing her voice into a light tone.

"I'm leaving this Tuesday, actually," Squall said, reminded of the news he still had to share. He couldn't be sure he'd always be reachable, considering the very lacking cell phone connection in the Winhill region, and the last thing he needed was Rinoa panicking when he didn't pick up for a few days. "I should be back in a week."

"Where are you going?" Rinoa asked, surprised. Clearly it wasn't anything Garden related. "Didn't you have an appointment with Odine on Thursday?"

"I'm postponing it," Squall replied, quickly continuing his explanation before Rinoa could protest. "I'm going to Galbadia with Seifer."

Rinoa's heart fell. "What for?"

"To see Ellone. And Fujin and Raijin." Squall wasn't sure just how much he should disclose of
something so private to Seifer. But Rinoa would understand.

"Ellone? I've been asking you for ages to go see her together and you always said no... And Seifer's posse?" Rinoa tried to see the point she was missing, but failed.

"We're going to see Ellone to prove something. For Seifer."

Rinoa's brow scrunched in confusion. "Her powers? You're going to make her use them?"

Squall grimaced slightly at that. "I already did once. After the war. To find out—"

"To find out about Seifer," Rinoa finished, realization dawning. After the war, Squall had gone from mission to mission like a man possessed. He'd been away for months. He could easily have snuck off on his own somewhere during that time. "What do you think you can learn that Seifer can't just tell you?"

"Ellone can't access his memories as Ultimecia's knight," Squall replied, his voice dead serious. Somehow Rinoa suspected that had they still been bonded, she would've felt an urge of angry protectiveness the way she had that day at the lab. "I think it means he was being controlled. Seifer needs to see the proof."

Rinoa fell silent at Squall's explanation. Remembering how reluctant Seifer had been to take Squall in, because of obvious guilt, she nodded slowly. Ultimecia had manipulated her as well, only she had been aware of the manipulation. She could only imagine what it would feel like not to be sure. "He doesn't believe it's not his fault?"

Squall slowly shook his head, his lips drawn into a stark line.

Swallowing thickly, she asked, "What does any of that have to do with Raijin and Fujin, though?"

"He had already planned to go see them."

Rinoa blinked at that. Granted, they had a valid reason to go to Galbadia, but this... this was Seifer taking Squall along to visit his friends. Friends she hadn't been allowed to meet when she'd been dating the blond. Friends that made up an exclusive gang of three, not four.

Unable to give a more reasonable explanation than he already had, Squall didn't know what to say in reply to Rinoa's clear surprise. It made him realize all over again how weird it was, this trip of theirs.

"I guess you were overdue for a holiday," Rinoa said finally, not an ounce of sincerity to her words. Squall had never gone on a trip with her. Emergencies had always sprung up at the last minute, the man always too busy. And Fujin and Raijin... Those two were like family to Seifer. She tried to swallow away the thickness that was starting to settle in her throat as the worst case scenario flit through her mind. Boyfriend, meet the family. Family, meet the boyfriend.

Squall frowned. Already, Rinoa was calling it a holiday as well. How on earth he was going to sell this one to Quistis, he didn't know. He hadn't intended for it to turn into anything reminiscent of a vacation.

"So, Galbadia. Got anything fun planned?" Rinoa asked, not sure whether she was trying to rub salt in her own wounds or feign indifference. It seemed like she had been stupid enough to give Seifer just the push he'd needed. Bye bye, bad case of denial. She'd made sure of that.

"Just hunting," Squall answered reluctantly. Somehow he felt as if he shouldn't be indulging in too
leisurely activities. He couldn't remember the last time he had, and wondered since when that habit had been ingrained in him.

"...Sounds nice." Rinoa got up from her chair, setting away their cups in the sink. "Say hello to Ellone for me."

As the girl washed the cups and spoons, her back turned to him, Squall was glad to see the topic closed. "Sure."

"It's been too long," Rinoa said, fighting to keep her voice from breaking. "When was the last time we saw her..." Setting back the cups into the cupboard, she turned around to lean against the counter. "New Year's Eve, and Laguna's birthday party... Almost a year."

Meeting the girl's solemn gaze, Squall felt a pang of guilt. Rinoa had always wanted to get to know Ellone better and visit the place he was born; the setting for many of Loire's stories. She'd tried to plan a trip twice, but both times her plans had fallen through because of his missions. He'd never really understood why she'd found it so important for him to 'reconnect' with what she'd called his roots. Maybe it was because she missed her own mother.

"You'll have to tell me how she's doing," Rinoa said. Watching Squall's small nod, she berated herself for letting the mood get this heavy. She'd just have to try harder, show the man that they could hang out casually, and maybe—after enough time—she'd be able to feel truly at ease instead of having to fake it.

Fiddling with her bracelets, the inhibitors feeling itchy in reaction to Squall's presence, she took a steadying breath before painting a small smile on her lips. "Will you tell Laguna? ...I wouldn't put it past him to ditch Esthar and come along for the family reunion."

Squall frowned at the thought. A self-appointed sister he'd outgrown, a father he didn't want and his mother's grave. If it wasn't for Seifer, he'd be happy to never set foot in Winhill again.

Getting no response in reply to her joking remark, Rinoa felt like chiding Squall for his touchiness with the whole family thing. After two years of trying to bring him around to her point of view, she knew it was pointless.

"Bring me back a few bottles of that cream gin she sent us once?" she asked instead. "You at least owe me a souvenir."

Squall glanced at Rinoa, his lips turned down in distaste. "You still like that stuff?"

"You know me and my sweet tooth," Rinoa said, a smile quirking her lips as she ticked off her order on her fingers. "The chocolate and vanilla ones, please."

Squall quirked an eyebrow at the girl's lousy taste, but acquiesced. "I'll see what I can find."

"Great," Rinoa said, her smile a bit less shaky when she pushed away from the counter. She could do this. Moving to sit back at the breakfast bar, she was distracted however by the increasing itch and pull at her inhibitors.

"What is it?"

Looking up from the bracelets, she smoothed out her frown. "Oh, it's nothing... Just—Seems like these still have to get used to your presence... Or, well, I have to." Seeing Squall's confusion at the lacking explanation, Rinoa released a little sigh. So much for light conversation.
"The inhibitors are probably keeping me from feeling it too much, but—" Faltering, trying to find her words, she met Squall's gaze. "Don't you feel it too?" she asked dimly. "The broken bond."

Concerned, Squall glanced down at the inhibitors, not recognizing them. Looking back up into hazel eyes, he nodded slowly. "A little." That same dull pull he had felt when stepping into the penthouse had persisted. Like an itch he couldn't scratch. "Are those new?" he asked, nodding at the bracelets.

"You're not the only one who's gone to Odine for a check-up," Rinoa said, trying not to sound resentful. Squall had had Seifer and Laguna with him. She'd been alone.

Squall frowned. "When?" he demanded.

"Friday."

Wanting to berate the woman for not telling him, Squall only barely managed to keep from uttering such hypocrisy. "...I could have gone with you."

"That's okay," Rinoa said softly. "It went fine."

"No side-effects?"

Rinoa shook her head. "I'm taking a higher dosage of suppressants. Just to make sure." She gave a wistful smile. "Now's actually the first time I feel anything."

Squall nodded thoughtfully. "Me too."

Rinoa rolled her eyes at that. "I guess you're not counting hallucinations and loss of consciousness." But she knew what Squall meant. She glanced down at her inhibitors, consciously having to stop herself from fiddling with them again. "Don't worry, though. It's nothing I can't control," Rinoa reassured. "I'm sure it'll pass."

Reminded of control and how easily it was to lose it, her gaze grew distant. What kind of person had to reassure the person they loved that they wouldn't invade their minds or hurt them. "Seifer told me your scar is healing," she found herself saying, wanting to know if it was true.

Surprised, Squall nodded slowly. "It is..." When had the two talked? It seemed like whenever he turned his back, they were calling each other up.

"When did it start to heal?"

Squall had to force himself to meet Rinoa's gaze. They both knew she already knew the answer to that question. He didn't see the point in hashing up things from the past.

"So it's true," Rinoa said dejectedly. "...I'm sorry."

"Don't," Squall dissuaded firmly. "Even if it didn't heal because of the bond, that doesn't make it your fault."

Snorting at such flawed reasoning, she didn't say anything for a while. It was her fault. It was because of her that he'd been injured in the first place. She could only hope that it had been some weird magic property that had kept Squall from healing, and not her feelings of resentment seeping into the bond, poisoning Squall.

"It doesn't hurt anymore?" she finally broke the silence.
"No."

"Can I see?" She knew it was a strange request, an unnecessary one, but she needed to see for herself that both of them could recover from the damage she had done.

Squall frowned. In the end it was just another scar. He knew Rinoa still felt guilty though. Not wanting her to think he’d flinch away from her or couldn't bear the thought, he nodded. Maybe letting her see the healed scar would help.

Taking a quivering breath, Rinoa got up from her stool and walked around to move behind Squall's back. Eyes following a path down his neck and back, she hesitated, but Squall beat her to it and pulled his T-shirt over his head.

It had healed. At an amazing rate, she noted. Remembering the charred hole, dark blood thick with magic oozing from deep in the brunet's chest, she swallowed thickly. The skin looked tight and uneven, but it was pale, the same color as the rest of Squall's back. The unhealthy tint of recurring infection was gone, along with the swelling. It even seemed to have shrunk in size.

Carefully fingering the center of the old wound, where she had desperately pressed her hands to try and stop the bleeding, she couldn't help herself from moving a bit closer to Squall. Alive. Healthy. No thanks to me, she thought bitterly.

"...I'm so sorry," she said again, her voice cracking this time. Before Squall could counter her apology, she continued, "I talked to Odine about getting rid of my powers. For good." She could feel him go very still at her announcement. He didn't speak, silently waiting for her to elaborate.

She softly placed the flat of her hand against Squall's scarred shoulder blade, trying to ignore the soapy scent she didn't recognize on his skin and hair. "It wasn't a possibility before, but with the things he learned from the tests... Odine's going to use the data for new research. A way to not just suppress a sorceress's powers, but remove them."

"How?" came the dubious question.

"Well... Ultimecia knew of a way to pass on her powers. They can be transferred. Maybe it doesn't have to be in death. If a sorceress isn't that different from a GF, like Odine thinks, then maybe... maybe powers can be drawn? I don't know. I didn't really understand Odine's explanation."

Squall went cold at the word death. There wasn't a chance in hell that he would let Odine experiment on Rinoa with stakes like that. "Don't do anything without telling me," he demanded harshly, turning around to face her.

Letting her hand fall away from Squall's warm skin, Rinoa took in his worried expression. "Don't worry. After the bond... I'll never rush into something like that again. No more unnecessary risks." When the dangerous glint to gray-blues abated slightly at her explanation, she continued, "But you have to understand. Without the bond my powers don't have a single purpose anymore. They only make my life more difficult. If I can—if it's possible, I want to try and be normal. Really normal."

Squall fell silent as he considered Rinoa's words. He had tried to imagine what it would be like at times; living in constant fear of losing control, always needing to numb your mind with pills and your powers with inhibitors. Now that he was experiencing his own share of magic altering medication and control issues, he understood Rinoa all the better.

"Only if it's one hundred percent safe," he issued his condition. "You're not his test subject."

Rinoa nodded, a faint smile on her lips. "You'll be the first one I call," she said. "But really, it
might never even happen. Odine's research could take years. Maybe he won't find a way."

Squall didn't reply, his expression drawn.

Rinoa nodded her head at the T-shirt still clutched in his grip. "Don't want you catching a cold," she said, wondering for the umpteenth time at Squall's overly pragmatic attitude towards nudity, the brunet never associating it with sexuality. It was a questionable trait; the ability to strip down in anyone's presence. It made him the perfect target for horndog blonds.

*If any of that was real on Squall's side, don't you think I'd be busy fucking his brains out back at the apartment right now?*

Watching Squall put his shirt back on, she tried to shake Seifer's blunt words, but failed. She almost didn't catch Squall's next words.

"Just be careful."

Pulled from her dark thoughts by his words, she lifted her gaze from Squall's chest to meet concerned eyes.

"I told you, I will." Taking her earlier promise seriously, needing to know Squall would be okay, she continued, "You too. With the trip and Ellone..." Faltering, she added what was really on her mind. "And with Seifer."

Squall frowned at hearing the same concerns Ellone had expressed. "Ellone's powers aren't dangerous. It's just memories. It can't hurt either of us."

Blinking at being so thoroughly misunderstood, Rinoa didn't know what to respond to first. Deciding she didn't want to know what that 'either of us' meant—what Squall was going to do with his own memories—she pushed on to say what she'd wanted to leave implied only.

"I meant with what's going on between you two... Be careful, okay?"

Catching on to Rinoa's implication, Squall felt himself run cold. Had there been marks on his back? Something he'd missed?

Watching Squall tense up, Rinoa clamped down on her feelings with everything she had. His expression said it all, as if she'd caught him in the act. Then Seifer had made his move... and Squall had given in. "I—I just don't want to see you hurt," she managed weakly. "That's all I wanted to say."

Squall floundered, at a loss for something to say. He hadn't intended for her to ever find out; hadn't intended the undeniable hurt that marred Rinoa's face. For the first time he felt a stab of guilt for what he'd been up to with Seifer. He had spared Rinoa no thought at all, hadn't even cared. Confronted with the sight of his ex-sorceress now, the girl fighting the quiver of her chin as she cleared her throat, he felt like a complete asshole.

"I guess you'd better go," she managed in a trembling tone of voice that sounded painfully fake. "Laguna's probably been anxious to see you all day."

The gently phrased request to leave was more gracious than he felt he deserved. For a moment he wondered whether he should apologize or explain himself, but he knew nothing he had to say would make it better.

Giving a terse nod, he turned and forced himself to walk away from the damage he'd just dealt.
Rinoa didn't follow, offering only a soft "bye" to his back as he left. Angelo's whines were the last thing he heard as he rounded the hallway and stalked out of the penthouse. Slamming his palm against the button that would call the elevator, he wished he could be out of there already.

Back with Seifer, his traitorous mind added. Seifer would make him forget.

Frowning, he stepped into the elevator and tried to summon some poise. Seifer wouldn't be able to fix this. Nothing could fix this. Rinoa knew, and there was little he could do about it.

He let out a controlled breath, trying to unravel the tension that had seized his body. Striding out of the elevator the moment its doors opened, he made a beeline for his car. It was only when he got in, closed the car door on the outside world and dropped his head back against the headrest that he could begin to think clearly.

He wasn't even sure why this alarmed him so much. He deeply regretted hurting Rinoa, but this was more than that. Opening his eyes, he regarded his reflection in the rearview mirror. Perhaps it was because everything he'd done felt more real now. The first repercussion of his choices had made itself known, bringing to mind everything else that could go wrong. What he'd seen on Rinoa's face... It was his own worst fear.

The realization caused him to frown, but the conclusion felt true enough. If anyone had that kind of power over him, it would be Seifer. And he'd given it to the man freely. Feeling the familiar surge of panic, he stomped it out. It was too late now. There was no changing course, no stopping what he'd started. Even if he was heading straight for disaster.

A strange sense of calm descended over him as he stared ahead at the concrete wall of the underground parking. The tracks were laid out in front of him. All he could do was to let momentum push him forward, to whatever end. He didn't want to cut things off with Seifer, not even to save himself. He would see things through. He would let himself have whatever Seifer chose to offer.

The resolution was a daring one, sending a rush of adrenaline coursing through him. As if he was in free fall.

Feeling a measure of peace for the first time since landing in the bastard's bed, he started the engine. He knew of only one way to quench this eager feeling. He wanted to see Seifer.

~ o ~
The Palace

[The Presidential Palace, Sphinxara District, Sunday, 26th of October, 6:53 pm]

Adjusting his tie, Seifer left the expensive shop just off Ivalice street. He'd never owned a suit in his life, had never even tried one on, but once the idea had taken root in his mind, he hadn't been able to help himself. Calder had laughed at him when he'd called for help, but the man had given him suggestions on where he'd be able to buy a suit all the same. He'd wanted to be dressed smartly for the commander and president, and suits were supposed to make people swoon; another hypothesis he couldn't wait to try out. It certainly seemed promising by how the shop assistants had been eyeing him up after he'd put it on.

Walking down the bustling street, he soon turned down a sidestreet and headed for the nearest access point for a good's lift. He was running short on time. Spotting a lift in the distance, hurtling it's way through the tall buildings, he grinned and prepared himself. Just in time he jumped and grabbed hold of a metal bar on the lift.

Leaning into the motions, following the sharp twists and turns, he remembered just how much Squall had enjoyed traveling this way. Almost as much as Seifer did himself. Only a few minutes now and he'd be laying eyes on the man again. Squall would be hands off for a while, but he'd make damned sure they'd make up for it later.

Keeping his eyes on a nearby walkway, he waited for the last swerve before jumping off, his feet impacting hard against the translucent blue glass of a deserted walkway. Only one block away from where he'd arranged to meet Squall.

He still didn't know what to expect. Laguna had been easygoing at the lab and he was certain they'd find something to talk about, but it would definitely be odd sharing a meal with the president. Squall would most likely be a grouch, but so help him Hyne, he was going to enjoy every minute of watching those two stumble through awkward social interaction.

Rounding a corner onto the palace square, he easily spotted Squall by one of Esthar's busiest meeting points. The man was leaning against the base of the large statue that commemorated the end of Adel's reign, clearly lost in his own head and oblivious to the bustle of people around him. The pose was so fucking familiar that Seifer had trouble containing his glee. In the past he'd taken great pleasure in goading Squall out of his inner world and forcing the man to acknowledge him. Now he knew he'd have Squall's attention in the span of a second. He stopped right in front of the brunet.

Pulled from his thoughts, Squall raised an eyebrow at the unlikely sight that greeted him. Dressed in the simple but elegant lines of a dark suit, Seifer looked like he'd walked straight off the pages of one of Rinoa's catalogs.

Pushing away from his perch, he was about to comment when Seifer stepped into his space and tipped up his chin to steal a kiss. The bastard played out the move too smoothly for him to stop himself from reciprocating the brief touch of lips, despite the public setting. He'd been waiting for the man with impatience, and he'd been fantasizing about far more satisfying activities than a mere kiss. Somehow the blond's smug grin only managed to further fan his desire to pull the man back in for more. It was all Seifer's fault they weren't somewhere more private.
"Like it?" the bastard asked, spreading his arms to indicate the suit.

"I doubt Loire mentioned a dress code," Squall said dryly, his gaze flitting over the blond's immaculate appearance. In addition to the suit, thick cologne wafted about the man, the same scent Seifer had worn that night at the club.

"Who said it was for the President?" Seifer said with a broad smile. The way Squall's gaze was glued to him made it worth every single Gil. "Which way are we headed?"

"The east wing." Squall tilted his head to where they needed to go. Watching as Seifer set off, he followed after the cocky blond with a frown and groaned inwardly when he caught his gaze falling to broad shoulders accentuated by the suit's cut. Trust Seifer to find new buttons to push, looking good while doing it.

Seifer's eyes traveled the awe-inspiring buildings surrounding the plaza. The Sphinxara district showcased the pinnacle of Estharian technology and architecture and amidst it all towered the political center of the country. The place where policies and laws were laid down. Where courses of action were being decided that would change the lives of millions. The home of Squall's dad, where they were about to go for dinner. Looking beside him, he grinned when Squall's glance darted away from him guiltily. Oh yes, he'd definitely made the right call.

Feigning innocence, Squall fixed his eyes ahead and turned them onto the path that led to the palace's east gate. Bastard, he thought inwardly for good measure. He'd have to make sure not to slip up and ogle the blond in Loire's presence. Even more dangerous would be Seifer realizing the extent of how infatuated he was, and so far he'd done a poor job of adjusting his behavior around the blond.

Fortunately, the scrutiny and brisk salutes of the two palace guards on duty by the east gate helped him assume a more proper state of mind. Offering his own greeting in the form of a nod, the two guards opened the gate and let them pass.

The massive bulk of the east wing loomed before and above them, the day's last sunlight glinting off the highest glass and metal tiers that crowned the building's elaborate top structure. In just an hour or two the whole place would come alight, becoming the brightest center in Esthar's glowing night. The Gardens paled in comparison to the technical ingenuity and modern splendor of Esthar's presidential palace. Built at the height of Adel's reign, he'd always found the towering building to reflect her hunger for status and power, but the Estharians had long since reclaimed what once had been a symbol of their oppression. Perhaps he just disliked the building because of all the times meetings had brought him there. That and his father.

Several more guards saluted them as they crossed the sterile lawns and gleaming walkways, security waving them through unchallenged as they entered the building's east entrance. He was certain Loire had already been made aware of their arrival by now. Keeping his frown in check, he led Seifer away from the main hover lifts to the private one that would bring them to Loire's quarters all the way at the top of the palace.

Seifer rose an eyebrow at him as an iris scanner allowed them access along with the private access card Loire had granted him, but he just shrugged as the large lift smoothly started into motion and shot upward. A section of the previously opaque lift became translucent, offering them a dizzying view of Sphinxara District during their ascent. No doubt the effect had been intended to dazzle visitors, and going by Seifer's awed whistle, the palace's architect had succeeded in his ploy.

When the lift came to a stop, the protective shield dropped and the doors opened to emit them into a wide foyer. Loire was already there waiting for them. As was usual for when the president was
off duty, the man was dressed in casual slacks and a floral print shirt, looking every bit out of place as Squall felt. Sending them a beaming smile, Loire walked over to meet them halfway.

"Hello, son. Seifer," he greeted warmly. "Glad to see you could make it." Moving his gaze from the mandatory study of his son's appearance, he turned to regard Seifer. "I think I'm feeling a bit underdressed," he jested, bringing up a hand to scratch at his neck with a slight chuckle. "Well, at least one of us looks like they belong, huh?"

"I'll keep the dress code in mind next time," Seifer replied with a teasing smirk, impressed by the courage of the man's shirt. "Might have to stock up on a couple of new shirts though. Where did you get that one?"

Taking the jibe in stride, Laguna smiled with a glint to his eyes. "What, this old thing? I think it predates you, kid. One of the few that survived my journalist days." His smile broadened. "Perfect for Casual Fridays."

"You know, you wouldn't believe it, but Squall actually has his own version of casual. I thought he slept wearing his belt collection, but what do you know, the cuddly lion actually likes drawstring pants and old comfy shirts."

Stunned at the bold words and mystified by the nickname, Laguna paused all but a second before letting out a hearty laugh. "And here I thought this was his interpretation of casual," the president said, indicating his son's combat inspired attire with a smile. "But really, we should behave," he said with a covert wink, clapping a friendly hand to Seifer's shoulder. "Come on. This way. They'll be ready to serve dinner any minute now."

Ignoring Seifer's amusement, Squall reluctantly followed the two men as Loire led them to the large sliding doors that would bring them into the president's quarters. It was beyond alarming how easily those two had already found common ground in bad jokes and banter.

"I hope you two brought your appetite," Laguna said cheerfully. "I asked Gabriel to make his boar roast." He eyed Squall fondly as he remembered his son's appreciation for the dish. "Don't tell my electorate, but Esthar has nothing on Galbadian cuisine."

"Agreed," Seifer chimed in, following Laguna's path through several rooms obviously meant for private receptions, before the doors slid open to reveal the most impressive room yet.

Waiting for his guests to enter, Laguna gestured inside. "Come on in and make yourselves at home."

Seifer smiled widely. The president's dining room. Unable to believe he was actually there, he took in the lush surroundings. They'd clearly spared no expense in designing the place, the high ceilinged room possessing all the grandeur of a presidential abode. The sliding doors and several panels on the walls glowed a soft, diffuse light that created a tastefully cozy atmosphere despite the stark and modern nature of the building. In fact, the whole place had a distinctly different feel than the rest of the palace. The president's residence still shared the metal and glass core of the larger structure, but that's where the similarity ended.

Where he would've expected the sleek lines of typical Estharian furniture, there were traditional wooden pieces that harkened back to older times and other continents. A round dining table, large enough to seat only a small party of guests, sat to one side of the room. A large rug with bright patterns was spread underneath it, while almost every inch of wall space was covered with the most eclectic collection of art he'd ever seen. At the other end of the room an area with plush sofas was set up within easy reach of a very promising looking liquor cabinet.
He walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window that made up the entire south side of the dining room, amazed to be looking out onto a lovingly groomed garden at these heights. The first autumn colors were sneaking into the leaves of the well-kept shrubs and trees. An abundance of winding climbers and seasonal flowers gave the garden a lively, intimate feel that contrasted sharply with the manicured laws of the palace grounds. At the far end, a balcony railing no doubt gave the best view of Esthar the city had to offer.

Raising an eyebrow, he turned around and looked to Squall for some indication that he wasn't the only one thinking the decor was rather unusual, but he only got a shrug in return before the brunet took a seat at the dining table. Amused at the unexpected setting, Seifer walked over to sit down as well. However strange the clash was of Estharian architecture and Galbadian decoration, the room felt homey and comfortable and the company was definitely going to make for an interesting meal.

"What aperitif would you like? I have a pretty well stocked bar," Laguna offered. "Or should I have some champagne brought up?"

"Pastis," Squall relayed his choice. He might as well take to the more potent alcohol if he was to survive the evening.

"I still have some left from that bottle you tried last time," Laguna nodded with a smile. "And what's your poison?" he said, turning to Seifer.

"Lemme try some of that as well."

"I'll stick to sherry, then," the president said with a slight shake of the head. "Can't say I keep the pastis around for myself." Raine had often poured herself a glass after a particularly taxing day. It was one of the things he hadn't told Squall yet, in fear of the brunet avoiding the drink solely for that reason.

Making for the liquor cabinet, he opened the compartment that held the aperitifs and rummaged around in it to find the bottle of pastis that had been Raine's favorite. "So, what have you two been up to today?" he asked, glancing at his guests as he poured the two glasses. "Hopefully nothing as dull as my schedule."

"Not dull at all," Seifer said. "Been busy training, had a friend over, did some lounging about... and some last minute shopping."

Laguna chuckled as he set the two glasses and bottle on the table. "Now that's the kind of day I could use. Minus the shopping, of course," he said with a smile, before turning to look at his son expectantly.

Resigned to the occasional input in the evening's conversation, Squall pulled his glass of liquid comfort closer. "Training," he said succinctly. "And I went to see Rinoa."

Laguna raised an eyebrow. When he'd had the girl on the phone that morning, she'd seemed subdued. It was clear Rinoa was still struggling with their break-up. However unpleasant, maybe a period of true separation would help heal her wounds better. "How was she?"

"Okay," Squall said, hoping the lie didn't show on his face. She'd been far from okay when he'd left. "She's moving."

"That's the first I hear of it," Laguna commented with a frown, taking seat at the table with his glass of sherry. "What about the penthouse then?" he asked in confusion, certain his son didn't care much for the place.
"I signed papers to end the lease," Squall said evenly. "She's moving in with a friend."

"I see," Laguna said with a small nod. It didn't bode well for his chances to see more of his son if the man wouldn't even have a place in Esthar to return to. Before he could say anything else, a polite knock signaled the arrival of a servant.

Seifer kept his eyes on Squall as the servant placed a pitcher of chilled water and several appetizers on the table. It was weird hearing Squall talk about Rinoa and their shared home. It stirred all kinds of unpleasant emotions, despite the fact that he knew the two were over and no longer shared a bed under the same didn't like it one bit.

"Help yourselves," Laguna said, mostly directing his encouragement to the newest of his guests and setting an example by picking a small toast with elaborate toppings off one of the trays.

Dismissing his misgivings about Rinoa and Squall's past for now, Seifer grabbed one as well while Squall diluted his drink with water. Preferring his alcohol neat, he brought up his glass and inhaled deeply. Not entirely won over by the sharp odor that hit him, he stalled for a second before knocking back a healthy gulp. Grimacing at the horrible taste that filled his mouth, he leaned over to pour a big glass of water. "Fuck, Squall... Seriously?"

Squall rolled his eyes. "You're supposed to water it down."

"It's the aniseed. Not for everyone," the president commented with a chuckle. "How about I fix you a glass of sherry instead?"

"Do you have any whiskey?" Seifer asked, needing something strong enough to overpower the lingering taste.

"I think I have a single malt that might be light enough. I'll go fetch it," Laguna replied amicably, glad the blond just spoke his mind instead of feeling self-conscious like most of his first-time guests. Getting up from his chair, he moved to go search the liquor cabinet.

"Thanks," Seifer said, looking over at Squall while Laguna was busy. "You actually like that stuff?"

Squall gave his drink a slight slosh around in its glass and shrugged. "It's good." Tastes differed. Like Rinoa's Hyne awful cream liquors.

"Hn." Seifer eyed the glass briefly, realizing there was a lot to the man he didn't know. "What other drinks do you like?"

"Herbal spirits, mostly."

"Never tried those," Seifer commented, as Laguna rejoined them. "And I'm not so sure I'll be rushing to either after this," he said, placing the glass of liquor that tasted more like drain cleaner than anything else in front of Squall.

"Here we go. Hopefully this will suit your tastes better," Laguna said cheerfully as he set a bottle of whisky and an accompanying glass on the table. "I must confess, if it wasn't for all the bottles I get from visiting diplomats, I'd stick to beer for the rest of my days."

"Amberval?" Seifer asked knowingly, always having loved that particular Galbadian brew.

"Of course Amberval! What else?"
"I could give up most drinks for that. Got a weakness for whiskey though." Seifer proceeded to
pour himself some from the bottle Laguna had put on the table. He leaned back in his seat and took
a good whiff of the whiskey in his glass, relishing the rich notes. It was most likely the finest
whiskey he'd ever taste.

"Now that we all have our drinks fixed. Here's to Galbadian beer, good food, and even better
company," Laguna said, wishing he could've spoken more personal words, but he'd learned since
his past mistake of toasting to friends and family.

Seifer raised his glass. "Glad to be here," he said, taking a large sip. Beside him Squall actually
bothered going through the motions as well, if somewhat lackluster. Putting his glass back down,
he eyed the president with interest. "So, you grew up in Galbadia?"

"Born and raised," Laguna answered freely, taking a sip of his brandy. "A real patriot, too. Signed
up for the army at eighteen," he added, laughing awkwardly at his youth's folly. "Sometimes I still
can't believe I've spent the past twenty years on another continent."

"You were in the army?" Seifer asked, unable to imagine it. "Why did you come to Esthar then?"

Squall silentlygroaned at the two questions that were guaranteed to get Loire going for hours.
Taking a royal swig from his pastis, he settled back and resigned himself to hearing the same old
stories for the umpteenth time.

Laguna glanced at his son as he contemplated the past. The brunet's demeanor was withdrawn, but
he supposed the lack of a dissuading glare was all the permission he was going to get. "That's a
long story, kid."

"Just to be clear, kid earns you old man in return. But go on, I don't mind a good story."

Loire chuckled at the retort and the prospect of finally being upgraded to an old man. He'd started
to feel like one years ago, his time spent as a soldier now seeming like a youthful digression.

"The army was just my way of seeing the world," he said, scratching the back of his neck in
embarrassment. "Can't say I was a very good soldier either, but those were some of the best years
of my life. Me, Kiros and Ward. Hyne, the stunts we pulled." He couldn't help an infatuated smile
even after all these years. "It's how I met Squall's mother as well."

Seifer tried to imagine them. A young Laguna and Squall's mother. There had to be a reason she
wasn't around anymore, why Squall hadn't mentioned her. Still, Laguna seemed to be offering the
information freely. "You met her when you were out on a mission?"

"I'm afraid the truth is less flattering," Laguna said with an embarrassed smile. "I met her after
I failed a mission." Drinking some of his sherry, he continued, "She took care of me when I was
brought to her place with injuries. Believe me, jumping off a cliff should only ever be a last resort."

"So, she nursed you back to health and was quite a knock-out too, I'm sure... Just how long did it
take for you to get down on one knee?"

Laguna quirked an eyebrow and even his son stirred from his absent-minded pose to regard Seifer
at the assuming comment.

"I'm that transparent, huh?" He chuckled good-naturedly, holding up his hand to show off his
wedding band. "Five months. And I was absolutely sure she'd say no." Smiling wistfully at
the memory, his gaze darted to Squall. "Stubborn to a fault and impossible to impress. To this day I
don't know how I managed to win her over."
"Now there's something to toast to," Seifer said, holding up his glass in a toast. "To you, for winning the heart of Squall's mom and to Squall, for... well, being Squall." He looked to Squall, grinning. "Stubborn and impossible to impress."

Squall just rolled his eyes as Seifer joined in on Loire's sentimentality, the blond choosing the opportunity to get under his skin.

"I'll drink to that, indeed," Laguna said cheerfully, quickly topping up his glass and raising it enthusiastically. Undeterred by Squall's lack of participation, he took a gulp of his drink along with Seifer.

Setting his glass back on the table, he regarded Seifer, his gaze still warm. "Her name was Raine," he said, somewhat disappointed that Squall hadn't told his friend about her at all. "Can't have you keep calling her Squall's mom."

"Wish I could have met her," Seifer said honestly. He hadn't missed the past tense nor the bittersweet edge to Laguna's expression. "Raine Leonhart," he spoke the name softly.

Loire hummed in confirmation, his smile growing again. "I'm glad his name is all Raine," he said, casting a look at his son. When he'd first laid eyes on Squall and heard the boy's name, his heart had nearly stopped beating. He was grateful the orphanage hadn't chosen to change the unconventional name his mother had given him.

"Mm," Seifer agreed. "Suits him."

The conversation halted as the servant came back in and cleared away the appetizers only to replace them with soup. Seifer took a good look and smiled fondly. "Now this brings back memories. I think I lived off this stuff for about a month straight," he added, chuckling under his breath. "My friend—a very unskilled woman when it comes to cooking—only knew this one recipe, and believe me, this version smells a lot better. Like it's actually safe to eat." He looked at Squall, dropping a tip about their week to come. "A reason to make sure Fujin doesn't lose when we're out don't want to let her near a cooking pot."

"You're going hunting?" Laguna asked curiously, immediately jumping on the new morsel of information.

"Yeah..." Seifer met Squall's gaze, letting him decide what to say.

Having promised Ellone to inform Loire, Squall leaned back in his chair resignedly. "We're going to Galbadia to see Ellone and some of Seifer's friends."

Laguna's eyes widened at that. "Ellone?" he asked, unsure whether he'd heard that right. "You're going to Winhill?"

Nodding, Squall didn't feel like adding anything to his statement, but he knew Loire wouldn't be appeased just yet.

"Why?" Laguna couldn't help himself from asking. There had to be something going on for Squall to go to his mother's hometown willingly. Something that required Ellone's assistance. "Is something wrong?"

At the tone of concern in Loire's voice, Squall glanced at Seifer. "Nothing's wrong. Just something we need her help with."

"Squall's trying to help me out," Seifer added, briefly regarding his almost empty glass of whiskey.
before raising his gaze to look at Laguna. "I need to know something about the war," he stated without much emotion, not wanting to bring up his past.

"I see… I didn't mean to pry. It's just—" Laguna paused, looking back at his son. "I was surprised."

"No harm done," Seifer said, relaxing as no further questions ensued. "We're going on Tuesday. We'll probably be gone for about a week. We'll keep up the training; use our magic and GFs properly. It'll be a hell of a lot nicer than being holed up in my apartment, that's for sure. A bit of R&R."

"Hunting, you said, right?" the president commented, seizing the opportunity to lighten the conversation again. "With your friends?"

"Yup. Raijin and Fujin. Been my friends for as long as I can remember. They live in Timber, so after I moved to Esthar we usually meet up every half year or so. To make things more interesting, we go hunting. We go to a new area each time and find a rare creature to track down. Thought I'd drag Squall along for this one. It'll be right up the Commander's alley."

Smiling at what sounded like a wonderful plan, Laguna nodded. "Nothing like the great outdoors." He missed the Galbadian woodlands and wished he could round up Ward and Kiros for a trip just like the one Seifer had described. "I must hand it to you. It's a first for anyone to convince Squall to take a vacation. A proper one, that is. Not just the few days of leave a year."

Seifer turned to face Squall with a widening grin. "Not the romantic get-away type, huh, Leonhart?" he asked, never having imagined as much, but it still pleased him to no end that he'd succeeded where Rinoa had failed. "We'll have to make it memorable."

Not wanting to encourage the stupid grin Loire's remark had put on the blond's face, Squall just glanced at Seifer evenly before returning his attention to his soup. He didn't voice the thought that any trip with Seifer was bound to be memorable, one way or the other.

"You'll have to tell me all about it," Laguna said excitedly. "And you're finally going to visit Ellone." He was happy for the overdue visit, even if Squall's reasons weren't the ones he'd have liked to hear. "I wish I could come with… It's been too long since I've visited Raine's grave."

Turning his gaze to Squall, he knew the man wouldn't visit his mother of his own volition. "Bring her a bouquet of white flowers for me?"

Ambushed by Loire's pleading eyes, Squall felt set up. He'd managed to avoid his mother's grave so far, but how the hell could he refuse such a heartfelt plea? He gave a reluctant nod.

Laguna smiled broadly. Finally Raine's son would come to visit her. He'd always felt guilty about that. Worse than his own predicament as a father was how he'd failed to prevent Raine from becoming a stranger to her own child.

"They have her favorite in the flower shop, south in town. White lilies."

"Okay, someone has to tell me what's going on here," Seifer said, looking to Laguna for an answer. "How do you know Ellone? And how come she's staying in the town where Squall's mo—Raine is buried?"

"Ah, my story was interrupted before I got that far," Laguna said, realizing Squall really hadn't told his friend much. No wonder Seifer was confused.

"Raine was from Winhill. When Ellone's parents—her neighbors—died, she took the girl in and adopted her. I was dropped on her doorstep about a year after that. That makes Ellone something
like Squall's sister... She never stopped calling me Uncle though." And my son calls me Loire, he thought somberly. Scratching the back of his neck, he smiled in slight embarrassment. "I guess I'm not sure how it all comes together."

"Well, I sure as hell won't be of any help in that department," Seifer said, looking at Squall. "A sister huh?" It made a lot more sense now that Squall had just up and called Ellone like that. They were family. Even if the brunet would probably never have volunteered that information on his own. "How did you end up here? How come Squall ended up at the orphanage?"

At the questions that were just as blunt as the previous ones, Laguna wondered where to even start when talking about the most painful episode in his life. "Well, you know about Ellone's powers. Adel kidnapped her because of them. I left Winhill to track her down and bring her back. My search brought me to Esthar." He paused then, collecting his thoughts and words. "Long story short, I ended up way more involved in the Estharian's cause than I'd anticipated. I sent Ellone back and promised to follow once the situation here was under control. One week became a month, two months, five..."

Laguna smiled wistfully. Even now he couldn't stop mulling over the choices he'd made, how he could've done things differently. Somehow both fight Adel's reign and save his family. "By the time things started to settle down, it was too late. Raine had passed away. I went back to Winhill when I got the word, but the people there—" They'd blamed him for leaving her, for her death. They had hated him. "They just told me that they sent Ellone away to a proper caretaker. Never mentioned Squall... I returned to Esthar after that." He gave a little shrug. "The rest is history, as they say."

Seifer stared at the man. The death of the love of your life before you could even start your life together and the knowledge of your own son denied... "That's fucked up," he said, having never guessed such tragedy. "Calls for another swig I'd say. For life fucking up all on its own. Up to us to pick up the pieces." He held up his glass in another toast.

Laguna deeply hummed his agreement, taking up the glass of sherry he'd set aside. "Here's to picking up the pieces then. As best as we can," he countered Seifer's bleak toast, raising his own drink.

Glancing between the two idiots who seemed to have abandoned their soup in favor of alcohol, Squall leaned back in his chair, resisting the urge to knead at his temples. No matter how many toasts they brought or how much they dredged up the past, it wouldn't change a thing.

Laguna set down his glass after his swig. "So. Winhill," he started thoughtfully, but he couldn't hide how pleased he was. "Some piece of advice. If Ellone gives you a choice, for the love of Hyne pick patrolling or kitchen duty. The locals will have you chasing your own tail if she sends you on errands in town."

"I was hoping for bar duty," Seifer said with a grin. "Give the girls something to look at. And I definitely know how to pour alcohol."

Squall rolled his eyes at the return of Seifer's trademark cockiness. "Not everyone orders beer or whiskey," he said dryly, wondering how Seifer figured himself such an expert on alcohol as he softly tapped his glass of pastis.

Eyes sparkling, Laguna barked out a laugh. He hadn't witnessed it often, but here his son was, engaging in banter of all things. "He's got you there, kid."

Seifer's smile didn't falter as he kept his eyes on Squall. "Good thing labels were invented then," he
retorted, not deterred from his plan in the slightest. No one in a backwater town like Winhill was going to order things like pastis anyway. "And the looks more than make up for it, wouldn't you say?"

Squall just quirked an unimpressed eyebrow at such arrogance. To his left, Loire chuckled, clearly enjoying Seifer's brass.

"I doubt seasoned farmers will be that impressionable," the president said. "And you'll find them quite protective of the town's beauties." Not a day had gone by without one of Raine's regulars offering to kick his useless ass to the curb. Seifer had the making of a man who could incite the lot of them should he take interest in their daughters.

"I'll find a way to impress them," Seifer continued. "Maybe a drinking game or two. Show them city folk can hold their liquor too. That usually does the trick." It had worked the countless times he'd stopped at a village pub on his travels. The locals had always been quick to take him in. "And hey, it's not like I'd be interested in any of the local girls either. No offense to your choice in women, old man. I'm sure Raine was a beauty and all. But I've got my eyes set on someone else."

Squall purposefully turned his gaze towards his soup, instantly smothering the assumption Seifer meant him with the more sobering thought that the bastard was always looking to get under his skin.

"Ah?" Sensing a good story, Laguna's interest was piqued. "That sounds like you didn't quite reel in the prize just yet."

"I've had a taste, so to speak" Seifer said, grinning unabashedly. "Just makes me all the more eager. But yeah, this particular fish might take quite a bit of reeling in... We'll see, huh?"

Laguna chuckled. "You like 'em hard-to-get then? I hope you know what you're signing up for. Take it from a veteran."

"Well, I'm always up for a challenge, but I usually prefer the easy option. Not one to stick around for the long term stuff, if you know what I mean," Seifer said, aware he was playing a dangerous game. Squall wouldn't be impressed with the topic or him speaking to Laguna about it so openly, but so help him Hyne, he wanted Squall to know this and there was no way he'd ever say this to the man directly. "This is different though. It's like all other alternatives have just vanished. Gone. To tell you the truth, it's kinda freaking me out."

Frowning at the seemingly genuine words, Squall glanced Seifer's way. He wanted to both kick him into silence and demand for the bastard to explain himself further. What the hell was the idiot thinking, talking to Loire about something that was none of the man's business. What the hell was he saying. His pulse sped up even as he told himself not to let Seifer's games get to him.

"Sounds like you're in love, kid," Laguna said, flattered to be deemed a worthy enough listener. He doubted his son had been of any help to his friend in this; a matter of the heart. "It has a tendency of catching a man unawares."

"Hn. Figured it'd have to be something overly sappy like that," Seifer commented, unsurprised by Laguna's conclusion. He should've fucking known. Hell, even Calder had pointed it out to him. "So was that what it was like for you? With Raine?"

"It started out that way, yes," Laguna said, happy to seize the occasion to talk about Raine. "I've had my share of crushes. A sweetheart or two, even. But no one ever got to me the way Raine did. I never actually thought anybody would be able to tie me down. The delusions of a bachelor."

He
chuckled at that. "You see, I wanted to travel. See the world and go wherever the stories took me. But when I met Raine... Well—" Laguna met Seifer's gaze with a knowing smile. "Like you described, when I met her all other alternatives up and vanished. I was still the same man, but how could I walk away from something like that? So once I got over the freaking-out part, I got hitched," he finished with a broad smile, wiggling his ring finger to show off his wedding band.

As Loire babbled on about a love grander than life, Squall tuned out the man's voice and the story he'd heard at tedium. Seifer's comments were a far more pressing issue. Reduced to a hard-to-get fish and forced to refrain from all reaction lest he alert Loire, he struggled to keep his face straight and his heart from leaping from his chest.

"So now that I spilled my beans, how about you tell me a bit more about your mystery lady?" Laguna asked, curious to know what kind of woman had made a man like Seifer stray from his set ways. "Maybe you can use some advice. I'm no charmer, but I know a thing or two."

Seifer glanced in Squall's direction, wanting to see how the brunet was holding up. As expected Squall's expression was composed, almost as if nothing had happened at all, as if he hadn't just admitted to being head over heels for the man. "Maybe some other time, old man. I definitely wouldn't mind a bit of advice. It can only improve my chances, but I think we might be boring the Commander. Can't have him wandering off into his own head."

"Everything all right?" Laguna asked his son, Seifer's remark drawing attention to the lack of eye rolls and other displays of annoyance he'd grown used to. Talk about love was usually a surefire way to earn the brunet's silent irritation. "You hardly touched your soup." Both himself and Seifer had managed to clean their plates, even while talking.

Looking down at the spoon that had been lying idly in his hand for who knew how long, Squall frowned before setting it aside. "I'm not that hungry," he managed as an excuse.

"Ah. Well, maybe you'll fare better with the roast." Laguna turned to look at Seifer, wondering what the man had noticed in Squall to call a halt to the topic. "Another time then," he agreed. Maybe after Rinoa romance was a more sore topic than his son let on. "We're far too sober for conversation like this anyway," he said, clapping a hand to Seifer's shoulder. "How about this. My bar is well stocked. You're always welcome for a round of drinks. It'll be on the house."

Smiling genuinely at the president's offer, Seifer couldn't wait to take the man up on it. "Well, you have my number. If you ever feel like a night of drinking and letting loose, just give me a call."

"Don't think this old man will hold you back. There's still enough of Galbadia in me to drink anyone under the table," he bluffed, already looking forward to the occasion.

"And there's still enough Almasy in me to not get outdone by anyone," Seifer retorted with a smirk. "But I'd like to see you try." Leaning back, he took a sip of whiskey, the image of Laguna dressed in a Galbadian uniform coming to mind. "So, I have to ask... What weapon did you use when you were in the army?"

"Nothing that'll impress you, I'm afraid," Laguna answered, somewhat embarrassed. "Just your standard army-issued machine gun. I didn't have the skill or patience to take up a proper melee weapon."

"Oh," Seifer said, unable to hide his surprise. He remembered seeing Laguna on the cover of an old movie. "Didn't you use a gunblade in that—" He paused as the servant swiftly cleared away their first course. "—er, movie, or something?"
Squall couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from twitching upward at Seifer's comment. Did the idiot even remember why the news probably came as a disappointment?

"Knight's Quest 4?" Laguna asked, surprised that Seifer had seen that particular blemish in his professional career. The movie had never ceased to amuse his two best friends, the poor acting and choreography a never-ending source of hilarity.

"Have you seen it any time recently?" Squall asked. Whatever Seifer thought he remembered, he was remembering it through the eyes of an easily impressed six-year old with a fascination for knights and dragons.

"Nope, just the cover," Seifer answered, frowning slightly as clear images of Laguna wielding a gunblade with practised ease asserted themselves. "But I must've watched it at some point because I do remember some specifics. Like Laguna chasing off a Ruby with his gunblade. He seemed pretty decent."

Laguna frowned in confusion at the unlikely statement, but fell short from comment when he spotted the subtle smile on his son's lips.

"You did watch it at some point," Squall agreed, unable to leave this one alone. "Over and over." After the blond had gotten his hands on an old copy, he'd been roped into more knight play-acts than he could remember. "You especially liked Loire's opening stance."

"What are you talking about?" Seifer asked, incredulous, but then an incriminating image came to mind. A young Laguna in his stance. Seifer frowned. "Fuck, no," he muttered, looking horrified before turning to regard Laguna. "I copied you?! That's an Almasy pose!" He could see Squall actually smiling out of the corner of his eyes. "Stop smirking, you sadistic bastard... smug only suits blonds," he corrected, still unable to quell how appalled he was.

Astounded, Laguna looked between the two young men, chuckling in spite of his lack of understanding. "I wasn't aware I had a fan," he said, amused. "I'm glad youngsters still recognize style when they see it."

Squall sent Loire an unimpressed look. "You wielded that prop like you couldn't tell the handle from the pointy end."

"Maybe," Laguna acquiesced happily. "That doesn't stop me from feeling flattered by some unintended plagiarism." He looked the blond's way. "Is it the bit where I hold the blade out in front of me? ...Fortunately for me that thing was made out of plywood."

"That's the one," Seifer said, bringing the glass of whiskey to his lips and helping himself to a large swig. "Maybe I should get you to sign Kronos or something."

"And embarrass me further? I don't think so," Laguna said with a shake of his head, assuming Kronos was the man's blade. "If there's one thing that movie taught me, it's to leave swordsmanship to the swordsmen." Gaze drawn back to the sight of his son's poorly schooled amusement, he was glad Seifer was taking it all in stride. Perhaps they were used to jibing like this. The thought made him smile.

Before he could start another topic, another servant appeared with their main meal. He watched contentedly as a plate of marinated boar and red wine was placed in front of each of them. "A roast like this is all the reason I need to hire a Galbadian cook." He took a bite and savoured the taste. "Good, isn't it?" he said. He was glad to note that whatever lack of appetite had plagued Squall before now seemed absent, both his guests digging in with gusto. It had been the conversation,
"Best thing I've had in months," Seifer agreed. "And that's saying something. I'm a pretty good cook," he said, swallowing another morsel of boar. "And before you start piping up again over there, I haven't shown you my full potential yet, so just curb it," he added, pointing his fork in Squall's direction. "Once you've had one of my Balamb steaks, you'll never leave."

"Too bad he won't be able to return the favor," Laguna said, not feeling beneath a slight jibe himself. "From what I heard, your friend Fujin isn't the only one you should keep away from the cooking pot."

Barking out laughter at the inside information, Seifer regarded Squall fondly, enjoying the deadly glare being directed at someone else for a change. "Seems like you'll have to team up with Rai and Fu and be real persuasive to get some decent food this coming week then."

Squall just cast the blond an unimpressed look. He'd sooner starve than grovel for food and feed into Seifer's ego.

"I don't know, kid," Laguna said with a mock serious expression. "His cooking might be all the persuasion you need. I've heard stories of toast burnt beyond recognition, even at the second attempt."

Laughing at Laguna's words, Seifer knew he'd struck gold. Not only would he be able to tease Squall about this endlessly, but he'd also be able to use it to lure Squall in. Mind-blowing sex, tasty food and challenging spars. What more could Squall want?

"I guess I'd better take pity on Rai and Fu then and teach you how to take down game," he said, smiling at Squall. "Unless you already know how and were just waiting to show off your skills next week; make sure we never found out about your weakness."

"I'll manage," Squall said dryly, meeting Seifer's amused gaze evenly. How difficult could cooking in the wild be? No special seasonings, utensils or complicated apparatus to figure out. Just a pot, fire and meat.

Laguna laughed softly, shaking his head. "Coming from a man who lives off rations and canteen food, that doesn't inspire much confidence."

"I'm going to have to agree with Laguna on this," Seifer chimed in. "But seriously, have you hunted for food before? You know how to bring down game without spoiling the meat?"

Squall shook his head. "Never had to." He'd had basic survival training, as all other SeeDs, but nothing like actual hunting for game.

"I'll show you the ropes then," Seifer said, before looking Laguna's way. "How about you? Have you ever done much hunting?"

"When I was younger," Laguna said with a nod. "Where I'm from, there aren't many people who've never held a hunting rifle. I'm afraid my skills have suffered after all this time though. So I take it the SeeD curriculum doesn't include hunting then?"

"No. Just a mandatory survival course," Squall replied.

"Yeah, nothing big," Seifer added. "We were left to fend for ourselves in the wild for a couple of days. To show we wouldn't just drop dead without resources. But they didn't even check if we'd brought stuff along. Easy enough to survive when you've got your pockets full of snacks."
At Squall's deprecating huff, Seifer chuckled. "Yeah, like you've never cheated, Princess."

"That was more yourthing." Squall pointed out, his gaze traveling to the scar on Seifer's forehead.

"Hey, now. You're not still holding a grudge over that, are you? Marring your pretty face was an accident. And you gave as good as you got, so I'd say we're even."

"The Fire spell was an accident too, then?" Squall didn't buy the show of innocence one bit. Seifer had come at him like a madman that day. To repay in kind was the least he could do. "You got off easy."

"So what if that Fire spell bent the rules a little," Seifer admitted with a mischievous smile. "Weren't you the one to confess to me that very same day how you felt like you could take on the world because of me?" He'd never let Squall live that one down. "Pretty big words."

Squall rolled his eyes. Those words definitely weren't an exact citation. "I think that was me accusing you of fighting dirty."

"You just keep telling yourself that, Squall... I know what you said."

Watching his son give up on further comment, but not without an unimpressed eye roll, Laguna couldn't contain his amusement at the easily exchanged jibes. He'd never seen this side to Squall before; so quick to take the bait and throw out retorts. And it seemed like this sort of banter was a longstanding tradition between the two younger men.

Glancing at his guests' mirrored scars, he remarked, "I have been curious about those. Any chance of me hearing the actual story?" He hadn't dared bring it up himself, should the scars be a remnant of the war with bad memories attached to them.

"Sure," Seifer started, enjoying the opportunity to recount the story. "It was the day Squall made SeeD. I persuaded him to spar with me in the morning and I guess I was quite pumped. Enough so that I misjudged. I only meant to scare the shit out of him," he said with a grin. "Squall was pissed. Made sure I paid with a matching scar. An eye for an eye and all that. Luckily for me he's a precise motherfucker. And hey, it doesn't look half bad if you ask me."

"Do your spars often get hairy like that?" Laguna asked with a raised eyebrow, wondering just how embedded this aspect of challenge was in their interactions, conversations and training alike.

"Quite. It's not really a spar without a cut or two, wouldn't you say, Princess?" Met with an even look that promised far more challenge than a cut or two, Seifer chuckled and continued. "It's easy enough to avoid scars if you heal right away, but we ran out of healing magic that morning. By the time I hauled Squall's unconscious ass back to Garden, it was too late. Not that the doctor would've healed us anyway. She refused to waste magic on irresponsible cadets. She failed to teach us a lesson though, huh?" He looked over at Laguna and tapped the fading scar on his neck. "I got this just last Thursday."

"You've never seen him fight?" Seifer asked, pride stirring on Squall's behalf. If Laguna hadn't seen his son in action, then the man was missing out. Badly. Even back at Garden their spars had drawn
a crowd. It had been one of the reasons they'd taken their spars somewhere else towards the end.

"No, never had the opportunity," Laguna said regretfully. His own attitude when first confronted with Squall's profession hadn't helped matters much. It had taken him some time to come to terms with the harsh life Garden forced on children, resulting in his son's worrisome acceptance of violence and injury. Clearly Seifer's definition of protectiveness differed from his own. "Think there's any chance I could?" he asked tentatively, wanting a second chance badly.

"We were planning on sparring after this, actually. You should come." Seifer looked over at Squall, unsurprised by the deadly glare directed at him. "After our show in front of my class the other day, this should be fine, right?" he reasoned, undeterred. The brunet would forget everything about their audience as soon they got started anyway.

Squall scowled at the continued disregard for his wishes. The spar was supposed to be their excuse for leaving early, not a reason for the bastard's new best friend to tag along. From the corner of his eye he spotted Loire visibly perking up at the invitation that wasn't Seifer's to extend. The damage was done.

Sighing inwardly, he turned to give the man an even look. "No interruptions," he said sternly, less than pleased. He could do without the overprotective man wincing out warnings or voicing his doubts about their fighting style.

Squall's taciturn permission didn't immediately register with Laguna, unexpected as it was. "No interruptions," he confirmed hurriedly, excitement catching up with his surprise. "So where do you usually spar? If it's no imposition, I'm sure I can find somewhere suitable on the grounds right here. It would save me some trouble."

"Here's as good as anywhere. Just have to find somewhere big enough."

"How much space do you need?" Laguna asked.

"Not much. About four times this room, perhaps." He turned to look at Squall. "You think that'd do?"

Squall shook his head slightly. For the ass kicking he had in mind, he'd need space. "Bigger," he said, meeting Seifer's gaze with a gleam of challenge. He wanted to move without restraints, employ the full extent of his speed.

Already eager to get started at the look Squall was sending him, Seifer grinned. "How big have you got?"

"Would a ballroom do?"

Laughing at the absurd images already in his mind, Seifer raised an eyebrow in inquiry as he regarded Squall. "What do you say? You up for a dance?"

Trust Loire to unthinkingly offer such a ridiculous locale, and Seifer to take it in stride. It probably fit the bastard's taste for dramatics. "Don't expect to lead," Squall jibed dryly.

"And here I thought you liked me in charge," Seifer immediately shot back with a broad smirk, waggling his eyebrows. "My bad." He thoroughly enjoyed the killer glare Squall sent his way. "Seems like you're in for a show," he added, turning his full attention to Laguna.

"Seems like it," Laguna echoed as he glanced at his son's expression and wondered if his staff would have to clean blood stains in the ballroom come morning. Did they always rile each other up
like this? He felt like he was missing the subtext to most of their jibes, the *real* infuriating part. "Not so sure who I should put my money on, though," he teased. Both men seemed confident enough.

"Neither did the cadets back at Garden, but we sure drew a crowd," Seifer said, thinking back on the awed gazes that had followed their every move. "Remember when we got going in the quad that one time? Must've been almost the whole of Garden watching by the end, even the instructors. No one dared to break us up."

"Quistis tried to," Squall corrected, not quite remembering the same glorious ordeal. Quistis hadn't been an instructor yet, but had already seen it fit to meddle in their affairs even back then. "The instructors only arrived after. They didn't have any trouble punishing us, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me?" Seifer asked, raising his eyebrows. "You wreaked just as much havoc as I did. Maybe you didn't leave any marks on the trees, but your boots trampled just as many flower beds as mine."

"I was studying. You were looking for a fight," Squall said dryly. He couldn't even remember how Seifer had managed to provoke him in the end, but it'd been enough to see red and chase after the blond into the carefully groomed foliage.

"Looked more like one of your brooding sessions to me," Seifer commented, recalling the faraway look to Squall's eyes as the brunet had sat alone in a secluded corner of the quad, a textbook lying open in his lap, forgotten. "And hey, I just thought I'd spice up your afternoon a bit. Not my fault you can't resist me."

At the ambiguous phrasing, something he would've overlooked before but couldn't anymore, Squall narrowed his eyes. He wished he could deny the words that rang too true. His fingers itched to show Seifer just how little he could resist handing the bastard his own ass.

"Sounds like neither of you can resist a challenge," Laguna laughed, having a good hunch now about their dynamics. Seifer baited with a challenge; his son accepted with equal ferocity. "You boys got in trouble often then?" he asked curiously. "I still remember how the army used to deal with troublemakers. They didn't lack creativity, I can tell you that much. Sure dissuaded us rookies from drinking on a cold night's watch."

Squall suppressed an eyeroll as the two began to one up each other with stories of how their antics had landed them in trouble. Seifer definitely had plenty of those, having dragged Squall down along with him to share in the punishment for a lot of them. It was strange to hear Seifer talk about those times with such fondness; as if they hadn't been walking a precarious tightrope back then, turning from companionship to antagonism within a single breath. Half of the times he hadn't even understood why the blond's temper with him would suddenly flare.

Compared to then, their current interactions weren't nearly as volatile. Perhaps sex provided a far more effective outlet than fighting ever had. Squall took a large swig from his wine. As much as he preferred to think that they had grown up, able to rise above the pettiest of their differences, Squall suspected he'd grown soft instead. Here he was, having dinner with Loire at Seifer's behest. Not that long ago he would've simply ignored both men in favor of keeping to himself.

The sudden good-natured jostling of his elbow snapped him back to the conversation that had been proceeding without him.

"And don't let Squall convince you all of it was my fault. He got into plenty of trouble all by himself as well." Seifer chuckled when a small frown appeared at the interruption of Squall's
precious thoughts. Any longer and the man would've been miles away. "Weren't you subjected to a month of team-building exercises once?"

Seifer's grin broadened when Squall scowled at the memory. "You should have been there," he said to Laguna, shaking his head. "I can't remember what the instructor said to bring it on, but Squall just tore everyone a new hole by explaining exactly why they were all a bunch of useless fuck-ups he wouldn't want on his side in combat. He only got through a couple of students before our instructor kindly asked him to shut up." He let out a laugh at the memory. "Most instructors learned early on not to ask Squall any questions and just leave him the hell alone. We actually didn't have a combat strategy instructor for a while because Squall utterly destroyed the poor bastard's plan of attack on an enemy base."

"Cid made him Commander for a reason," Laguna said proudly, unsurprised by the story. "He's a harsh opponent over any bargaining table. Pair him up with Quistis and I'm guaranteed to have to settle down a few riots in the meetings to come."

"Meetings?" Seifer asked, recalling what Squall had told him. "Like the one on Tuesday?"

Spotting his son's nod, Laguna smiled. "Squall has already brought you up to speed then," he said affably, spared the trouble of having to explain to Quistis why he had broken a confidentiality contract yet again. "The last meeting was just to introduce the proposal. This time I'm afraid we'll get down to the nitty-gritty. The real fight for or against Esthar Gardenwill begin."

"Well, Esthar could certainly do with some elite mercenaries close by," Seifer commented. "No offense," he added, eyeing Laguna. "The local forces just don't get the necessary training. Not nearly intensive enough. Most Estharian operatives don't even know how to defend themselves from a simple Fire spell. This place would be screwed if another sorceress came along."

"I'm aware of our military shortcomings," Laguna said with a sigh. "Esthar hires SeeDs on a regular basis for affairs my own people can't handle. It's the only reason I managed to justify allowing the meetings in the first place. There's a lot of opposition." He smiled then, not wanting the conversation to turn to purely politics. "Butting heads with my own son at the other end of the argument has already proved very challenging," he said, looking at Squall fondly.

"I can imagine," Seifer said, only then realizing just how effective Squall would be in a meeting. Used to the instructors leaving Squall alone, he'd forgotten how convincing the man's arguments could be, underlined by his succinct and pitiless nature. The brunet would be just as good at shutting down politicians. "So how long do you expect it'll take before you reach a decision?"

"That depends on the opposing parties and whether they'll try to throw a wrench into the proceedings. There will probably be several meetings over the next month or two before we take it to a vote," Laguna explained. "If we get the go-ahead, it's to the drawing tables. Agreements will need signing, plans put into motion. The public will need to be informed." He gave a resigned shrug, used to the ways of politics. "Actual construction wouldn't start for another several months, and that's the best case scenario."

"And what's your stand?" Seifer asked. "For or against? Just curious, not planning on starting a family feud here."

"Well, I suppose I'm in favor of a compromise," Laguna conceded. Squall already knew about his opinions and their differing philosophies weren't the main reason for their strained interactions. "Esthar needs the backup and skills only SeeDs can offer. This irrational fear of anything sorceress or magic related has paralyzed my people. They don't want to dirty their hands, so logically someone else has to. It's a matter of pragmatics and I will not leave my country defenseless." He
paused then, only hesitating slightly before continuing to the part of his opinion Squall disagreed with. Most likely so would Seifer. "I can't, however, in good conscience let children take up arms. I would propose regulations; at the very least a minimum age requirement instead of the maximum Garden enforces. Also, I can't allow any outside military organization the kind of autonomy and exemption from Estharian law that Garden demands."

"Interesting," Seifer commented. "My two cents is that you've got kids with nowhere to go and you need to train elite forces from early on, especially when it comes to magic. Seems like a match made in heaven. Sure, tough luck for those kiddies, but it beats living on the street and they get a chance to make something of themselves. In an environment like that, you get someone like Squall, someone you need when the shit hits the fan. When kids start training here at fourteen, it's simply too late. They've been sheltered and coddled for too long. They put other things before the fight. They don't realize that it's you or them. It isn't hammered into their heads to always be on top of their game. They don't understand that out there, in the real world, there are no second chances."

Glancing Seifer's way, Squall wasn't the least bit surprised at hearing his own opinion from the blond's mouth. He nodded his agreement, looking back at Loire. "He teaches at the SCTA. He knows both systems."

Laguna nodded in deference to the insight. "And he has an understandable bias for the way he was brought up. Just like you." He smiled wanly and shrugged. "Maybe I am too naive, but it's a sad thing when adults have to rely on children to do their fighting. I never thought it would be quite so difficult to be both president and an idealist... But enough shoptalk," he interrupted himself, spotting the ill-boding twitch to Squall's brow. "If it's any consolation, I genuinely hope we'll have an Esthar Garden soon."

"Will be interesting to see how it turns out," Seifer said, thoughtful. "Out of curiosity though, how often did you make it back to Esthar before these meetings kicked off?"

Squall returned the blond's gaze, his mood souring. His schedule had never bothered him before, but now... "Once a month at most. Usually less than that," he said, not mentioning how he'd hardly ever been to Esthar City before his move there.

"Because of missions?" Seifer asked, none too happy when Squall hummed in confirmation.

Taking in the sudden drop in atmosphere, both men obviously disappointed by what appeared to be news to Seifer, Laguna frowned in confusion. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I follow. I was under the impression you two were in touch all this time."

"We've only been in contact these last two weeks," Seifer said, eyes on his half-finished plate. If Rinoa hadn't come to see him that Tuesday, they probably wouldn't have ever seen each other again. "We met by accident just before Squall and Rinoa broke their bond."

Unable to believe Seifer meant they hadn't met since the war, Laguna managed to keep himself from voicing the stupid comment just in time. Apparently this was a sore spot, but it made little sense to him. The two men seemed closer than anybody else he'd ever seen Squall interact with, Rinoa included. He'd never seen his son seem regretful over long missions before either.

He nodded slowly, carefully weighing his words. "Life has a way of separating friends and bringing them back together in unexpected ways. It's been the same for me," he said, hoping to bring the mood around. "I lost track of Kiros and Ward for nearly half a year when recovering from my injuries. I dragged them off that cliff with me and for a long time I never knew whether they made it. Back then you couldn't just send emails or phone someone up. Kiros ended up being my best man and both of them followed me to Esthar."
Smiling softly at Laguna's story, Seifer looked up from his food. "They sound like good friends," he said, the pair sounding just as loyal as Fu and Rai. "Here's to hoping the Commander sets up residence in the new Garden so we'll both get to see more of him," Seifer said, turning to look at Squall. "You're also welcome to stay at my place, of course. Wouldn't have to try and track you down in between missions then."

Laguna quirked an eyebrow, smiling at Seifer's eagerness to keep his friend around. "You'll have to take it out with Quistis in that case," Laguna said, shifting his gaze to regard his son. "She's counting the days until you return to Balamb. Whatever you decide, you'd better not keep her out of the loop for too long."

Squall just nodded distractedly, Seifer's seemingly casual offer echoing in his thoughts. He hadn't let himself think much beyond his current stay with the blond, but this... Even if it was just for the odd few days of leave, it changed a lot. Loire just rambled on happily, saving him from coming up with an immediate reply.

Laguna shook his head slightly. "I'm surprised she hasn't shown up herself yet. She never did take your move to Esthar well." But that was the lot of anyone deciding to have Squall in their lives. Always in the field, the young man was impossible to tie down to any one spot or get a hold off. Rinoa was a saint for having put up with it the way she had. He looked back to his son. "But it sounds like you've settled in with Seifer quite well?" he asked, trying not to sound too hopeful. If his son returned to Balamb, he'd be back to only seeing him a meager few times a year, mostly on the job.

"...I have," Squall admitted, unsure whether he should say even this much. He knew Seifer tended to make rash decisions and this might be one the man would regret. This thing between them wasn't set in stone. "I'll talk to Quistis tomorrow."

"Will be quite the conversation," Laguna said, more than able to imagine her ire. "Just let me know when I can stop bending the truth every time she calls."

"You decided if you're going to tell her?" Seifer asked.

Squall met the blond's gaze at the question. "If I do, I can't predict what she'll do."

"Only one way to find out."

Squall shook his head slightly at the answer he should've guessed. At least he wouldn't have to lie anymore. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"That's settled then," Laguna said with a smile. "I hope she's leaving that whip of hers at home when she comes to chew us out."

Seifer laughed at the remark. "Let's hope so. Though if it's whips against gunblades, I'm pretty sure I know who will come out on top."

Laguna met Squall's gaze with a conspiratory wink. "Hubris before the fall."

At Squall's agreeing snort, Seifer was happy to play along. "It's not hubris if you've got the goods to back it up, old man." He leaned back in his chair. "But yeah, can't say I'm looking forward to her nagging. Had enough of that back at Garden... Always on my case and never on Squall's. Guess that's one thing crushes are good for, huh, Squall?"

"She never bothered you with one-on-one tutoring sessions," Squall retorted dryly, pretty sure he would've preferred Seifer's predicament over his own. "I couldn't even get Ifrit on my own."
"Thank fuck for that," Seifer said, chuckling.

Laguna laughed at the altercation. "I wonder why I never heard about this until you told me," he said, looking at Seifer with a shake of the head. "But careful, kiddo. Crushes can make people do crazier things than tutoring."

"Ain't that the truth," Seifer agreed, looking Squall's way. He'd already surprised himself quite a few times since Squall's reappearance in his life. He'd dropped everything to go search for the missing commander, had accompanied the man for a tedious day of medical, he'd more or less offered for Squall to move in with him, which was after he'd owned up to his crush in front the man's dad. Not mention the expensive fucking bill for a new suit he had just footed. He was definitely one-hundred percent fucked.

Looking away before his study of the brunet became too intense, Seifer realized he should probably turn the conversation down another path, one that wouldn't inevitably lead back to this. He pushed his empty plate away and leaned back comfortably with his wine glass in hand.

"I gotta say, old man, you live in style," he said, looking around him. It was simply gobsmacking to be sitting inside one of the dining rooms of the palace. And every single part of their meal had been absolutely flawless. He couldn't wait to come back another time.

Laguna let out a laugh. If only his son could feel equally at ease in his home. "I don't always dine like this, but for special occasions I don't mind pulling out all the stops," he confided jovially. "They should be up with a dessert platter any moment now."

Seifer nodded, his smile widening at just how much he was enjoying this. He looked over to Squall. "While we wait... I figure you owe me a story or two. I've had to listen to teenagers go on about your missions and heroic acts for ages now. Gotta know how much is make believe and how much is just you kicking ass."

Squall huffed. He hated the myths that had sprouted up around his name. "I've heard claims that I'm eight feet or taller," he said with a pointed look at the blond. And that was actually one of the less ridiculous transgressions of the truth.

"All the more reason to tell me how some of it actually went down. Like... the last story I heard was you single-handedly taking down a giant snake. The rumors say three to five stories tall, depending on how enthusiastic the teller is."

"That one was Esthar commissioned," Squall replied. "Went in with a standard party of three." He paused then, thinking back to the battle of that day. "It wasn't five stories tall, but it was big enough. Turned out to be just one of a whole nest. If Zell hadn't been there, I could've lost a leg." He met Seifer's gaze. "Nothing single-handed about it."

"Rough one, huh?" Seifer said, eyeing up Squall carefully. "Never heard anything about anyone other than you being there. I did hear you got injured though... First time too, so it was quite the talk among my students," he said, remembering how he'd first heard the rumor while he'd been rounding up his pupils before class. "Hey, out of curiosity, just how long ago was this? I mean, the rumor only started circulating about a month and a half ago."

"Four months ago. Took a few days to recover. I've completed many missions since."

"A couple of months' delay then. Seems like the public is keeping pretty good tabs on you," he commented, taking another sip of wine, before leaning forward in his seat. "What about your latest missions? Anything interesting?"
Watching from the sidelines as Squall actually began to talk about one of his more risky missions, Laguna wasn't sure what he was witnessing. Seifer seemed to be able to ask all the right questions, luring his son into more details with every remark. No doubt it helped that Seifer knew all of Garden's mission procedures inside and out. A few times he was tempted to ask for elaboration on something he hadn't quite understood—when the SeeD lingo became tricky to follow—but he knew it would only break the spell that Seifer seemed to have cast on the usually reticent commander. He couldn't remember a single time he'd heard his son talk at length like this.

It was clear the two men shared a love for being in the middle of the action and, perhaps even more so, for the gunblade. Every once in a while Seifer would briefly remember his presence and point out something, but Laguna was content to limit himself to the occasional observation and just listen as the conversation unfolded between them. Even the arrival of dessert didn't slow Seifer down much, the blond asking guiding questions in between mouthfuls of chocolate cake. And all the while Squall indulged his friend, despite the regular rolling of eyes or dry retorts.

To catch a glimpse of Squall's inner workings like this was a rare gift, even if he didn't like hearing how the young man brushed off near run-ins with death or horrific injury. But he knew Squall was capable. His son had grown up well without him.

Catching the growing wistful tinge to the president's smile, Seifer straightened himself from his close lean towards Squall and regarded the time on the big standing clock in the corner of the room. 9:04. Shit. Squall was going to have his balls if he didn't get them out of there soon. Finishing the rest of his wine, he leaned back in his chair and regarded the president. "I'd say it's about time for you to actually see Squall in action," he said with a grin, before looking over at the brunet. "I'll go grab our blades and training gear from your car," he offered, holding out a hand. "If you give me the keys."

Meeting Seifer's gaze, Squall hesitated before digging into his pockets and handing the blond his keys. To refuse would be childish, but he didn't like the way Seifer had gotten him to drop his guard. Any other dinner and it would've been him grasping the opportunity to escape and have a moment to himself. "I parked by the entrance to the Sphinxara Palace parking lot."

"Alright," Seifer said, pushing up from his seat. "Thanks for dinner, old man," he nodded in Laguna's direction, then looked between the two men. "I guess I'll just meet you guys back here?"

"It might be more convenient to come straight to one of the guest rooms to change. I'll have a guard show you the way when you return," Laguna offered. "I need to alert the night's watch anyway. Can't have them shoot first and ask questions later when an armed man shows up on my doorstep."

"Sounds like a plan," Seifer agreed with a grin, turning to leave.

As Seifer left the room his son clearly remembered his surroundings again with a slight frown. Laguna couldn't help but smile as their gazes met. He'd seen Squall completely unaware of the people around him before, but it had always been his own thoughts he'd been caught up in; never another person. And by the look of it, his son had realized as well.

"He's quite the character," he commented with a smile. The man seemed to have a perfect handle on his son, but he wasn't about to say as much. "He's not the kind of friend I expected for you."

Squall frowned. He didn't care about anybody's expectations. "Your point being?"

Undeterred, Laguna widened his smile. "That I'm pleasantly surprised. I'm glad you brought him along so we could meet properly."
Huffing at the statement they both knew wasn't true, Squall fell silent. It was Seifer who had dragged *him* along.

"It's hard to imagine you two only met again two weeks ago," Laguna continued, carefully reading his son's expression for the moment he inevitably crossed a line. "You get along very well."

"I guess."

"I'm not sure I understand everything, but... he seems like a good friend," Laguna reiterated his earlier words. "To think he's been sitting right under my nose all this time." He studied his son closely. "...How come I never knew about him?" he asked carefully.

"You know who he is," Squall said, his mood darkening. Loire had known perfectly well who he was allowing to live in his city, from the first day Seifer had set foot in Esthar. And in spite of an explicitly stated understanding that all parties involved would inform Garden about any news concerning the man, Loire had chosen not to.

"I knew about the sorceress knight," Laguna corrected with a frown, not liking the tone of accusation in Squall's voice. "I thought he was some former no-name SeeD. Not a cadet from Balamb. Nobody bothered to tell me he was your friend. Nobody ever even mentioned his name until Rinoa came to me last week."

Squall's brow twitched in annoyance. "You didn't tell me anything either," he said, his voice dangerously even. He hadn't given it much thought before, but now he couldn't help but think how Seifer and him could've cleared the air years earlier.

At the accusation now spoken out loud, Laguna knew Squall was raising his hackles. "I didn't think I had the right," he said firmly. "I gave him the benefit of the doubt when he crossed our borders. He's not the only person to have been manipulated by Ultimcia and he's certainly not the only one living under Estharian protection. It's not a policy I've made public, but I haven't regretted it yet."

He paused, aware of his son's close attention to his every word. "I followed up on Seifer's files personally the first two months after his arrival, but he kept his nose clean. National security still keeps tabs on him. The usual protocol; employment, criminal record, anything out of the ordinary, but he dropped from our high priority lists very early on." He met Squall's intent gaze. "I was simply protecting an Estharian citizen."

"From Garden?" Squall said incredulously. "We signed the treaty. We agreed with the general exemption article."

Laguna shook his head slightly. "Revenge is an ugly motive," he said soberly. "Someone who's been wronged might not care about things like mind control. A treaty won't keep them from hunting down their aggressor... A lot of SeeDs lost their lives at the hands of Galbadian soldiers, under a knight's orders. Maybe the public doesn't know much about what went on, but your operatives, do they all agree with the general exemption? Do they still look at Galbadian soldiers the same?"

"Fine," Squall interrupted tersely, not wanting to hear anymore about the war. "I get it." He badly wished he could take out his frustration on Loire, but the man hadn't actually done anything wrong. Loire had done his best to protect Seifer, which was more than he could say for himself.

"Like I said, I don't know or understand everything that happened," Laguna offered, his voice gentle. "I just wanted to say that whatever the circumstances, he seems like a good man." Squall didn't reply, but he saw some of the tension leave the stern set to his son's mouth and eyes. "I'm glad the war isn't the last you two saw of each other."
Accepting the ceasefire, Squall slowly leaned back in his chair and let his gaze fall to the table. 
"...Me too."

Everything about his son's demeanor told Laguna there was more to their story than just two old friends reconnecting. Thinking of their trip to Winhill, he couldn't help but wonder why they needed Ellone's help to revisit the war. Seifer's need had to be great for Squall to put aside the intense dislike he harbored for his birth place. It seemed that the war had not only separated them, but it had also created wounds.

Stifling a sigh, he tried to push back all the could-have's and should-have's. If only he'd been more resolute about breaking Esthar's isolation sooner. If only he'd strong-armed his cabinet into following his leadership instead of waiting for them to come around. He hadn't known he had a son at the time. A son who was risking his life along with his friends while Esthar's politicians had been paralyzed by fear, bickering and debating the merits of joining the fight against another sorceress. They'd done nothing when the first reports came in of Timber's and Dollet's occupation. They'd stood by idly as Galbadia's government crumbled from within. The destruction of Trabia Garden had only led to the strengthening of their own shields. By the time Squall had shown up to bring the fight to them, so much damage had been done already.

And now his conscience would have to find a way to reconcile the fact that Esthar had failed Seifer as well. He highly doubted Ultimecia had been a kinder mistress to her subjects than Adel.

He shook his head. This was not the time for such somber thoughts. His son was visiting him, and he'd just been extended an invitation to watch him spar. Today was a good day.

"I suppose I should go alert my staff and make arrangements for you two," he said, drawing his son's gaze. "I'll have housekeeping prepare two guest rooms as well."

Unsurprisingly, his son frowned at the offer. "We're leaving after the spar."

"Well, you need a room to change anyway," Laguna said with a smile, undeterred. He knew it was unlikely for Squall to take him up on his invitation, but he made it all the same. As he always did. "You might as well spend the night if you'd like. It'll be late by the time you're done. I'll have Gabriel prepare us a royal breakfast." Playing into Squall's newly discovered weakness, he added, "I'm sure Seifer would love it."

His son sighed and rubbed his brow. "I'm sure he would," he said coolly, his reply noncommittal.

Laguna smiled, encouraged by the lack of an outright refusal. "Well, feel free to take or leave the rooms," he said, easing up. "No need to decide right away." He stood up from his chair and tried to remember who was tonight's head of watch now that Kiros was away. "I'll go and make preparations then. I'll send someone by to lead you to the guest room."

Squall just looked at him wearily, but then nodded.

"Perfect." Laguna said, clapping his hands together. Beaming a final smile to his son, he walked out the dining room with a spring in his step.

Tonight was proving to be the best night he'd had in a long time. Squall had been uncharacteristically tolerant of him so far, reinforcing his belief that not all was lost. And he'd just gained a new ally. Seifer clearly shared his interest to have Squall return to Esthar as often as possible and the man seemed to have a great deal of influence over his son. His smile widened. Things were looking up.
Primal Urges

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[The Presidential Palace, Sphinxara District, Sunday, 26th of October, 9:42 pm]

Entering the lavish guest room he’d been shown to, Squall dismissed the palace aid with a nod and waited until the door closed behind him before looking around with a sense of premonition. He’d never had any reason to come to this part of the palace before, but Seifer's foolhardy plan for their spar meant they needed the room to change.

A room that apparently came with a queen size bed and en-suite bathroom, along with Loire's offer for them to spend the night if they so chose. The adjacent room had been made available to them as well.

Not that Seifer would pay that fact any heed. Letting out a sigh, Squall tried to clear his mind. His nerves were frayed after the too long evening, the president quick to sour his mood once Seifer had left. He needed that spar. He would make Seifer pay for every second of boredom and unease he'd had to sit through.

Between Loire's oblivious babbling and having to maintain an unaffected facade, he hadn't had a proper chance to fully consider Seifer's earlier words. Even now, his pulse sped up as he recalled just what had been said. The genuine quality to Seifer's voice. The apparent ease with which he'd made his admissions. The lack of denial when Loire had called it love. To chalk all that up to an ill-conceived joke... Even Seifer wouldn't go that far. Would he? There had been amusement in Seifer's tone when the bastard had compared him to a fish that needed reeling in. The challenge of a difficult hunt; was that what Seifer was after?

As soon as the thought popped into his head, he dismissed it. A sense of trust had grown between them over the past week, and the man himself had said this wasn't about making some conquest.

Squall let out a sigh. There was too much at play. There was a definite risk of projecting his own feelings onto anything Seifer said or did, but even if he hadn't misunderstood, he wasn't sure whether it improved his situation. The longer this went on, the harder the end would be.

He allowed himself one conclusion. Seifer seemed genuinely affected by what was happening between them and intent on continuing down this path. He'd even been invited to stay at Seifer's place whenever he returned to Esthar. It was more than he had dared hope for at the start of it all.

Battling the upward tug of his lips, he thought ahead to their spar instead. He'd be damned if Seifer got the upper hand simply because he was too distracted. He had a lesson to teach. He hadn't forgotten any of Seifer's transgressions since staying with the vexing man, being dragged to the palace featuring first and foremost in his mind.

With that bit of resolve he walked over to the large bag that sat innocuously by the foot of the bed. Loire must've given the order to bring it over as soon as the man had left to arrange the particulars of their spar. Picking up the bag to put it on the bed, he zipped it open and looked through its contents.

Quistis knew him well. All of his favorite clothing items were included, along with a few sets of training gear. Rummaging through his things to select a shirt for the spar, he willed himself not to
As Seifer opened the sliding doors to the guest room, his eyes singled in on where Squall was standing by the end of the bed, looking good enough to eat. Only then did the rest of their surroundings start to register. The room was ridiculously lush, from the expensive decor and the free alcohol lined up neatly on a desk, to the massive bed. The perfect setting for what he had in mind after their spar.

Moving to the desk, he placed their blades on top, then continued over to the bed and let the two bags with their changes of clothing drop to the floor with a soft thump. "How long do you think we have before it'll start looking suspicious?" he asked, a smirk growing on his lips.

Glancing beside him, Squall managed to summon an appropriately even expression. "Loire went ahead. He's already waiting," he pointed out, hoping to discourage even as his stomach made an eager flip. That damned suit.

"I could easily have spent ten more minutes finding the car," Seifer said with a playful smile, closing the distance between them.

Filled with anticipation despite himself, Squall didn't move away from the hand that came up behind his neck to draw him in. He'd been looking forward to some time alone with Seifer ever since leaving the penthouse. Just one kiss, he promised himself, molding his lips against Seifer's.

The slight roughness of stubble against his skin was enough to send a host of pleasant sensations rushing through his body, the blond's deep musk finally starting to register past the cologne again. When another hand began to pull at his waist however, he forced himself to break the kiss that was turning decidedly more heavy than he'd intended.

"You owe me a spar."

Seifer hummed and leaned in to steal another kiss, only to immediately be cut off as Squall stepped away. The look to Squall's eyes said it all. Squall was ready to spar and Hyne be damned if anyone got in the man's way. "In the mood to maim?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Maybe a cut or two. Your definition of a good spar."

A slight chuckle left Seifer as he took a step closer. "I'll give you the spar of your life—" he said, watching Squall closely, "—if you give me the ride of my life. You on top. Afterwards. Making me come by riding my cock." He let his eyes travel down Squall's chest and waist, taking in his prize. "Deal?"

The spike of adrenaline Squall felt at the prospect was undeniable. Arousal began to mix with his anticipation for the coming fight in strange ways, bringing a new edge to an old dynamic.

"Deal."

Seifer's impatience increased exponentially at the unflinching reply. "Then let's get this show on the road," he said and began to loosen his tie.

Trying to return his attention to his own gear, Squall couldn't stop his eyes from darting to the tie that was being tugged free, exposing the man's throat, the dip between clavicles, the tanned skin. Forcing himself to look away, he pulled off his own shirt, only to immediately feel Seifer's eyes on him. His pulse quickened as he continued to undress under the intent gaze.

Seifer grinned and shrugged out of his suit jacket. Even if they weren't going to fuck until after the spar, he was going to enjoy the hell out of this. Squall's eyes had been glued to him as he had
started to undress, so it only seemed right to ogle the brunet in return.

Dropping his slacks to the floor, he didn't miss Squall's glance down to the tented fabric of his boxers. His lewd thoughts had gotten him worked up in record time. Shame there was no way he'd be able to persuade Squall to suck him off. Squall wanted his best game and for that he'd need adrenaline, not the dazed sluggishness that followed an orgasm. He grit his teeth, knowing he'd have to deal.

Bending down, he fished out his training gear and drew up the more comfortable pair of pants. All the while his gaze never strayed far from Squall as the man put on a white tee and black soft leather pants that hugged his ass like they had been fucking melted onto him. When Squall pulled a belt from a bag he hadn't noticed before and proceeded to fasten it around his hips, he held his breath, his hands falling away from the shirt he'd just put on. Another belt followed. Then another one. Item after item, Squall was assembling the exact image he'd jerked off to countless times. Any hope of his erection dwindling was absolutely fucking zero now. To hell with this.

Squall startled when Seifer advanced on him, the look in the blond's eyes leaving no doubt as to what he had in mind. Unsure what had brought on the sudden change, Squall was barely able to turn and face the man before he was pushed down onto the bed. He fought to keep a clear head as Seifer's lips descended on his, the bastard already tugging at the clothes he'd only just put on.

Realizing he needed to move fast lest he lose himself in the exchange, Squall broke the kiss and tried to push Seifer off. When the bastard simply ignored him, pressing his whole body down against Squall's, he bit back a moan and glared at him even as his length stirred in appreciation. He'd never known it was possible to be pissed off and turned on at the same time.

He needed to put an end to this.

Pulling Shiva into a junction, he seized the surge of strength to throw Seifer off and leaped on top of the bastard. He held the blond down, staring into green eyes that were inflamed with indignation and arousal. Leaning in close as he kept the man's shirt curled in his grip, he almost forgot his intentions when his eyes flitted over Seifer's parted lips before darting back up.

"The deal was after," he said huskily, pressing a hard kiss against that dangerous mouth.

Running out of internal curses, Seifer stared straight into silver eyes. He hadn't thought he could be any more turned on, but Squall had just proved him very wrong. When the brunet moved off him, leaving him on the bed with a hard-on that wasn't going anywhere, he groaned and let his head fall back against the soft bed. If he'd ever wondered what getting involved with the commander would be like, then he certainly knew now.

"Foul fucking play, Leonhart," he commented as his eyes caught Squall's again. The man's irises were back to their usual gray-blue, the ice goddess no longer deemed necessary. He rolled his eyes when Squall ignored his complaint and simply looked at him with barely contained impatience, Lion Heart in hand.

Getting off the bed as well, he hoped to hell his dick would be limp by the time they made it to the ballroom. Otherwise he'd make Squall explain it to the man's dad. This was not his fault. "Wear belts like that again and face the fucking consequences."

Having his answer as to what had set Seifer off, however inexplicable, Squall raised an unimpressed eyebrow. He'd wear whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, no matter Seifer's opinion—or libido for that matter. "Less talk, Almasy."
Grabbing Kronos and walking over to where Squall was already halfway out the door, Seifer brought his hand up in a mock salute. "Yes, sir," he said before striding past the man into the hallway, the satisfying smack of his hand against Squall's leather clad ass earning him a nasty glare. "Just be ready to pay up, Princess."

Squall's glove creaked as he firmed his grip on Lion Heart's handle. The bastard definitely needed taking down a peg, and he'd be more than happy to provide. That infuriating grin would be the first thing to go. Stepping into the hallway as well, he shouldered past the man. "Keep up."

Taking the lead before Seifer could instigate anymore trouble, Squall kept a brisk pace as he took them from the guest wing into the palace proper, through wide, gleaming hallways and down one of the central lifts, until they emerged into a large foyer that housed a grand set of softly illuminated stairs that was clearly meant for pageantry. Despite several nervous glances landing on their blades, none of the guards they passed challenged them. Squall could only guess what they thought of Loire's demand not to intrude on the private demo that was about to bring their president in near proximity of lethal weapons.

When they reached the top landing, the large doorway that led to the ballroom stood open wide in invitation, the crystal chandeliers within already lit. Walking inside, Squall suppressed a snort as he looked around. It was a ridiculous locale for a spar.

"Ah, there you are," Laguna called out in greeting, a broad smile plastered on his face.

Catching a look from Squall that made it very clear who would be dealing with the president, Seifer flexed his fingers and walked towards their audience. Squall was already off the other way, further into the ballroom. "Ready for a demonstration?" Seifer asked when he drew even with Laguna.

"I can't wait," the president replied, his eyes briefly following his son's retreat. "I made sure we won't be disturbed. We have the place all to ourselves."

Seifer nodded, not really minding if they had a crowd or not, but Squall would probably appreciate it. The man had already started a warm up routine, completely focused on what was to come. "I'd better get ready too," Seifer said, inclining his head briefly in Squall's direction. "If I don't want my ass handed to me."

"Of course. Don't let me keep you," Laguna said with a nod. He glanced to where Squall was guiding his blade through a series of quick arcs. The lack of greeting as well as the intensity applied to a mere warm-up told him his son's mood hadn't improved appreciably. "I'll be up there," he said, pointing to the balcony that lined the east side of the ballroom, offering prime view of the floor below. "I thought it might be best if I stayed out of the way and gave you two the full floor."

"Alright," the young man said, turning on his heels and hurrying along. "Enjoy the show!"

Smiling at such eagerness, Laguna let his own excitement hurry him towards the stairs that led to the balcony. He'd never thought he'd get this chance. Part of him had even expected his son to change his mind and leave the palace without a word of goodbye. It wouldn't have been the first time. But here both men were, gunblade in hand.

He bounded up the stairs, unwilling to miss even their warm-up. He'd only ever heard the stories and had seen some of the unimaginative mission reports. Whenever Squall's friends talked about his achievements, his missions, there was a certain reverence in their eyes that implied total faith in their commander. They joked with him and talked freely as befitted friends, but as a fighter his son commanded respect. He'd always wanted to see why firsthand.
By the time he made it to the balcony his breath was coming in a bit more labored than he would've liked. Good thing Kiros wasn't there to chide him for it and remind him of the palace's gym for the umpteenth time. He picked his spot in the center of the balcony and leaned against the ornate balustrade, slowly catching his breath as he watched the two young men warm up. He found himself smiling again at how his evening had played out. He'd given many speeches from this exact spot, addressing guests and dignitaries below, but tonight he'd be the spectator. He most definitely owed Seifer a favor.

When both men finished limbering up and took their beginning stances, Laguna straightened at the changed atmosphere that seemed to permeate the room. The banter that had gone on just out of earshot had stopped, the two men slowly circling each other with their gunblades raised at the ready. The intense look to their eyes seemed almost too serious for what was essentially a friendly spar. Laguna raised an eyebrow and leaned forward with anticipation.

His son was the first to charge, the explosion of movement catching Laguna off guard. There had been no tells that he could see, but Seifer had countered the attack unflinchingly, turning it aside and countering the move. By the time the sequence of actions had registered in his brain, the two fighters were already several parries and blows further. It was simply too fast to follow.

Laguna blinked in disbelief, causing him to miss yet another clash of blades. At first he thought they had to be junctioned, but the few times they moved slow enough for him to make out their faces with some detail, he could discern no glow to their eyes. It didn't seem possible.

Recovering from his surprise, Laguna tried his best to adjust to the speed of their fight. If he focused hard enough, he could just about follow the snap of quick movements, the dizzying arcs of their blades, the bursts of speed that preceded the impossibly loud collision of metal against metal. Each deafening blow rang throughout the ballroom, aided by the acoustics that were meant for gentle music. Every grunt and cry brought a sense of gritty realism to the whole thing, as if they were true opponents on a battlefield.

He hadn't expected this assault on the senses; this absolute ferocity that informed their every move. Several times he winced when he was certain someone's limb or head would go flying, but every time the seemingly inevitable was averted with an equally impossible looking countermove. The two men wielded their blades as if they were an extension of their own bodies, with an ease that was astounding.

After a while he began to see their differences. Seifer reminded him of Ward in some ways; solid and unmovable even under great forces and a reserve of strength that seemed unlimited. The blond was much faster on his feet however and had far more grace, but not in comparison with his son. Squall flowed from stance to stance with impeccable precision and speed; a deadly blur of movement. Even Kiros couldn't move like that. And then there was the surprising fact that his son liked to fight dirty. A few nasty kicks had almost landed Seifer on his ass, the man only barely managing to evade all but the last one.

He wished his friends were there to see this. Kiros would probably point out all over again that it had to be Raine's genes that accounted for Squall's excellence. He would probably agree. He couldn't even imagine what Raine herself would say if she could see this. Her philosophy in life had been decidedly pacifist.

Leaning his arms on the balustrade, he absorbed every detail to recount to his friends later. The two young men were well matched, their reckless fighting styles clearly attuned to one another. They had to be, to not kill each other at those speeds. And then, the fight became more heated. He hadn't quite caught the blow that had caused it, but Seifer's abdomen now sported a long gash, his shirt
Seifer had warned him about this, but it still dumbfounded Laguna that this wasn't enough cause for them to stop and assess the damage. Far from it. Seifer was now doggedly harassing his son's every move with a burst of speed that the blond had refrained from before, and within moments Squall was sporting a bleeding slash of his own, on his bare right arm.

*Hyne above.*

They'd been holding back until now. Laguna shook his head at the realization, both awed and dismayed as the fight devolved into a frenzied blur of lethal attack after lethal attack. Or so it seemed to his eyes. He wasn't sure his heart could handle the suspense. The newly kindled fervor they brought to the spar didn't spare the ballroom either. So far he counted three long gashes in the east wall, along with an abundance of nicks and marks in the reflective surface of the floor. Neither man had shown any sign of even noticing.

Laguna grimaced at the damage that followed in their wake. He'd have one hell of a time explaining this to his staff, but he didn't feel the least bit of regret as he watched Squall and Seifer give each other chase and fight with utter abandon. This was his son in his element, more so than any official occasion or reluctant dinner that had provided the backdrop for their past interactions. This was the man his son had grown up to be. A lethal fighter. It wasn't what he would have chosen for any child of his, but he couldn't help but feel immense pride. He was also happy to see Squall had a friend who could match him in this.

Even though he had vowed not to, he was definitely getting maudlin. He watched a while longer, his chest swelling with love and pride for his son. He managed to let go of his anxious concern, deciding to trust the two not to inflict any serious injury. It made their fight a joy to behold. No doubt he was smiling like a loon the whole time. He wished he could watch them like this for the remainder of the night, but he'd have to call it a night soon.

When the two men finally stopped their barrage for a brief moment to catch their breath and size each other up, he seized the moment to announce his departure. It was getting late and they didn't show any sign of stopping soon.

"Uhm, hey!" he called down awkwardly, but got no response. "Ah, sorry for interrupting!" he called out again, waving this time to catch their attention. The two men finally noticed him and turned to look his way, his son in particular looking none too impressed. "I know I promised no interruptions, but it's getting late. I'd love to stick around, but I have an early start tomorrow and well, you don't need me around to continue, right?"

Realizing he was babbling, he smiled apologetically. "So, I'll be heading to bed. In case I don't see you guys anymore before you head out; I had a fantastic evening. We should do it again." Pausing, embarrassed by his clumsy interruption, he finished his ramble. "Good night!" Before he could incite any more annoyance, he waved a final time and turned towards the back stairs, all the while still smiling.

Squall scowled at the swiftly vacated balcony. It was jarring to be interrupted like that, just as it had always been jarring in the past to suddenly discover they had an audience. To him their spars were a personal thing, but Seifer had always liked to flaunt his skills, especially in this.

His lips curled upwards. They were alone now. No one to play nice for. He flexed his arms and swung Lion Heart into an attack stance as he met Seifer's gaze.

Grinning at the wild look to Squall's eyes, Seifer sidestepped just in time to avoid being sliced in
half, the man's blue blade digging into the floor instead. He let out a low chuckle. Squall was not holding back. Definitely no mercy for daddy's ballroom.

He rushed off to the side, creating distance between them before planting his feet firmly on the ground, ready for Squall's next attack. His muscles were aching, his pulse high and ears ringing with the beat of his heart. Before the brunet could close the final distance, he jumped forwards, blocking Lion Heart's path. A series of parries sent sparks flying as he pushed the man towards the other end of the room, those gray-blue eyes narrowing until they were mere slits.

A twist of blades and he had to step back. Jumping to the side, Squall was on his tail, swinging Lion Heart in a blur of blue. Neither of them were close to breaking. They kept hounding each other, taking and giving as their stamina started to falter. For every cut that was landed, another followed in retaliation, their breaths falling more heavily from the continuous exertion.

Seifer lost himself to the frenzy. Dancing with his blade, he loved every single intense moment. He never felt as alive as this. Sex was amazing, but this was living right at the edge. Only a handful of people in the entire world mastered this skill and Squall was right at the fucking top. The perfect challenge. He grinned when a thin cut caused pain to bloom along his right bicep, his penalty for losing even a fraction of his concentration.

He swung his blade high and landed a heavy strike that tore at Squall's strength. The man was still light-footed, but sweat was clinging to his brow and his parries didn't hold the same strength as when they'd started. Chasing Squall with Kronos, Seifer landed his blows with all the force he could muster, loud clangs resounding in the large room. Even in this Squall was sexy as fuck; all determination, focus and calculated moves. He couldn't wait to lick at the pulse he saw thrumming wildly against that pale throat—

Another blunder. Squall's blade bit at the back of his thigh. Jumping out of the way just in time, he pivoted around and bore all of his strength down onto where Kronos impacted against Lion Heart. Squall became a blur as the man sped out of the way before twisting in the air while swinging Lion Heart at him. Stepping backwards to prepare a parry, Seifer was abruptly halted in his retreat when his back crashed into the ballroom wall. Squall had him trapped. Fire was burning in those gray-blue eyes and there was no way he could wait any longer.

His chest heaving with ragged breaths, Squall didn't move a muscle as he kept Seifer pinned against the wall, Lion Heart's sharp edge a nudge away from drawing blood. The blond was at his mercy, unable to move without pressing his throat into Squall's blade, but Seifer didn't seem to mind. They stood staring at each other, suspended in a moment of exquisite tension.

Knowing what would happen the moment he released the man, Squall let his blade linger just a heartbeat longer before he lowered it.

Like a storm unleashed, Seifer grabbed him by the front of his shirt and spun them around until Squall was the one thrown against the wall. Their lips collided before Lion Heart even hit the floor. Seifer's hands were all over him, groping him roughly, snaking underneath his clothes, demanding access. His eyes snapped shut when Seifer ground into him hard. He wouldn't last. If he'd have to endure much more, he'd come then and there.

Glancing down when Squall shuddered against him, Seifer caught the almost pained expression on the man's features. He cursed and fumbled for the man's belts. No way in hell he was going to let Squall come until the man was impaled on his cock.

"I need to fuck you," he demanded hotly as he started undoing the clasp of Squall's top belt, immediately moving in for another rough kiss. "Right—" As the belt came undone he yanked
down the man's pants, "—now," he added, before whipping Squall around in front of him, leaving the man's ass naked and exposed. His cock jolted. With a bruising grip he pulled at the man's hips and forced him closer.

Heart hammering, Squall listened with bated breath as Seifer unzipped his fly, followed by the rustle of fabric and the sound of spit. He was painfully hard, his erection giving a keen throb when Seifer pulled his buttocks apart and pressed into him without warning. Sucking in a lungful of air, Squall braced himself against the wall as Seifer sank into him with a few shallow, sharp thrusts. He gasped at the rough entry, the pain of it lancing through his body even as his length jerked in pleasure.

"Harder," he hissed, unwilling to wait for what he wanted.

Thrilled by the command, Seifer firmed his grip on Squall's hips and pushed in all the way to the hilt despite the lack of lube, despite the impossibly tight friction. Rewarded with a loud and unrestrained moan, he repeated the move, faster this time. Quickly settling into a frenzied pace, he cursed and groaned in between thrusts, the jangle of belts and the feel of leather slapping against his thighs spurring him on. In front of him Squall was bent over, the leather of the man's gloves creaking with the effort to brace himself against the continuous thrusts.

Forcing all of his pent up lust into their fevered coupling, he let out a low grunt. Squall took every mad thrust without a sign of hesitation. In fact the brunet tried to push back against him to take as much of him as possible. As hard as possible. Squall was fucking hungry for his cock and he'd give him every last inch.

Looking down, his eyes feasted on the sight of Squall stretched wide around his cock as he thrust in and out of the man. Squall's ass cheeks were starting to redden from the repeated impact. A loud moan left the brunet and they both rocked forward as some of the man's strength faltered. Squall's whole body tensed and he knew exactly what that meant but he didn't let up, so very close himself.

He dug his fingers in harder as his cock started spurting into Squall. The friction disappeared, come seeping past his cock, but he kept fucking Squall with all the speed he could muster until the last of his orgasm was spent. When he finally stilled, he dragged in a deep breath and leaned against Squall, his right hand sneaking around the man's waist and up under his shirt.

"Seifer," he said hoarsely, pulling at the hand that was still stroking his skin. When all he received was a content hum rumbled into his skin, he redoubled his efforts. "Let go."

Bringing a hand down to steady the move, Seifer pulled his cock out of the slick heat, causing the brunet in front of him to inhale sharply. He tucked himself away, his eyes never leaving the sight of Squall's ass coated in sticky white. Placing a hand at the man's hip, he junctioned Bahamut and...
Squall grit his teeth as a wave of magic washed away every last bit of pain, including every nick and bruise he'd earned during their spar. He quelled a frown, unsure how he felt about Seifer taking the choice out of his hands. Pushing away from the wall, he pulled up his pants with as much dignity as he could manage. The result was an uncomfortable wetness that he only had himself to blame for.

As he turned around he glanced to the ballroom's several exits and was only briefly relieved not to spot any scandalized palace staff. Anyone that might've seen them would have long bolted by now. Seifer was smiling at him stupidly, as if nothing untoward had just happened. The soft kiss that followed was entirely anticipated yet inevitable. He let out a sigh against Seifer's lips, unable to deny the man even now.

"No Cures next time," he stated firmly the moment Seifer pulled back. He would've liked to hold on to all the aches a little longer. Now it felt as if they hadn't fought or fucked at all.

Seifer rolled his eyes. He could see Squall's annoyance in the set of his eyes; how the man felt cheated. "You're such a fucking masochist. You wouldn't have been able to walk straight."

Frowning at the unflattering epithet, Squall steeled his gaze. "It's up to me. Not you."

Seifer held up his hands in surrender. Fine by him if Squall wanted a limp from being fucked raw. "We can do it all over again when we're back in our room."

Interest stirring at the cocky grin, Squall knew he stood no chance of refusing the room for the night. He'd known they'd end up in that queen-size bed the moment he'd laid eyes on it. And he had a deal to honor. His gaze traveled down to Seifer's ruined shirt, to where a shallow but wide gash of his blade had sliced the fabric to hang open and reveal much of the blond's abs. A thin graze of congealing blood followed the same arc along glistening, tan skin.

"Your shirt," he said, holding out a hand in obvious demand as he met Seifer's gaze.

"Why?" Seifer asked with a slight chuckle. At the no-nonsense "I want it off" he received in reply, his grin widened. He couldn't deny the brunet some eye candy, not with how Squall was already eyeing him up. Pulling the fabric over his head and dropping it into Squall's waiting hand, his amusement was promptly snuffed out when Squall turned towards the dirtied ballroom wall.

"Don't you fucking dare!" he exclaimed with a grimace, but Squall was already wiping down the wall and floor. And if that wasn't bad enough, his reflexes fucking betrayed him the moment Squall turned around and threw the stained fabric his way, his hand catching it effortlessly.

"You're gonna pay for this," Seifer promised as he stuffed one end of the shirt into his pocket and wiped his hand.

"It was already ruined," Squall stated evenly, studying Seifer's naked back when the man bent over to pick up Kronos. "And better yours than mine." he added, fighting the curl to his lips as he retrieved his own weapon. He saw no need for sympathy when his own pants squelched uncomfortably with every move he made.

"Is that so, Leonhart?" Seifer asked with a raised eyebrow.

At the return of his last name and the dangerous edge to Seifer's tone, Squall felt the old familiar thrill that came with provoking the man. Only this time he was certain any retaliation Seifer decided to mete out would be far more interesting than anything in their past. Swinging his
gunblade onto his shoulders in a casual show of unconcern, he fell into place next to Seifer, all the while holding the blond's intent gaze.

Seifer smirked at Squall, then glanced back at the ballroom one last time before he let the brunet take the lead. One hell of a spar and one hell of a fuck. When Squall calmly strode a foot ahead of him, he followed closely behind. It wasn't until the bottom of the impressive staircase that they encountered a guard. Squall just looked blankly ahead, but Seifer couldn't help himself from sending the man a wide smirk. When the guard quickly averted his gaze, a frown tugging at the man's brow, Seifer held back a chuckle. Probably wasn't every day gunbladers strut through the palace's hallways shirtless, armed and bloody.

As they continued through multiple hallways, into the guest wing, he became more and more impatient. He'd only just come, but already he wanted more. Much more. When they arrived at their room, he stopped Squall in place. "Showtime, Princess. Be quick when you clean up."

Fighting the urge to kiss Seifer, Squall pushed past the man and into their room for the night. Striding straight to the bathroom, he felt Seifer's eyes rake his backside as the man followed close behind. Neither of them attempted anymore banter, the air between them having shifted subtly with their shared purpose.

His eyes traveled to Seifer while he began to remove his belts and placed them on a bench. Seifer unceremoniously stripped out of his remaining clothes and headed to the large shower, unperturbed by Squall's lingering gaze throughout it all.

A brief hiss sounded from Seifer's lips when hot water impacted against several cuts and grazes, the blond washing away sweat and blood with rushed moves. Enraptured, Squall was slow to peel off his own clothes and by the time he'd stripped down to his boxers, Seifer was already out of the shower again, dripping water in his wake and looking ridiculously attractive as he gave his hair a quick tussle with one of the huge and plush towels.

Smirking at the badly veiled look of appreciation on Squall's face, Seifer tossed the towel aside and made sure Squall got a good eyeful as he walked out of the bathroom. In the bedroom, he hurried to get things underway. Dimming the lights to a setting that was still bright enough to enjoy every detail of what was about to transpire, Seifer placed Squall's bag on the floor and pushed the large silk comforter off the bed to join it. He went straight for his bag, tossing the small tube of lubricant from one of the side pockets onto the bed. He'd let Squall decide how slick he wanted his ride.

Eyes returning to the open bag now placed on the floor, Seifer grabbed one of the belts he could see lying just beyond the zip. Taking it with him, he bounced onto the bed and lay back in wait, his eyes taking in every little detail of the belt as he turned it around in his hold. It still seemed like such a twist of fate that he was lying here, waiting to have sex with the owner of said belt.

Looking over at the bathroom door when it swished open, Seifer grew impatient at the sight of a slightly damp Squall, wearing nothing but a loosely wrapped towel. He let the belt fall out of his hand and out of sight, his eyes never leaving the brunet.

Squall stilled for a moment as he took in the scene Seifer had set. As frantic as their encounter in the ballroom had been, this was something else entirely. There was a level of premeditation that hadn't been there before. Seifer was lying in wait, stretched out naked on the bed like a big, lazy cat. The opulent backdrop suited the man far better than Squall could've imagined. Those green eyes studied him intimately, unapologetic in their appraisal.

His feet carried him closer despite a sudden twinge of nerves. Even though Seifer remained
unmoving, there was an almost predatory gleam to his gaze. The man's quiescent length stirred to life before his eyes, stiffening as he approached and moved onto the bed. Squall's breath momentarily faltered. Seifer looked dangerously sexy, yet in that moment he was giving Squall the reins.

Setting aside his self-consciousness, Squall gave himself over to instinct and moved to straddle the man. His towel fell loose around his hips with the motion, so he pulled the impeding item away and discarded it on the floor. Seifer's hands came up to rest at his hips, the man's fingers flexing against his skin, but they didn't tug or guide. A heady sensation flooded him as he met Seifer's heated gaze. Once again he had the man pinned in place, this time with the squeeze of his thighs rather than a blade.

Emboldened, Squall leaned down and pressed his lips to Seifer's in a passionate kiss. Seifer yielded to him instantly, their tongues seeking and twining with barely contained hunger. Drawing as close as he could without lying down on top of the man, he guided his hands along well-defined obliques, over firm pecs and further up, until his fingers tugged at fine blond hair. He would never tire of kissing this man.

Breaking away to catch his breath, he let his gaze travel down Seifer's body, to where their hard lengths were just close enough to brush together. His pulse sped up as he regarded their differences and their like responses. As in all other respects Seifer was by far the larger one, but rather than intimidate, the sight instilled a growing need to touch the blond. He reached down and trailed his fingers along the hot skin of Seifer's cock, before closing his hand around its thick girth.

Sucking in a greedy breath as he jerked beneath Squall's touch, Seifer stared at those gray-blue eyes that were entirely focused on where the man's fingers were slowly massaging his cock. He moaned as Squall started pumping him in a slow rhythm, and let his head fall back into the soft pillows. The heat of Squall's legs and buttocks pressing against him along with the tantalizing touches were making his head spin.

He let his own fingers travel along Squall's sides, until the brunet leaned further back and out of his reach. His eyes followed Squall's moves as the man briefly let go of him to take hold of the lube. No words, just that ever present intensity. Drawing in a sharp breath at the slick cold of lube against his length, he watched Squall slowly lathering up his erection.

A deep rumble of a groan left him as Squall continued the torturous slow glide of his palm and fingers up and down his length. It throbbed as he studied the lean and muscular fighter before him, dark bangs hanging low, a wild strand contrasting against pale cheekbones and determined eyes. He grit his teeth as Squall drew his cock straight up and eyed it in appraisal. In preparation.

Raising himself onto his knees, Squall got into position and slowly lowered himself onto Seifer's cock. After the unwarranted Cure it was just as tight as the first penetration, bringing that same sting of pain and restoring what the healing magic had taken from him. The moment he sank past the resistance of the thick head of Seifer's cock, the blond bit out a curse, green eyes transfixed on his every move. He could feel himself stretch wide as he sank all the way down and he allowed himself a few seconds to relish the sensation before he lifted himself again.

Stability was key, so he steadied his hands at Seifer's sides as he got a feel for the new position that awarded him more control than he'd had so far. After a few testing thrusts onto Seifer's length he began to move with confidence, chasing every stab of pleasure as he looked down into Seifer's heavy lidded gaze. Seifer's hands groped and caressed without constraining him, the man ceding all control to him. He hadn't anticipated the possessive thrill of holding the blond in place and taking what he wanted.
Seifer had asked this of him. Seifer wanted this.

His arousal flared at the thought and he lost himself to the primal rhythm of his body's needs, his gaze roving over Seifer's body and face. Arching his back, he furrowed his brow when he found just the right angle. His entire awareness singled in on the feel of driving himself down on Seifer's cock.

Spellbound and panting heavily, Seifer couldn't stop himself from staring as Squall rode him, not hard and fast but with a sensual abandon that put all his fantasies to shame. Shit, the man was a natural. Fucking gorgeous. His gaze darted down to where Squall's cock was jutting out between them, a sight he'd wanted to get a better look at the other times he'd fucked Squall. So hard and pumped red with arousal, bobbing whenever Squall's buttocks made impact with Seifer's hips. It was begging to be touched. Steel covered in velvety softness.

He grabbed the lube and squeezed a dollop into his hand before fisting the head of Squall's cock, letting the man slide into the warmth of his palm every time the man impaled himself on his cock. The brunet's body pulled into a sensuous arch at his touch, those intense eyes snapping shut. Low moans started to spill from slightly parted lips.

"I—" Seifer started without having any idea of what he wanted to say. All he could do was feel the exquisite pressure all around his cock, the build-up of ecstasy deep in his balls, almost ready to explode. "Fuck, Squall," he growled as he spread his thighs wider and added a slight lift of his hips to meet the man's downward glide, forcing Squall to take in more of him. Judging from how Squall's cock jerked in his hold, he must've hit the man just right. He let his hands drop to the bed. This time he wanted an unimpeded view of Squall coming. Fuck, he wouldn't ever want to see anything else.

Another few moments of meeting Squall's slow thrusts and white ribbons of liquid shot forth from Squall's length, Seifer's own cock choosing that fucking moment to undo him. He had to shut his eyes at how raw the unhurried pace made every throb of ejaculation feel. The visual of Squall's cock erupting like that played back on repeat. He breathed deep and fast. "Squall," he said softly as he looked up, feeling at home the moment the man leaned in and kissed him.

The call of his name, uttered in that breathless voice, pleased Squall to no end. The languid meshing of their lips and tongues fed into the pleasant hum of his afterglow, his entire body buzzing with it. He let Seifer draw him closer, as close as was possible in their current position, but his sweat was starting to cool on his skin, the softening length within him slowly slipping free.

Pushing up far enough to move off Seifer's length, Squall lowered himself to the bed. Not once did Seifer let go of him, the man using the opening to roll on top. At the touch of warm lips, Squall let go of the vague notion that he should maybe deal with the mess he was leaking onto the bed in his new position.

Kissing Seifer like this was intoxicating. It was slow and intimate, and it required him to ignore the many alarms that were going off in the back of his mind even as he melted into Seifer's touch. It felt a lot like forcing back one's fears to cross a deadly chasm. The thrill of the deed, the danger of the fall. It felt good. Just as it had felt good to make Seifer look up at him with need; a near reverence as they had moved together. Squall could remember seeing that expression only once before, during their night on Avalanche. Being on top definitely had its benefits.

Sliding his fingers down firm muscles, Seifer loved the way they fit together, the way Squall felt against him. Warm yet rough around the edges. He smirked as he let a hand travel up the inside of Squall's thigh, wanting to see that pained expression of building pleasure back on the man's face. Gray-blue eyes honed in on him, catching on to his intent, just before he slid two fingers into slick
heat.

Squall held his breath at the intrusion and dropped his head back with closed eyes. The fingers slid back out teasingly, a third one joining the next slide in. The ache he felt from sex was more a sensitized throb than any real pain and the feel of Seifer's fingers raking against him, inside him, quickly kindled the still lingering pleasure to life. The man found just the right spot within seconds.

Watching as Squall's fingers clenched into the bedding and one of the man's legs subtly fell to the side, Seifer grinned, then leaned in to steal a kiss against the nape of Squall's neck. "You lived up to your part of our deal," he admitted lowly, letting his breath warm Squall's skin. "But you still have to pay for my shirt." He trailed his tongue down the brunet's neck, just as he pushed his fingers in deep.

The words and the more forceful thrust of Seifer's fingers had Squall harden fully. Opening his eyes, he watched with increasingly labored breath as Seifer drove his fingers into him and brought him closer and closer. Seifer's own libido had clearly recovered, the man's erection standing proud and awaiting touch. When Seifer suddenly leaned back and lifted him by his knees, Squall raised his hips to let his buttocks rest on the pillow the blond shoved underneath it. The look in Seifer's eyes as he let the man pull his legs wide meant only one thing.

He moaned when Seifer's cock thrust into him hard enough to displace the pillow. His eyes rolled up in pleasure, his view of the ceiling shifting with each rough thrust into him. Any exhaustion he felt from their spar, any thought of sleep vanished from his mind as the certainty settled in that they would be up all night. A contest of stamina. It wouldn't be the first time, even if their methods had changed radically.

Looking back down into Seifer's face drawn tight with pleasure, Squall accepted the challenge with a groan and a push of his hips. All night then.

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Chapter End Notes

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Navigating Expectations

[The Presidential Palace, Sphinxara District, Monday, 27th of October, 7:07 am]

A thin sliver of sunshine fell from between the curtains, straight onto Squall's face. Blinking at the offending light, he tried to turn his back to it, but his backside throbbed a warning as he attempted the move. An arm thrown around his waist further curbed his freedom of movement. Behind him Seifer lay curled close, the man's deep and even breaths tickling the back of his neck.

He glanced at his phone, the thing just out of reach on the far end of the bedside table. In a rare occurrence he'd completely forgotten to set his alarm clock, but going by the angle of the sunlight it wasn't all that late just yet. More than enough time to linger a bit longer.

With Seifer still lost to sleep, he settled back against the man's chest. The arm tightened around him reflexively, his hair nuzzled by the oblivious blond. When they'd first started to share a bed, he'd tried to wriggle away from these instances of accidental proximity as stealthily as possible. Now he didn't mind at all. At least as long as Seifer wasn't awake to catch on to his weakness for moments like this.

He wished he could doze and fall back to sleep, but he was already wide awake. He looked about the overly lavish room and let out a soft sigh. Only Seifer could turn dinner with Loire into this. Unfortunate as their location was, he couldn't bring himself to regret the night that had resulted from visiting the palace; the single most debauched night of his life, and that was their night on Avalanche included. He would've lost count of the times he'd climaxed if every moment of pleasure hadn't been etched into his memory forever. Seifer had fucked him both roughly and gently, handling his body expertly.

He bore the marks of such heavy use. His skin was sensitive wherever Seifer had latched on to suck and kiss and nibble, but most painful were his ass and lower back. Unsurprising considering what they'd done. To his relief Seifer hadn't attempted to heal him. Less agreeable was the discomfort of dried crustiness between his legs and on the sheets beneath them. They hadn't even bothered to clean up. By the end of it, neither of them had had the energy to do more than fall unconscious.

The evidence was damning. One guest room with thoroughly dirtied bed linen, the other room left untouched and pristine. Just as with the ballroom, his lust had overwritten all rational thought. They had taken no precautions. He let out a small groan and prayed that the cleaning staff was discreet above all else. He wasn't ready for Loire to find out about this.

Loire. The man was no doubt waiting hopefully for them to come to the east wing and join him for breakfast. He wanted to bail on breakfast badly, but it would be in poor taste to only take Loire up on his hospitality when it suited his libido.

Remembering all the other things they still needed to do that day, he couldn't hold on to the sleepy comfort he'd felt just moments earlier. He managed to move out from underneath Seifer's arm with some difficulty, the blond unwilling to relinquish his new personal bolster.

"Where're you going?"

Ignoring the mumbled complaint, Squall got out of bed with a measure of grace despite the aches that assaulted him all at once.

"Bathroom."
Growling out his displeasure, Seifer kneaded his brow. He already missed the warmth that had been pressed up against him. Turning to lie on his back, he looked over at the closed bathroom door. A grin spread on his face. He wasn't much of a morning person, but waking up next to Squall in a palace after a sex fest; now that was a morning worth repeating.

Tossing the duvet aside, he strode over to the bathroom. Squall was already in the shower, lathering himself up. With a wide smirk, he hurried through taking a leak and brushing his teeth, before entering the large shower area.

"Need a hand?" he asked as he eyed up the man's backside.

Unable to quell his anticipation, Squall turned around to look at the shamelessly naked blond. He handed over the soap he'd been using, not shying away from the lewd gaze that raked his body.

Squeezing out a dollop from the expensive bottle, Seifer leaned in for a deep kiss and slid his hands over firm muscles, from Squall's abdomen up to firm pecs. "Morning, Sexy," he mumbled into their kiss as he ran his hands up and down the man's back.

Squall raised an eyebrow at the new nickname, but was distracted when Seifer's hands started to travel lower. Whatever aches the warm water had smoothed away were faintly rekindled as Seifer groped his buttocks and gently pulled them apart to trail careful fingers along his crack and anus. He pressed a harder kiss onto Seifer's lips and let his arms be guided around Seifer's neck. Strong hands hooked under his thighs and lifted him off the ground. They were both hard and ready.

Wrapping his legs around Seifer, Squall felt his impatience grow when Seifer took a few steps to push him up against the shower wall and maneuver him into position. He could feel the tip of Seifer's erection brushing against his entrance, poised just right. The man's grip tightened on his hips, lowering him. The penetration hurt a fair bit, his ass sore after the night they'd had. Persevering, he arched his hips to take in more, sheathing Seifer's cock to the hilt.

The moment Seifer started to thrust up into him, he forgot about the discomfort and met every move with a roll of his own hips. The spray of warm water slicked their coupling, easing the man's frantic pace. Seifer smothered most of his moans and exclamations with deep kisses, but the wet sound of their flesh slapping together rang out loudly in the bathroom.

When his climax started to roll through him, he broke free from Seifer's mouth. He needed to breathe. He moaned and held on tight when Seifer responded with a furious series of thrusts, telling him the man was close as well. A few more hard plunges and he was coming. Forgetting their position, he arched his hips to take in more, sheathing Seifer's cock to the hilt.

Squall let his head fall back against the cool wall behind him, his breathing labored. He relished the twitches of Seifer's length, the last few rutting movements inside him. Trusting Seifer to carry his weight a moment longer, he loosened his grip on Seifer's back and trailed a hand up to card through wet, blond strands of hair.

Letting out a contented hum at the touch, Seifer leaned in for another kiss and enjoyed the feel of slick lips against his own, all pliant and languid. Squall's legs were still wrapped around him, but his own cock was slowly growing soft inside the man. He pulled out and set the man down, his eyes feasting on the well-fucked brunet before him.

"Who knew you were such a sex kitten?" he asked with a teasing smirk.

Squall's brow wrinkled. "Kitten?" he repeated drolly, not hiding his distaste for the overly cute pet
name. Somehow it seemed even more diminutive than Princess. Maybe Seifer had merely numbed him to the latter already.

"Lion?" Seifer asked, grinning widely.

Watching as Squall rolled his eyes and began to wash, Seifer fought the urge to junction when he spotted the man's stiff movement. "Cure?"

Squall frowned and considered his options. He could handle the pain and derived a certain pleasure from it, but he didn't want this new aspect of his life to impede any future training or sparring sessions. He'd have to set firm boundaries.

"Yes," he admitted reluctantly.

Before he could junction himself, Seifer leaned in to kiss him, the man's eyes alight with an amber glow. The move caught him off guard, the tingle of healing magic fusing with the rush brought on by their lips slowly meshing together. It was a strange feeling to have all residual sensations of sex melt away while Seifer kept his body suspended in a gentler pleasure.

When the bright embers of magic faded, he looked up into the man's usual green eyes. Only Seifer would think of something like this. He only hoped that next time he needed to cast a Cure out in the field, he wouldn't be distracted by the memory of Seifer's lips.

Seifer pulled back from their kiss without breaking their gaze. He stroked his thumb against the man's jaw and traced the outline of smooth lips. Squall was fucking breathtaking. Placing one last soft kiss against the man's lips, he moved to grab the shampoo and made quick work of the rest of his shower. When he was all done, he placed a firm smack against a wet buttock on his way out, earning himself a deadly glare. He'd definitely be paying for that later.

Grabbing a huge bath towel, he swung it over his shoulder and headed straight for the bedroom. He hummed to himself as he patted himself dry before retrieving the suit he'd thrown over a plush armchair. Just as he finished putting on his dark slacks and dress shirt, he heard the muted sound of bare feet joining him in the bedroom.

"We'll have to do this again soon," he said, sending the brunet a playful smile.

Squall huffed and cast a pointed glance at the mess they'd made of the room. "If we're allowed back," he said dryly, walking to his duffel for a fresh set of clothes.

A low chuckle left Seifer as he looked over to where a towel hung low against the brunet's hips, not leaving much to the imagination. "I'm sure I'll be able to persuade your dad."

Squall rolled his eyes before putting on a white shirt. Aware of Seifer's lascivious gaze, he dropped his towel without flinching and pulled on a pair of boxer briefs. "We trashed the ballroom," he reminded. "I doubt he'll want to host a rematch."

"Did you actually see his expression though? He fucking loved it."

Squall raised an eyebrow. Too engrossed in their spar, he hadn't bothered catching a glimpse of Loire's reactions. He didn't really care what his father thought, one way or the other. Buttoning up his pants, he turned to regard Seifer. "This was a one-off. I'm not spending the night here again."

"Not even for another sex marathon?"

Lifting his two bags onto his shoulder, Squall glanced at the lecherous blond with a small tug to his
lips. "We can have those anywhere."

Seifer wolf-whistled as Squall fetched Lion Heart's case and walked to the door. He fucking loved how Squall could deliver a line like that in that no-nonsense tone of his. "I'll definitely be holding you to that," he said as he grabbed his own stuff and joined the man.

"Any chance we're sticking around for a presidential breakfast?" he chanced, testing his lucky streak.

"That's where we're heading."

Seifer smirked when Squall couldn't quite sell the annoyance in his tone. It seemed like an all-nighter was just the thing to mellow out the stern commander. "Lead the way," he said eagerly, more than happy to wring every last bit of luxury out of their stay before he'd have to leave Squall behind for a work-filled day.

Yup, he'd definitely be back here again.

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[The Presidential Palace, Sphinxara District, Monday, 27th of October, 8:02 am]

Tapping a finger against the table, Laguna skimmed over the daily news and reports that had been handed to him first thing in the morning, but he failed to muster his usual focus. He missed Kiros's astute observations for one, his old friend just as much a trusted advisor as he was the head of the palace guard. He could've used the man's advice on how to deal with his son as well, or Ward's calming and reliable presence. Not for the first time he lamented their simultaneous absence.

It was hard to rein in his excitement ever since housekeeping had let him know his two guests were still at the palace. He tried not to get his hopes up. He told himself it was more likely they'd prefer sleeping in over joining him for breakfast, and Squall had no doubt already exceeded his tolerance for his father the night before. Still he found himself glancing at the doorway for the umpteenth time, before he checked the decadent Estharian breakfast that had been set out on his order. Maybe he should've gone Galbadian after all—

When he heard two sets of footsteps approaching, accompanied by a deep voice he recognized as Seifer's, he quickly set aside the reports and tried to tone down his giddy expression. He couldn't quite believe his luck. The moment the sliding doors opened, he pushed up from his chair and ushered his two guests inside.

"Come on in, sit down!" he said with a beaming smile. "You've made my day, joining an old man for breakfast." His mood improved exponentially when Squall nodded at him in greeting, for once not looking as if he wanted to bail right then and there.

"So, you two had a good night's rest after your spar? Dare I ask who came out as victor?"

Seifer chuckled and glanced at Squall as they sat down. "I had to let the Commander get the upper hand in the end just so we could go to bed," he said, his amusement growing at Squall's loud snort. "Don't even know what time we finally fell asleep." There was no way his smirk could get any wider. Grabbing a bread roll, he added, "How about you, old man? When did you head off anyway?"

"I retired around eleven thirty, I believe," Laguna said with an apologetic smile as he loaded up his own plate as well. "Don't get me wrong, I would've stuck around until the end if my schedule would permit me sleeping in, but sadly I've got a meeting in half an hour." He looked between
them fondly. "I have to admit, I hadn't expected you two to go at it for quite that long. I've seen a few exciting spars in my army days, but nothing quite like that."

Seifer chuckled good-naturedly. "It's probably for the best you didn't stay around till the end. That's when we tend to get a bit sloppy. Might've proven a bit too exciting."

Laguna quirked an eyebrow. He'd already thought their fighting styles to be plenty exciting. "It's a miracle you kids survived into adulthood," he said with a shake of the head. The times he'd spotted one of their blades barely missing a vital body part, at speeds that told him they were simply trusting the other to dodge...

"Nothing miraculous about it. Just pure skill. I guess you got to see exactly why you pay Garden those over the top fees when you book the Commander."

"I was very impressed," Laguna confirmed. He looked at his son with pride. "Now I'm not sure what to imagine anymore for when he fights junctioned."

"The world's most unstoppable force," Seifer said. "After yours truly, of course."

Laguna smiled at so much youthful confidence. "What is it like? Can you feel your GFs right now?" he asked curiously. He knew how it all worked in a general sense, but he'd always been curious about how it felt to the person junctioning. "I was told by Odine that not one is the same. That they even have personalities and quirks."

"They do," Seifer said, pouring himself some coffee. "You know Shiva, right?" he asked, continuing when Laguna gave a nod. "When Rinoa and I found Squall last week, I had to draw her, and Hyne, whenever I was around him after that, she was pining away like crazy. Don't think she was too happy about her new home."

He leaned forward in his seat. "My GFs are very different from her. They're all beasts, not humanoid. I get impressions from them and sudden drives. Better instincts." He took a drink of his coffee, letting out a content hum at the high quality brew. "I know some GFs talk, but I've never kept any of those. Got enough mess in here without them," he said tapping the side of his head, before looking Squall's way. "How about yours? You got any that talk?"

Squall huffed as he thought about his most willful GF. "Diablos. And not just in my head either." More than once the irritated GF had hissed insults at his squad members in a language no one understood. Only he could somehow understand the words, their meaning fed straight into his brain through their link. "He's insolent, but he's the perfect scout. I used him a lot during the civil war."

"What is he like? Humanoid like Shiva?" Laguna asked.

"Humanoid the way he's built and moves, but he has wings. Looks like a demon."

"Ah," the president smiled, glad to have discovered another topic his son didn't mind talking about. "The clue is in the name then."

"What are your new ones like?" Seifer asked.

"You've seen Griever," Squall said after a moment of contemplation. "After Shiva, we're the most attuned. He's protective. Alpha. Took him months to accept me and only as an equal. He considers the people closest to me as members of our pride."

Laguna quirked an eyebrow at that. "As in a troupe of lions?"
Squall nodded. "Beastlike GFs think differently than humanoid ones."

"Probably not gonna like another dominant male in his pride," Seifer commented with a smirk, before biting into his buttery bread.

Squall quirked an eyebrow at the cocky assumption. "What makes you think he won't just consider you another charge to protect?"

"Because I'm all alpha, baby," Seifer said with a wink.

Rolling his eyes, Squall only just refrained from informing the man that Griever wasn't quite sure yet whether to see Seifer as a challenger to the pride or in the more subservient role of Squall's mate.

Laguna laughed heartily at the altercation. "Well, he sure wasn't so happy to see us at the lab. He seemed very protective of you indeed."

Squall frowned at the memory. "He was confused. He would never attack his own." Catching himself too late, he shut his mouth at the unintentional admission, but the harm was done.

Laguna tried to contain the broad smile threatening to break free. "Seifer and I are part of the pride already then?"

Squall tried to look unfazed. "By proximity. He knows you," he explained, needing to downplay.

"So what about the other ones?" Seifer asked, secretly just as pleased as Laguna. "It was quite a list you reeled off at Odine's."

"The ones I named are mine. Not Garden property. I defeated Fenrir and Atomos during missions. Both are beast types. Fenrir's a wolf. Atomos is... a deep sea creature," Squall decided, for lack of a better description for the unsightly GF. "A water elemental."

He paused then, wondering how to explain his two remaining GFs. "Eden and Anima are both female. Eden is abstract. She's very powerful, machine-like. She's the only GF I don't get any impressions from. I give her orders, she obeys." It always felt somewhat unsettling whenever he summoned her, as if he was wielding some terrible weapon rather than dealing with a sentient being. "Anima's different. She feels human in my mind, but she's unpredictable. Destructive. I only get her out when I don't need to distinguish between foes and friendlies."

"Can't wait to see them," Seifer said, intrigued. "We should get them out to play when we go hunting."

Squall frowned at the thought of unleashing some of his GFs in the dense Galbadian woods just for the sake of having some fun with them. Half of them would need a considerable clearing in the woods to be summoned, Fenrir and Griever weren't likely to welcome the company, and Anima was always a risk. To summon any of them to deal with minor monsters would be major overkill. "If they cooperate," he said dubiously, not sure his GFs would appreciate such carelessness.

"Afraid they'll want to switch hosts?" Seifer teased at Squall's unenthusiastic reply.

Squall rolled his eyes. "You're free to try," he shot back. "I meant that Shiva's the only one likely to play nice."

"Yeah. Been there, done that," Seifer said with a shake of his head, recalling how the ice goddess had already gotten on his nerves just a few days ago. The way she'd sauntered over to Squall and
pressed her hand to the man's cheek had rubbed him entirely the wrong way. "No thanks," he added and then narrowed his eyes as he slowly realized he'd been played. "Fuck," he cursed under his breath. Burrowed in his brain, free to rummage around, Shiva had to have known how he felt about Squall. She'd pulled that playful flirt just to rile him up. "The cunning, little—"

Laguna's brow shot up at the unprovoked profanity. "Not fond of Shiva, are we?"

"I just realized she's had some fun at my expense. I bet she's even laughing it up in there right now."

Squall frowned, feeling Shiva stir in amusement the moment Seifer called her out on it. "You have her attention," he remarked dryly, not happy to be left out of the loop by his own GF.

"She likes to tease then?" Laguna guessed.

"Apparently so," Seifer said. "So yeah, you can keep her. Not interested."

At the snub Shiva let out a crystalline laugh, the GF curling up in Squall's mind with an ostentatious delight she wished the blond to see. *I'm not summoning you here,* he told her plainly.

"It's universal then," Laguna commented knowingly. "Teasing those you like."

Seifer quirked an eyebrow, wondering if Laguna had lost his mind. "I'm pretty sure that's not the case here. What do you say, Squall? You're the one with the inside information."

At the question, Squall shrugged. Shiva had always been fascinated with the blond ever since he'd gotten her. Probably because of his own connection with Seifer, but still... "She likes you," he said evenly, vindictively pleased at Shiva's little huff over his betrayal.

"No shit," Seifer said, a wide grin spreading on his lips. "Maybe she got smitten with the excellent wiring up here after all."

That made Squall snort. "The entertainment value, maybe."

Laguna's eyes shone with mischief. "Like I said. *Universal.*"

"He's got you there," Seifer said, chuckling. "But don't worry, Princess. I like you too."

Laguna smiled at his son's halfhearted scowl in reply. "So, how about you tell me more about your GFs," he said, looking at Seifer.

"Like I said, they're all beasties," Seifer said, happy enough to elaborate. "Ifrit, Cerberus and Bahamut. Ifrit's fire-based. He was the first GF I ever got. Well, apart from Pandemonium but that GF was worthless. One junction was more than enough. I mean, if you're gonna have a GF, at least have one that actually looks intimidating. Pandemonium looked like—" he tried to think of a way to describe the GF, but fell short. "I don't even know what that weird ass thing looked like." He scratched at the back of his neck as he thought of his three trusted demons.

"Now Ifrit, he was a bit temperamental at first, but after I saved him from being a test-toy for all of Garden's newb cadets, he's mellowed out a bit. He even rustled up a couple of new kickass spells just for yours truly." He looked over at Squall. "I'll show you when we see Rai and Fu."

Squall nodded, interest piqued. He wasn't going to discuss the semantic difference between saving Ifrit and stealing the GF from Garden's directory when it all boiled down to the same thing. The GF had been pitiful in that cavern.
"Don't start any forest fires, now," Laguna ribbed good-naturedly, taking in the keen looks on the fighters' faces. "I happen to like the Galbadian woodlands."

"We'll try not to," Seifer replied jokingly. "No promises though." He finished off his second bread roll and helped himself to another one. "So yeah, that's Ifrit for you," he said, and continued when the president still looked interested. "Cerberus is just a big dog. As in very big. Makes for good transportation if you're out in the wild, just not if there's any chance of running into someone. He's not really your usual fauna after all. Has three heads and some very pointy fangs."

Squall raised an eyebrow. "You ride Cerberus," he repeated dryly, trying to conjure the visual. He'd seen and fought that GF, and it definitely hadn't seemed like the type of creature that would be amenable to being ridden. Apparently Seifer didn't believe in conventional transport methods.

"Just like Bahamut. I'll take you along for a ride in Galbadia if you want," Seifer offered easily. He looked over to Laguna to explain more about his favorite GF. "Bahamut has wings like Diablos. He's about the most amazing creature you'll ever see. If you're interested, I'll show him to you at some point. No one should be deprived of such a sight."

"I'd be happy to, but I think I'll skip on any rides." Laguna shook his head at the thought of flying atop a GF.

"Your loss."

"I'm sure, but I think you'll have more success limiting your efforts to my son. I don't do well with heights," Laguna admitted, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment.

"I guess you wouldn't like my way of getting around Esthar then," Seifer said with a smirk, wondering if the president had any idea of how the city's cargo lifts could be utilized. "Whoever designed the goods lifts was a genius. Fast and easy. That and you get to see the most stunning views the city has to offer."

Laguna blinked at the unsettling risks such a thing implied. "You don't mean to say—" He turned to look at Squall, his son's gaze ducking to his coffee mug. "You too?" He shook his head once more. "Hyne, how do you even manage to stay on top of those things and not fall off?"

"It's not that hard," Seifer said, finishing the rest of his coffee. "And believe me, it's worth it."

"Here I thought I was spontaneous, but you've got me outgunned, kid."

"Aren't presidents supposed to be the opposite of spontaneous?" Seifer asked with a raised eyebrow. "Then again, I can't say I ever imagined a president to be anything like you. And I mean that in the best possible way, old man. Add in the good food and extremely comfortable beds around here and I'm afraid I'm gonna have to come back again soon."

"You're welcome to, kid," Laguna said with a smile. "Maybe next time, when you take me up on that offer for drinks." He turned his gaze to his son. "You too, Squall. My door's always open."

"That offer for a permanent room still stands." He sighed then, glancing at his watch. He'd never been so reluctant before to start a day's work. "I'm afraid I have to go now. Politics wait for no one," he said with an apologetic smile, getting up from his chair.

"Seifer," he said, extending his hand in parting and giving it a firm shake when Seifer grasped it. "In case we don't speak before your trip to Galbadia—Good hunting, and good luck with whatever it is you're looking to find."

"See you, old man."
Breaking the handshake, Laguna gave a fond slap to the blond's shoulder, before facing his son who had gotten up from his chair as well.

He rounded the table and placed both hands on the brunet's shoulders, for once ignoring the slight frown that emerged at the touch. "It was wonderful having you here. We should do it again," he said with warm eyes. "Say hello to Ellone and Raine from me." After a final squeeze, he lifted his hands from Squall's shoulders and turned to leave.

"You kids enjoy your breakfast." Giving a final nod to both young men, he was out the door.

Sitting down again, Seifer reached over to grab one of many pastries lined up. Taking a big bite, he smiled at the sweet taste, his lips only quirking further when Squall raised an eyebrow at his behavior.

"What can I say, I like it here," he said, managing only a modicum of dignity with his mouth still half-full of the sweet bread. He refilled his cup of coffee and brought it to his lips. "Maybe I'm heading down the wrong career path after all. Maybe President is the way to go."

Squall snorted lightly. "I wouldn't recommend it."

"No?" Seifer asked. "You gotta admit having your very own palace is kind of awesome. Beats a one-bedroom apartment any day."

"It's excessive," Squall commented evenly before downing the last of his coffee.

"Nothing wrong with excessive," Seifer said with a smile, realizing he had no idea what Squall's place looked like. He couldn't even imagine it, too used to the memory of Squall's old dorm. "Your dad mentioned a penthouse, right?"

"...Rinoa picked it. Never really was my place to begin with."

"What kind of place would you pick then?"

Squall furrowed his brow in thought. He'd never actually had to pick his own place before. He'd always just been put up somewhere, be it the orphanage, Garden or even the penthouse. He shrugged. "Anywhere I can sleep is fine."

"Of course," Seifer said, chuckling softly at Squall's pragmatism. "I agree for the most part. It's not like I'm going out of my way to save up for a better place. I'd rather spend it on stuff I want here and now. Live in the moment."

Since he hadn't detected any expenditure of that sort in Seifer's apartment, it didn't take Squall long to guess Seifer's meaning. He'd seen firsthand just how much one could spend on the Estharian nightlife from Rinoa's bank statements. And drugs probably weren't cheap.

"Seems like everybody thinks living means spending money."

"Well, I can tell you one thing, living without money sucks," Seifer said, remembering just how rough those first months in Esthar had been. "So I guess it does. And why not blow a little cash if it means you have more fun? What good is a number increasing in a bank account anyway?"

Squall considered Seifer's words, not sure he completely agreed. Rinoa had certainly seemed to come around from the idea. The perfect penthouse and an unlimited cash flow hadn't been able to make her happy. Then again he'd never had to live in poverty; no food to sustain him, no roof over his head. His outlook might be different then too.
"Money never improved my life," he stated simply.

Seifer nodded, finishing his pastry as he considered the fact. Squall had to be bringing in a lot of cash as the SeeD Commander, yet the man had been miserable the night they'd met at the club, and from the sound of it, for a good while before then too. And he knew Squall meant it when he said all he needed was a bed. There wasn't a single frivolous bone in Squall's body. It was one of the things he'd always admired about the man; his no-nonsense tenacity in all aspects of life. He looked over at the brunet. The man had finished his food a while ago, his plate empty. Seifer sighed. However much he'd like to protract their stay at the palace, he knew it was almost over.

"I guess we'd better get going if we want to get in some training before I have to start work," he said, remaining in his seat.

Squall nodded, suddenly feeling the lack of sleep keenly. He'd already assembled a mental list of all the things he still needed to get in order before tomorrow's meeting and none of those tasks required his full attention or acumen. He already knew he'd be bored to tears once they concluded their morning of magic training and he had to leave Seifer's side. At least he'd be safe from paperwork and politics the moment they set off for Galbadia.

He looked over at Seifer and got up when the man still didn't stir. "Let's move."

"Let's," Seifer agreed and pushed out of his seat.

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[Dry cleaner, Chimera District, Monday, 27th of October, 12:36 pm]

Leaning against the wall opposite from the counter, Squall stared out the dry cleaner's window with crossed arms as he waited for his last errand of the day to be concluded. A brand new sleeping bag was already sitting in the trunk of his car, along with a sleeping pad, water canteen and other camping items he'd usually simply get from one of Garden's depots. There was definitely something to be said for Garden's facilities.

For the first time in his life, he'd actually needed to hunt down a place to get his uniform pressed instead of just leaving it up to Garden's laundry service or Rinoa. The hated garment hadn't come out looking very good after he'd unceremoniously dumped it in his duffel bags when moving out of the penthouse, and he doubted Quistis would appreciate him showing up looking anything less than immaculate.

In the end he'd driven around Seifer's neighborhood for nearly half an hour before finally finding a dry cleaner that would take the job on the spot, and that was only after a royal tip had convinced them to bump him to the front of their workload. He frowned at his own ineptitude. Until now he'd been blissfully unaware of the shortcomings he'd developed when it came to household chores. And Seifer's hilarity would only increase once they actually found themselves in the Galbadian woodlands, peering into a pot containing his cooking.

Squall huffed at himself. He didn't like the thought that all these years he'd actually been coddled by Garden. Fighting was the only thing he'd ever been taught, while Seifer had managed to grow past his childhood lessons and had become a functioning member of society. He would just have to do his best to learn, the trip to Galbadia his first opportunity.

Thinking ahead, he skipped over Winhill and allowed himself to look forward to the hunting part at least. Seifer's enthusiasm was proving very infectious and the idea of spending a week in the woods with him was becoming increasingly appealing. No diplomats, no Garden, no operatives to
command. No social responsibilities to friends or self-proclaimed father figures.

He let out a sigh as he recalled how his very promising morning had derailed into having breakfast with Loire. In hindsight, he wondered whether it wouldn't have been wiser to ignore the man’s invitation for breakfast in favor of sneaking out of the palace. Loire had seemed insufferably pleased with himself when they'd said goodbye, and had even mentioned the possibility of a next time.

It was problematic to say the least. It somehow felt as if Loire had firmly wedged his foot in the small opening he'd allowed the man, and he knew the president would only expect more from here on out. One moment of lenience was all it had taken.

Fujin and Raijin should be manageable in comparison. Or so he hoped. Maybe the DC leader was overestimating what his posse would put up with on his order. He'd just cross that bridge when he got to it. For now he was looking at a week away from civilization, no mission objective to go with it. He couldn't quite imagine such indulgence.

He tried to suppress his anticipation when his mind started to provide their trip with images of spars and more. Considering the presidential palace hadn't deterred either of their libidos in the slightest, he felt confident there would be plenty of opportunities while they were off in Galbadia. The tent posed a problem. No doubt it would provide little privacy and it definitely wouldn't be soundproof. Their stint in the ballroom had made it embarrassingly clear just how addled his mind could get around Seifer, and exposing himself like that wasn't something he wanted to turn into a habit.

Catching himself as he pictured the two of them stretched out in a tussle on forest soil or pressed up intimately against a tree, Squall straightened in awareness of his surroundings and scowled at himself. He was fantasizing about Seifer at a dry cleaner. His mind was going strange, as if all the sex they were having was overwriting his ability to focus on anything else. Even a long night of vigorous sex at the palace hadn't managed to burn out their lust for each other.

And there were Seifer's admissions to Loire that he had to take into consideration. He couldn't quite believe it, but for now it seemed that Seifer wanted him. Maybe even as badly as he wanted Seifer.

Shaking his head as he kept returning to the same issue, poking at it from every possible angle, he pushed away from the wall. Idling around like this was giving him too much time to think. "How much longer?" he demanded, startling the shop owner from his bookkeeping.

"…Another fifteen minutes, I'd say," the man said, growing jumpy under his gaze.

"You said the same thing ten minutes ago," Squall grumbled.

"Ah—I'll go see what's taking them so long," the shop keep offered with a thin smile, quickly disappearing into the back with his books.

Scowling, Squall resumed his position against the wall. He knew he should make use of the time to call Quistis, the one thing on his to-do list he had kept postponing. He took out his cell phone and stared at it with indecision. He'd dug himself a hole there was no climbing out of. Sooner or later, Quistis was going to find out. It would be better for all parties involved if he was the one she heard it from. With some luck she wouldn't freak out.

Not very convinced of his chances of success, Squall walked out into the street for some privacy and dialed Quistis's personal number. At least Seifer wasn't around to overhear his fall from grace
as he tried to justify his latest decisions.

"Squall?" came the almost instant reply, the ringtone only sounding twice before she picked up.

"Quistis," he said in greeting.

"You caught me just in time. I was about to head into a meeting with Xu." He could hear her set down something; a stack of files or clipboards no doubt. He felt a pang of guilt for letting her deal with his absence.

"So, what's the problem?" she asked, a touch of concern to her voice. They both knew he wasn't one to call her up for an idle chat, definitely not with a standing lunch date the next day. "Something missing from the files I sent you?"

"No. I read them. I'm up to speed." He paused then, frowning. "Never thought I'd read the Estharian constitution," he added sourly.

"We all had to, Squall," came the chastising reply. "The opposition will try and condemn an Estharian based Garden as unconstitutional. If we're going to have to compromise, we better know what laws we're binding ourselves to."

"We won't," he said simply. He'd read some of the counter plans and offers for compromise. It all boiled down to them losing the autonomy they needed and gaining a whole lot of authorities they'd need to justify their every move to. "I'm not placing any Garden under governmental control."

A suffering sigh sounded at his comment. "I know. I don't like it either, but we need this base of operations."

"For money," Squall replied dryly.

"Yes. For money, Squall," Quistis said calmly. "For money, influence and new troops. We're not the only military force out there. Weapon development has never evolved so fast since Esthar decided to join the rest of the world. Galbadia is finally rearming and Esthar thinks it can manage without us. We can't afford to rest easy. ....But you know all that," she added after his unconvinced huff. "Why are you calling?"

He hesitated, looking for the right words. He'd never been able to deal well with Quistis's ability to see through most of his bullshit. He almost missed the days when she was more easily flustered when talking to him.

"Out with it, Squall. Or do I start guessing?"

Deciding to go for broke, he kept his voice even. "I'm not staying with Loire."

A moment of silence was followed by a deceivingly calm voice. "Of course you're not. I stopped thinking that was the case after my second phone call with Laguna." Quistis's tone took on a more foreboding edge when she continued. "The man's a better liar than you, I'll grant him that."

"He was trying to help," Squall spoke in defense of the president. He wasn't looking to place the blame with anyone other than himself.

"Trying to get into your good books, you mean," she retorted sharply. "That man would do anything to make you see him as a father."

"It wasn't up to him to tell you anything," Squall said, barely reining in his voice at the low blow.
"It wasn't up to me either."

Quistis didn't immediately respond as she mulled over his evasive words. "So *whose* choice was it to lie to me, then?"

"It's not that simple."

A huff sounded in reply. "I'm not stupid, Squall. If it was just a case of you wanting to hide somewhere by yourself, I don't think you'd bother covering it up like this." Gaining steam, Quistis continued to lay out her suspicions. "At first I thought all of this was about Rinoa somehow; that she was making you hide something from us. But after I called her, I knew. *She's* the one covering for you." Her next words were delivered with a hint of pique. "So, am I finally going to hear about this mystery friend of yours?"

Unnerved by how much Quistis had managed to piece together already, Squall realized he'd been right in his decision to come clean now rather than later. "Hear me out."

His prompt was followed by a long pause, before the woman finally replied. "Alright."

"It's Seifer."

A unamused snort sounded, but when he didn't add anything the other side of the line fell conspicuously silent. Just when he started to think Quistis had hung up, she spoke again.

"You're going to have to explain this to me. *Very. Clearly.*"

Inwardly wincing at the cool tone to her voice, Squall quickly offered the short and edited version of the past few days. "We ran into each other two weeks ago. We talked. After the bond was broken, he helped Rinoa find me. I've stayed with him since."

Another long pause stretched out uncomfortably. "Let me get this straight... You talked things through. With Almasy."

Aware that Quistis's tone didn't bode well, Squall resigned himself to answering her questions as best as he could. "Yes."

"More than two years of avoiding even his name and now you tell me you've just... *made up*?"

Squall grit his teeth. "We've all had to grow up."

"I didn't think the man was capable of it."

"Quistis," he said warningly.

"I can't believe this. You're serious. You're *defending* him."

"If you knew what I know, you would too."

"I'll decide on that. You were always weak to his arguments. The rest of us aren't quite that biased in his favor."

Annoyance lapsing into anger at her words, Squall narrowed his eyes. "Either you listen or this conversation ends."

"I'll listen. After you answer this question," Quistis replied coolly. "Is he responsible for you and Rinoa breaking the bond?"
Squall frowned, his voice stark when he replied. "No."

"It's not that strange a question, Squall. You say you ran into him two weeks ago. Don't tell me the timing's a coincidence."

"He's not responsible," he said tersely. "Rinoa and I split up months ago. The bond was a matter of time."

"So this isn't him trying to drive a wedge between his ex-girlfriend and former rival."

"It isn't." Almost nearing his boiling point, Squall tried his best to keep composed. He needed Quistis to understand, for Seifer's sake.

"Even if it isn't, why are you staying with him? Since when does one good talk make up for an entire war?"

"The war wasn't his fault either," he snapped, agitated at her continued disbelief.

Stunned into silence by his outburst, Quistis didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"Is that what he told you?"

"There are more ways to manipulation than pure mind possession," Squall said, his words heated. "He was used and we did nothing to help him."

"You better be one hundred percent sure about that theory, Squall. It would be a dangerous mistake to think he's harmless."

Squall huffed at that. "I know he's not. But he is innocent."

"This is Seifer we're talking about. Are you sure this isn't just... wishful thinking?"

"Are you sure you're not avoiding the possibility you failed him?"

"...Squall."

"He's been helping me," Squall continued. "We're training together. His magic was affected just like mine."

"I'm assuming Laguna and Rinoa know about all this then?"

"Rinoa's the one who suggested me staying with Seifer. And we just came back from visiting Loire."

"You took him to see Laguna?" she asked, possibly sounding even more incredulous than before.

"...Not by choice," he said, remembering Seifer's ploy with a slight frown.

"But they know about each other."

"Yes."

"Wait a minute... How long has Seifer been in Esthar?"

He should've known she would put things together more quickly than he had. "Since a few months after the war."
"Oh, I'm going to enjoy killing Laguna slowly."

"He didn't know who Seifer is to us. He thought he was protecting an Estharian citizen."

"We're bound by contract not to start independent investigations in Esthar. In return we expect the man to let us know about these kind of things." At the ramble of clipped words, Squall knew Quistis was looking to vent her frustration. "For Hyne's sake, how are we supposed to negotiate when there's this little trust."

"He didn't trust us not to execute Seifer behind closed doors," Squall interrupted her coolly. "With the rest of the world in conflict, someone needs to ask questions first and shoot later. He made the right call."

"And now you're defending Laguna." She sighed deeply. "I don't know what to say, Squall. All I remember is an arrogant kid, an even more arrogant cadet, and the war."

"You never knew him the way I do."

"Oh, sure. I never had him egg me on into countless fights, never had him beat me into the infirmary. What do I know."

He could practically hear the exasperated eye roll in her statement, but he would not be dissuaded. "Tell me right now you don't care about him."

She didn't immediately reply. "I did... I was a fool to think I could make a difference. That bastard squandered his potential. He left us, Squall. He made his choices."

"He wasn't given a choice," Squall countered, his patience growing thin. "Ultimecia took him. You were there."

"And I saw him bail out on us. Smirk and everything."

Squall shook his head, determined to get the truth across. "She looked like Matron. She accepted him when he thought everybody else wanted him gone. He's not the first to fall for an offer that's too good to be true."

"So he did choose to be her knight."

"Until Deling City, maybe. By then he wanted out, but she didn't let him. I think she was influencing his thoughts from the start."

"Squall—"

Not letting her interrupt him, Squall continued. "I'm taking him to Ellone to prove it."

"Ellone? What does she have to do with anything?"

"I went to see her once. To know what happened to him."

"You traced his movements in the past?"

"That was the plan, but Ellone couldn't see into his memories as a knight. Seifer thinks that's the way it is for knights. I believe it's because of Ultimecia's mind control."

"And you're going to prove that how exactly?"
"Compare his time as a knight to mine."

"Oh no, you're not." Quistis immediately said. "You're not letting him into Ellone's home like that—into your own head! Have you learned nothing from the past?"

"Ellone already agreed. And he's letting me see his memories too." Squall was trying really hard not to snap again.

"Only you said there's nothing to see in his."

"I'm doing this."

"Not until I've talked to him in person. There's not a chance in hell I'm letting you stay around that man until I've seen for myself just how much he grew up."

"We're leaving right after the meeting tomorrow."

A dangerous silence fell. "Right after?" she asked thinly.

"I can't meet you for lunch."

"If you think you can try and avoid a confrontation that way, Squall, you're mistaken. Who do I have to thank for talking you into this courtesy phone call? Laguna? Ellone?"

Squall's mood darkened. "Seifer, actually. He didn't want this to come between us."

"I see." Squall didn't like the mock resignation in Quistis's voice. "Then I'm sure he'll be very understanding when I come to ask him some questions myself. What's his address?"

Hesitating, Squall didn't want to share such private information without consulting Seifer first.

"You know I'll get it," she said fiercely. "If not from you or Laguna, I can always put the hostage protocol into effect."

She had to be joking. "I'm not his hostage—"

"Oh, I know," she interrupted. "This one is all you. Still, it would be very effective. Wouldn't look good on his record either." When he failed to immediately give her what she wanted, she prodded him again. "So? Where does he live?"

Letting out a sigh, he replied with a deadpan tone. "Zayin House. Chimera District."

A pause fell, followed by the sound of a keyboard. "You left me no choice, Squall. I'm taking an earlier train. I'll arrive at Esthar Central Station at 9:52 pm. No need to pick me up. I'll find my own way."

Hyne, she was serious. "We can talk when we're back from Galbadia."

"You've had your chance. After all we've been through, you owe me better than this." Her voice grew resolute then. "I'm coming over, and so help me Hyne, if you give that man a head start to bail out, I will hunt down both your asses."

"Quistis—"

"Be there, Squall. Don't make me come looking for you." With those ominous words, she hung up.
Squall winced as he looked down at his phone. That did not go well. It had also gone exactly as expected. She was coming to confront them, and she wasn't going to hold back. He'd tried to warn Seifer, but he doubted the man had truly grasped what it would mean to suddenly register on Quistis's radar again after all this time. He had to let Seifer know, give the man a head's up.

Ringing the by now familiar number, Squall wished he could tell him in person, to gauge the man's reaction, but they wouldn't see each other again until that evening. He could only hope that Seifer hadn't been bluffing when discussing their former instructor.

"What's up?"

The jocular greeting was accompanied with a din of sounds in the background, sounds Squall now knew to connect with the hissing and clanging of an active forge. He wished he was there.

"It's Quistis. She's coming by tonight."

"...When?" Seifer's voice was already losing most of its levity.

"She'll be at your place around ten."

"What did she say?"

The brazenness Squall had hoped for remained absent, the blond merely sounding resigned at best. His answer would probably do little to improve that. "She's angry with me. Wants to talk to you in person."

A noncommittal huff sounded over the line, but no further comment ensued. "I can send her away," Squall offered belatedly. It would be the feat of the century, but it wasn't too late yet.

"No," came the curt reply. "...I'll hurry back from class."

Before Squall could say anything else, the connection was cut. Seifer had hung up. Frowning at the brusque goodbye, he dreaded the evening to come. Hopefully they'd all still be in one piece when everything was said and done.

Pocketing his phone, he entered the dry cleaner's shop again to find the shopkeeper shuffling in place, his carefully covered uniform draped over the man's arm. Taking the clothes by their hanger without comment, he strode out into the street, his mood infinitely soured.
Idling around restlessly, reading unimportant emails just to be doing something, Squall waited. His uniform was up on its hanger, immaculately pressed, awaiting the next day. He'd already packed everything he thought he could need for the trip, along with the new gear he'd purchased. All documents for Tuesday's meeting were read and double-checked. He had nothing left to do but see who arrived first.

As he reread the same line for the third time, the ring of his cell phone jerked him from his thoughts. One glance at the display had him steeling himself.

"Quistis."

"What's the apartment number?"

So she was already here. In the lobby no doubt. For some reason, he didn't like the thought of letting her into Seifer's home without the man there. But letting her wait outside definitely wasn't going to help their case either.

"905," he offered reluctantly.

Without a word of acknowledgment, Quistis hung up. Releasing a sigh, Squall closed his laptop and waited for the knock on the door that would set things in motion.

Rising from his chair when the curt rap finally sounded, he assumed an even expression and opened the door. Quistis's narrow-eyed gaze immediately honed in on him, most likely registering things nobody else would. She looked haggard—the way people usually looked after an eight hour train ride—a large overnight bag slung over her shoulders, but she certainly didn't seem any less fierce for it.

After a tense moment of not knowing whether or not she'd actually punch him, Quistis put him out of his misery and broke the silence.

"I see your things reached you fine," she said coolly, jerking her head to indicate his clothes.

"...I picked them up yesterday," Squall replied slowly, not mistaking the harmless statement for a peace offer.

"Are you going to let me in?"

Remembering himself, he stepped out of the way and granted the woman access. He watched her closely as she stepped into the middle of the room and set her bag on the ground. Her eyes traveled the room, a faint quirk to her eyebrow betraying the apartment was not what she'd expected.

"Where is he?"

"He'll be home from work soon."

Looking away from where his laptop and work bag were sitting on the coffee table, she turned to regard him with a frown. She seemed to mull over his words, probably trying to imagine Seifer in a non-Garden setting; the way he'd struggled to imagine it at first too.
"What does he do?"

"Something you can ask him when you have your talk," Squall said evenly. He wanted to get it through her head somehow that this didn't have to be an interrogation; that it could be a reunion.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Spare me the attitude, Squall. I'll ask him exactly what I need to ask."

"This is his home. His life. He doesn't have to talk to you, but he will." He looked at her imploringly. "Give him the benefit of the doubt."

At his words, Squall was relieved to see her piercing gaze make way for a softer expression; the frown and exasperated shake of the head she reserved for when he'd done something particularly aggravating, but not unforgivable. Sighing, she stepped closer to him; another good sign. She didn't make any promises however.

"You look good," she said softly, almost as if it was an offense. "Much better than what Odine's test results had me expecting."

"It's just magical damage at this point."

"Just," she huffed, her temper still quick to stir. "I can't believe the situations you get yourself into. Do you have any sense of self-preservation?" Picking up steam, she vented her frustration. "What kind of person reacts to assaults on their life by moving in with their attackers? First Rinoa, and now this. It's like you want to get hurt."

Meeting her anger head-on, Squall didn't miss a beat. "Neither of them wanted to hurt me. I won't abandon someone because a sorceress messed up their lives."

"You're impossible!" she burst out, only to immediately reel herself in again with visible effort. "Too late for the party?"

Turning to the front door, Squall cursed inwardly as he saw Seifer standing beyond the doorway, Kronos in one hand and a duffel bag in the other. He'd hoped to have more time with Quistis, to ease her into a more tolerant mood. He warily kept his eye on the two as they stared each other down.

Opening her mouth as if to say something but seemingly thinking better of it, Quistis only slowly regained her composure. "You didn't change a bit," she finally said, her deadpan tone making it impossible to judge the statement either as observation or insult, but Squall recognized the familiar tension that stiffened her shoulders from the many times they'd been in the field together. As if she was assessing a potential threat.

"Neither did you, it'd seem," Seifer said, dropping his duffel bag to the floor and closing the door behind him. Walking over to the kitchen counter, he put down Kronos before facing his new guest. "So, dear Instructor, what brings you here?"

The cutting use of her former title, just as lacking in respect as it had ever been, told Quistis everything she needed to know. The man was going to turn this into a battle. To think that for a second she had hoped Squall's assertions about her one-time student would be true; that Seifer was a changed man. She drew herself up to her full length.

"I'm here to find out why Squall has been lying to me about everything that happened these past six months," she replied stonily. "You happen to be part of the lie and I'm not so sure I've heard everything there is to hear."
"I guess I'm in for a show then," Seifer commented, looking from Quistis to Squall, who was trying to shut him up with a foreboding stare. "Who'd you like to grill first then? Or was that that I just interrupted?"

"Can I take that to mean you're volunteering?" Quistis asked sweetly, her eyes flashing. "Because I have a lot of questions. You see, there are these coincidences I have trouble wrapping my head around." She squared her shoulders, stepping closer. "Like say, Squall avoids the very memory of you for years, but suddenly you're his new best friend. I'm sure this has nothing to do with the rough time he's going through, or the fact Rinoa ditched him the moment you showed up." Getting fired up, she plowed on. "Let's see. What would be most in line with the past? Caring friend, or traitor with a grudge?"

"Fuck you too, Trepe," Seifer said, his voice seething. "I didn't even want to take Squall in because I didn't think he should ever have to look at me again. I hate what I did. I. Hate. My. Fucking. Past," he barked out, his posture rigid. "Are you getting this?" he demanded angrily. "I would never do a fucking thing to hurt him."

"Convenient revelation—"

"Quistis," Squall warned, moving to intervene

"—after the facts, Almasy."

"QUISTIS!" Squall stared down her defiant gaze. "This isn't why I called you," he reminded her with coolly controlled anger.

Quistis squared her jaw as she stared at Squall in disbelief. The man rarely raised his voice and to find herself as its recipient for the first time was unsettling. She looked between the two men, united in their displeasure with her. Losing some of her defiance along with her certainty, she shifted her focus to the livid ex-knight. The genuine hurt she saw in his expression caused her to falter further.

"Old habits die hard," she finally said, her voice tempered but not exactly apologetic. "I didn't come here to fight. I came for answers."

As Quistis's temper visibly deflated, so did Seifer's. He hadn't been able to help himself, not with the scene he'd walked in on, but he hadn't meant to antagonize.

"...She's right," he said in belated agreement. What she'd said was right at the crux of his burden. "It is fucking convenient for me to just come along and say that. I have no proof, no physical way of showing any of this." He looked over at Squall. "You're convinced I was mind controlled, but I just don't know. I have no fucking clue. All I can do is tell the truth." He returned his gaze to Quistis. "So if Quistis wants to know what's been going on, I'll give her that," he said with as much calm as he could muster, even though part of him balked at having to explain any of it to the aggravating woman in front of him. "Even if she's being rude as fuck to get it."

Unsure whether he liked this sudden compliance, Squall looked from Seifer's stony expression to the twitch of Quistis's brow. The woman was reigniting herself in admirably at the promise of information, for once not snapping back.

"All I want is some honesty," Quistis said, forcibly uncrossing her arms to seem more welcoming.

Seifer nodded. "Okay," he said as he looked at the two most intense people he'd ever met. One was waiting for answers, the other warning him with an intent look not to say too much. He had to
suppress a grimace. "Anyone want a drink before we start?"

Shooting Seifer a wary glance, Squall shook his head. He'd prefer for all of them to be as far from inebriated as possible, lest unnecessary things were said. Predictably, Quistis refused as well. Whenever the woman was on someone's case she was like a bloodhound. All focus, no leeway.

Watching as Seifer proceeded to pour himself some whiskey, Squall sat down on the couch with a sigh. After a shared glance with Quistis, he gestured for the woman to join him and sit down too. The atmosphere was already uncomfortable enough without everybody staring each other down with hostile postures.

As his old instructor sat down on the couch as well, Seifer brought the glass he'd just filled to his lips. With a large gulp, he steadied himself. "So what do you want to know?"

Quistis eyed the distance Seifer had left between them, the man's expression so carefully collected it might as well have been Squall. She couldn't remember the last time Seifer had taken anything serious at all, but here he was, looking contemplative of all things.

"How about we start two weeks ago," she suggested, unsure what to expect. She still wasn't entirely convinced Seifer had nothing to do with Squall and Rinoa suddenly breaking their bond. She hadn't forgotten Seifer's fling with the girl. There could be resentment there, even if she didn't understand what either of them could possibly see in the exasperating sorceress.

Rounding the corner of the kitchen counter, Seifer leaned back against it, the glass of whiskey cool against his fingers. He looked between his two guests again, then took another swig.

"I first saw Squall at a nightclub. Wednesday night, two weeks ago."

As Seifer started recounting the events of that evening, Squall quickly lost hope that for once Seifer would have the sense to censure himself. The man had always been a loose cannon and this time was no different. Conveniently leaving out his own reasons for being there, Seifer told Quistis every damning detail of what had happened at the nightclub, including how Rinoa had slapped him and left with someone else.

"She did what?" Quistis interrupted, looking to Squall for confirmation. The brunet's scowl said it all. "Please tell me that wasn't a recurring thing."

Unenthused, Squall met her with a deadpan gaze, not about to elaborate. Seifer had better get to the point if it meant breaching his privacy like this.

Quistis's eyes darkened. "All those times I called to ask about you two and you didn't think to mention Rinoa was cheating on you?"

Squall frowned at the woman interpreting his silence as confirmation. "We split up months ago."

"Rinoa sure still treated you as her boyfriend until recently. You were still bonded, for Hyne's sake." Quistis shook her head in outrage. "This is why I worry about you, Squall."

Needing the topic closed, Squall steeled his gaze.

"Have it your way then," Quistis said with narrowed eyes. "I was still meaning to pay Rinoa a visit anyway."

Squall winced inwardly at that. Ever since their move to Esthar and the incident that had precipitated it, Quistis's opinion of Rinoa had dropped to an abysmal low; something he'd always
found undeserved. He should warn Rinoa, but the thought of calling her after how he'd left things between them… Suppressing a frown, he tuned back into the conversation, just in time to look up and find Seifer's eyes resting on him.

"He spent the night, but we didn't settle things till the following evening. Squall left after that... I don't think either of us imagined we'd ever see each other again."

At the memory of just how final that night had felt to him as well, Squall frowned but forced himself to listen as Seifer began telling Quistis of how they'd found him at the Skyway Inn. He hadn't wanted to know nearly as much as what was being said and he could only cringe at every last embarrassing detail.

Seifer lost some of his steam as he came to the part where Quistis would probably throw a fit. "Rinoa didn't want to risk bringing him home because of their newly broken bond. She wasn't sure she'd be able to control herself. The only other option was Garden." He paused, but met the woman's gaze head-on. "Rinoa suggested me."

"Rinoa suggested you," Quistis repeated with a calm she didn't feel. That girl had ruined so much, causing Squall's move away from Balamb and her watchful eye. And now this. "Care to tell me how you two figured Garden shouldn't be involved? A KO'd SeeD Commander and I'm the last to know about it?"

"I know how Garden handled Squall in the past," Seifer said, his eyes narrowing at Quistis's indignation. "And I know how Squall handles Garden. He wouldn't have let anyone help him. He wouldn't have told anyone a thing. I didn't give him a choice."

Quistis face drew into stark displeasure at Seifer's words. "I wonder if that's how Squall sees it," she said almost blandly, her gaze flicking to the frowning brunet for a moment. "I think it must be a lot easier misleading one person than the whole of Garden. Someone he shares a certain disregard for health and safety with."

"I'm not about to regret my decision," Seifer said, squaring his jaw. "Squall is doing a lot better."

"How like you to take credit for that," Quistis said derisively. "Never mind Odine's pills and research. It must be your wholesome influence." Her gaze hardened in determination. "Since he's doing so much better, I'm sure you'll agree it's about time he returns to where he belongs."

Immediately tensing up at the words, Seifer spoke through his teeth. "That's up to Squall to decide," he said, glancing over at the man in question. "And I didn't say it was the right decision or my influence, just that you or anyone else won't make me regret it."

"I'm confused, Seifer," Quistis baited. "Which is it now? Up to Squall to decide, or you not giving him a choice?"

"It's my decision," Squall finally interrupted from the sideline, scowling as he looked between Quistis and Seifer. He was right there, but that didn't seem to bother either of them. As if he could be made to stay anywhere against his wishes. "I'm not going back," he announced, fed up with sidetracking from the point any further. "Not yet. We are making the trip to Galbadia. Everything else can wait."

At the statement that left no room for argument, Quistis was dumbfounded. Never, not once, had she needed to remind Squall of his duties at Garden. His priorities had never wavered, the man always where he needed to be. Unprecedented as this was, it made her more than a little nervous. And all because of Seifer.
She shook her head in disbelief. "So that's it? You can't even tell me when you'll return to Garden?"

"This is more important," Squall replied, unbending.

"This is ridiculous," Quistis muttered. "For years I try to get you two to be civil…" Her brow set into a deep frown. "Can we at least agree that this—" She waved her hands between them "—is inconsistent as hell?"

Seifer huffed. "Don't think anyone would argue with you on that," he said, but his eyes didn't leave Squall. The man had just prioritized him over Garden, and wouldn't even make a promise of when he'd return. It took all his willpower not to jump Squall right then and there.

Quistis shook her head, unable to process any of it. Even if Squall had clearly made up his mind, the fact that the man had lied to her for months still remained. Years of friendship, discounted so easily.

"Go then," she said, her words clipped. "Nothing I say or do means anything anyway. You don't tell me anything. You actually summarized a trainwreck of a breakup and days of unconsciousness as I broke the bond." The continued disregard for her side of things was starting to wear her down. "It's insulting, Squall. I thought we were past this."

"So because we're friends, I'm not entitled to a private life," came the beyond exasperating reply.

"That's not fair and you know it," Quistis replied, her tone gaining more bite. "Do you think we'll go running if we discover your life's not perfect? That you're not perfect? Newsflash, Squall, that cat's long out of the bag." She looked at him evenly, the corners of her mouth sloped downwards. "If I come across as pushy, that's because the only way to get even near you is to get in your face. You don't acknowledge anything less!"

At the outpour of too personal words in Seifer's presence, Squall frowned. He hated it when she managed to make him feel guilty like this; like a lousy friend.

"Yet forcing Squall to talk has never really gotten anyone anywhere, has it?" Seifer supplied from the sidelines. "Don't tell me you actually expected him to sit down and have a heart to heart with you about his relationship. You're not that stupid."

"Says the man who made a hobby out of getting Squall to react," Quistis retorted angrily at the interruption. She narrowed her eyes. "Don't you dare tell me you'd put up with this kind of treatment."

"I wouldn't. But I wouldn't expect him to talk about his relationship either. Or how incredibly stupidly he handled the breaking of the bond."

Scowling at the contradicting words, she glared at Seifer before looking Squall's way again. "Incredibly stupid, indeed," she said lowly. "How long were you unconscious for in that hotel? Two days? Three?"

Meeting her unwavering gaze, Squall didn't reply, not inclined to set himself up for an endless debate.

"Did Seifer have to carry you of the room? Do you even remember anything?"

Squall's expression darkened, but again he refused to take the bait.

"I'm just trying to understand here, Squall, because if it's pride that made you go hide by yourself,
then I'd say your plan backfired spectacularly. So next time you're in trouble, personal or not, I'd suggest making a phone call. Me. Laguna. Anyone. Hell, call Rinoa and still you'll lose less face than you managed now."

When she was met with stubborn silence once again, Quistis sighed. Squall had thrown up his walls. Nothing would reach the man now. Still she couldn't help herself from making one last plea. "Being friends means we share our worst moments along with our best. From birthdays to break-ups." She looked at him earnestly. "You need to let people in."

Seifer rolled his eyes. "Enough with the fucking lecturing already," he said, more than fed up with Quistis telling Squall how to act. "Just make sure you know what the fuck is going on in his life and be there when the shit hits the fan. Simple as that."

At the interruption, Quistis turned to jab a finger in Seifer's direction. "You need to keep the sideline comments to yourself," she snapped, her lips a thin line. "This is between Squall and me."

Making to face Squall again, she changed her mind and turned back. "And did I just hear that right? Simply be there when the shit hits the fan?!) She glared at Seifer openly, her voice incredulous. "I guess I could just consult my crystal ball next time," she sneered. "Tell me. How did you manage to be there, huh? As I recall, the only reason you know anything is because Rinoa chose to save her own skin instead of calling me or Laguna first."

"Stop twisting and manipulating every word I say and start listening instead," Seifer spoke heatedly as he took a step closer. "Squall and I weren't ever supposed to see each other again. You were supposed to be his friend."

Quistis's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Oh, I'll happily correct both mistakes and take him off your hands."


Squall huffed. For all decisions to apparently be his, he'd had very little say in the argument unfolding before him. "Here's another decision then," he interrupted before Quistis could voice whatever insult was forming on her lips. "I can fight my own battles. Let me deal with this."

"Fine," Seifer said, not caring to stay a moment longer. The woman was a fucking pain in the ass. "You two sort this shit out. I'll be in the other room." He knocked back the remainder of the alcohol and left the empty glass on the kitchen counter. Grabbing Kronos and his duffel bag, he stalked to the bedroom.

Releasing a sigh, Squall moved his gaze from the bedroom door to Quistis. "Oh, don't you dare be pissed at me," she countered his withering look. "Like I said, this is not what I called you for."

Quistis scowled at him. "I know perfectly well why you called me, Squall. A preemptive confession before I'd find out by myself."

Squall frowned at the seemingly endless accusations. "I was going to return after breaking the bond. Tell you once I was back."

"So I was demoted from being told after the facts to being told way after the facts. Either way, that's too late."
"The bond was my problem and it's been dealt with," Squall snapped impatiently. "I wasn't planning to hide it. Things changed when Rinoa involved Seifer."

"Ah, right, I remember now. You called me because of Seifer. Because he didn't want to come between us, was it?" She cast him a derivisive look. "How exactly did Seifer change things that you suddenly thought it was necessary to sneak behind my back?" Cutting him off before he could even attempt an explanation, she added sharply, "And don't try to tell me it was to protect Seifer from Garden or me. Maybe Laguna didn't know we'd honor the exemption, but you do. The bastard's practically family, for Hyne's sake."

Squall quirked an eyebrow at the first hopeful words to leave Quistis's lips since his phone call. "So you do care about him."

Quistis scowled. "Don't dodge my question, Squall."

Sighing, he wasn't sure how to begin to explain. "You know why we're going to Galbadia," he started after a moment of thought.

"I know what you told me, which is next to nothing."

"You heard what he said about the war. He's different. Even you can see that."

Quistis glanced at the closed bedroom door, before meeting his gaze again. "A guilty conscience doesn't mean his mind was controlled."

"It isn't his guilt to bear," Squall replied hotly. "Since everybody seems to need proof, that's what I'll get."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

Glaring at the woman for her stubborn one-track mind, Squall took a moment to rein in his annoyance. "I didn't want to tell you about him until he was ready. I knew you'd want to see him."

"Until he was ready for what? That bastard is as impossible to intimidate now as he was as a cadet."

"He doesn't handle the war well," Squall simplified. "Trust me. Don't force the past out of him."

He frowned, some of the worries that had plagued him shining through. "I only just told him about the orphanage and I'm not even sure he wants to remember that much."

Quistis's eyes widened slightly. "Hyne. I forgot. All this time, he didn't know?"

Squall shook his head. "He still doesn't know about Matron."

Falling silent, Quistis processed the new information.

Watching her frown, Squall knew they were both thinking of Edea's reaction when she'd found out about Seifer; her expression frozen and wide-eyed, a woeful sound wrung free from her throat.

"He'll remember if he tries," Quistis said quietly.

Relieved that she was finally catching on to the severity of the situation, Squall gave a slight nod. "I need to tell him. He could see her in my memories."

"Is it that bad?" Quistis asked doubtfully. "I mean... Matron was possessed. She doesn't even remember. If we're expected to forgive Seifer, he has to forgive her."
"It's about trauma," Squall replied soberly. "Not forgiveness."

Quistis regarded him in thought. "What does Ellone think?" she finally asked, her tone betraying she was approaching a hypothesis, not yet taking his word for it.

"She believes me," Squall said in implied accusation, his tone even. "When we first tried, she said something felt wrong. She couldn't access Seifer's memories."

"You're leaving tomorrow?"

"Like I said."

Quistis nodded faintly. "Let me know what you find out."

Squall frowned, somehow irked by her words. "I'm doing this to help him. Not to confirm what you already know."

"Squall," she intoned. "Meet me halfway here. I don't want to be left in the dark any more than you do. This is important."

"...I'll call you when we're back."

Looking for a moment as if she was going to press for more, Quistis sighed and slowly nodded her agreement. "Any idea when that will be?"

"No," Squall said, unsure of how much detail he should divulge. Quistis already had trouble accepting that Seifer and him were on speaking terms, let alone friendly terms. "After Winhill, we're heading north to meet up with Fujin and Raijin."

Quistis's eyebrows climbed high at his statement. "You're tagging along to meet Fujin and Raijin?"

She frowned. "Why?"

Not keen to bring the conversation to the whys of his most recent decisions concerning Seifer, he shrugged. "We're going hunting."

"...Right."

At the continued disbelief, Squall felt compelled to explain. "Seifer already had the trip planned. We're combining the two."

"You do realize who you're talking about, right? They were never your friends. Now you're going on trips with them?"

Squall felt a nigging sense of doubt reassert itself. He would be intruding, no matter how sure Seifer had seemed about him joining them. "Seifer will need their support."

"And he needs you there for that?" Quistis questioned immediately, her gaze far too scrutinizing to his liking. "Bullshit. Same as you staying here... I'm not buying Seifer's claim, you know. Nobody can coerce you into doing what you don't want to. You're here on your own terms."

When he didn't come forth with any explanations, she narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "You missed him," she said with an incredulous huff.

"He's a good sparring partner," Squall replied reflexively, not liking how quickly Quistis was drawing her conclusions.
"Oh, I bet," she shot back, glancing at the scar between his eyes. "Even after everything, you can't help yourself, can you?"

Looking at her warily, his palms starting to sweat, Squall didn't reply.

"He just has to snap his fingers and off you go, getting into trouble." She shook her head with a snort. "I guess life is too boring with friends who don't constantly need to fight and challenge you."

Annoyed, Squall glared at her. "It's not like that."

"Oh, I'm sure deep down all the fighting you like each other." Quistis rolled her eyes. "Only you and Seifer would pick such a backward way of caring." She sighed then. "I'm just saying. Be careful, Squall. Your life's been upended. I get that you need to... vent, but I also remember how destructive you two can get around each other."

"We're not cadets anymore," Squall said tersely.

"No," Quistis agreed, looking at him in concern. "You're two men with a past. You can't return to the way things were."

"I'm not trying to," he said clippedly. It was the first thing he'd come to realize when Seifer returned into his life. "He's helping me train. Tomorrow I'm going to Galbadia to help him."

"Just exchanging favors, huh?" She shook her head again, this time in defeat. "Fine. If this is what you think you need right now, I won't stop you. Just... Don't do anything stupid. Well, more stupid than what you already have planned."

"Ellone's powers are harmless."

"Physically harmless," Quistis corrected softly. "Look, I'm tired of fighting. It's late. We both got our points across. I think it's time to compromise here."

Squall raised an eyebrow. "Spoken like a diplomat."

"Like a friend," she retorted with a weak smile, "You know I'm only like this because I care about you, right? ...You don't see me rushing to Trabia, barging in on Selphie and Irvine's lives. With them I know when I'm needed, when to leave them be. With you it's always been a guessing game."

More than aware of his unsuitability as a friend, Squall tried to let go of his annoyance. "I'll call you when we're back," he repeated, genuinely this time.

"You better," she said, admonishing him with a soft push against his shoulder. "You gave me such a scare... Hunting trip or not, don't you dare neglect your treatment."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Right answer, Commander."

Rewarded with a look of fond exasperation, Squall felt some of his tension melt away. It was never good for anybody's stress levels to have Quistis on their case.

"I expect you to make up for cancelling lunch, you know."

"Should I make reservations?" he said, quirking an eyebrow.
"You can keep your wallet closed, charmer." She smiled sweetly then. "Let's just say you owe me one."

When amicable silence fell between them, Quistis's smile faltered slightly as she glanced at the bedroom door once again.

"That man makes it impossible to have a civil conversation," she muttered, in self-defense no doubt. When he didn't comment, she frowned. ".I guess I was a bit harsh."

Not about to applaud the obvious conclusion, Squall met her gaze evenly.

"I'll go talk to him," Quistis announced with sudden bravado. At the concern she saw in Squall's expression, she tried to reassure the man. "Don't worry, I'll play nice."

Straightening her clothes, she tried to shake the tension from her shoulders. She'd have to keep her poise if this was to work. If she didn't manage to reach some form of understanding with Seifer, it would bug her until it drove her crazy.

Walking over to the bedroom door, she gave it a brief rap with her knuckles. "I'm coming in," she spoke in warning. When no reply came, she entered.

Seifer looked up from where he was slouched on the bed. Quistis actually looked calm; nothing like the queen of fury he'd left behind. Good thing he'd had enough foresight to put away the lube or they would have started yelling all over again. Or maybe that would have been the tipping point for her, the moment she'd call down Leviathan to obliterate his ass.

"All made up with the commander?" he asked, his eyes following her as she closed the door and walked closer.

"So it seems," Quistis replied, trying to keep her tone light. "At least, until the next time he does something exasperating."

"You want to talk in here then?"

"That's probably for the best." She could do without Squall interrupting her whenever the conversation might get potentially distressing for the blond. "Mind if I sit down?" she asked, gesturing at the foot of the bed.

"Feel free," Seifer said with a nod. He hadn't particularly looked forward to this, but he'd try to deal.

"So..." Quistis began after taking a seat. "Let's start over."

"Let's," Seifer agreed, wishing they could hold on to this more relaxed atmosphere between them, if only for a short while. It seemed like Quistis was finally willing to listen and hear his side of the story. About the war.

Only he couldn't. He didn't want to return to those memories. He'd done it once for Squall and he'd sworn it would be the last time. He couldn't bare himself like that again.

Thrown off by the uncharacteristic silence stretching on between them, Quistis suppressed a frown as she tried to figure out how to start the conversation. She had so many questions. Taking Squall's warnings to heart, she kept her first question as broad as possible. "What happened?"

Seifer couldn't look at her. "...I fucked up," he said simply, the memories beginning to surface,
however hard he fought them back. They wanted to be seen, heard and felt. Not locked away in the deep, dark confines of his mind. He turned to stare out the window, wishing he'd left it open so he could've felt the breeze against his skin to root him in the present.

"I can't go back there," he said, knowing that if he did, he'd have trouble returning to a reality where he'd allowed himself to sleep with Squall. Where he was letting the man make huge sacrifices for him; for his conscience. He kept his voice level. "Please don't ask me to." He despised the pleading word, despised what it reduced him to.

*Please. Just fucking end it.*

Golden eyes, seas of blood. Memories of begging for the end.

He blinked and forced himself to relax the fingers that had gripped firmly onto the bedsheet beneath him. He could only hope Quistis understood what this cost him.

Quistis stared at the man before her. Squall had been right. Seifer hadn't come out of the war unscathed. His eyes hadn't strayed from the window, his pleading words laced with a detached quality that unnerved her. It was all far too familiar. After the war she'd had to deal with more than one case of PTSD among her students. The thought of Seifer going through something similar brought an ache to her chest. It didn't seem right for the arrogant yet brilliant cadet she remembered to struggle like this.

But she needed answers. Now more than ever. "I need to understand, Seifer. Can you answer me simply? Yes or no?"

Seifer brought up a hand to knead at his forehead before turning his gaze back to Quistis. "I'll try," he relented, and drew up his feet to cross his legs.

"Alright," Quistis said with a soft nod, deciding to start at the beginning. Collecting herself, she tried to keep her voice as calm and free from judgment as possible. "Squall said you didn't want to follow her. Especially after a time. Is that true?"

Seifer huffed. A question like that was impossible to answer with just one word. "It's not that simple." He got out of the bed and walked to the window. His eyes drifted to the cars below, to the people hurrying down the street. "She made an offer I couldn't refuse," he said, his gorge rising as he heard her sweet voice in his head, almost as clear as it had been then.

*Come, poor boy. Fulfill your destiny.*

He grit his teeth, willing away the flashes pushing to the forefront of his mind. But there was no refusing them. Not when he had to speak the words that would bring them back. "There were only a couple of times during the war when I felt—" His eyes clenched shut.

*A swerve.*

*Hyperion cutting through his chest.*

"—like I do now." The windowsill felt cool underneath his hands. "Disgusted." He pressed his fingers into the hard metal. "If I could undo it all, I would."

Feeling her throat close painfully with emotion, Quistis got up from the bed to take a step closer. These weren't the words of a megalomaniac, of someone who had enjoyed inflicting pain. She realized then that details didn't matter. Not truly. Only one question remained. "You were so... angry. I could see it in your eyes that you hated us." Her voice wavered, more invested in Seifer's
Seifer looked over at Quistis, stared at her as the memories came flooding back. Her face drawn taut in determination and whip held high. The crackling of magic as they faced off for the last time. He'd hated her then. Had felt the urge to maim and hurt. He could still so vividly see what his mistress had craved. All SeeDs dead. Slaughtered and disfigured. She'd shown him the future she was planning for.

"It felt real at the time," he said lowly as he tried to push the revolting feelings of loathing away. "I can't separate what was her and what was me. The only thing I know is how sick it makes me feel now."

When Seifer turned away from her again, unable to hold her gaze any longer, Quistis began to understand Squall's distress. "So we're looking at major discrepancies between your convictions now and then," she reasoned, forcing herself to approach this with logic. "You wouldn't repeat your actions. You can't explain them reasonably. Am I right so far?"

The terse nod she received in reply urged her on. "And you didn't identify with her methods, her end goal?"

Seifer narrowed his eyes. Somehow the simple question managed to cut deep like a knife. "To torture and kill like a maniac?" he commented bitterly as his vision filled with the faces of the dead. It sucked him in, until he could hear the crackle of fire and smell the gunpowder. "No."

Quistis faltered. Half-formed suspicions she'd long laid to rest crept back into her thoughts. Torture. She had never managed to get Squall to divulge any details about his time at D-District, but he had changed in that prison. She could still remember the haunted look on his face, his frantic need to get out of there.

Shaking her head, she hoped she was wrong. If not... It would certainly explain why Squall was so desperate to believe Seifer had been manipulated; that his childhood companion hadn't wanted to hurt him. But even as those thoughts played through her head, it was becoming increasingly difficult to deny the truth unfolding before her.

"So you followed orders to realize a goal you didn't support, using methods you despise." No reply came to her statement, but she didn't need one to follow the evidence to its logical conclusion. "...There'd be only one way to make you do something like that," she said, recalling the stubborn cadet that had only ever answered to himself. "I think Squall's right."

Seifer frowned. He should have felt relief at her words, but he knew the truth; had come to accept it. "That doesn't change the past." It had been his hands, his sword, his glee. The memories would always be the same.

Having found her resolve, Quistis decided she would fight for him. "It doesn't," she agreed solemnly. "But it changes other things. Your future, for one."

Seifer huffed, and turned to regard her. "How so?"

"You could come back," Quistis said, meeting Seifer's gaze with determination. "If you wanted it, there'd be a place for you with us."

Squall had warned him about this, Seifer realized. However unlikely he'd found the suggestion at the time. But ultimately it didn't change a thing. "I made my decision long ago," he said, choosing to share something with her he'd never told anyone else. "I don't want any more blood on my
The admission stopped Quistis short for only a moment. She nodded slowly. "I respect that," she intoned with sincerity. "But we get plenty of monster missions. And Garden needs more than just field operatives. Support staff, tactical, medical, instructors, communications—the list goes on." She ticked the alternatives off on her fingers. "You'd have options."

Taken aback by the conviction behind Quistis's offer, Seifer frowned. "I'm happy here," he said honestly. There was no way he'd feel at home at B-Garden. Not with all the memories there and everyone knowing about his past. The only reason he'd been able to move on was because Esthar had given him anonymity and a clean slate.

Quistis let out a thoughtful hum. "That's all anyone can ask for, I suppose," she said, not entirely convinced. "Even so, you'd be welcome."

Seifer nodded for a lack of something to say, still having trouble processing it all. He strongly doubted he'd ever set foot in Balamb Garden again, but the knowledge he hadn't burnt all his bridges after all... It meant something. If nothing else, Quistis had accepted him for now, which was exactly what he'd wanted; for Squall's sake.

At the somewhat lackluster reaction, Quistis decided to save her new project for another time. Clearly her offer still had to sink in and it wouldn't do to overwhelm Seifer all at once. She'd have to take things one step at a time.

"One last thing," she asked, remembering the man waiting for them in the other room. "How is Squall coping?"

Relaxing when Quistis let go of any more talk of the past, Seifer was unable to repress the slight curl to his lips. "He's good. Enjoying himself," he said, remembering their time out in the desert. How Squall had been so entirely in his element. "He'll be back to saving the world soon."

Certain she was seeing fondness in Seifer's eyes just then, Quistis's eyebrows rose. "Enjoying himself, huh?" she grumbled. "Glad someone is. I've been worried sick..." She frowned when her gaze wandered to the door. "I guess I should be happy he's not hiding away somewhere like I thought... *tch*. Hunting trips and spars. That's got to be the weirdest rebound I ever heard of."

A low chuckle left Seifer. Quistis didn't know the half of it. He'd lost count of just how many times he'd made Squall climax in the mere span of a few days. And that had been with plenty of distractions taking up their time too.

Heartened by the small show of amusement, Quistis considered her one time student. He seemed healthy enough at least. He'd certainly bulked up a bit since the war, so he was still keeping in shape. "Squall told me you're training your magic together. How's that been going?"

"Good." It was one hell of an understatement, but Seifer wasn't about to tell her that he'd lost almost all abilities when it came to paramagic after the war. "Who'd have thought it, but we make one hell of a team."

"I wish I could've seen it," Quistis said with a disbelieving huff. For a party of two, they'd cleared their mission in the Behema Sands in record time. In hindsight, it seemed obvious whom she should've suspected as Squall's partner. "Your mission bonus should come through tomorrow by the way. Remind Squall to pass it on. He can get forgetful about things like pay."

Seifer huffed as well. "Sounds like him." Squall probably didn't spend a fraction of what Garden
"Actually," Quistis said, realizing the opportunity to lure the blond further into her net, "I should just put you on Garden's payroll. As a freelancer. Next time Squall heads this way for a monster mission, you two can team up." Perhaps a taste of what Garden had to offer would make the man change his mind.

"You sound like a true headmistress in the making," Seifer replied affably. He certainly wouldn't mind another day like that with Squall and to get paid for it seemed absurd.

"Was that an actual compliment?" Quistis said with a raised eyebrow, trying to mask her surprise with levity. The words meant a lot coming from the last person she'd ever expected any respect from. "The official transition will be at the start of next year, but Cid seems to think he's already retired."

"Not long," Seifer commented, realizing that if he played his cards right he'd end up with both a Garden headmistress and a president on his side, not to mention a certain SeeD commander. "And you've certainly got the tenacity to pull it off."

Quistis almost blushed at the continued flattery. "Any less won't cut it," she said matter-of-factly. "I have Squall to keep in line, for starters."

Another chuckle left Seifer. "Good luck with that," he said and looked over at the door.

Following Seifer's gaze, Quistis let out a soft sigh. She wished she could have more time with just Seifer, but maybe a break would be for the best. "Do you want to head back in?" she asked, nodding at the door. "Let him know we're still alive?"

"We'd better," Seifer agreed, having gone without the man's presence for far too long that day. If it hadn't been for the immediate distraction upon his entrance, he would've had a hard time not greeting the brunet the way he'd really wanted to. That was going to be equally hard now. As he started towards the door, he glanced at Quistis. "You hungry?"

Moving around the bed, she looked at him with a slightly quirked brow. "A little, I guess. Those train meals never amount to much."

Seifer nodded, having assumed as much. "I bet the Commander's forgotten about dinner as well," he said, following her into the other room. His eyes fell to where Squall was sitting on the couch. "You had dinner yet, Princess?"

Raising an eyebrow at the unexpected lightheartedness, Squall glanced over Seifer's shoulder to where Quistis was standing. Noting her composure and slightly bemused expression, he slowly relaxed.

"Not yet," he said, meeting Seifer's gaze.

"Guess I'd better feed my starving guests, then," Seifer said, walking over to the kitchen and opening a cupboard. Rummaging through it, he got out the things he needed.

"Did he just call you Princess?"

"He did," Squall replied resignedly. He'd gotten so used to it, he apparently wasn't even capable of registering it anymore, no matter the company.

Quistis's eyebrows climbed high as she processed the uncharacteristically mild reaction to an
offense that would've set off an impressive fight in the past and would've landed either or both cadets in the infirmary. The strangeness didn't end there. Watching as Seifer got out ingredients and utensils, she joined Squall by the couch, her eyes glued to the spectacle before her.

"Pinch me."

Squall huffed softly in understanding. "He cooks these days."

"Huh. I'm Seifer Almasy's guest," she said, as if it was the punchline to a joke she didn't quite get. "Next thing you'll say he does your ironing as well."

"Just my laundry. And groceries."

"That's right. He cooks, he does groceries, he works. Even does laundry and occasionally cleans. And best of all, looks sexy as hell while doing it all," Seifer said, looking over his shoulder with a shit-eating grin. "Everything you'd need in a man, wouldn't you say, Quistis?"

At the return of the trademark cockiness, Squall rolled his eyes. Next to him Quistis huffed, stifling a laugh. "Let's first see if you can present me with something edible. I've learned to distrust a man's cooking, you know," she said in jest.

"I don't blame you. Laguna told me about the burnt toast," Seifer said with a chuckle. "But trust me, once you've tried this, you'll wish you were the one staying here as my guest."

Making herself comfortable on the couch, Quistis watched the blond at work. "I never would've pegged you for the domestic type, Seifer," she teased. "I don't know how many more surprises I can take."

"I guess I'd better get the rest out of the way then," Seifer said, turning around to face her. He'd always loved throwing people for a spin. "I'm working to become a weaponsmith. Balios's apprentice. I'm also a gunblade instructor at the Tiamat SCTA." He paused for emphasis as he leaned back against the counter. "And I'm gay."

A faint, aborted smile lingered on Quistis's lips as her eyes grew minutely wider. "Wait, what?"

"You heard me," Seifer said, turning back around to continue cooking, having stored Quistis's priceless expression away in memory forever.

The moment Squall felt Quistis's eyes on him, looking for some sense, he made a formidable effort to rein in the flutter of panic in his stomach. Seifer's words had no actual bearing on him. There was no way Quistis could connect the dots with so little information. As he caught her gaze however, he wasn't at all reassured by her frown and the quick dart of her eyes back to Seifer.

"You two are stringing me along, right?" Quistis spoke to Seifer's back. "You, gay? I distinctly remember a whole lot of shameless flirting and even some wolf-whistling, and none of it involved guys."

Seifer shrugged. "Took a while to figure it out," he said, getting out three cans of beer.

She watched the blond with a scrutinizing frown as he walked over. "...You sure had me fooled," she commented doubtfully, accepting the can of beer. "Along with the rest of Garden. Hyne, you even flirted with Kadowaki."

"And now both sexes get to enjoy it," he said with a wink. "I don't discriminate when it comes to flirting. Only in the bedroom." He held out the other can of beer for Squall.
Praying to Hyne for the two to pick another topic soon, Squall took the can. He met Seifer's gaze only briefly before looking down at his drink. The bastard probably loved putting him on the spot like this.

"So now you consider yourself Hyne's gift to women and men?" Quistis huffed in reply. "How like you." She sipped her beer with a mystified shake of the head.

"Hope you're not too heartbroken," Seifer said, walking back to the kitchen.

"I'll live," Quistis replied dryly. "And just for the record, I'm never discussing tastes in guys with you."

"Praise Hyne," Seifer muttered under his breath as he stirred the vegetables in the pan.

"So," she continued after another, more royal drink from her beer. "Now that you've had your fun shocking your former instructor... Care to elaborate on how you became one?"

More than relieved at the change in conversation, Squall allowed himself to relax as Seifer gave her the same rundown as he'd been given. Beside him, he could sense Quistis perking up at the story of how Seifer hadn't been able to refrain from correcting the students and how he had landed himself a job in the process. Squall was absolutely certain the woman was already plotting several ways to steal Seifer away from the SCTA.

"Just like that?" Quistis said, eyebrow quirked. "You teach, proper uniform and everything? Don't tell me Garden lost out on a gunblade instructor."

"Proper uniform and everything," Seifer confirmed, getting out some plates for them. "Squall got a show just this Thursday."

"Really?" Immediately Squall found himself fixed with Quistis's gaze. "Well?" she urged when he didn't immediately provide her with the intel she wanted.

Having already warned Seifer about the possibility Quistis would want to headhunt him, Squall figured it was out of his hands. "He's good. Best I've seen since Peyton."

"Better than Peyton," Seifer corrected as he stirred the food. "And better than anyone else that 'teaches' gunblades at any of the SCTAs."

"Good gunbladers are rare," Quistis huffed in agreement. "Someone who can teach it even more so. I know, I've looked."

"Maybe you should come by sometime," Seifer said, part of him eager to show his former instructor just what Garden was missing out on. "See the prodigy in action."

Quistis studied him thoughtfully before giving a nod. "Next time I'm in Esthar I'll take you up on that," she agreed. "So, an instructor and a weapon smith as well, huh? Sounds like you're doing very well for yourself." She sipped her beer, considering how all of this would affect her chances of bringing Seifer back. "Am I right in assuming you were talking about the Balios?"

Seifer looked over at her with a broad smile, proud of what he'd achieved. He hummed in agreement. "Made my own blade too. You can go check it out if you want. Still a couple of minutes until the food is ready."

"I'd love that, actually," Quistis said, setting down her can of beer. "I'm afraid I only have a good eye for gunbladers, though. Not the actual weapon itself."
The smirk that spread on Seifer's lips was unstoppable. "I thought we weren't going to discuss our
taste in men," he quipped.

Eyebrows climbing high at the remark, Quistis got up from the couch. "Ours, Seifer?" she pointed
out dryly, entering the bedroom after glancing Squall's way. "You're making your sparring partner
awfully nervous there."

Seifer turned his head towards the bedroom. "Don't worry. He's already used to the flirting," he
said, before turning back to stir their food once more.

"Seifer," Quistis admonished from the other room. "Don't tell me you've been picking on Squall."

"Always, Instructor," Seifer said as he sampled a forkful of their dinner. "Can't help it."

Taking down a gulp of his beer, Squall glared fruitlessly at Seifer's back. Quistis wasn't as easily
fooled as Loire. A few more comments like those and they'd be in trouble.

Smiling at the unlikely banter, Quistis switched on the lights of the small bedroom and looked
around. The room, just like the rest of Seifer's apartment, was unexpectedly modest and normal
looking, but it still managed to look more like a home than Squall's and Rinoa's penthouse ever
had. Like the way Squall's uniform hung off an unassuming hanger at the back of the door, instead
of the ridiculous walk-in closet she remembered from the house warming party Rinoa had thrown.
Zipping the uniform's covering open to quickly check the state of Squall's uniform, she closed it
again upon finding it suitably presentable. She stifled a laugh as she imagined Seifer ironing it with
careful focus.

She followed a meandering path to where she'd spotted Seifer's gunblade, not bothering to rein in
her curiosity in the slightest. It was obvious that Squall and Seifer had been able to mend things
simply from looking at their things. Squall's gunblade cases stood next to the dresser that held
Seifer's gunblade. Clothes she recognized as Squall's hung neatly arranged on the back of the
room's only chair, while Seifer's lay haphazardly on the seat.

It reminded her of when she'd shared her small cadet quarters with a roommate. Nothing bred
mutual understanding or loathing like cohabitation, and for Seifer and Squall it seemed to be the
former. To think that instead of all the disciplinary measures she'd inflicted on the two, she might
have had better results if she'd forced them to be roommates.

Shaking her head at the thought, she came to a stop before the dresser and let her hands alight
softly upon the gleaming metal of Seifer's gunblade. She couldn't quite believe Seifer had made
this. It looked like the real deal, just as any other blade she'd seen on display. She felt pride stir for
the man. He'd always been gifted, that one. Lifting it from the dresser to get a sense of it, she rose
an eyebrow.

"It's lighter than Squall's," she called out, loud enough for the others to hear her. Certain this blade
would have a name just as its predecessor had, she asked, "Its name?"

"Kronos," came Seifer's reply.

She frowned at the familiar name. She'd heard it before, but couldn't quite place it. "Why does that
ring a bell?"

It was Squall who answered. "Think Centran deities."

Quistis laughed as it all clicked into place. First Hyperion, and now Kronos. Of course Seifer
would go the dramatic route in naming his blades.
'At least I didn't base it on my surname.'

At Seifer's attempt to slander Squall, Quistis shook her head with a smile before setting Kronos down again. "Well, I just think you're both obsessed, naming your weapons in the first place," she added her own two cents as she walked to the door. "Why do men do that?"

"I dunno, Quistis," Seifer called out from the other room. "At least I haven't named my cock... Even though it's impressive enough to deserve it."

Blinking at the crude words and the unbidden imagery that popped into her head, Quistis was speechless for all of a few seconds before she let out an appalled huff. "I see you still have the sophistication of a caveman," she said, walking into the living area to fix Seifer with a mock stern look.

"Missed it?" Seifer asked, smirking as he met Quistis's gaze.

"Like toothache," she snorted. Moving to lean against the kitchen counter, she looked Squall's way. "How can you stand this idiot?"

How indeed. Nursing a newfound appreciation for his can of beer, Squall forced himself to relax. "The price I pay for a decent spar."

Seifer grinned at the brunet, knowing better. "Okay, kiddies, dinner is ready," he said, filling up their bowls. "Get it while it's hot."

Sticking her nose in the air to catch a whiff, Quistis peered over the counter to see what he was readying. "That actually smells like it's safe for consumption."

"I'm sure you'll like it," Seifer said, handing her one of the bowls over the counter.

Accepting the food, she poked around its contents as she moved to the couch. "I can't remember the last time I had a home cooked meal... You better not disappoint me, Seifer," she announced before tucking in.

Walking over and handing Squall a bowl as well, Seifer grabbed a cushion. Dropping it to the floor opposite from Squall and Quistis, at the other side of the coffee table, he sat down and took a sip of his beer before digging into the food.

Lifting another forkful of noodles, Quistis shook her head. "I really shouldn't inflate your ego any more than it already is, but... this is great." She let out a chuckle at her own words. "Can't say I expected my day to turn out like this."

"Same here," Seifer agreed. "Never thought I'd say this... but it's good to see you, Quistis."

Quistis's expression softened. "I could get used to you calling me Quistis again, you know."

Remembering how Squall had told him that their past ran back much further than he'd known, Seifer regarded Quistis carefully. "Squall told me about the orphanage." The whole thing still seemed too ridiculous to be true to him. "That you were there... as well as the others." He paused, once more trying to recall anything from before his time at Garden. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Believe me, it didn't make much sense to us either when we first found out," Quistis reassured. "If Irvine hadn't been such a rookie with GFs, we might never have known."

When Seifer didn't say anything, seemingly lost to thought, Squall wasn't surprised. Quistis briefly
glanced at him in question, but there was nothing he could tell her now that he hadn't already warned her about, so he just met her gaze. The set to her eyes warned him she hadn't let go of the topic yet.

"Squall was actually the last to pop back into our memories," she said with an amused shake of the head. "We all stood there, trying to remember, and he just lingered in the background." She fixed Squall with a teasing look. "You were probably still hoping to deny all affiliation with us, weren't you?"

Seifer looked up from his food. "He's the only one I do remember," he admitted softly. "I never thought the image I had in my head of a crying toddler was real though, much less that it was Squall," he mused, shaking his head. "Actually, yesterday I remembered Selphie as well. Squall told me the sand castle she'd helped me demolish was yours." He couldn't help but smirk at the memory.

"Don't think I ever got an apology for that," Quistis said with a wistful smile. "Hyne, you and Selphie!" She huffed then. "Selphie never did outgrow that tendency for destruction... For some reason she has it out for Zell these days."

Squall looked up from his food at the remark. "The holo updates."

"What?"

"The updates Zell requested. They cut into the budget of the explosives department."

"She's still on that?" Quistis said with a quirked eyebrow. "Then she must've forgotten to mention to you that I also signed off on the extra funding for her new favorite toy. She nearly totaled the first prototype..." She narrowed her eyes then. "You know, she told me you inspired her to post all those embarrassing photos of Zell."

Squall just met her gaze evenly.

Seifer couldn't help but butt in. "What kind of photos are we talking about here?"

Quistis shook her head with a long-suffering sigh. "Nothing to help his image as an instructor. And of course Selphie had to post them directly on the Garden forums. Poor thing. He's already saying he'll never have another birthday party again."

"She posted all of them?" Squall asked, almost feeling bad for the combat instructor.

Quistis nodded gravely. "Mhm... It just started with the hat, but then his Mach Kick went viral. His students can't keep a straight face anymore when he demonstrates a martial arts move."

Seifer knew exactly what photo Quistis and Squall were talking about. It had to be the nude one of Zell that Squall had mentioned when they'd been out in the desert. He let out a deep laugh, then shook his head and cringed. "Promise me you'll never show me those pictures," he said, looking straight at Squall, hoping the man would heed his word. "Any pictures of you on the other hand, I'd be more than happy to take a look at." He grinned. "Especially if they include skinny dipping."

Stunned, Squall stared at the blond. Feeling Quistis's gaze on him as she picked apart his reaction, he wished he could punch some subtlety into the idiot.

"That doesn't look like he's used to it, Seifer," she admonished dryly. "And for your information, we failed to persuade him."
"I know," Seifer said, still smiling as he shifted his gaze to Quistis. "And you may be right... Guess I should go easy on him, huh?"

"Mhm," Quistis agreed sweetly. "Might be safer to pick on someone who doesn't have the skill and tools to castrate you."

"True," Seifer chuckled.

"So," Quistis cut the topic short, looking at Squall. "How exactly did you get Selphie to post those pictures?"

"...I asked her for some older ones," Squall said in defense. "She added the ones from the birthday party as well," he added, explaining the so-claimed inspiration he'd provided.

"Ah," Quistis said in understanding, glancing at Seifer. "Selphie's our self-appointed archiver. She's got this obsession for capturing everything on photographs... All of us still use GFs. She sees it as a way to keep our memories safe." Quistis's lips quirked upwards. "I doubt Zell agrees at the moment."

At Seifer's chuckle, Quistis regarded him warmly. "So, might be a tip now that you know. Selphie's also got this online journal. We're all supposed to write in it, but she makes the most entries... Predictably, Squall hasn't added anything yet," she added with a teasing glint to her eyes. "I don't think he's doing the private diary thing either."

"Can't say it sounds like something I'd do," Seifer remarked.

"I have to admit I'm not very consistent about it either," Quistis said with a shrug. "The way I see it, we just make sure we don't let each other forget. And Selphie's more than up to the task."

Squall snorted. "I hope we'll never have to rely on that journal to figure out the past."

Quistis bumped his shoulder admonishingly. "Hey. At least we'll always remember the exact date Zell's Mach Kick hit a thousand views... I happen to think the anecdotes are more worthwhile remembering than official Garden business."

Falling silent, a contemplative expression crossed Quistis's face. Biting her lip against a smile, she put her fork down on the coffee table. "Okay—you'll probably never let me live this down, but now I have to show you," she said to Seifer, her gaze darting briefly towards Squall.

Moving from her seat, she went to squat down by her overnight bag, fishing out a worn, leather organizer. Flipping it open at the back, she returned to the couch. "I had a copy made so I could have it on me."

Raising an eyebrow, Seifer took the small photo Quistis held out to him. It was of a beach with lots of kids fooling around in the sunshine. A sense of recognition surged through him. It was the beach he'd almost been able to remember, as if the vague substance of his recollections had suddenly been given form in the picture before him. He skimmed the children's faces—the hair colors, clothes and expressions. He could see a lighthouse in the background. The lighthouse.

A brunet boy and brunet girl with pigtails stood out to him. He recognized them. Squall and Selphie.

Selphie was crouching down together with a blond boy, their interest caught by some crabs. Squall was standing in the surf in wait, knee-high in the water, an older girl heading his way with an air mattress.
In the foreground, a blond boy with a missing tooth was posing with a fish net, a forgotten red bucket right behind him. To his left, further down the beach, a girl was pointing her finger at an unfinished part of an elaborate sandcastle, looking dead-serious as she conferred with another girl. Another boy was busy digging a trench to guide water to the sand castle's moat, other kids seemingly helping out as well. Every part of the sandy structure was intricate, sea shells adorning the towers.

"And you said I haven't changed?" he asked with a slight smile and raised eyebrow, glancing up at Quistis. The bossy girl at the sandcastle was obviously her.

Quistis regarded him thoughtfully, a soft smile on her lips. "That's what I like about this picture. The years may have changed us, but in this picture I can still recognize myself. All of us. Who we are." She glanced at it fondly.

Seifer looked back at the picture. Quistis's implication was clear; he was in it. Along with everyone else Squall had mentioned they had grown up with. He skimmed the kids again and picked out the blond haired boys. He had no idea what he'd looked like as a kid. No way he was the stupid kid posing in the front. Maybe the one in the background shooting frisbees with some other boys. Or the one crouching down together with Selphie. He wasn't going to ask.

Humming in delayed agreement with Quistis's words, he placed the picture on the coffee table. "It's a good picture," he said nonchalantly.

At the lukewarm reaction, Quistis regarded him closely before looking at the picture again. "Luckily this particular sandcastle survived your alliance with Selphie. Too distracted with picking apart dead crabs together." She glanced at the duo in the picture. "You're practically behaving in this one."

Seifer curbed the urge to reach out for the picture again to take a closer look. "Where did you get it?" he asked instead, continuing his meal.

Squall could tell Quistis deliberately didn't look his way. He'd known a pitfall like this would come up. It's why he'd wanted to wait with the pictures until after he'd told Seifer about Edea.

"We got it from the orphanage," she began to explain. "The place is a ruin now. We found some albums, but those didn't survive in one piece. The pictures we've got were in a box."

"There are more?" Seifer asked, frowning slightly.

"Mhm," Quistis intoned. "The older pictures Squall asked Selphie for, I'm sure," she added with a knowing smile. "It helps to remember."

Seifer turned to look at Squall instead, his frown deepening. "You've got them here?"

Too late for damage control now. Inwardly throttling Quistis for her well-intended meddling, Squall nodded. "In case you'd want to see them."

The way Squall spoke the words put Seifer on edge. They were too casual considering the fact that Squall would have considered very carefully when to show them to him. "How come you didn't tell me about them then?" he asked with a hint of accusation.

Squall frowned. "It seemed... premature," he said, hesitating before adding, "I planned to show you tomorrow. With Ellone coming up."

Matching Squall's frown, Seifer studied the brunet for a moment. Something was definitely up.
There had to be a reason for Squall to wear the serious expression he was, considering they were just talking about pictures from their childhood. A simple mention of the pictures earlier, when Squall had first told him about their past, would have made a lot more sense. It would have been all the proof he would have needed when he'd doubted Squall's words.

"Why wait?" he asked, challenging Squall. "Today or tomorrow, it's all the same."

With a sigh, Squall met Quistis's gaze before getting up from the couch. The difference between today and tomorrow was privacy. Quistis had no idea how deep this went with the blond. Already she'd shown just how little she understood Seifer's unenthused reactions.

Retrieving his laptop from his work bag, he moved back to the couch and placed it on the coffee table. "It's about the orphanage," he started cautiously. "You'll remember it eventually. You might see it in my memories." Switching on his laptop, he looked up to meet Seifer's gaze. "You need to know in advance."

Seifer's frown deepened. "What do I need to know?"

Leaving the cursor to idle over the innocent looking folder Selphie had sent him, Squall steeled himself. There was no sugar-coating a truth like this. "There's someone who isn't on that picture," Squall started, nodding at Quistis's childhood memento. "The person who took it. She was in charge of the orphanage... Matron."

When no reaction came, Squall knew he'd have to spell it out completely. Seifer didn't remember a thing.

"She's a sorceress. She became Ultimecia's target for possession because of it." Squall paused, hesitating to speak the name. "Edea."

Seifer narrowed his eyes, completely dumbstruck. He'd heard Squall's words, but he couldn't take them in. What Squall was saying didn't make any sense. He shook his head. It couldn't be true.

"No."

"Ulti-" Squall started, but was immediately cut off.

"No," Seifer repeated forcefully, before getting up from the floor and placing the remainder of his meal on the coffee table. "You're wrong," he said once more, gesturing emphatically to underline his point, "because it doesn't make any sense. Why would she possess her? Why would she choose a woman in charge of an orphanage and then choose one of the woman's kids to be her knight?" He closed his eyes and shook his head, overwhelmed by the memories of what he'd done with her. He remembered every part of her; from her silky white skin to her golden eyes as she softly beckoned him to join her.

_Come here, sweetie._

The image of her lying naked in wait on the large bed pushed to the forefront. And then another memory snuck in. A lighter voice; softer and calmer. Younger. _Caring._ He'd been a boy then as he'd looked up into the eyes of the only person who'd ever cared for him.

_Come here, and I'll make it better._

He was going to be sick.

Spotting Squall about to speak, he thrust out his hand to shut the man up. "You can keep your
"Hyne-damned pictures to yourself," he spat before stalking over to the counter where he'd left out his glass and the bottle of whiskey. Filling the glass to the brim, he brought it to his lips.

Squall rose from the couch at the harsh dismissal, wishing he could stop the man. He knew exactly where this would lead, but anything he had to say would be immediately dismissed at this point, the man's barely contained anger telling him it was already too late. Beside him Quistis stirred from her daze, opening her mouth before he could warn her off.

"At least hear him out," she said, a hint of pique in her voice. "It might help to understand how Edea got involved. How we got involved."

"Save it, Trepe," Seifer said, relishing the burn that would soon lead to addled thought. He looked over at Squall and huffed at having earned himself the commander's pity. "I'm heading out."

Losing all hope of salvaging the situation, Squall watched as Seifer gathered his keys and jacket with brusque moves. He hated the harried look to the man, as if their mere presence disgusted him.

"...Seifer," he called in vain, utterly ignored. The blond walked past them, not even sparing them a glance before he stepped into the hallway. The front door slammed shut behind him with a ring of finality, all too reminiscent of the last time Seifer had walked off like this, but this time he wouldn't accept it. This time he'd make sure he'd be there when the man returned.

Looking away from where Seifer had disappeared, Squall sat back down on the couch. Slumping back, he pinched the bridge of his nose. The man's reaction had been worse than he'd anticipated. Far worse. He couldn't stand to see the raw pain that lay just beneath Seifer's unaffected exterior.

"Why did you let him go?"

At Quistis's more than unhappy tone of voice, Squall dropped his hand to stare at her. The woman had ignored his advice, had blown right past every warning sign and had actually sounded annoyed with Seifer when the man had been barely able to rein in his distress.

"Squall," she persisted when he didn't answer. "He shouldn't be out there by himself."

So now she was catching on. Too little too late. "He's been out there by himself ever since the war. He'll manage," Squall replied tersely, leveling her with a glare.

Quistis's gaze narrowed slightly. "Are you angry?"

"You forced my hand," Squall said coolly. "I warned you about Matron. About the past."

"I showed him a picture," Quistis exclaimed, exasperated. "I thought he'd like it."

"You steered that conversation in a very deliberate way."

Quistis straightened in her seat, her lips drawn into a tight line. "Today or tomorrow. He was right, Squall. What difference does it make? At least now he has some time to let it sink in before you go to Galbadia."

"Or time to change his mind," Squall said evenly. He knew dropping the bomb right before their arrival at Winhill would've been less than perfect, but there was no ideal timing here. Only less ideal company.

"It's not like him to turn tail and run."
Squall quirked an eyebrow. "Then what do you think just happened?"

The remark brought a deep frown to Quistis's brow as she fell silent.

"When I tell you not to push, don't push," he reiterated, hopefully for the last time. "Not when it's about Seifer."

"Fine, I get it," Quistis bit back, her shoulders sagging. She stared at her unfinished bowl of noodles. "I'm just afraid you guys won't encourage each other where it matters. Spars and training are distracting, but it doesn't address any real issues. With me here—"

"I was addressing the issue," Squall interrupted. "Winhill, remember?"

"But what about Garden? Have you even mentioned the possibility that he could return?"

Squall held her determined gaze evenly. "I told him you would."

Quistis shook her head in exasperation. "Don't you want him back?!"

"That's not up to us. He's good at what he does. He started a new life here."

"Because he thought he couldn't come back!"

Sighing at her adamancy, Squall didn't immediately answer. Seifer; a SeeD. Doing missions together. It was a life he'd long stopped considering. Reality had turned out so very differently.

"There's no point in asking him," he finally explained. "As long as he blames himself, anything to do with the past is a dangerous topic. That includes Garden."

"Then you make sure he goes to Winhill with you," Quistis replied, as if it had been her idea all along. "...I suppose I better hold off the rest of the gang for now."

"Please," Squall intoned at the obvious.

"What train are you taking?"

"12:30."

She raised an eyebrow at that. "That's cutting it close, Squall. You know these meetings. They tend to drag on."

"Then make sure it doesn't. Or finish the meeting without me." He wasn't feeling particularly patient, wishing he could be on that train already. A meeting with those pigheaded politicians was the last thing on his mind right now.

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"You're the moderator," he said with a shrug. "Moderate."

"Hyne, you can be such an ass." Pushing up from the couch, she walked over to pick up her overnight bag. "I'm on your side here, Squall," she said, not sounding like she felt much goodwill towards him. "I'll moderate your ungrateful ass out of there. In return you had better get results and keep me posted."

Running a hand over his tired eyes, Squall got up as well and moved to intercept her. "...Quistis."
"I know," she said, her voice softer. "That man turns anyone's temper into a short fuse and you've been around him for days." Shrugging into her coat, she picked up her bag and hitched it onto her shoulder. "You just make sure you're on your best behavior tomorrow morning and I'll do my part to get you out of there in time."

Squall gave a nod, grateful for her understanding. "You've got a place to go?"

"Yup, Sphinxara district. Ritziest hotel in the city," she replied with a small smile. "And I even have cab money."

"I'll drive you," Squall offered, moving to grab his jacket from its hanger by the door.

Quistis held out a hand to stop him. "You should stay here. I'm fine."

"He'll be a while."

She quirked an eyebrow at the discouraging statement. "Not the first time?"

"No."

She studied him thoughtfully, frowning. "I'm sorry," she offered softly.

Looking around her, she seemed reluctant to go. "Wait just a sec." Getting out her leather binder, she tore out a blank page and walked up to the counter. Writing something down, she folded the paper in half and set the empty whiskey glass on it.

"Seifer's eyes only," she said secretively, turning around to meet Squall's gaze with a smile.

Unable to see how a note would improve matters much, Squall just nodded and put on his jacket. Closing his hand around his car keys, he let out a sigh. Sphinxara District. That would be at least half an hour there and then another back. No chance at all that Seifer would be back by then. He'd have another night of waiting to look forward to.

He held the door open for Quistis, resigned.

"Let's go."

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Reality Check

[Zayin House, Monday, 27th of October, 11:48 pm]

Seifer hurried down the corridor of his apartment building, towards the elevator that would take him downstairs—away from Squall and Quistis. He didn't care what they thought of his abrupt departure. He needed alcohol and he needed to be the fuck alone. No more fucking reminders.

Forcing his mind clear of intruding thoughts, he rushed out of the building and past his pickup. A few streets farther he jumped onto a goods lift. The rush of adrenaline and whipping winds helped, but he knew it wouldn't be enough. Not tonight. He needed whiskey and lots of it to work through the mess of his thoughts. To face the truth he'd been told.

Matron.

His stomach lurched as the image of the young woman stroking his hair reasserted itself. A childhood memory that intersected and interweaved with the grim menagerie of his more recent past. He held on more tightly to the goods lift. He needed to focus if he didn't want to end up as a smear somewhere on Esthar's gleaming walkways. Leaping off at the last second, he steadied his footing against the translucent blue road below. He hadn't been this way in a while, but he was only a couple of back streets away from one of Esthar's more unsavory parts.

The signs were bright and colorful, each broadcasting their seedy offerings into the night. Everything from nightclubs to sex stores. An easy place to pick up drugs on the go. Or a quick fuck if you were inclined to pay and willing to sink that low. Ignoring the lackluster calls and offers of several prostitutes lingering on the sidewalk, he hastened his step as he passed by a club he knew all too well. He'd been there plenty of times as he'd sought out the true pleasures in life. Drugs and fucking. The thrill of the hunt for a willing partner for the night.

He grimaced, then stepped down a small side alley and into the dingy bar that was his goal. It was dimly lit inside, the air heavy with smoke. A fair amount of people were there, sitting at worn tables or propped up at the bar. Lowlives like himself. Seated by themselves, away from others. It was just the kind of bar he needed; a rundown dive where all the drunks, addicts and depressed fuckers washed up to try and figure out what the hell had happened to their lives. A place for regrets.

Pushing onto a bar stool at the darkest end of the room, he scratched at his stubble. He'd probably end up spending most of his cash here tonight. He called over the bartender.

"Double whiskey, neat."

His eyes dropped to the stained surface of the counter. As soon as the alcohol was placed in front of him, he downed half and stared at the remaining liquid. Amber and gleaming. He rolled it around in the glass, then gulped down the rest. Placing it back on the counter, he waited for the bartender to look his way again. "Same."

By the third drink he was starting to feel the effects, his mind beginning to escape the blankness he'd imposed on it. Images of his mistress reappeared.

His Matron. The woman who had taken him in as a son.

He knocked back his drink, looked up at the bartender and gestured for a refill.
It was all so fucked up. How the hell could she be one and the same woman? Apart from that one memory he couldn't remember her at all, but as he sat there, focusing on a past he'd rather never have known about at all, glimpses of the woman from his childhood emerged. His memories froze on an image of her, looking younger than when she'd been his mistress. She'd been beautiful then, just as beautiful as when he'd met her again as a failed cadet. He'd been attracted to her, to the power she'd exuded.

He narrowed his eyes as he remembered Deling City and the parade. Where Squall had been speared by an icicle.

Afterwards, he'd joined her in her lush bedroom at the grand estate she'd been staying at. She'd slowly let her dark violet gown come undone and he'd joined her willingly. He'd been high on the power of defeating Squall and the others and it had fused with his mad want for her. He could still feel the blind lust so clearly, right along with his elation at being able to stay hard when he'd entered her, unlike his fumbled attempts with Rinoa and Fujin. He'd come hard. The first time in his life he'd come inside someone. She'd taken that from him.

"Bring me the rest of the bottle," he yelled at the bartender while throwing some cash on the counter.

He clenched his hands. When he thought of her supple and milky-white body, he felt nothing but revulsion now. No attraction, no lust. He felt sick with the conflicting emotions. All that was left was the dread and shame. He'd been here before, disgusted by what they'd shared and by what she'd made him feel, mere moments after the most atrocious deeds he'd ever committed. A cocktail of sick satisfaction and all-consuming lust. Why the hell hadn't she gloated over him emptying his seed into the closest thing to a mother he'd ever had? Ultimecia had always played her cards right, and no amount of pain was ever enough. She would've loved tormenting him over that fact towards the end. After he'd failed her. After he'd tried to—

He brought the bottle to his lips, not giving two shits about what it looked like. He wanted alcohol induced oblivion so badly, for the approaching unconsciousness to take over, but he was nowhere near it at all.

Squall hadn't wanted to tell him. Squall had kept those pictures to himself and had only relented after being inadvertently pushed into it by Quistis. Did Squall suspect just how deep it all went? Squall had looked at him with such pity, had tried so damned hard to mend the pieces and hold everything together.

He took another large swallow, then pushed the bottle aside. "Your best herbal spirit," he said loudly, waiting for the bartender to fetch his order. Another glass was placed in front of him. He eyed it carefully. Squall's preferred poison.

The man he'd both fucked and torn apart.

Something broke inside him. How could he be so sick? To bring the man he'd forced through hell into his bed, a man he'd fought a war against? How the fuck had Squall even allowed it? Who the hell let their torturer fuck them? Did Squall get off on being dominated and humiliated? Was that it? The perfect match for the physical pain of a raw fuck. Squall was fucked up if that was the case. Even more so than himself. There was no way he should be allowed anywhere near Squall ever again.

He downed the glass of opaque, dark alcohol, wincing at the sharp taste. It wasn't any better than the pastis he'd tried at the palace, but it served well to clear his mind. To see the truth for what it was. The bloodhound knight and the savior of the world. He brought the bottle of whiskey to his
lips again. No fucking way he'd let Squall sink that low. There'd be an outcry if anyone ever found out. Squall would lose his job, would be slandered and dragged through the mud.

Shit. He'd thought he could change things, that he could actually cheer Squall up and teach him to enjoy life. How fucking rich. He hadn't even realized what he'd reduced Squall to. A madman's fucktoy. Hell, he'd been right in his first guess as to why Squall had downed that bottle after their night on Avalanche. Who the hell would want to deal with something so fucked up?

But no more. He would not let this sick thing between them continue. He wouldn't let Squall risk defamation or gain satisfaction from being degraded by the man who'd only ever caused him pain. And he had. Even if Squall hid it well and was determined that it wasn't his fault, he'd seen it in the man's eyes. The shock and betrayal. When Squall had been pinned to that wall and had taken the first jolts of electricity, those grey-blue eyes had been their most honest. And it tore a hole in his heart. Ultimecia had to have known. She hadn't ordered him to torture any of their other captives. Only Squall. She had seen what he hadn't. She'd seen how Squall was the one person to make him weak, how this would haunt him for the rest of his life.

He pressed his fingers to his eyes and let defeat consume him. There was no stopping the swarm of memories now. Alcohol was his only true companion in this.

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[Zayin House, Tuesday, 28th of October, 3:40 am]

The walls felt too close, the ceiling too low and the air too stale as Seifer made his way to the elevators. Stumbling into an abrupt lean against the wall next to the swirling buttons and numbers, he groaned and felt the wall behind him tilting. Or maybe it was himself. He closed his eyes to shut out the flickering lights. The whole building moved like it was out at sea. Swallowing back the acrid taste at the back of his tongue, he pressed a few buttons with blurry numbers, certain one would be the right one. It would be easier in the elevator, when he could follow the increasing count on the display.

A ding signalled an elevator's arrival.

Pushing away from the wall, he took the precarious steps that brought him into the smaller compartment. The lurch of sudden upward movement unsettled his stomach, the elevator's walls closing in even further. He stared at the display that would tell him when to get off, but his reeling head and fuzzy vision made it an almost impossible feat. He knew he needed to get off at the ninth floor, but everything around him was spinning.

The doors opened and a girl entered. She moved straight to a corner, as far away from him as possible. He'd do the same if it didn't mean he'd actually have to attempt movement. His stomach roiled at the mere thought. He swallowed hard and tried to bite back the unpleasant tang.

Ding.

The blue number looked vaguely like a nine, so he stumbled into the hallway. A familiar can lay on the floor, next to a stain that had been there ever since he had moved in. Home. He staggered the best he could, leaning against the wall whenever he needed to stop himself from falling. Stumbling inside his apartment, he closed the front door and leaned back for support. It was pleasantly dim inside, the only light source his small work lamp, along with a bright square. Squall's laptop. He grimaced.

Shutting his laptop with a sigh, Squall placed it on the coffee table. He took a moment to steel
himself, the ruckus of Seifer's blundering entrance telling him exactly what the man had been up to. He'd hoped against hope that maybe the blond had been riding Esthar's goods lifts, seeking out adrenaline to vanquish his distress like last time. But as the hours had passed Squall had started to fear that Seifer wouldn't return for the night at all.

Getting up from the couch, he turned to take in Seifer's appalling state. The man was unsteady on his feet, the reek of alcohol and smoke reaching him even from where he was standing. Seifer's usually well kempt hair was disheveled, matted with sweat, but most troubling was the revulsion that marred the man's face.

They stood there and stared at one another, neither of them saying anything. When Seifer finally pushed away from the door and stumbled past the couch, Squall was being utterly ignored. Seifer opened a kitchen cupboard and started to fumble around in it. The sounds of glasses clinking against one another none too gently, hard enough to break, finally stirred Squall to move from his transfixed position by the couch. Any more of this and Seifer would cut himself on broken glass.

Picking up his empty coffee mug from the coffee table, he walked up to the kitchen to join Seifer by the sink. The man immediately stumbled away from him, as if he was the one that stank a mile away. Squall frowned but persisted. Leaving his mug in the sink, he reached into the cupboard Seifer had been rifling through and retrieved a glass. Not about to ask what Seifer had been meaning to drink, he filled it with tap water and held it out to the drunk blond.

Narrowing his eyes at the outstretched hand, Seifer took the glass but didn't move it to his lips. Instead he tried to focus on just standing still as Squall turned around and began washing his mug. The man looked disturbingly at ease, as if it was fucking normal for him to be staying in his apartment. As if their past wasn't the biggest fuck up of all. He'd been far too hopeful that Squall might've come to his senses and decided to leave. Of course the man would stay and see things through. Fucking hero complex.

He took a greedy few gulps of water and nearly missed the counter when he set down the glass with a loud thud. He could swear the counter had just moved, but then the arm he'd been using to prop himself up gave in and he almost stumbled. It took all his effort to regain his focus on the man in front of him, and then he remembered another unwelcome guest. "Quisty still 'ere?"

At what could either be an old nickname or slurred speech, Squall glanced at Seifer. "I drove her to her hotel."

"Good," Seifer said, his voice growing more resolute as he pulled himself up to his full height, trying not to sway. "You need to leave too."

Frowning, Squall turned to fully face Seifer. The man was having trouble holding himself up properly, the reek of alcohol even sharper up close. Too late he realized it had been a mistake to let Seifer run off again. "I don't think so," he stated firmly, not about to be bullied.

"I do," Seifer bit back. When Squall just squared his jaw and sent him an unimpressed look, he gripped tightly onto the edge of the counter. "What we're doing— " he started with a grimace. "You staying here. It's wrong."

During the many hours of waiting, Squall had resolved to deal with whatever Seifer would throw at him, but he hadn't expected this. The level of contempt in Seifer's countenance was entirely too convincing. "Not to me," he said evenly, refusing to believe it of Seifer as well.

"It's. Fucked. Up," Seifer said forcefully, wanting Squall to realize just how fucking sick this was. He tried to keep himself steady; to find the right words. "How can you let me fuck you?" he
demanded but immediately brought up a hand to knead at his forehead, nausea blooming at the focus he was trying to muster. "How—How can you even look at me?"

Squall tried to ignore the tone of disgust and forced himself to focus on the problem that had reared its ugly head; Seifer's self-loathing. He'd seen it at work more than once now and was becoming intimately accustomed to the antagonism that went with it. He straightened himself, his gaze hard.

"I started doubting your guilt long before I let you fuck me. It will take more than sex, or this, to cloud my judgment."

Seifer closed his eyes to summon the power to keep himself standing. This was pointless. There was only one way to make things right. "I want you out of here."

As they came full circle, Squall realized Seifer wasn't going to listen to reason. The man looked, smelled and sounded drunk, his every word slurred. Seifer was too far gone, left alone with his thoughts for too long. He reminded himself of how Seifer had been looking forward to their upcoming hunting trip, of how they'd had sex with searing passion just that morning, of everything the man had said at the palace. But most of all he reminded himself of what they still needed to do.

"No," he said evenly, readying himself in case things got physical. "I'm staying."

Seifer stumbled closer and grabbed a fistful of Squall's shirt. "Wasn't D-District enough for you? You want more pain? Or do you actually like being fucked by your torturer?"

The words hit Squall with the force of a physical punch; to have what he'd shared with Seifer reduced to something so ugly. He easily wrenched himself free from the drunk and balled his fists, tempted to repay the hurt. "You're an asshole," he bit out, seething. "But I'm still staying."

Even through his addled impressions, Seifer could tell how close Squall was to losing it. How far he'd pushed him. He was almost there. "I bet Rinoa was too sweet for you. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Not like me, huh, Leonhart?" He pulled up his lips in a snarl and took a step closer. "Fucking masochist."

With Seifer's face practically shoved in his, Squall found it hard to breathe. There was no lie in the man's words that he could detect, the revulsion painfully honest. He wanted nothing more than to deck the bastard, to repay the hurt that coursed through him. It suddenly became very easy to recall all those times in the past when Seifer had waltzed right over his every boundary, always managing to single out the words that would cut the deepest. He wouldn't fall for the bastard's baiting this time.

Enough.

Junctioning Shiva, he immediately dove into his magic stores and cast an Esuna spell on Seifer, keeping Protect and Stop spells at the ready. They weren't cadets anymore. He would not be provoked.

Pulled into the present, every thought yanked into clear and sharp focus, Seifer stared straight into silver irises regarding him with cold fury and felt his own blood start to boil. Headless of the man's fortified strength, he slammed him up against the nearest wall. "Fuck you, Squall!"

Despite the harsh impact and threatening proximity of the blond, Squall forced himself to do no more than meet Seifer's gaze. "Are you done?" he asked coolly.

"No," Seifer said as he stared Squall down. "It's all still fresh in here," he accused, his voice dangerously low as he tapped a finger against his temple. "Every fucked up thing I did." He
squared his jaw, refusing to let the words spill that would clue Squall in to the full extent of the truth. Instead he focused on the wrongness his mistress had put between them.

"I tortured you. One of the few people I actually care about," he said, his words heated. He released his grip and headed straight for the bottle of whiskey and glass on the counter.

When Squall stepped in to block his access, those grey-blue eyes looking up at him with more emotion than he'd ever thought the man capable of, it was a moment before Seifer could gather the annoyance to push the man aside. Grabbing the bottle and glass, he filled it to the brim as he strode off. "Stay the fuck away."

Squall could only stare as Seifer thrust up his glass with a taunting smirk, as if bringing a toast. His chest squeezed painfully at knowing just how much pain lay behind such volatile behavior. All anger fled him, to be replaced with a terrible sense of helplessness.

"Stop this," he said, unjunctioning as he spoke the words.

"Make me," Seifer challenged, but when Squall just looked back at him without any fight he threw his tumbler against the wall. "Stop being a fucking coward and hit me!"

Fighting to remain unflinching, Squall glanced at where the whiskey had splattered all over the wall, a mess of glass shards scattered onto the floor. "You've punished yourself enough," he said, not letting go of Seifer's gaze as he walked from behind the kitchen counter.

Seifer chuckled darkly. "Not nearly enough," he said under his breath. "Hit me. Make me fucking pay for what I did to you," he gauded, unable to fathom how Squall still wasn't getting this. "I beat and electrocuted you. I know what you look like when you're in unimaginable pain." He grit his teeth and clenched his fists, the image forever seared into his mind. "I left you behind to die."

"That wasn't on you," Squall said vehemently. This self-hatred scared him far more than the anger. "What happened at D-District was done to both of us."

Meeting Squall's stare head-on, Seifer knew they'd reached an impasse. Squall could never understand the depth of this; how having those memories and living with them was tearing him apart. He'd been able to manage when they'd been subdued, pushed to the back of his mind. He'd even managed to block it all out the past few days when they'd been screwing like bunnies. He grimaced. That was why it was hitting him so much harder this time. He had something to lose now.

"That doesn't change anything," he said forcefully. "I still see it. When I close my eyes I still see you up on that wall."

Crossing the final distance to stand in front of Seifer, Squall needed the man to snap out of the past. "Then look at me now," he implored. "We're not in that prison anymore. We're here. Safe. Together."

Forcing himself to really look at the man in front of him, Seifer wanted so badly to give in. Together. It would be so easy to just lean in and kiss Squall and forget about everything, but the sense of wrongness wouldn't leave him. "You're the fucking SeeD Commander, Squall. I'm a war criminal. There'll be a witch-hunt if anyone ever finds out."

"I'll never let that happen," Squall said with dangerous calm. If the public at large would ever judge his choices; if he ever had to choose between remaining commander or abandoning Seifer… No command was worth such disloyalty. He'd throw it all away before he'd let any harm come to
"You can't control everything," Seifer said in annoyance, some of his earlier steam giving way to deep felt frustration. "I'm not going to fuck up your life again."

"I make my own choices. This is one of them."

With a snort, Seifer moved to sit down on the couch. Squall was so fucking stubborn and he didn't know how the hell to move on from this. He didn't want Squall to get hurt again, not because of him, no matter what Squall thought he could decide. And he couldn't just ignore his past and bury it again, not when Squall was right there. Closing his eyes, he tried to shut it all out.

Squall watched in silence as he let Seifer come to terms with what he'd said. The man didn't look particularly happy about it, but he was also still in the apartment and no longer reaching for his next drink. It was a meager victory, but Squall would take it.

"You need sleep," he pointed out, reminded of his own exhaustion. "And a shower. You reek."

Irritated at being told what to do, Seifer opened his eyes. "I'll sleep here," he said, grabbing a cushion and planting it firmly in place for the night.

Frowning at the clear line in the sand Seifer had drawn, Squall tried to tell himself that it made no difference if they slept separately, that getting Seifer to Winhill was all that mattered, but his throat closed up with a sharpness that revealed his true feelings. "Suit yourself," he said stiffly and walked away.

Ignoring the brunet, Seifer moved to lie down on the couch and pulled up a blanket. He closed his eyes but he couldn't shut out Squall's retreating footsteps, the turning of the door handle, or the thud of the bedroom door falling closed.

Turning around with a deep groan, he made himself more comfortable, but peace eluded him. He stared at the tatty fabric of his old couch, hating the sense of loss that took over now that Squall had left the room. The hot flare of his anger fizzled out, leaving him drained and numb in the wake of his own internal chaos. Slowly but surely regret started to gnaw at him, not necessarily for what he'd said but for how he'd said it.

Closing his eyes, he couldn't forget the look in Squall's eyes even when the man had stayed adamant and calm in all of his reactions. He'd hurt Squall. Again. The last thing he'd wanted to do and it had been the exact outcome. His past had swallowed him whole and he'd lashed out hard. Kneading his forehead, he tried to force away the emptiness that overwhelmed him. Throughout it all Squall had remained firm. Squall believed in him and had taken his side without a single sign of doubt. He looked over at the bedroom door. He owed the man so much.

He should be punished for what he'd done to Squall and sleeping with the man felt like a reward. He had no right to be around Squall or gain any pleasure from it. That realization alone hurt so fucking much; to know what they could have, what it was like to be with Squall, and not deserve any of it. There was nothing he wanted more. And by some fucked up coincidence or sick twist of fate, Squall was foolish enough to want it too.

Sitting back up in the couch, he sighed. The storm of his emotions had taken its toll, leaving only his weakness. Despite everything, despite all he'd said and still meant, he wanted nothing more than to join Squall in bed and feel the man against him and inhale his scent again. It would be so easy to let Squall decide for now. If Squall wanted to stick by him and risk everything, then how could he deny him? Even if it was so fucking wrong.
He rubbed his face tiredly. He'd managed to push the memories away before. He'd sworn he'd do it for Squall so he could show the man a good time. Getting up from the couch, he walked over to the sink and filled a glass with water. Could he do it again? Probably not with Winhill coming up. The mere thought made him tense up. How could he even go through with Winhill? How could he ask Squall to do that for him? What good could even come from it? They'd just be digging into memories that were better left alone.

Or maybe he'd finally be able to forgive himself.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply as he tried to imagine what it might feel like. Relief. Absolution. No more of this crushing guilt. Squall by his side, smiling and unequivocally his.

Anything might be possible. They had to try.

Pushing away from the counter after emptying the glass of water, he walked to the bedroom door. Past be damned, he would clean up and indulge in Squall's closeness. After Winhill he might not get another chance. Lowering the handle, he opened the door to the bedroom gently. Squall was lying on his back on the bed, lost to thought. The quick smoothing of the man's expression into an blank mask had come just a second too slow, belying the impassive gaze that turned Seifer's way.

"...I'm taking a shower," Seifer said awkwardly, the words sounding absurd after all the harsh things he'd hurled Squall's way. Grabbing a clean pair of boxers, he hurried into the bathroom.

Flicking on the lights inside the small room, he was met by his reflection and grimaced. It had been a while since he'd seen those dark circles beneath his eyes and a paleness that had nothing to do with a lack of sunshine. He ran his hand under the cold tap and through his hair. He brushed his teeth on autopilot, getting rid of the stale taste of alcohol and vomit, and stripped down. The moment he entered the shower a flood of recent memories descended on him. Squall leaning back against the tiled wall, lips parting to let out panting breaths as Seifer stroked him to completion. Soft gasps that left the brunet as he fucked him from behind. Squall's warm skin, wet and smooth. Hard muscles wherever he touched. A deeply passionate kiss.

He'd never be able to shower in here again without thinking about Squall. He closed his eyes and washed as quickly as possible, while trying to rein in his straying thoughts. Nothing would ever be the same after what they'd started. There was no going back.

Turning off the spray, he grabbed a towel and dried off his hair. A brief pat over the rest of his body would do. He needed sleep, he could no longer deny it. Slipping into his boxers, he turned the lights off and dumped the towel to the floor. When he entered the bedroom, Squall was still awake, the man's eyes once again drifting over to where he was standing. They followed him all the way over to the bed, but Squall didn't speak. The man's retreat behind a carefully collected facade told him just how badly he'd fucked up.

Lifting up the duvet on his side of the bed, Seifer lowered himself onto the mattress, his muscles getting heavier by the second. He was so fucking spent. Hardly any sleep the previous night, a taxing day and a clusterfuck of an evening. He sighed, then looked over at Squall. For the first time in days it felt hard to breach the distance between them, but there was no way he'd fall asleep like this. He turned on his side and scooted closer, then moved his arm until it was resting across Squall's stomach. The tense lines of Squall's expression softened in response, ever so slightly. Another shift and he was pressed up against the man, his nose touching soft locks. When Squall turned his head to meet his gaze, he captured the man's lips and instigated a slow kiss that finally doused the tension that had clung to him ever since he'd left the apartment. Squall readily accepted it, the man's arms wrapping around him.
They kissed like that for a while, the closeness of the act enough to silence all the thoughts that had been swarming in his head. Squall's skin was soft underneath his fingers. No space was left between them. Squall was holding onto him, the man's hands firm against him. Every single move was laced with longing, a deep need that had grown since they'd last touched like this. He moved on top and guided the man's shirt up and off, needing to feel all of him.

Releasing an unsteady breath, Squall drew Seifer close against him. Part of him knew he was letting Seifer pull all of his strings, in whatever order the man pleased, but he couldn't help but need this. The sense of rejection Seifer had afflicted him with, however short-lived, had been enough to rob him of any chance at sleep. He didn't dare question what had brought the man back into the bed they'd shared for days now. All he wanted was for Seifer to erase his earlier words with something more potent.

Their reconciliation was almost painful for the relief it brought him. He let Seifer take whatever the man wanted from him. Kisses, caresses, every dangerous expression of intimacy he feared. When Seifer stopped to study his face, Squall could only look back with open honesty and hope that it was enough for now. He couldn't bring himself to speak.

Pulling Seifer back down for more deep kisses, he let out an encouraging sound when the man tugged at his underwear. He lifted up his hips, his boxers discarded within seconds. Seifer's naked body covered his, flushing Squall to his core with more than just arousal. This felt too fragile to call it mere lust.

Seifer's hands snuck between them, raising his legs into position. He couldn't quite recall when Seifer had grabbed the lube, but the man started to apply a generous amount on both of them. Two fingers pushed into him slickly, just enough to ease their passage before retreating. And then Seifer was inside him. A gasp, and he unraveled.

Seifer's thrusts weren't dominating nor were they gentle. Slowly but surely Seifer was taking possession of him. Those warm lips never relinquished his, every bit of touch used to reestablish connection. His legs were bent back at an unforgiving angle to allow for the closeness, but Squall's only thought was to tighten his hold even further. The waves of pleasure that rolled through him washed away all else. It didn't take either of them very long to come, Seifer following him closely behind.

His exhaustion hit him full force the moment his orgasm receded into a pleasant buzz. His eyes fell closed, only to open again when Seifer slid out of him and lowered his legs to the bed. The man proceeded to quickly wipe both of them down with a handful of tissues. Just as well. Squall didn't think he had it in him to bother. After the catharsis of sex, all he wanted was sleep. He only barely remembered to set his phone's alarm. They'd only get a few hours of sleep at best.

Seifer settled in next to him, pulling him close when he made no move to budge. He was kissed again, the feeling of coarse whiskers and the scent of minty toothpaste mingling with fading alcohol following him into his dreams.

~ o ~
Forced Honesty

[Seifer Almasy's Apartment, Zayin House, Tuesday, 28th of October, 6:00 am]

When the alarm went off Squall felt like he'd only just managed to fall asleep. Screwing his eyes back shut, he groaned out a soft sigh. His day's schedule stretched out before him, potential disaster lurking behind every corner. To tackle it all with this little sleep was a daunting prospect. Telling himself he'd dealt with much worse in the past, he cautiously disentangled himself from Seifer's hold and pushed up to sit at the edge of the bed. The chill air lined his naked form with goose bumps. His boxer briefs and shirt still lay where they'd been discarded on the floor.

He looked behind him, his gaze landing on Seifer's face slack with sleep. The man hadn't even stirred. An unease fell over him as he sat there considering the lines of exhaustion etched onto Seifer's face. When the blond had slipped back into bed with him unexpectedly he'd been too tired and distraught to question any of it, but what little relief he'd felt at finding himself back in Seifer's embrace now failed to materialize. Seifer's words still stood between them. The man had offered no excuses, no promises. As for Seifer's touch... He hadn't known sex could be so raw; such a desperate necessity.

This morning was a far cry from how they'd woken up at the palace. It seemed impossible that only a day had passed since then. The small measure of confidence he'd found after that amazing night had mostly evaporated now. He couldn't even be sure what Seifer would say or do the moment the man awoke. For all he knew, Seifer hadn't changed his mind at all.

Squall frowned at being plagued by such discouraging thoughts first thing in the morning. Kneading his temple, he got up from the bed and grabbed a fresh pair of underwear. He had to get going, had to get ready. One task at a time. And a shower might just clear his head a little.

Forcing his sluggish moves into a more acceptable pace, he entered the bathroom and got into the shower after emptying his bladder. He set the temperature on a far colder setting than he would've preferred. Letting the water shock him awake, he went about his morning routine quickly, without much eye for detail. His hair would just dry at whatever angle it wanted to anyway, and no amount of grooming could undo the circles under his eyes.

Back in the bedroom, he kept his gaze away from the sleeping blond and focused on getting dressed. He cast his uniform a disheartened look as it hung innocently off its hanger and sighed, resigning himself to the inevitable discomfort of wearing it for an entire morning. Moves rushed, he pulled on the stiff fabric and strapped on the ridiculous amount of insignia and decorative contraptions. As if no one would take him seriously if he didn't show up with his every accomplishment pinned onto his chest.

A brief glance at the bed reassured him that Seifer would remain fast asleep a while longer. He knew he was avoiding the man; also knew that he couldn't afford to.

Coffee first.

Leaving the bedroom with a soft click of the door, he aborted his short trek to the kitchen when he spotted the glass shards still lying scattered on the floor on the far side of the living area. The whiskey had dried onto the wall in unsightly brown splatters. The room reeked of it.

He froze in place as he recalled the grimace of rage on Seifer's face. The impact of shattering glass. The shock of that booming voice, yelling at him, telling him to hit the man.
Frowning, Squall walked to the kitchen to wet a cloth and grab the small bin underneath the sink. One by one, he tossed the glass shards into the bin before wiping the floor. The stained wall improved only little with his efforts. A window would've been good to air out the stale room, but for now this would have to do.

He returned to the kitchen and set the bin and cloth away. Next he switched on the coffee machine and prepared himself a simple breakfast of dry toast. There'd be catering at the meeting in case his hunger managed to break past his exhaustion, so he didn't bother with attempting more. He set up his laptop on the coffee table for the customary final read-through of all the relevant files, his meager breakfast and medication set alongside it. His eyes skimmed over the words, the numbers, the names of all attending people. The lines blurred into meaningless scribbles, his tired brain unable to absorb any of it. His toast lay forgotten in his hand.

The meeting was important. A lot was at stake. But in that moment he couldn't bring himself to care. All he could think about was the man in the other room.

Seifer's drunken homecoming had been a crude reality check. It had been the most volatile episode yet. They were getting worse, closer together in time. Squall knew with certainty now that it was because of him. His presence was raking up everything Seifer had tried to put behind him. All his hopes were pinned on Winhill now.

If he even managed to get Seifer all the way to Ellone, let alone without any major incidents. Suddenly the thought of Seifer going to Odine's by himself seemed like a monumentally stupid idea. The doctor would pry and ask questions about Seifer's knighthood. Even if Seifer ignored those and stuck with the magic tests... It would do nothing to relax the man. It could set off another episode.

His phone had found its way into his hand, his finger lingering just above Quistis's number. He grit his teeth as he realized the futility of trying to reason with the woman. She'd understand his distress better than most, but she wouldn't condone his absence. If he didn't show up today, that would be the death of their plans. It would be considered a grave insult and an excuse to box any further mention of Esthar Garden. Quistis would not forgive him as easily as she had the day before.

He had to go to the meeting.

He couldn't let Seifer go see Odine by himself.

Laguna and Quistis were required to attend the meeting themselves. He couldn't count on either of them to stand by Seifer. There was only one other person he could trust with this; someone who would care enough to bother. His finger moved to her number. They hadn't parted well. It was probably wildly inappropriate of him to even consider this. It was also his only option. She would understand.

He called her number before he could change his mind. The ring tone stretched out for a long time, until finally his call was answered.

"Squall?"

Rinoa's voice was thick with sleep, her greeting followed by the sound of rustling sheets. Squall winced inwardly at having woken her up. He'd forgotten all about the early hour in his rush to address the situation. "Sorry to wake you."

"It's okay." Another rustle of fabric sounded as she shifted in her bed. "Aren't you supposed to be getting ready for the meeting?"
He couldn't help but notice the guarded tone to her words, carefully collected in a way he wasn't used to. "I'm leaving soon, but... I need your help."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" came the immediate reply.

"It's Seifer," he said, deciding on bluntness. Better to get it all out in one go. "He has an appointment with Odine this morning. I don't think he's ready to handle it alone. I can't let him go by himself."

A long silence fell as Rinoa processed what he'd just said. "Are you asking me to go with him?"

"Yes."

"Why?" She didn't let him answer, her voice growing agitated. "Why ask that of me? You know how I feel—" She cut herself short, drawing in an unsteady breath.

Squall frowned at her distress, once again feeling like an asshole. "You're the only one I can ask," he explained, suddenly less certain she'd be understanding. He searched for the right words. "Quistis came by last night. I had to tell her—"

"Quistis? At Seifer's place?" Rinoa interrupted, managing to sound both incredulous and worried at the same time.

"She might come to see you as well. Probably after the meeting," he remembered to warn her.

A groan sounded over the line then. "Hyne. I'm sure she won't have anything pleasant to say."

"She's calmed down."

"I bet," Rinoa said with a disbelieving snort. "So she knows about Seifer. How did that go?"

"As well as you would expect," Squall said with a sigh, resting his head back against the couch. He disliked going behind Seifer's back like this, but then again the man had had no qualms in doing the exact same thing. And Rinoa needed to know the full extent of things, especially if she'd be dealing with Seifer in a few hours. "They talked things out in the end, but... She showed him a picture. It was taken at the orphanage, on the beach—"

"I've seen it. The whole gang, playing in the sun, right?"

"That's the one," Squall said. "It made things hard to explain. I had to bring up Matron."

"Oh gods." Her voice was soft then. She'd caught on immediately. "How badly did he take it?"

"He disappeared all night. Got drunk." It was a tame description, but it would have to do. "I need to get him to Winhill, but the way things are now... If he has to deal with Odine as well—" Squall shook his head, refraining from burdening her with the darker aspects of Seifer's trauma. "He might bail."

Rinoa let out a sigh. Another long silence fell as she considered his words. "How would it help if I'm there?" she asked feebly. "Won't I make things worse if I show up? I mean... We don't exactly get along anymore."

She would say yes. She'd go. Squall firmed his voice, pressing on. "Odine won't stop until he has everything he wants. I need you to keep him on track. Stop him from asking questions about Seifer's time as a knight."
"What exactly is he going in for?"

"Magic tests," Squall said. "He needs meds, fine-tuned to him specifically. For his recovery."

"His chances are looking good then?"

"Best to make sure."

"I can't believe you're asking this of me." She sounded beyond tired, her tone clipped with tightly controlled emotion. "But I'll help you. On one condition. Tell me the truth. The whole truth. You owe me that much."

He grew still, his stomach flipping uncomfortably. She could mean only one thing. When he didn't immediately volunteer what she wanted to hear, she pressed on.

"What's going on between you and Seifer?" she asked with a determination that sounded vulnerable to Squall's ears.

"...Rinoa."

"I need to hear you say it." Her voice cracked on the words. "For once in your life I need you to be honest with me. With yourself."

"I—" He pinched the bridge of his nose, unable to see how it would improve anything, but he couldn't afford to ignore Rinoa's ultimatum. He'd had enough fights with her to know when she'd dug in her feet. If he didn't give her what she wanted, then Seifer wouldn't get the help he needed. It was that simple."I'm not sure," he relented, resigned to forced honesty. "Everything's been going so fast..." He trailed off, unable to describe the whirlwind of the past few days any better.

A long silence fell before she spoke again. "Are you sleeping with him?" she asked softly.

Squall winced at the question that left no room for prevarication. They both knew she'd already guessed the answer. "...Yes."

Rinoa drew in a quivering breath at his admission. "With drugs?"

Squall wished she'd never known about that particular lapse in judgment. He couldn't even reasonably explain to himself why he'd done something so spectacularly stupid. "No."

"...Do you love him?"

He scowled at what she demanded of him. "I don't know—"

"Don't lie to me," she said firmly, her voice quivering.

He was stunned into silence by her bluntness. It was unsettling to have her see through him so completely, even without the bond.

"I don't know what love is supposed to feel like," he started over, dreading her next words.

She laughed a miserable laugh. "Yes, you do. I felt it. When you were with him." Her voice turned terribly flat. "Are you really telling me that was just drugs?"

"...No," he heard himself say. "But it doesn't matter."

That stopped her in her tracks for a moment, before she replied with outrage. "How could it
"If he doesn't come to Winhill with me—" he started, hating the emotion in his own voice. "If he can't let go of the war... How I feel won't matter."

Rinoa huffed out another laugh, a trembling and unconvincing sound. "You've always been such an idiot," she said, chiding him in a way that was jarring in its familiarity. "It's never mattered more, silly."

The fondly exasperated tone felt wildly out of place, and her remark made no sense to him. If Seifer couldn't stand to be around him, then there would be nothing he could do about it. He couldn't erase or change their past, no matter how badly he wanted to.

"What time should I be there?"

Squall blinked, having trouble making the jump back into calmer waters. "...Nine."

"If things are really as bad as you say, it's probably for the best if you don't give him a heads-up. Better not give him any extra reason to bail out or refuse help."

When he failed to immediately agree or disagree, she carried on. "Well then... I guess we should get going, huh?" She inhaled deeply, as if steeling herself. "I'll do what I can to help," she promised earnestly. "Call me when you get back from Galbadia, okay?"

"I will."

"Alright... Take care, Squall. Bye."

He looked back at his phone when she hung up. He'd bought Seifer the help he needed, but at what cost he wasn't sure. To give voice to any of it had made it all the more real. Right when it might all end.

Remembering himself, he glanced at the time on his phone. He only had a little time left before he had to leave. He couldn't shirk his responsibilities no matter how much he wanted to and he'd made the necessary arrangements. It was out of his hands now. Either Seifer would show up at the station or he wouldn't.

He got up from the couch and put away his laptop in his work bag. There was nothing else to do before he left. He'd already packed his gear for Galbadia the day before. His two gunblades were impeccably clean and polished as well. He couldn't think of a single other thing to delay him, so he forced himself to walk to the bedroom door.

Opening it at a crack, he peered inside before pushing it wide open. Seifer hadn't moved an inch since he'd last looked at him, the man still sound asleep. He had to wake him. At the very least he had to announce that he was going to the meeting and make it clear that he still expected them to go to Galbadia.

"Seifer," he called out, remaining in the doorway. When the man grumbled incoherently, only to roll onto his side and burrow further underneath the duvet, Squall let out a sigh and walked up to the foot of the bed. "Seifer," he repeated more loudly.

Grimacing, Seifer brought a hand up to knead at his eyes. It was a fucking crime to pull him out of such deep sleep, when he felt so Hyne-damned tired.

"What?" he grumbled, not moving a single muscle.
"I have to go. The meeting."

Turning around under the duvet to face Squall, Seifer bravely attempted to open his eyes. At the end of the bed, he could make out Squall's silhouette, all dressed up and ready. In uniform.

"What's the time?"

"Almost seven," Squall replied, feeling his own exhaustion more keenly when confronted with Seifer's. When no reply was forthcoming, he grabbed the gear he'd packed for the trip along with Lion Heart's case. Revolver would have to stay behind for the sake of traveling light. He walked to the door, stalling before he turned in the doorway. "Train leaves at twelve thirty," he reminded in an even tone, as if he wasn't plagued by doubt. At least one of them had to remain firm and confident if this was to work. "I'll meet you at the platform."

"Alright," Seifer said, before rolling over and closing his eyes again.

Squall let go of the breath he'd been holding. The mumbled response wasn't exactly ringing with enthusiasm, but at least it was an affirmative. "Don't forget your appointment with Odine."

"Yes, Commander," came the sleepy reply, muffled by the blond's pillow.

The brief sign of levity, however slight, further eased him. Any other time the condescension might have rankled him, but it was a vast improvement compared to the previous evening. Glancing at his phone, he spared one last look at Seifer's turned back. He definitely needed to go now if he didn't want to be late.

"I'm off."

Listening as Squall left the bedroom and then the apartment, Seifer rubbed at his brow and temples. He was still exhausted, but Squall had reminded him of everything he needed to prepare for. He'd hoped to squeeze in another hour of sleep before getting up, but he hadn't packed a single thing for their trip. He rolled onto his back, spread out his limbs and let out a deep sigh. There was no way he could go back to sleep now.

Pushing away the duvet, he planted his feet firmly on the floor and ran a hand through his hair. Discarded tissues were strewn around, proof of what he and Squall had been up to just before falling asleep. He'd needed to be inside Squall so badly and Squall had craved it too. It had been enough to take the edge off the chasm he'd created between them, but not enough to fully bridge it. He'd fucked up so badly yet he still meant every word he'd said.

He knew he should end it, but with Winhill just around the corner there was no way he could. It was beyond selfish to ask this of Squall, but he wanted answers and he damned well wanted Squall. If there was any chance Winhill could fix it all, then he'd take that chance. And if they were on borrowed time, then he'd make every last second count. If Squall would let him after the scene he'd caused.

Picking up the used tissues from the floor, he dumped them in the bathroom trash can and glanced at himself in the mirror. He looked like a fucking zombie come back to life. Brushing his teeth and cleaning himself up, he got ready for the day. First Odine's lab and then their trip. He'd take the first as it came, no use in wasting more energy on the imp than necessary.

Putting on some clothes, he proceeded to grab everything he'd need for their trip and stuffed it in a duffel bag. Getting the sleeping bag from the back of his cupboard, he attached it to the bag and grabbed his tent from underneath his bed. Turning off the lights in the bathroom and bedroom, he
looked over the mess. Not much different from how he usually left it before going on a trip. He'd deal with it when he came back. Slinging the duffel bag and tent over his shoulder, he grabbed Kronos and exited the bedroom.

His eyes fell to the cushion still lying where he'd placed it on the couch the night before. Where he'd intended to sleep. He was relieved he hadn't let things end that way. Reaching the couch, he dropped the bag and tent to the floor and set down his gunblade case. His eyes were drawn to the new stains on his wall. No shards. Squall had picked them up. He'd yelled at the man to leave, but Squall had stayed. Squall had waited up for him, had dealt with his drunken bullshit at an ungodly hour, all on a night before an important meeting.

He looked over at the front door, wishing he'd demanded a kiss before Squall had left. He hadn't even had the fucking brain power to fully take in the sight of Squall in commander gear and he'd been looking forward to that like a dog in heat. Shit, he missed the man already.

Grabbing the phone in his pocket, he navigated to Squall's nickname and typed out a message, but just before pressing 'send' his fingers stilled. He'd fucking hurt Squall, yet here he was, about to send the man a flirty message. But there was no way he'd apologize or grovel for forgiveness, not when he still meant it all. This would have to do. It was the only way to deal with this that wouldn't lead to them having the exact same argument all over again. Squall would know what it meant. That he still wanted him and that he'd go through with their plan. He pressed send.

- Message to SexLion / 7:40 am / Morning Princess. I'm packed and ready to go. Couldn't fall back asleep. Need your lips on mine and a whole lot more. See you on the train. -

Not expecting a reply, he almost put away his phone, but instead his fingers quickly tapped out another message.

- Message to SexLion / 7:43 am / Wear your commander gear for me soon. I promise I won't behave. -

Pocketing his phone, he walked over to the kitchen to grab breakfast when his gaze was drawn by an empty glass on the counter. A note was folded up beneath it. Frowning, he lifted the glass and unfolded the piece of paper.

*Sorry I couldn't wait around to say goodbye. I just want you to know how glad I am we got to meet again. In a way you probably won't understand yet, you're like family to me. The same way the others are my family too. You're stuck with me, whether you like it or not. So next time I'm in the city, I'm coming to see that class of yours. Maybe sample some more of your cooking.*

*And Seifer, ease up on the flirting. I might just get the impression you have eyes for my Commander.*

*Take care,*

*Quistis*

*023 158 296 36*

Unable to believe Quistis had actually left him such a friendly message, especially after the scene he'd caused just before storming off, he reread it a second time. It was beyond surreal that Quistis considered him family and wanted to spend more time with him. Just as surreal as her offer for him to return to Garden. He smiled at the last line of her note. Getting his phone back out, he added her number to his list of contacts and sent her a text.
He just couldn't let the opportunity to mess with her pass him by. When his mind immediately summoned Squall's reprimanding glare, he chuckled softly. The man would hate him seeding suspicion in Quistis's mind like this. But hey, it'd look a hell of a lot more suspicious if he was gay and didn't try to get into Squall's pants.

His phone buzzed.

- Message from Headmistress / 7:51 am / Did you just text Squall? -

His fingers flew across the screen.

- Message to Headmistress / 7:52 am / I did. Why? -

- Message from Headmistress / 7:53 am / Maybe keep a lid on whatever it is you're doing. I can't have him distracted like that during the meeting. -

Oh yes. He'd managed to stir a reaction from Squall. Even if he hadn't heard from the man himself, his purpose had been served. There was no way he could stop himself from sending the man another message.

- Message to SexLion / 7:54 am / Already imagining it? Your fly undone, your hands in my hair and your cock pressing into the back of my throat. I'd take it all. Suck you dry. -

With a wide grin, he hurried to send off another message to the Headmistress-to-be as well.

- Message to Headmistress / 7:55 am / There. Last one. Promise. -

- Message from Headmistress / 7:55 am / Don't make me confiscate his phone. -

Chuckling at Quistis's instant fallback to instructor mode, Seifer wished he could've seen Squall's expression.

- Message to Headmistress / 7:56 am / Told you. I'm done. I know what's at stake. -

- Message from Headmistress / 7:56 am / So you can actually manage restraint? Good to know. -

Another message appeared a few seconds later.

- Message from Headmistress / 7:57 am / We need to go in now. Good luck in Galbadia. I'll keep in touch. -

At the thought of Squall and Quistis heading in for their meeting, about to kick some Estharian bureaucrat ass, Seifer smiled and sent a reply. He'd have to get on with his own preparations as well.

- Message to Headmistress / 7:57 am / Enjoy the view while I can't. See you around, Quistis. -

Glancing at the provocative messages he'd sent a final time, he grinned and set his phone aside to fix himself a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. Some of his grogginess lifted as he took a healthy gulp of the black liquid. Digging into his breakfast next, he considered his one-time instructor. His eyes fell to the woman's note again, penned in a careful and elegant hand. It was definitely weird to have Quistis back in his life, in a different way than he'd ever imagined. It even seemed like they
could get along. Who would've thought.

Taking another sip of his coffee, he considered any future visits. If she'd ever mention the war or Edea again, he'd show her to the curb, but as long as she stayed clear of their past, he was game. It'd be interesting to let her sit in on one of his classes and he'd be more than happy to show her what Garden was missing out on. He got out his pills from Odine and swallowed them along with some more coffee as he mulled over the possibilities. Maybe he'd even take her up on her offer to become a Garden instructor at some point. If the plans for Esthar Garden came through that was. He'd never go back to Balamb Garden or any of the other Gardens, but a new Garden close by could work. He'd be able to fit it in on top of what he did at Arc's instead of his work at the SCTA. And he'd definitely make it work if it meant he got to be around a certain commander.

Catching himself, he snorted at just how quickly he'd gotten ahead of himself again. Just one unguarded moment and he'd been imagining a future where they were together. It had been so easy to imagine something like that after their stay at the palace. Fuck, Laguna had been one hundred percent on the money. He had it bad for Squall. The rival of his teens. The coldest bastard on the planet and he wanted to run off into the sunset with the man. Despite their fucking past.

Running a hand through his hair, he grabbed his things, then checked the time on his phone. He had to get going, but when he reached the front door, he stopped in place and looked back into the apartment with sudden reluctance. As much as he had wanted to get out on the road, it felt strange to leave. He'd made his first move on Squall here. They'd escaped their unforgiving past for a few amazing days. Whatever they were setting out for now... It could easily end badly. There were no guarantees. Taking a deep breath, he walked out the door.

~ o ~
Brittle Poise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Odine's Laboratory, Chimera District, Tuesday, 28th of October, 8:42 am ]

"Okay," Rinoa said, looking at herself in the rearview mirror of her sedan. "You can do this."

Her reflection didn't seem convinced. Frowning, she studied her face critically. Only a slight puffiness to her eyes remained, any lingering redness expertly concealed with a quick dab of makeup. She was determined not to show Seifer a single trace of sorrow or jealousy. She would handle this with poise and grace.

Somehow.

Pinching her cheeks to coax some more color into them, she let out a sigh. She hadn't slept well since breaking the bond and it showed in the lines of her face. When she did manage to fall asleep, more often than not she would startle awake in a panic, groping for a connection that was no longer there. It always took her a few seconds to remember.

Squall wasn't making things easy for her. Just thinking of him with Seifer wrenched her heart, summoning all manner of petty thoughts. Her earlier conversation with Squall repeated in her head over and over. Squall was in love with Seifer. They were together.

And the most frustrating part was that she could sort of see why. She couldn't even pretend that it was some rebound experiment doomed to fail or some cruel long con that Seifer was pulling on Squall. She'd come to know both men rather well, having dated one and loved the other. For all their differences, they had a lot in common. They'd shared a whole childhood together and years of SeeD training after that. They were forged from the same fire.

This was the real deal. Or at least it was for Squall.

"Get a hold of yourself," she admonished with a shake of the head. Her eyes were starting to sting again. Every time she thought she'd shed her last tears, she managed to prove herself wrong. She fanned her face with her hands and fought down the tightness that had started to constrict her throat.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Suck it up.

When she'd finally managed to regain enough calm, she put on her coat and scarf, grabbed her purse and got out of the car. She'd already scanned the parking lot when first pulling in and hadn't spotted Seifer's pickup truck yet. She'd made sure to be the first to arrive so she could have the time she needed to mentally prepare herself. Walking to the stairs in front of the lab building's entrance, she went to sit down on the highest step.

She immediately regretted it the moment she was overcome by an unsettling sense of déjà vu. The hour was around the same time she'd met Squall for the breaking of their bond. The wind had been sharp that morning too, tussling her loose hair and blowing it in her face as she'd sat waiting for her knight in that exact spot. Jumping back onto her feet, she pulled her hair up into a ponytail with a hair tie she found at the bottom of her purse. Shoving her hands into her pockets, she burrowed deeper into her scarf and walked back to the bottom of the stairs.
She cast a quick glance at her phone. Not that much longer now.

Unless Seifer would be late. It had been an annoying habit of the blond when they'd been dating. She'd always waited for him, stupidly gullible whenever he'd made his unlikely excuses. He'd stood her up more times than she could count. In retrospect she'd realized the guy had been a lousy boyfriend, but she'd been naive and crushing hard. He'd had that bad boy charisma down pat; the kind of over the top swagger and cockiness that would cause her to roll her eyes if she'd see it now. He'd been the perfect irritant to bring home to her father. Or so she'd thought. She'd gotten ahead of herself, dumped after only a brief summer fling.

She couldn't help but wonder if he was any more boyfriend material now than he'd been back then. Maybe he was different when dating someone he was actually attracted to. Maybe he'd grown up. Maybe he wouldn't treat Squall any better.

Scowling at the train of thought that seemed intent on painting Seifer in a bad light, Rinoa reminded herself that Squall hadn't been a saint either. Far more respectful, sure, and ever so loyal, but he'd rarely been around. Squall had been the epitome of distant and aloof. At least Seifer had slung his arm around her when they'd walked around town, pulling her close and making her feel special whenever he'd bothered to actually show up.

For a brief moment she wished that they'd be miserable together. Mr. Something-Came-Up and Mr. Never-Around. They deserved each other.

Catching herself, she winced at the return of such ugly thoughts. Poise and grace, she reminded herself, unclenching her fists as she inwardly repeated the mantra several times. She was here to help. Seifer needed her. No matter how hurt she was, she still cared for the aggravating blond. If she could help him cope even a little, then it would be worth it. And if he was going to be a permanent fixture in Squall's life, then she would need to learn how to be around him.

Her noble resolve to be the perfect ex-girlfriend was abruptly shattered when she spotted Seifer pulling into the parking lot. Her pulse sped up as her eyes followed the dark green pickup truck. She knew he wouldn't be happy to find her here. Taking a few steadying breaths, she conjured a pleasant and friendly expression.

He was walking towards the building now, but he hadn't spotted her yet. He didn't look like he was in the best of moods, his brow knotted into a frown. When he was within earshot, she waved and called out his name.

"Seifer!"

Looking up at the familiar voice, Seifer raised an eyebrow at the sight that greeted him. Mystified, he looked behind him to check if Squall was there only to realize that the raven-haired woman had called his name.

"Rinoa," he greeted with a frown while crossing the remaining distance. The fact that she didn't seem the least bit surprised to see him left him with a growing sense of unease.

"Good morning," Rinoa replied cordially, her gaze flitting over Seifer's appearance. He definitely looked like he'd been out on a bender all night, the circles under his eyes even worse than her own.

"What're you doing here?" Seifer asked, unable to muster the energy to put on a fake expression of friendliness himself.

"I figured you could use some company," the young woman said, as if it was a perfectly normal
thing for her to do. "Believe me, I know how much it sucks to go in by yourself."

"You're here for me?" He wasn't sure his eyebrows could rise any higher.

"No, I'm here for Odine's sparkling conversation," Rinoa replied with an eye roll. "Of course I'm here for you." She shivered as another cold gust of wind swept her face. "Are you ready to go in? It's chilly out here."

Standing at the bottom of the steps, Seifer didn't know what to make of it. Why the hell was she there? Last they'd spoken, she'd hung up on him after holding back sobs when he'd asked her what Squall had felt for him that terrible night he'd first slept with Squall. So much had happened since then, but none of it made it more plausible for her to be standing here, waiting for him, wanting to accompany him for an appointment with Odine. How had she even found out he was going in today? Only two other people knew of his appointment: Laguna and Squall.

"Squall put you up to this," he accused lowly even though it made little sense.

"He knows what it's like," Rinoa said, rubbing her hands together. "And I don't want you to go in alone any more than he does. Now let's go."

Scowling at the realization that Squall didn't think he could handle a simple meeting with the imp on his own, Seifer stood still as Rinoa started up the stairs. She cast a look over her shoulder to check if he was coming. "I don't need a babysitter," he said sourly, moving to catch up with her.

"I'm not here to babysit. I'm here to help. Just like when you went in with Squall."

"I don't need any help. I can handle the imp just fine." When Rinoa just continued walking on ahead as if she hadn't even heard him, he groaned. "Any chance I can persuade you to leave?" he grumbled. It had been one of her annoying habits when they'd been dating to always insert herself whenever she thought he needed to be cheered up or distracted.

"None whatsoever," she replied sweetly, pushing open the door for him.

He'd so have Squall's ass for this. Not only did he have to deal with Odine, but now Rinoa as well. It was going to be awkward as hell. Their last few interactions had been strained to say the least. Shit, most of their conversations lately had ended with them yelling at each other. How in hell did Squall think her presence would help? If anything, the man should be worried about her figuring out just what they'd started.

He cursed under his breath as he walked through the large hall where he'd been waiting around for the meds with Laguna, then glanced at the young woman beside him. Her being there made no sense. He'd fought her in a war, had thrown her into the arms of a mad Sorceress and had slept with her boyfriend while she'd been able to feel it all. How the hell could she look past all that? But she didn't seem affected, just kept a composed front and looked determined. And she definitely knew her way around, taking the lead.

"Squall told me you come here a lot," he commented as he looked at her more closely.

Rinoa frowned, thinking back to all the times she'd come here alone. Squall had always tried to make her appointments, but more often than not he'd been away on missions. Just two weeks ago she'd had to go in on her own because his meeting had dragged on. But for Seifer, Squall had made sure someone would be there in his stead. Quelling the stab of jealousy, she refused to be bitter about it. Seifer's circumstances were different. "I'm afraid so," she answered belatedly.

Seifer knew things had to have been bad for that to be the case. As bad as an unhealing scar
marring Squall's back. He immediately killed the thought. Anger over something that had happened over half a year ago, over an event that had nothing to do with him would not be of any help in this. "Not a fan of Odine either?"

Rinoa huffed. "He's a nasty little man," she said as they walked over to the hover lifts. "His patients are nothing more than test subjects to him. He only cares about his experiments. If it was up to him, I'd be permanently locked up in a research facility."

"Then he'd have two ex-knights and a president on his ass," Seifer said lowly, surprised by the strength of his resolve on the matter. "I'm not sure he'd fare so well."

The sentiment had Rinoa glance up at Seifer, her hand falling away from the hover lift's call button. Her smile became a little less feigned when she detected no lie in Seifer's statement. "Don't worry about it. Laguna keeps a tight leash on him, so Odine knows his limits," she reassured, before adding, "Well, most of the time anyway."

She received only a nod in reply, the man filing onto the lift's platform after her. She tried to read Seifer's demeanor, tried to find the signs that would confirm Squall's assessment of his mental state. "Did you sit through all of Squall's tests when you were last here?" she asked as the floors whizzed by on their ascent.

"Most," Seifer replied, thinking back to the day in question. It had been Hyne-dammed boring, yet the outcome had changed his life for good. "The physical tests took the longest, but I'm not doing those. The magic tests mostly just involved casting spells of increasing strength."

Watching the slight frown play out on Seifer's brow, Rinoa could guess at what was going through his head. "Laguna told me it wasn't pretty. But Squall wasn't taking any meds at the time. You're both doing much better now, right?"

"Yeah, much better," Seifer agreed, his lips tugging upwards at the corners as he recalled their day out in the desert. "Did he tell you we went out to Behema Sands?"

"He didn't," Rinoa replied. Quistis had phoned her up and grilled her about it instead. That particular stretch of desert was deadly to anyone who went in without magic. She had been worried sick. A ding signaled the end of their ride up to Odine's lair, the force field that enclosed them falling away. Stepping off the lift platform, she looked at Seifer. "Your magic can't be all that bad if you made it back out."

Seifer nodded. "Squall was in great form. You should have seen him. He was a fucking god on that field." He recalled how Squall had slain the horde of Grand Mantises; how the man had created a path of solid ice for him as he'd rushed up onto the Catoblepas' back. "We cleared the mission in record time."

Rinoa's eyebrows rose further at such honest admiration. She knew firsthand just how impressive Squall was in battle, but she hadn't thought it possible for Seifer to acknowledge anyone's excellence but his own. "I guess this is just a formality then. To get you better meds?"

"I guess so," Seifer said, with a shrug, happy enough with the pills he was already on. "Odine said it might help to do a comparative study. Last time it didn't seem likely Squall would bounce back the way he has. I thought this could help. Maybe it still can."

Looking ahead to the big doors that would lead them into Odine's personal lab, Rinoa frowned. It sounded invasive and she'd bet Odine had greatly exaggerated the benefit to either ex-knight. "The situation has changed. You can't let Odine dictate the terms. Anything he suggests without outside
cajoling is for his own benefit, trust me."

"I'm sure it is," Seifer said, pushing open the doors that had been manned by palace guards the last time he'd been here.

Following after Seifer, Rinoa let out a soft sigh at finding herself back at Odine's lab so soon. The feelings and memories associated with the place hadn't improved after the breaking of the bond. They moved through the first room filled with machinery and continued to where Odine waited, the man looking visibly excited when he jumped down from his desk chair, clipboard in hand.

"Mister Almasy," he said in a show of feigned welcome, the gleam in his eyes a tad too fanatical. His cheer lessened however when he spotted her at Seifer's side. "...and Miss Heartilly. To what do I owe ze pleasure? Your next appointment isn't for anozer week."

"It isn't," she agreed, unfazed. "I'm accompanying Seifer. I thought it might be helpful for him to have someone around who knows how this works. The commander himself suggested it."

Seifer watched as the doctor snorted and let out a "Yes yes," while making a dismissive hand gesture. Already he felt his temper flare, not one bit endeared by the doctor's welcome.

"His other guardian angel called just an hour ago. You can forego your posturing for today. Ze gentleman is quite safe wiz me."

Raising an eyebrow at Odine referring to Squall and who he assumed to be Laguna as his guardian angels, Seifer moved to stand tall in front of the doctor. He didn't need anyone's protection. "What's the plan?"

"I vill need ze same data zat I gathered for Commander Leonhart," Odine said, unperturbed. "Of course a true comparison vill be difficult due to ze medication and ze difference in time since ze breaking of ze bonds, but we may still glean a lot from ze results." He walked back to his desk, rifling through the papers on his clipboard. "We vill begin with an in-depth interview, followed with magic tests and after zat you're off to floor five. An assistant vill run you through ze standard physical tests."

"No physical," Seifer refused, crossing his arms. "There's no point. I'm at the top of my game."

"Is zat supposed to impress me?" Odine replied, glancing up from his papers. "Your top game, your worst; it's meaningless to me without a baseline to work with. Now if you will sit down." He pointed to the two chairs set up opposite to his desk. "Let's begin ze interview."

About to tell the doctor where to stuff his physical, Rinoa beat him to it. "He's in perfect health," she said with a tone of finality. "Put that in your file for a baseline. And let's get the magic tests out of the way first."

Seifer chuckled lowly at Rinoa's direct approach, realizing that this was most likely why Squall had enlisted her. Sneaky bastard.

Odine stared at her, a vein in his forehead popping ominously. "Does my scientific method displease you, miss Heartilly?" he said, his voice dripping with condescension. "Decades of dedication to ze field, hundreds of successful experiments, yet you know better?"

"What I know is that Seifer has to be somewhere else soon," she said tartly. "He doesn't have all morning. His recovery takes priority and the magic tests are key to that." She walked over and picked the clipboard out of Odine's hands, earning herself a scandalized look. "And I want to take a look at these questions first."
Seifer was lapping it all up—Rinoa's no-nonsense approach and Odine's growing incredulity. The way Odine's face was growing redder by the second was just the icing on the cake. Rinoa had definitely learned how to deal with the imp.

"Give zat back zis instant!" the doctor fumed angrily. "Zis is a violation of ze confidentiality between doctor and patient!"

Rinoa huffed and shook her head at that precious line. She still remembered how Odine had taken advantage of her fear and confusion during her first appointments with him, forcing her to answer some very personal questions about the nature of her bond and relationship with Squall.

"What do you say?" she said, glancing over at Seifer. "Do I have your permission to go over this and sheer it down to the essentials?" She let the many pages flip through her fingers to get her point across. "While you and Odine get started on the magic tests?"

Seifer widened his grin as the doctor launched into a shrill complaint.

"I vill do no such thing until you give back my questionnaire unmolested!"

"Feel free to take your grievances up with your boss," Rinoa said with a shrug. "But I'm sure we both know how that will end."

Odine reddened further with the effort it took to bite back the curses he no doubt wanted to fling at her. "Zis is no way to work! If ze results are skewed, let it be on your head!"

"I'm pretty sure it'll be on your head," Seifer commented with a smug smirk. Maybe a thank you was in order the next time he saw Squall after all. "I agree with Rinoa. Magic first, then questions, and sure," he said, looking over at Rinoa, "Trim away."

"There you have it," Rinoa said to Odine. "Now that you know what to do, let's get started."

The doctor cast her a particularly narrow-eyed look, too calculating for her liking. "No matter," he said, affecting a resigned nonchalance that did nothing to fool her. "He's not my only subject, and he certainly isn't ze most interesting."

His implication was clear. Dependent as she was on his help, she would be stuck with him long after Seifer and Squall had moved on with their treatments. Anything she did now to annoy the petty man, he would no doubt make her pay for in the future.

"How fortunate for you," she said evenly, before picking a black marker off his desk. She walked towards Seifer and met his gaze. "Ready?"

Seifer nodded, eager to get it over and done with. He hadn't missed Odine's underhanded tactic, how the doctor had implied he'd get Rinoa back for this. It made him want to throttle the imp again, but he swallowed the urge and focused on getting them out of there as soon as possible instead. "Where are we doing the magic tests? Same place as last time?"

"Such remarkable deductive skills, Mr. Almasy," Odine replied snidely. "It is a wonder I am needed at all." He stalked off without another glance, clearly expecting them to follow.

Rinoa rolled her eyes at the contrived insult. Seifer's eyes flashed with anger, but to her relief the blond refrained from taking the bait. They followed Odine to the magic testing chamber, the door already standing open to admit its newest occupant. Glancing at the reinforced glass window that offered a view of the chamber from the lab, Rinoa realized she'd never been on the observing side for this. The multitude of angry scratches that Griever had left behind on the glass were still there,
an eerie reminder that this could still go wrong.

"In you go," the doctor said impatiently, waving his arms to herd Seifer inside.

Rinoa held out a hand and halted Seifer before he could walk into the chamber. "If you need to stop the tests, just give me a sign," she reassured. "I'll be right here. I can step in and draw your GF the moment you need me to." Even if she hadn't junctioned or touched minds with a GF since the war, she still had the ability to do this. She would keep him safe.

Holding Rinoa's gaze, realization dawned on Seifer. It hadn't just been Rinoa's experience with Odine that had led Squall to request Rinoa's help. She could draw. She could step in, the same way he had with Squall. He nodded, accepting the help he'd so blatantly refused upon spotting her at the lab.

Seifer's silent nod was all the agreement Rinoa needed. The boy she knew from her past would've interpreted her offer as a slight and would've declined with harsh words. Seifer had changed more than she'd initially given him credit for.

Watching as he walked into the chamber, she felt a sympathetic twinge of claustrophobia when Odine closed the heavy metal door behind the blond, but Seifer betrayed no sign of unease as he walked to stand on the blue dot painted on the floor. Rinoa held her breath. Beside her, Odine turned on the mic and addressed the man.

"I see here you have three GFs. Name zem." Yet another clipboard had found its way into Odine's hands, a pen held at the ready to take notes.

//Ifrit, Cerberus and Bahamut.//

The doctor raised an eyebrow at the reply that came through the speakers. "If I'm correct in my assumptions about Ifrit, zen Garden has become very lenient in regards to theft indeed." He scribbled a few quick notes. "Now zere are some interesting passages about Bahamut in Centran lore. You claim to have tamed ze legendary creature?"

"Tests first, questions later," Rinoa reminded, speaking loud enough so that her voice would carry over the mike for Seifer to hear.

Odine let out a long and suffering sigh, before he spoke again. "Name and junction ze GF with ze highest compatibility rating "

//Bahamut.//

The doctor looked excited at that, his gaze evenly distributed between his machines' readings and his test subject. Rinoa pushed back her annoyance with the man and kept a close study of Seifer's face. His eyes turned a soft glowing amber, the color much warmer than the icy silver of Squall's junction with Shiva.

"Cast on my order, over ze red mark," the doctor said, adjusting a final few dials and settings. "Fire."

Rinoa's tension eased when the Fire spell materialized a split second after Odine's order, right where it was supposed to. Seifer didn't look like he'd strained himself at all. Odine ordered a few more of the basic spells before he transitioned into the next level.

"Fira!"
The greater ball of flame whooshed into the air, perfectly timed, perfectly aimed. Rinoa hadn't detected any sign yet that Seifer was less than in perfect control. Keeping half an eye on the proceedings, she turned her attention to the clipboard in her hands. Odine was sufficiently distracted for her to get this done with minimal interference.

Uncapping the marker, she held it at the ready and read over the first page. She frowned when she discovered that more than half of the questions were either intrusive, upsetting or plain inappropriate. But to be fair, Odine couldn't possibly anticipate the upsetting nature of some of these questions.

*When did you first meet your sorceress?*

The answer to that very question was exactly what had driven Seifer to drown his past in alcohol, just the previous night. Things had gotten ugly enough for Squall to call her for help. Squall *never* called her for help.

She crossed out the question with a few vehement swipes of the thick marker and continued skimming question after question. Some were difficult to gauge when considering them from the point of view of someone who'd suffered trauma. Anything could be a trigger when looked at like that. She decided to leave the mostly innocent and factual questions for now, while crossing out the more intrusive and subjective questions that required lengthy replies. During the actual interview, she'd just have to intervene the moment she sensed Odine was pushing Seifer beyond what he could handle.

Her frown deepened as some of the questions lingered in her mind, seeding horrible suspicions and fears.

*What was the nature of your relationship with your sorceress?*

*Were you romantically involved? o Yes o No / If yes, elaborate:*

*Were you sexually involved? o Yes o No / If yes, elaborate:*

Dragging her marker across the questions and the whole section that followed, she glanced up to let her gaze rest on Seifer, the blond still effortlessly casting the spells Odine was announcing into the mic. She hoped with all her heart that nothing of the sort had happened. There had to be such a thing as a platonic bond between sorceress and knight, even if her own experience hadn't been like that.

*Did she take control of your actions? o Yes o No / If yes, elaborate:*

*Did you ever try to resist the bond? o Yes o No / If yes, elaborate:*

Rinoa wasn't sure whether Seifer even knew the answer to those questions. It was the very reason Squall was taking him to Winhill; to find out the truth. She crossed them out.

The next section of questions made her heart squeeze painfully in her chest, this time with more than just sympathy for Seifer. She couldn't help but wonder whether her own bond with Squall had inspired Odine to add these. In fact, she was certain of it.

*Did you ever injure her? o Yes o No / If yes, how did it affect the bond?*

*Did she ever injure you? o Yes o No / If yes, how did it affect the bond?*

*If you sustained injury, did it affect the bond? Did it affect her?*
Could you feel it when she sustained injury? o Yes o No / If yes, elaborate:

She stared at the second question, the words accusing her and daring her to censure them with the black marker. Despite her love for Squall, she had hurt her knight almost irrevocably. Even the best of intentions and the deepest of affection hadn't been able to stop her bond from turning malicious. She was afraid to imagine what someone as depraved as Ultimecia might have done to Seifer.

Her grip on the marker became white-knuckled as she crossed out question after question, until she'd reduced the list to less than half of its original length. It had left her drained just to consider each query, to imagine the things Seifer must have endured. She'd made the right choice to handle things this way. Glancing up, she hoped neither man had bothered to look at her during the tests. She quickly dabbed at her eyes and cleared her throat, to try and dislodge the thickness that had settled there.

Poise and grace.

Refocusing her full attention on the magic tests, she was relieved to see Seifer was still doing well. Odine was having him cast higher tier spells already, at rapid intervals that were far faster than any standard SeeD magic test. Some of the spells were starting to flicker mildly, coming in with slight second long delays. That wasn't bad at all considering Seifer was firing off Firaga after Blizzaga, alternating between the two with an impressive speed.

Going by the sheen of sweat on Seifer's brow and the jacket that had been discarded to the floor, it had to be stiflingly hot and humid in the testing chamber as a result of the constant back and forth between fire and ice. Rinoa suspected too late that Odine was most likely doing it on purpose.

"How much longer does he have to do this?" she asked, not liking the avid little curl to Odine's lips as he watched Seifer.

"Oh, I suppose I have enough data," he yielded far too easily.

It had been on purpose then. Rinoa frowned, chiding herself for becoming too engrossed in the list of questions.

The doctor bent over to speak into the mic again. "Ve are moving on to summoning next. Are ze dimensions of ze testing chamber sufficient to allow for Bahamut's materialization?"

/Only Ifrit will fit in here./

Rinoa raised an eyebrow at the thought of summoning a creature as temperamental as Ifrit into such a small room. "Is that really necessary?"

The doctor sent her an unpleasant smile. "As you vell know, magic is a two-pronged ability for anyone zat isn't a sorceress. Spells and summons. I've observed patients with abysmal casting abilities and excellent GF compatibility scores, and vice versa. Ve must exclude that ze same might be true of Mr. Almasy."

The explanation actually made sense for once, and the insufferable glint to Odine's eyes told her that the man knew it. He waited for her go-ahead with a feigned obedience that grated at her nerves. Rinoa sighed and nodded. "Fine."

The doctor immediately bent over to relay his next order. "Junction and summon Ifrit."

Rinoa held her breath when Seifer narrowed his eyes in focus, drawing the fire demon into the
world. A whirling chasm of lava and fire opened up beside him. She could hear Ifrit's roar before she could see him. The moment the beast stepped into view, the moisture in the test chamber's air seemed to sizzle and evaporate with a hiss against Ifrit's red hot skin, creating condensation against the observation window. She could feel the heat even from where she was standing, on the other side of the protective layers of glass and magic. Seifer was protected only by his connection with the beast.

Ifrit moved to stand beside Seifer and crossed his huge arms, the beast's intense gaze never straying from Odine. Again, it was clear that Seifer was in complete control of the situation and his GF.

Letting out her breath, Rinoa glanced at Odine. If the scientist was at all nervous about being stared at by a fire demon, then the man wasn't betraying it. Not for the first time, she wondered how quickly Odine's courage would fail him the moment his technology and protective magic failed him; how easily he'd be able to dismiss his 'subjects' then.

"Order your GF to cast a spell," the doctor pushed on, undeterred. "Preferably one that won't destroy my test chamber."

Ifrit let out a derisive snort that trailed smoking wisps into the air, before the fire demon brought up a lazy clawed hand and conjured a ball of flame to dance above his open palm. The ball immediately began to writhe and quake with its desire to be hurled free, towards Odine.

"Is that all?/ Seifer's impatient voice sounded over the speaker.

"Yes yes," Odine relented. "I suppose I have all ze data I need for now. I vill unlock ze chamber once you have dismissed and unjunctioned ze GF."

So Ifrit had managed to unsettle him after all. Rinoa smiled when she spotted the knowing curl to Seifer's lips, the blond clearly not worried about his potential confinement. He shared a final look with his fire demon before Ifrit stepped back into the scorching chasm he'd come from, leaving behind fiery embers to drift in the air. The sudden absence of Ifrit's heat felt like stepping away from a roaring campfire, leaving her suddenly chilled.

The sound of the test chamber unbolting was followed by the door sliding aside, releasing a hot gust of air. Seifer emerged with his jacket slung over his arm, looking only slightly worse for the wear because of the heat. His shirt clung damply to his chest, but other than that he looked perfectly fine.

Rinoa smiled and walked towards him. "You did great!"

Stopping in front of her, Seifer smiled warmly at her enthusiasm and hummed in agreement. He hadn't expected it to pose any problems after his amazing day out in the desert with Squall, but after years of being punished every time he cast the most simple of spells, he still felt that brief twinge of worry before casting.

"Thanks to ze medications I have provided, no doubt," Odine piped up, ruining the happy moment.

Rinoa sighed and leveled the spiteful man with an annoyed look. "I'm sure you won't mind prescribing him something more tailored to his needs then."

"Yes yes," the doctor said with an eye roll, looking away to focus on several printouts that were being spewed out by a nearby machine. "Ze Commander's new and improved pills are already prepared and my chemists are on standby to implement my advised dosages for Mr. Almasy." He
poured over the papers of endless data. "I foresee we can manage at least a fifteen percent increase in efficacy for both."

Seifer had to smile at that. Even Squall would have trouble controlling the corner of his lips at such good news. He couldn't wait to tell him. "That leaves the questions," he said, his smile quickly fading. That was the part he'd dreaded the most and he was sorely tempted to skip it. But there was no way he'd live down a decision like that. The fact that it might help Squall meant he had to do it. Squall was sharing his memories with him, was taking him across continents to try and help him. Answering a few questions about his past was the least he could do in return.

Odine looked up, effectively pulled from his study of the new results. "I will need my terminal to make notes as we proceed," he announced before hurrying off towards where they'd come from with renewed vigor and hopping onto the chair at his desk. The moment they sat down across from him, the doctor snatched the question list back from Rinoa's hands, only to stare at it balefully. "Thorough, aren't you?" he said sourly, sending her a glare.

"This is the way it's going to be." Rinoa fixed the doctor with an equally firm look.

"If we must," he said with a suffering sigh, sounding not nearly defeated enough. Rinoa narrowed her eyes, but she could only wait the man out for now.

"State ze name of your Sorceress."

It took a moment for Seifer to steel himself. "Ultimecia." The mere name left a bitter taste. He hated talking about her, hated talking about his past. Even though he'd spoken more about it in the past two weeks than the last two years, it hadn't gotten any easier and the revelations from last night weren't helping at all. Since waking up, he'd refused to face that particular truth and he absolutely refused to do so now too. Even for Squall.

"How old were you when the bond was formed?"

Seifer kept his answer to the point. "Eighteen."

"And her age?" the doctor asked next.

"Mid forties, I guess."

Odine looked up at the imprecise reply. "Zat sounds like an estimate. Do you refer to Ultimecia herself or her vessel?" he asked, leaning forward avidly. "So far I have not been able to discern her real age."

Seifer grimaced. "I have no fucking clue how old the real bitch was," he said sourly, disgusted at having to think of her at all. "Never saw her, but I'm sure she was a hell of a lot older."

Undeterred by the colorful language, Odine gave a nod and made his notes. "Zat is my opinion also. A sorceress of her ability would require decades to ascend to such magical prowess."

Rinoa frowned at the faintly admiring tone to Odine's voice, though she was hardly surprised. The man claimed to have served Adel only under duress, but she knew better. The man didn't care about politics or human rights, as long as he could do his research. No doubt Odine found her a very disappointing sorceress in comparison.

"Ven vas ze bond formed?"

Seifer had to think back on it. He hadn't counted the months or kept track of time, burying it all as
deeply as possible. "Two and a half years ago, give or take."

Odine's brow gave a twitch. "It would seem precision is beyond you," he muttered under his breath, then launched into a series of questions. "Describe zee process. Vat did it feel like? Vas it a mutual decision?"

Seifer forced himself to face the memories. "By the time I agreed to be her knight, she was already speaking inside my mind. Seemed like a promotion, a title, really. She told me it'd enhance my magic and make me stronger."

"Most interesting," the doctor replied, entering the new data into his terminal. "She chose to manipulate you from zee start."

Rinoa felt like smacking the doctor for his lack of tact, but his immediate conclusion sounded like it could actually be helpful. "What makes you say that?" she said, standing up to look at what he'd entered into Seifer's file. "Indications of a skewed balance of power," she read out loud.

Odine frowned at the interruption and the question he clearly considered stupid. "It is quite obvious. Ultimecia most definitely knew what a bond entailed, yet she withheld zee information. Zat means zere was no informed consent." He tapped his screen, sounding as if he was reeling off a lesson to toddlers. "It vas also a vell documented and favored method of hers to speak directly into zee minds of zose she vished to manipulate and promise zem power. It vas how she von over Dinzer and ultimately, Galbadia."

He turned to look at Seifer again. "Vat did zee bond feel like and how long did it last?"

"It's hard to explain, really," Seifer said, recalling how it was mostly his own thoughts and actions that had started to change. None of it had really felt like her. "Like a vague constant presence. Communication without words. Even over distances. It lasted for the duration of the war."

"Was zere any emotional transference? Did you have a sense of her vereabouts? What waz her presence in your mind like?"

Seifer brought a hand up to scratch at his chin and eyed Odine carefully. "I had an idea of where she was." He thought harder, his muscles tensing as he prodded at the memories. Different aspects of their bond were emerging. Aspects he'd tried his best to forget. "She knew my thoughts," he said, remembering how that feeling of constantly being watched had lingered for months after he'd come to. "I could feel her emotions." Her anger and hatred. Her disappointment when he'd failed her.

A shiver ran down Rinoa's spine as she remembered the malevolent touch of Ultimcia's mind. She couldn't imagine being exposed to something like that for over a longer period of time. For the first time Seifer had faltered, his voice less composed, his expression set in a grimace. She sat straighter, keeping close watch.

"Vould you say zat Ultimcia had total control of ven and how she made herself known in your mind, while you had no way of shielding yourself from her intrusions?"

"Yes," he stated coolly.

Odine made an entry in his terminal and nodded with satisfaction. "Zen ve have found our first consistency."

Rinoa drew in a tremulous breath, unable to look Seifer's way. She hated being anything like Ultimcia at all. She deeply regretted every moment of lost control that had made her encroach on
Squall's privacy and mind like that. Thinking back, it seemed so unreal she had ever been able to do such a thing.

"Ze balance of power is most definitely skewed in favor of ze sorceress," Odine prattled on, unaware of her distress as he turned to address her. "My next question is obvious, even if you have chosen to eliminate it. Ze answer is key to understanding ze nature of zis particular bond."

Seifer narrowed his eyes. "Go on."

"Did Ultimcia impose her own vill upon you or deny you your own?"

Gritting his teeth, Seifer recalled the feelings of utter despair that had consumed him the times he'd tried to escape. "Yes," he let out darkly.

"Describe an instance ven she—"

"No," Rinoa interrupted, having rallied from her self-pity. One moment of weakness and Odine was already taking advantage, causing a look of pain on Seifer's face. "He answered your question. Move on to the next and stick to your list."

The warning that he could damned well speak for himself stayed locked on Seifer's tongue. Rinoa looked as fierce as a Torama, ready to pounce as she carefully eyed her prey.

Odine glared back at her. "Such shallow answers are nowhere near enough to arrive at a complete understanding of his bond viz Ultimcia."

"You don't need to understand completely," Rinoa snapped, her patience starting to wear thin. "You need to know just enough to be able to help him. I think we're done." She pushed up from her chair.

The doctor blinked at her threat, grasping her sincerity. "Let's not be too hasty," he rushed to say. "I have a final few questions zat are paramount to determining his treatment."

She studied him coolly before sitting back down. "Make it quick."

Seifer raised an eyebrow at the show that had just unfolded before him. It was absurd to watch Rinoa fight his battle. Just like the way Quistis and himself had utterly ignored Squall as they'd both stood their ground to fight over what they thought was best for Squall. Protection. That's what it boiled down to and it left him baffled.

"How did ze bond end?" the doctor asked, looking directly at him.

"She died," he supplied sternly.

"How was your sorceress killed and vat vas your location at ze time? Vere you aware of ze severing?" Odine continued, definitely not taking the hint, but the doctor rushed to explain at the glare he received from Rinoa and himself. "Ze nature of ze severing might be of importance. It is ze event zat precipitated ze distortion of your magic abilities."

Seifer looked away as he recalled those moments. He'd been bleeding heavily, the dizziness from blood loss blurring his memories. Fu had been pleading with him to stay with them as she and Raijin had hauled him off the Lunatic Pandora. He forced himself to try and explain.

"I don't know how she died," he began. "Magic, weapons, whatever. SeeDs killed her," he said lowly, then caught himself digging his fingers into his thighs. He relaxed them slowly and looked back up, straight into the doctor's eyes. "I wasn't with her," he said, but the pain that had lashed
through him was still all too clear. Her emotions had eclipsed his own. "I felt her pain, her panic… I don't remember anything after that."

Rinoa wished she could take Seifer's hand to show her support, but he didn't look like he'd welcome any touch in that moment. Her guilt stirred again when she realized she'd never even considered how Seifer had made it out of that final, terrible battle. They'd left him behind in the Lunatic Pandora, pushing on to the next obstacle without looking back, despite the man's serious injuries. The horrible reality of their actions suddenly caught up with her, and she was beginning to understand Squall's plight. He'd been the one on the forefront, calling the shots.

"How did you come to?" she heard Odine ask, distracting her from her guilty conscience.

Seifer sighed. The specifics eluded him, but Fujin had been there. "At my friends' place," he said, once more reminded of just how much he owed them. "I kept drifting in and out of consciousness. When I finally came to, they told me I'd been out of it for almost a month. Took a while to retrain."

Odine hummed in acknowledgement. "A far longer convalescence zan ze Commander," he noted, looking up from his screen. "Vas zis due to injury or ze bond? Or both?"

"Both," Seifer said, remembering how the weeks after he had regained consciousness had been riddled with nightmares and headaches. Vivid flashes from the war and sudden bouts of vomiting. His physical wounds had healed much faster. "I couldn't use magic. If I tried to, I threw up and got a motherfucker of a headache," he paused briefly, but knew Odine would ask about the duration anyway. "It lasted until you gave me those meds."

"Ze Commander suffered a host of side effects as ze result of a far less traumatic severing. Surely zere must be more." The doctor handed him the clipboard with questions, tapping at a list of symptoms. "Are any of zese familiar?"

Perusing the list, Seifer frowned. "I slept a lot, had nightmares," he said, but couldn't really recall any of the other side effects on the list. "It's hard to tell since I don't really remember anything from the first month after her death."

"It is possible you shared ze Commander's symptoms without any memory of zem, but ve vill have to make do with ze data at hand zen," Odine said with a sigh. "For now ve vill treat ze symptoms zat have persisted. Wiz time you should be able to lower ze dose and most likely not need zem at all. If you are diligent in your training, zat is." The doctor typed a final few entries and clicked away at his terminal, before he took up the phone on his desk without warning. "I sent you ze specifications for ze new drugs," he barked into the open line. "Have it sent down to ze lobby."

Hanging up, he looked between his two guests. "Zere. As you requested."

"So we're done?" Seifer asked.

"We are. A productive first appointment indeed," Odine replied in an almost pleasant tone, his agenda glaringly obvious. "Contact my assistants for a follow-up in a month's time."

Seifer shook his head as he pushed up from his chair. "Not gonna happen." He'd gotten what he needed. "Which reminds me. The Commander can't make it on Thursday." Watching the doctor's face grow red was entirely satisfying after what he'd just had to sit through.

"And vat is ze reason for zis?"

"He's going on holiday," Seifer said, sending the doctor a smirk.
The red flush to Odine's face grew deeper. "And zis holiday is more important zan his recovery? Zan our understanding of bonds? My lab is not some common apothecary zat vill dispense state-funded next-gen pharmaceuticals at your leisure and convenience. I am a scientist. My help comes viz strings attached. Zat has always been ze deal!"

"Not today," Rinoa said firmly, getting up from her chair as well. "Thank you for your help, Odine." She turned to Seifer, more than ready to leave. "Let's go."

Sparing the doctor one last grin, Seifer turned to Rinoa. "Let's," he agreed, a genuine smile on his lips, but the smile she sent back didn't quite reach her eyes. She still looked fierce but there was an underlying current of concern and sadness that hadn't been there before. He hadn't really stopped to consider it as he'd answered Odine's questions; how she would be taking it all in too. He didn't even think he'd said anything too revealing. He'd just stated the facts. But he could see it plainly enough. Her pity. Letting out a sigh, he tuned out Odine's mumbled rant of displeasure as he turned and walked towards the hover lift.

Following after Seifer, Rinoa fell into step beside the blond and stole a glance of his tense expression. Stepping onto the lift, she pressed the button that would take them back down to the lobby. The force field pulled up around them, giving them their first moment of privacy since entering Odine's personal lab.

"What's the matter?"

"You shouldn't have come," Seifer said without meeting her gaze. He knew full well she'd been a great help, but he didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him, not when he'd been the one to do all the damage. "I don't want your pity."

"You sound just like Squall." Rinoa wasn't sure what had instilled this destructive notion in their heads; that feelings were a liability and that to show them or to accept help to deal with them implied some kind of failure. "You call it pity. I call it compassion," she continued gently but firmly. "It's what sets us apart from psychopaths like Ultimecia. I care about you, so of course I hurt for what happened to you. It's human. I know you'd feel the same for me."

Not immediately replying, Seifer watched the floors whiz by. Whatever name Rinoa put to it, it didn't matter. Pity or compassion, they both dealt with a past better left forgotten. Moving on had always been the better option. Even so, Rinoa had shown him a new side to herself that day. "You've certainly learned how to handle the imp."

The change in subject wasn't subtle at all, but Rinoa let it slide. "I've had to," she said with a shrug and smile. "With Odine, you either learn to swim fast or you drown."

"I bet," Seifer said as the lift came to a halt on the ground floor.

Stepping into the lobby, Rinoa felt some of her tension fall away now that there was a good distance between herself and Odine. She allowed herself a tentative sense of relief. Things had gone well considering the circumstances. She had done what Squall had asked of her.

Walking over to one of several vending machines for waiting visitors, she got out her wallet and popped in enough coins for two cups of coffee. If her memory served her correctly, Seifer took his black. Returning to Seifer, she held out a cup. "Here's to your first and last appointment with Dr. Odine," she said with a smile. "Congratulations on making it through without throwing a single punch."

Letting out a laugh despite himself, Seifer brought the black liquid to his lips. Hyne, he needed it if
he was to make it onto that train. "Didn't think it possible."

Rinoa wrapped her hands around her cup, her smile widening at hearing Seifer laugh. It had been such a long time. "So what's next on today's schedule? When's your train?"

"Twelve-thirty." Seifer looked up at the big clock by the reception desk. 11:08 am. He still had little over an hour to go. "Got one long-ass train journey ahead of us. It'll be boring as fuck. At least we'll be able to catch up on sleep."

"You haven't been getting much of that?" Rinoa asked, familiar enough with the particular joys of insomnia and sleep deprivation. And Squall had told her how Seifer had been out all night, drinking himself into a stupor. Not the best coping mechanism.

"No." Seifer took another large sip of his coffee. "Especially not last night. Quistis came by."

Rinoa let out a soft groan. "Squall told me. She'll probably show up on my doorstep this afternoon as well. Not looking forward to that."

Seifer looked at her with sympathy. Quistis was going to chew her out. "Too late to turn tail?"

"Nah. It's better to face her and hash things out." Rinoa let out a sigh, chagrined at the prospect of having to deal with the unfair woman. "She's never liked me much, you know."

"Don't think she ever liked anyone much. Apart from her favorite student."

Rinoa let out a huff at that. At first she'd suspected that jealousy was the reason behind Quistis's dislike of her. Maybe that's how it started, but she doubted the woman was that spiteful. Far more likely was that Quistis had judged her actions and had deemed her lacking. She wasn't even all that sure she disagreed.

"So you talked to Squall this morning?"

Looking up at the question, she found Seifer studying her closely and gave a nod. She'd rather not think about her phone call with Squall, hating the jealousy it brought back to the forefront of her mind. It seemed beyond petty and inappropriate after having stood by the blond. "He asked me to come here today. To help you out," she said after a moment. "Please don't blame him for it."

Seifer nodded. He still wanted to make Squall pay for going behind his back like that, but in the end he couldn't blame the man. He would have done the same. What surprised him more was Squall actually having asked someone for help. And Rinoa saying yes. Suffering through Odine's presence without absolutely having to merited a fucking medal. "If you ever need help with the imp, let me know." It was the least he could do.

"I'll keep that in mind, but I've got it covered for now," Rinoa answered with a smile, and then an idea occurred to her. "I will need some help moving though. Think you'd be up for that?"

Seifer raised an eyebrow at the unlikely request, but there was no way he could deny her. "Sure. Where are you moving to?"

"I'm moving in with a friend. She lives in Elvoret District. I still have some packing to do and some stuff to sell, so it'll be another few weeks at least." Rinoa finished the last of her coffee, briefly wondering if she was insane to keep insinuating herself into the lives of her two exes like this. "Give me a call when you're back from your trip?"

Looking up from his now empty cup, Seifer met her gaze. "I will."
Spotting the approach of a lab worker carrying a paper bag, Rinoa gestured at Seifer when the assistant walked up to them. They'd part soon now, her window of opportunity rapidly shrinking.

"Here you go, sir."

Taking the bag of meds from the assistant's hand, Seifer nodded in dismissal, then looked back at her. Rinoa teetered on the edge of indecision, uncertain whether it would be wise to bring up Squall, but perhaps it would be better to have it all out in the open.

"Want another cup?" Seifer offered, indicating the empty one in her hand. "To go."

"I'm good," she said with a shake of her head, steeling herself as she met Seifer's gaze. "Just one last thing." She kept her tone even, her expression calm. This was her last chance before Squall went off to Galbadia with the man for a whole week. "You don't have to hide what's going on."

Seifer tensed but quickly masked the reaction. He was pretty sure he knew exactly where Rinoa was steering the conversation and he definitely wasn't in the mood to go there. "What do you mean?"

"You and Squall," Rinoa replied simply, leaving no room for skirting the issue, but Seifer just looked at her with a stubbornly unfazed expression. "I know you're sleeping with him," she stated matter-of-fact. "It isn't easy and I'll need time to work through this, but I'm dealing. The last thing I want is for either of you to lie to me and pretend that nothing's going on. I won't break. I'm stronger than that."

Seifer looked away. She sounded sincere. At first he'd thought she was trying to get him to confess, but she sounded one-hundred percent certain in her knowledge. She was struggling with it yet had forced herself to speak the words. What the hell did you say to that? He wished he could stall his reaction by taking another sip, but tough fucking luck. "So you know."

"I do," Rinoa said. Though the confirmation was no longer a shock, it was still painful. "It doesn't change the fact that I still want to try to be his friend. And yours."

Taking a moment to fully understand what Rinoa was saying, Seifer just stared at her. Somehow she was able to look past everything. She'd known they'd started something, yet she'd still shown up at Odine's. She'd still asked him to help out with her move. "You want us to be friends?" he asked, incredulous.

"I'd like that," Rinoa said, surprising herself. "We used to get along, didn't we?" she added cautiously. Even if Seifer had never been attracted to her, she refused to believe that everything had been feigned. The times they'd hung out and laughed together; those had been real.

A small smile stole onto Seifer's lips. "We did," he said, remembering some of the affection he'd felt for her. "Not your fault your exes are so fucking oblivious."

Taken off guard by the almost joking remark, Rinoa wasn't sure she was quite ready for such levity. At least he was right about one thing. What had happened between Seifer and her hadn't been her fault. "Hyne, I was so confused," she said with a huff, recalling how hurt and insecure she'd been when Seifer had bailed after their botched attempt at sex. "You know, I wouldn't have been nearly as angry if you'd just told me what was going on with you."

"Shit," Seifer said, shaking his head lightly. "I had no fucking clue what the hell was going on back then." The only thing he remembered was how he'd needed to get away from her as soon possible. "I only figured it out after I moved here."
Rinoa raised an eyebrow at that. "Really?" Even if she'd never been certain, the suspicion that Seifer might be gay had definitely crossed her mind long before the man had shown up in Squall's life again. "So back at Garden, with Squall around… You never realized?" It was so hard to believe they hadn't been involved before the war. What she'd felt from Squall that one horrible night couldn't possibly have sprouted from thin air.

"Nope," Seifer admitted honestly, somewhat amused at just how dense he'd been. "You'd think I'd have caught on with my inability to leave him alone."

Rinoa wondered if it could be that simple. An affection born long ago but never realized. Squall was definitely the clueless type to suppress any and all feelings, but she hadn't quite expected the same of Seifer. "And now?"

"Now I know better," Seifer said with a shrug. The time in Esthar had changed him drastically. Just one proposition from Calder and he'd readily accepted the truth about himself. It hadn't taken long for him to put two and two together and realize just what had caused his obsession with Squall. "There's no fucking way I would've followed her if Squall and I had started something back then."

Rinoa's eyebrows climbed high at the statement. When they'd been dating, Seifer had often talked about his desire to leave Garden and make his own way, firm in his belief that everybody there had only ever held him back. To think Squall could have been the only incentive Seifer might've needed to stay despite all that…

"We can't change the past," she said soberly, "but we can make the right choices now."

Seifer nodded but refrained from saying anything. His past choices had been the bane of his life and even those had seemed right at the time. And the decision he was facing now, to go to Winhill or not, didn't really feel like a choice at all. They had to. Simple as that. He looked toward the exit. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Following Seifer towards the exit, Rinoa glanced at him from the corner of her eyes. She'd come here as a favor to Squall despite her many misgivings, but somehow she'd come out of the experience with the unexpected resolve to befriend Seifer as well. "Good luck in Winhill," she said sincerely, hoping they'd find the answers they were looking for, and that Seifer would find some peace of mind. "You'll be in good hands with Ellone. She's the best."

"Can't say I'm looking forward to it," Seifer admitted, the cold air greeting them as they stepped outside.

Rinoa looked at Seifer with compassion. She didn't envy them one bit. Their task wasn't an easy one, but after the morning she'd just had, she realized that it was absolutely imperative that they go. "Sometimes pain is a necessary part of healing."

Taking the last step down the front stairs, Seifer glanced at the woman. She clearly understood what they'd be doing. There were so many ways in which it could go wrong. He sighed. "I hope it'll be worth it."

"I'm sure it will be," Rinoa said, wanting to encourage. Squall would make sure of it. "Just take it one step at a time."

Seifer hummed in agreement and came to a stop right by the entrance to the car park. "Take care, Rinoa."

Rinoa's heart constricted in her chest, demanding more than a few feeble words spoken in parting.
Their brief conversation had only scratched the surface and she needed Seifer to know she cared for him, that she wished him well. Stepping close, she drew him into a firm hug, half expecting to be rebuffed immediately. Instead she found herself squeezed tightly in his arms, the blond returning her hug.

Don't cry.

Letting go, she stepped back and sent him a beaming smile. "Take care, Seifer," she said, echoing his sentiment.

Taking in the wide smile on Rinoa's lips and the glistening sheen to her eyes, Seifer remained in place as she turned and left. He breathed in the chill air and felt his exhaustion even more clearly now that he didn't have to put up a front. Her sentiment still echoed in his thoughts, that she wanted to be his friend. She'd stood by him, had helped him even though she knew. He couldn't imagine ever being as forgiving. If it had been the other way around he would have done everything he could to thwart his competition. Yet there she'd been, ready to support and protect him. And just like Squall she seemed unwavering in her resolve. He ran a hand through his hair and sucked in a deep breath. It didn't even come as a surprise anymore that he wanted to be her friend too.

They'd been good together if discounting the sex. She'd been the perfect distraction when things at Garden had started to turn south. An escape that took him away and made him forget. They'd laughed together and she'd been honest in her admiration. She'd always believed in his strengths, when his instructors and peers had only ever pointed out his flaws. He strode over to where he'd parked his pickup, deciding that he'd do his part in making things easy for her. If she wanted him to be her friend, he'd be just that. If she needed space, he'd give her that instead.

Unlocking his pickup, he got into the driver's seat. He still couldn't believe Squall had actually called her for help though. It seemed so unlikely, so wildly out of character. He ran a hand over his face, tried to quell some of his shame. He'd forced Squall's hand. After his fucked up return the night before, Squall had been worried enough to seek Rinoa's aid. But why? To protect him? To make sure he wouldn't crack? He ran his finger over the thin line of scar tissue that crossed the bridge of his nose. Squall's composed behavior that morning had been a front, that much was obvious now. He should've fucking kissed the man and not let him wander off without any reassurances. Squall's feelings for him went much deeper than he'd ever dared imagine.

He'd see Squall soon. They'd be heading to Galbadia together. He'd take every single moment with Squall that he could and make each one count. Turning on the ignition, he placed his hands firmly on the steering wheel and pulled out of the parking lot. It was time to go to Winhill.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who’s reviewed so far! Means a lot to us :) Hope you’ve enjoyed the chapter - more to come soon! (and yes, reviews do work as bribery! ;) )
"And where will the funds for all this come from?" Lantos Farkas, the mayor of Fisherman's Horizon, stood to address the room, as always looking uncertain of himself and his position amidst some of the world's most powerful men and women. "FH will be more than happy to take on construction contracts for Esthar Garden, but we worry about the ambition of these plans and the financial realities. There hasn't been an endeavor of this size and scope since Adel's reign, and we stand in that very building today. President Loire, you yourself must realize how the Palace drained her coffers. FH will not invest any manpower nor will we import any costly materials until we see a solid financial agreement, stating who will foot what part of the bill and insuring us against any losses. A construction like this could bankrupt us if even one backer falls through."

Stifling a sigh, Squall didn't know what was worse. The endless debate about money, or the continuous verbal attacks against Garden. Farkas was doing just as much damage as the many crude accusations and false statements made by General Reardon and Chief of Police Borecco. Nothing was more infectious than the sound of anxious people closing their wallets.

Next to him, Quistis did a convincing job of looking like she had taken Farkas's concerns to heart before correcting him firmly. "Esthar Garden will make FH the most wealthy engineering hub in the world, putting you at the forefront of technological advancement and securing the next few decades of your monopoly on propulsion technology." She stood ramrod straight, her voice and bearing the epitome of confidence and competence. "No risk, no gain, they say. But in this case, I see only advantages."

"For Garden and FH perhaps," the Estharian Secretary of Economy cut into the exchange, ignoring all rules of civilized debate. "We all know that the majority of the bill will go to Esthar. Garden might be powerful, but they aren't rich. They rely on their clients and Esthar's goodwill to keep their heads above water, and this is just another ploy to encroach on our sovereignty using our tax payer's money."

Glancing at the clock that ticked away precious second after second, Squall had had enough. They'd been in there for nearly four hours, with little to show for it but insults and bickering. Even Loire's expression was tense with the effort of trying to smile inoffensively despite all the frustrating speeches they'd had to listen to. He didn't wait for Quistis to invite him to speak.

"Garden might not be able to compete with Esthar's treasury, but we are richer than any nation when it comes to skill." He didn't stand to emphasize his words, instead locking eyes with each attendant who seemed like they might disagree. "Unrivaled magic expertise, martial strategy, rigorous discipline, instant deployment where no one else dares to go. That's our currency. The bargain is fair." His gaze landed on Zautra, the chief executive officer of the SCTA. The man had been suspiciously restrained throughout the proceedings, and now as well he merely met his gaze with a calculating stare.

"As the Commander says, Esthar is greatly indebted to Garden," Loire replied, immediately trying to take the edge off his words. "But so is Garden indebted to Esthar. That is the nature of mutually beneficial alliances. I'm sure we can come to an agreement that will benefit all parties."
"I sincerely doubt that." Zautra's voice didn't boom loudly. Instead it was the man's composure and control that commanded the room's attention. "Garden is seeking to supplant the SCTA and the Estharian army with their own operatives and agendas. Tell me, what benefit is there for the many good men and women trained by our facilities when soon they'll have to compete with SeeDs even in their home territories? Will they too have to accept the taint of unnatural enhancements just to stay in the race?"

Not once did the man's dark eyes stray from Squall's, challenging him to speak. No one else took the floor, the room plunged into thick tension. "I don't consider competition as something to avoid. It weeds out the weak." Squall paused, before adding. "More Estharians will be deployed in the field than ever before, both on a national and worldwide scale. They will have access to unparalleled training and will be able to better defend Esthar. Paramagic isn't a taint or threat. It's a necessity. Without it Esthar wouldn't be here today."

"Only SeeDs can save the world? How humble." Zautra's stare conveyed the deep offense he'd taken, belying the man's civil tone. "Estharians on the world's stage," he continued thoughtfully, as if considering it seriously. "An attractive prospect, if one ignores the fact they'll be under foreign orders. I've studied the contracts Garden enforces on its students and operatives. Loyalty to Garden over all else, transcending even family and nation." The man narrowed his eyes in concerned speculation; a well rehearsed façade. "Such a worrisome creed might work for orphaned misfits, but it hardly seems appropriate for Esthar's youths. They are the future of this country, not some chattel to be ransomed to the highest bidder."

"We expect dedication, integrity and loyalty, but never blind obedience," Squall countered, equally unbending. "We don't deploy operatives against their personal beliefs, against conflicting loyalties. They all have a voice. They all have an equal chance to gain rank."

"Noble mercenaries?" Zautra let out a snort, the first breach in his polished demeanor. "Pardon me, but I find that hard to believe."

"We charge for our services, as do you. Generating profit doesn't preclude ethics." Squall kept his voice cool and clipped. "But even if you question our methods, you can't argue with our results. We get the job done."

Quistis immediately seized the opportunity to chip in. "We have a 64% higher success rate in non-magical conflicts and a 98% higher success rate in magical conflicts compared to military operations. Worldwide monster populations have dropped an average of 12% and up to 92% in areas with regular SeeD patrols."

"Compelling statistics indeed." Zautra's reply dripped with condescending calm, the man never even looking Quistis's way. "And just how many of those missions have you actually taken part in yourself, Commander? A man of your age."

A din of hushed comments rippled through the attendees at the most blatant challenge of his authority yet. The blandly pleasant expression had finally vanished from Loire's face and Quistis was sending him a silently pleading look.

He bored his gaze into Zautra's and contained his anger, forcing it into a cold and seething fire that fed his every word. "The average SeeD accrues more active field time and experience by their first year than most Estharian operatives do in ten. I have successfully completed a hundred and twenty-seven missions in the past two years, all of them in a leading capacity. I have earned my position, as do all SeeDs who rise through our ranks."

"One hundred and twenty-seven missions?" Zautra scoffed, his eyebrows raised high. "In two years
time?"

Before Squall could reply, Quistis laid open one of her many folders. Her fingers tracked the data as she began to read out loud. "One hundred and twenty-seven missions, sixty-two of them commissioned by Esthar. Seventy-one high level monster clean-ups, thirty-two stealth and recon missions, twenty-four human conflicts. Some of these missions include battlefields and large scale conflicts. Commander Leonhart was at the frontline for each and every one. He has done high-risk solo missions, has led small elite parties, as well as commanded forces as big as thousands of operatives."

Quistis briefly looked up from her file to fix Zautra with a piercing gaze, yet kept her smile pleasant. "In fact, his most recent mission was commissioned by Esthar. The clearing of an Oilboyle nesting ground at the Mi'ihen Refinery in the Estharian desert, sector 8D. Of course Commander Leonhart's capabilities far exceeded the requirements for this mission, but we agreed to send him as a favor to President Loire. He impressed upon us that Esthar's oil production is of great economic importance and the Oilboyle infestation could have destroyed one of Esthar's biggest oil reserves." Her smile grew sharper, as did her tone when she continued. "Of course none of that compares to the crucial part Commander Leonhart played in stopping the rise of a Sorceress bent on world destruction. All of you here have been briefed about this. All of you know just how close we came to the end."

Squall stifled a groan as he felt the stares of all those present settle on him in unabashed scrutiny, their voices rising in excited speculation. To hear Quistis sing his praise like that made him feel uneasy. The looks of awe on some faces were just as annoying as the doubtful sneers on others. He didn't care what anyone thought of him, whether they painted him as a hero or a fake.

Zautra cut through the din of voices. "And how are we to believe all this? We still don't have any evidence."

Quistis sent the man a look she usually reserved for her most stupid and recalcitrant cadets. "There are contracts, debriefs and reports for all missions, signed and approved by our clients. They're kept classified for confidentiality, but many of them have been signed off by President Loire himself, with me and the Commander in the room. If you can't trust my word, then trust President Loire's."

All eyes turned to the president, the tension in the room further heightened by the implication that Zautra would distrust the much lauded and beloved president of Esthar. Squall cursed inwardly as Loire didn't miss a beat and cleared his throat, rising from his chair. Better and better. After today no one could ever find out they were related. It would be the shit storm of the century.

"I have had the privilege of coordinating many missions together with the Commander, and he has seen them all to a satisfying conclusion." Loire addressed the room with gravitas, his gaze sweeping over all those present as he spoke. "I have witnessed his fighting skills with my own eyes, and I have seen Garden flourish under his leadership. He is a true ally and an accomplished leader."

Zautra snorted, ignoring Loire's testimony in favor of glowering at Squall. He returned the man's gaze, not in the least intimidated. "If all this is true, then why hide your face?" the man challenged stubbornly, the ring of reason starting to fade from his arguments. "You say SeeDs will go where no one else dares to go, yet you don't even dare to venture out in public baring your true name. How can we follow someone like that?"
"I don't need the approval of the public, and I don't need the approval of men who prefer profit over progress," Squall replied evenly. "I do what needs to be done."

Quistis quickly cut in, smoothing over the increasingly unprofessional nature of the debate. "Garden's senior officers and headmasters collectively made the decision to keep Commander Leonhart's identity undisclosed to ensure that he can do his job with maximum efficiency. He isn't just a figurehead. He is our most valuable operative. If his face was known all over the world, his deployment rate would decrease drastically. Stealth would become impossible. Sensitive missions would become a playfield for the press."

"That's one possible explanation," Zautra conceded with a sneer. "Or perhaps Garden knew just how well the public would receive someone as… pubescent as Commander Leonhart. Not exactly the hero everyone has been imagining."

A shocked murmuring spread through the room, Zautra's comment too uncouth for even the more vocal opponents of Esthar Garden. Squall's fists itched with the desire to wipe Zautra's sneer off his face. Had he been anywhere else, he would've put the asshole in his place the moment the first disparaging comment had left the man's mouth. Back at Garden bullies had never bullied him for long.

"Mr. Zautra, you are out of line." Loire said, eyeing the head of the SCTA carefully. "The purpose of this meeting is to ascertain the viability of an Esthar Garden facility, not to attack Garden and its Commander with such scurrilous charges. You will either show respect and assume a professional manner, or you will find the SCTA without representation for any meetings to come."

Zautra blinked at the direct admonishment from his president. Perhaps sensing the changing sentiment in the room, he wrested his expression under control with visible effort. "My apologies, Mr. President," he managed, resuming his tone of polite superiority. "I merely have our nation's best interests at heart."

"As President Loire pointed out, we've strayed far from the main topics on today's agenda," Quistis spoke up, heading off anything else Zautra might wish to say. "But I'm pleased with the progress we've made. It was enlightening to hear everyone's concerns and advisements. I feel optimistic we can manage a more focused attitude during meetings to come and reach a decision soon."

Listening with only half an ear as Quistis forced the meeting into a rushed conclusion, Squall flexed his gloved hands and glanced at the clock again. He was running out of time. Several Secretaries were making loud enquiries, but Quistis ignored them all as she profusely thanked Loire for facilitating the day's meeting. Zautra had resumed his previous silence, the man's offending gaze challenging him to return it, but he was done with Zautra's posturing and insults. He had more important things to do than being provoked into another pissing contest.

"You may reach me at all times if you have any questions or concerns. I'll be in Esthar for the next few days, to facilitate easy communication between all parties involved. I will be in contact with your offices as well, to run by the adjusted propositions based on what was discussed today." Quistis stood up from her chair and neatly squared the stack of folders and files in her hands, signaling the end of the day's proceedings. "That is all for today. Thank you for your attendance and collaboration. I hope we may yet turn a daring vision into something truly great."

Squall got up from his seat the moment Quistis adjourned the meeting and called an official end to his morning's torment. He could already see several officials try to attract his gaze as they got up from their seats as well, most troublesome of all Zautra. The man was matching his brisk stride towards the exit, intent on intercepting him. Quistis and Loire sent him concerned glances, but they were set upon by several attendees vying for their attention. Just as he reached the double doors,
Zautra set his hand on one of the handles, pretending at helpfulness while blocking him. Up close, he was a good head taller than Squall and the older man clearly reveled in the fact.

"I fight for Esthar, Commander Leonhart," Zautra said superciliously, his gaze raking over Squall in a derogatory manner. "Who do you fight for? Whoever pays you most for your services?"

Narrowing his eyes at the insult, Squall stepped close enough for the man to catch the icy glow in his eyes and feel the chill touch of Shiva's magic in the air. "You fight for Esthar. I fight for the world, for the people who need me."

Grabbing the other door handle, he shouldered past Zautra with an ease of strength that seemed to startle the man. Was Zautra truly that obtuse? That blinded by appearances? Whatever. The head of the SCTA would learn soon enough.

Stepping into the hall, he left the uproar and noise of the conference room behind him with quick strides, all the while feeling Zautra's malevolent stare boring into his back. He didn't care to linger and see who else was of a mind to come delay him with more pointless talk. Navigating the hallways to a private room Loire had arranged for him, he nodded at the guards in passing but his thoughts were already a mile away.

One look at his phone told him he needed to move. He would somehow have to manage a half an hour drive in twenty-five minutes. And that was if he got out of there fast. Picking up his pace, he entered one of the smaller waiting rooms near the palace's many conference rooms and strode over to where he had left his change of clothes. As he started to unstrap a decorative band that ran along his chest, the door behind him opened, followed by the sound of heeled boots.

"I tried my best." Closing the door, Quistis leaned against its frame. "Will you make it?"

Fingers moving from one unnecessary ornament to the next, Squall looked over to her. "If I'm not delayed," he replied succinctly, returning his attention to his uniform.

"I asked Loire. You can take the second north exit. No security checks."

Finally shrugging off the restrictive uniform jacket, Squall nodded his thanks.

"Did you check in any weapons?"

"No. I left Lion Heart in my car," he replied, before pulling his dress shirt over his head instead of unbuttoning.

Walking farther into the room, Quistis watched with a raised eyebrow as one item after the other was tossed into a careless heap. "Let me take the uniform. I'll get it back to you in time for the next meeting."

Squall grumbled at the mention of a next meeting. "They better decide soon."

Discreetly turning away when Squall's hands moved to his belt buckle, Quistis shrugged in resignation. "We all have to sit through it, Squall. You think I like this?"

"You were born for this," he answered dryly, glancing over at Quistis's impeccable appearance, the proud lines to her posture. "You don't need me here." His presence was proving to be more of a hindrance to the proceedings than an asset.

"Oh, I don't know," Quistis said with a secretive smile. "It definitely looked like you managed to intimidate some. Farkas for example."
Suppressing a satisfied sigh as he slipped on a soft, cotton t-shirt, Squall frowned belatedly at Quistis's statement. FH's new mayor was a spineless man. "At least Dobe spoke his mind."

Quistis quirked a teasing eyebrow. "You're siding with a pacifist now? Politics are changing you."

Squall snorted as he pulled up his worn combat pants. "FH is not the problem."

"I know," Quistis conceded, sobering a little. "I don't know who'd like to get rid of us more; the army or the SCTA."

"They'll have to bend to the decision of their government."

Quistis smiled. "Too bad Laguna doesn't believe in autocratic rule." Watching as Squall pulled on his boots, her gaze grew thoughtful. "You know why you're here. You're a reminder of all the reasons they need Garden on their side."

"I'm not impressing anyone."

"They might be testing you now, but everyone in that room knows about your war effort, the missions you've taken on personally for Esthar." She walked over to pick up the uniform Squall had dropped on the nearest chair, meeting the man's gaze. "The sooner those pencil pushers realize what kind of ally they could gain in you, the better. As for Zautra, I'll keep a tighter leash on him next time."

When she only received a snort in reply, Quistis continued, "Besides, it won't hurt our cause to have your name mentioned when it's time to sway public opinion."

"So it's a mascot you need," Squall said abrasively. "Not my contributions."

Quistis met his glare head-on. "I need both," she admitted bluntly. "You're the best PR any organization could wish for, but—" she added, smiling in satisfaction, "—you also crushed Councillor Cadogan's comments on the immorality of our profession, you reminded General Reardon that it were SeeDs who led his troops during the Lunar Cry clean-up, you practically tore apart all contingency plans that downplayed our contribution, and you didn't miss a beat when dealing with Zautra. Do you need to hear more?"

Squall quirked an eyebrow. "No warnings not to speak out of turn?"

"And break up my dream team?" Quistis smiled sweetly. "You're the stick and Laguna's the carrot. It's what'll get us through this thing." The brunet huffed in reply, clearly preoccupied with his rush to be elsewhere. To go to Seifer.

"Did he get home alright?" she asked, her gaze shifting to the dark circles under Squall's eyes.

Squall just hummed an acknowledgement as he put on his leather jacket.

"Late?"

Studying Squall's frown as he nodded, she surmised Seifer's eventual return hadn't been fun. But whatever had happened, it was clear they'd managed to turn things around again. Seifer's messages were still running through her thoughts, their scandalous content all the more suspect considering the expression she'd caught on Squall's face that morning. It had been very different from the angered or deadpan reactions she'd witnessed during their cadet days, when Seifer had been in the habit of pestering his sparring partner any chance he got. For a short span of time Squall's attention had been ensnared fully by Seifer's words, a guilty look of interest flitting across that usually
impassive face before Squall had pocketed his phone.

"He sent me a few texts this morning. He seemed to be in good spirits," she said, testing the waters while keeping a close eye on Squall's reaction.

Squall raised a surprised eyebrow and met Quistis's gaze. "...For now," he agreed cautiously. The playful messages he'd received himself pointed in the same direction, and it was a good sign Seifer had decided to stay in touch with Quistis. He certainly hadn't expected it after the man's behavior the night before. Even Seifer's appointment with Odine had apparently gone well if the text Rinoa had sent him was to be believed, the young woman assuring him that Seifer was fine and on his way.

"I have to go," he said, his urgency renewed. He couldn't afford to be late.

"Okay," Quistis said, stepping out of his way. Squall's expression wasn't betraying anything more than his concern. She huffed inwardly at herself for letting Seifer succeed in his teasing ploy. Squall and Rinoa had only just separated. "You call me the moment you're back in Esthar, okay? I can't say I like you boys going off-grid for a week."

"I've been off-grid longer than that," Squall replied with a quirked eyebrow. "It's Winhill."

"Plus a hunting trip in the wild. With Seifer."

"And Fujin and Raijin."

"Okay then," Quistis conceded. "Seifer and his cohorts. How reassuring."

Rolling his eyes, Squall walked past her, into the hallway. "I'll live."

"As I said, I'd like for you to actually confirm that and call me when you're back," Quistis replied, accompanying him on his way out.

"I'll call."

"Thank you," Quistis said in sweet victory, before looking at him with a bemused smile. "I can't believe you're going on a holiday."

"If we even get to that part," Squall muttered, maintaining a fast pace. No matter Seifer's seemingly improved mood and Rinoa's reassurance, the previous night was still fresh in his memory. He'd come to understand that the smallest thing was enough to send their precarious balance crashing down, that Seifer's smiles and quips were just a thin veneer over what lay beneath. There were no guarantees.

Quistis frowned. "If he runs again, just drag his ass back."

At the unconventional piece of advice, Squall glanced Quistis's way. She shrugged and sent him a smile. "Fight pigheadedness with pigheadedness," she said. "You'll manage."

Wishing he could take the vote of confidence to heart, Squall looked away again. Silence fell between them as they made their way down two separate lifts and several hallways to the second north exit that had been arranged for him. When they drew even at a set of sliding doors that led out onto one of the lesser plazas and gates, Quistis held out her arm to stop him.

"One last thing before you go," Quistis said, her expression apologetic. "I'm sorry about yesterday. The picture I showed... I swear I wasn't trying to force things, but I realize now that it was
insensitive. Maybe it's better to start out with new pictures first." Squall met her gaze without comprehension, the predictable reaction making her smile. Even though she knew her suggestion would probably fall on deaf ears, she still felt compelled to try. "You're actually going on a holiday. Make your first contribution to our collection and snap some shots. Get Seifer in there too. Seems like a good place to start."

Squall wasn't convinced but he held his tongue. No number of new pictures could make up for the past and he wasn't sure it would be wise to create lasting reminders of his time with Seifer. Soon he might be better off without them.

Quistis let out a soft sigh at Squall's wholly uninterested expression. She'd simply have to try Seifer instead. Taking a step back, she looked him over as if performing a last minute check-up before proofing him for duty. "Well then, I guess you have somewhere you need to be, Commander."

Squall nodded. "Thanks." He felt like it was the appropriate thing to say, even if she had caused more trouble than could've been prevented. Stepping out into the vacated plaza, Squall nodded at the guards posted outside and started into a fast pace.

"Good luck," Quistis's voice sounded from behind him.

Waving his goodbye without looking back, he hastened towards the gates that were already being opened by another two guards. Not the best exit. His car was parked on the other side of the Palace, a few streets down the adjacent block. An unfortunate consequence of needing to prevent people from connecting his license plate to that of the SeeD Commander. Glancing at his phone, he scowled and broke into a jog. Now he only had twenty minutes to manage the walk to his car and a half an hour drive.

Not that it mattered. Even if he had to run all red lights, he would not let Seifer down.

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[Esthar Main Train Station, Sphinxara District, Tuesday, 28th of October, 11:54 am]

Locking up his pickup in the station's parking area, Seifer glanced over at the machine that would eat most of his money upon their return. He'd already spent far too much money on drinking himself into oblivion the night before. Whiskey wasn't cheap, nor herbal spirits.

Slinging his duffel bag and tent over his shoulder, he grabbed Kronos's case and headed for the escalators that would take him straight up into the train station. A brief glance at the announcement displays told him their train would be on time. No delays, no leeway in case Squall ran late. He still hadn't heard from the man, his phone sitting silent in his pocket for the past few hours, but he supposed that was a good sign. If Squall knew he wouldn't make it, he would have heard from the man.

He bought them lunch and coffee at one of the many shops before setting out for the station's upper level of platforms. Esthar had built the massive transport hub in record time, finally connecting the isolated city to the outside world with a high-speed railway net. Numerous train platforms were spread out over several levels, the whole place bustling with people and accents that were decidedly not Estharian.

Unfortunately for Squall and himself, the high-speed part of their trip would only take them as far as Fisherman's Horizon. After that they were doomed to the slow chugging of old style Galbadian trains. When he reached the turnstiles for the right platform, he scanned the code Squall had forwarded to him. The gate opened with a whirr, leading him out onto the translucent blue platform
that provided a view of the many levels below.

Only a couple of other passengers had arrived, the platform almost empty. In his rush to be there in time, he'd managed to be early. Taking a deep gulp of his coffee, he felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He steeled himself for a message from Squall, saying that the meeting had dragged out.

- Message from Headmistress / 12:10 pm / One last request before you're off. Take some pictures. It could be your first entry to add to Selphie's collection. "Squall's first holiday ever." No one will believe it without any proof. -

A smile tugged at his lips. Now that would be an entertaining way to let everyone know he was still alive and kicking. He'd be able to avoid messy confrontations while at the same time still shocking everyone. A win-win situation all around.

- Message to Headmistress / 12:12 pm / I might just take you up on that. -

He quickly sent another message.

- Message to Headmistress / 12:13 pm / He's on his way then? -

- Message from Headmistress / 12:14 pm / He left about ten minutes ago. He should make it. -

His smirk widened. There was something satisfying about knowing Squall was rushing to see him, even if it was just so they wouldn't miss their train. The platform was filling up quickly now and in the distance he could see their train approaching on the tracks. The moment the train came to a halt, people walked past him to board. Squall would be cutting it close.

As the minutes ticked by, the bustle of people arriving diminished. The only people on the platform now were either waiting for someone as well, or walking straight onto the train. He finished his coffee and chucked the cup in the nearest bin, before eyeing Squall's cup and draining that one too. The platform had emptied when he looked up, the conductor waving at him from a few cars down, motioning for him to get on.

He shook his head, stalling for time. But then a dark figure rounded the corner, carrying a gunblade case and taking quick strides with a look that meant business. One very sexy and very determined commander. And of course Squall wouldn't stoop to a run, no, not when there was a whole minute left before the train would depart. Seifer smirked and opened the door of their car as the man drew close.

"After you, Princess," he said, behaving like the perfect gentleman as he indicated the train with Kronos's case.

Pulse still racing from the manic drive to the station, Squall regarded Seifer's smile with a surge of relief. The man's mood truly had improved then. He nodded his greeting and stepped onto the train.

Following Squall up the steps and down the narrow aisle in between seats, Seifer couldn't actually believe they'd made it. With not a moment to spare. Just as they were placing their luggage onto the overhead racks, the train gave a slight start and set into motion.

Sitting down into his seat, he glanced out at the platform disappearing into the distance, the buildings blending into blurs of blue and gray. His tiredness set in full force, the extra cups of coffee he'd had not even close to staving it off. He looked over at Squall, the man immediately meeting his gaze and looking every bit as tired as he felt. His conscience gave another twinge, but he quickly pushed aside any hesitance or thought that might lead him back to the previous night.
"Fun drive?" he asked instead.

Squall let out a huff, the stress of rushing to the station slow to abate. "Nothing but red lights."

A low chuckle left Seifer as he imagined Squall's impatience in the car. He leaned back further into his seat and stretched out his legs, nudging Squall's in the process. "And the meeting?"

"A pain," Squall said, rubbing his temple before looking at Seifer more closely. "Yours?"

"Alright. Even including your little stunt," Seifer said, with a huff. "She's fierce. And she certainly knows how to keep the Doctor in line."

Squall allowed himself to slowly relax. It seemed he'd made the right call. "What did Odine say?"

"That we can both expect a fifteen percent increase in our magic with the new pills," Seifer said, smiling broadly. They'd been deadly to start with. Another fifteen percent and they'd be able to take on the most hardcore GFs. "With time, hopefully a full recovery for us both."

Squall raised an eyebrow at the amazingly optimistic assessment. If that was true, then he'd be able to regain the level of skill he'd worked so hard for all his life, and so would Seifer. He let out a soft breath of relief.

"He wasn't happy you had to cancel," Seifer said, remembering Odine's annoyance with glee.

"I'm not inclined to reschedule. We've got what we needed from him."

"You'll need a clean bill of health to return to your missions though."

"I don't need Odine to prove my competence," Squall replied dismissively. "Kadowaki's assessment will do."

Seifer chuckled lowly. "Just imagine Odine's expression when he finds out, Princess."

Settling back into his seat, Squall mirrored the blond's good humor with a curl to his own lips. It was amusing enough to imagine Odine's ire, but far more satisfying was Seifer's smile.

"There's a sandwich for you in my bag, if you want," Seifer said, kicking said bag lightly. "I'm gonna catch a nap."

Squall watched as Seifer yawned, got comfortable and shut his eyes, sleep quickly claiming the blond. He hadn't dared to hope they would make it this far. Seifer's appointment had gone unexpectedly well, and the man had actually shown up for their trip in good spirits.

Rinoa was a force to be reckoned with.

Most likely she'd been a better companion for Seifer at the lab than he would have been himself. Rinoa knew exactly when to apply pressure and when to placate in order to avoid deadlocks and get what she wanted from the doctor. It was a dubious skill he wished she'd never needed, but it had definitely helped them today. That, and she probably had a lot more to offer than him in the way of comforting words. She'd always been a gentle touch, with a toughness at her core.

Going by Seifer's praise, it even sounded like the two might have gotten along. He wasn't sure how to feel about that, but Seifer deserved all the help and all the allies he could get. He got out his phone.

- Message to Rinoa / 12:42 pm / We made it. Thank you. -
Pocketing his phone again, he turned to look out of the window. Esthar's high-rise structures were already slipping towards the horizon and the muted conversation from the few other passengers pulled at him like a distant lullaby. But he was too high-strung for his thoughts to allow him any rest.

Winhill.

A sense of responsibility for Seifer had driven him forward, down this path. He owed it to the man after the way he'd abandoned all belief in him. He'd single-mindedly conceived the plan and put it into motion without much thought to the actual consequences he could suffer as a result. For once those hadn't mattered.

He still didn't doubt he was doing the right thing, but now that they were on their way, coming inevitably closer and closer to the reality of what he'd offered Seifer, the magnitude of it all became impossible to ignore.

For all he knew, and having Ellone's promise to that effect, she'd never let anyone into his memories. The closest anyone had ever come to seeing his mind were Rinoa's unsolicited attempts to read him and more often than not it had felt like an invasion. But worse than the violation of his privacy was the fact that she hadn't liked what she'd seen. Her access to his mind had been the beginning of the end. As if it had slowly chipped away at her belief that there was more to him than the unfeeling man most people saw. Instead each glimpse into his mind had confirmed just how dysfunctional he was.

This wouldn't be any different. Seifer could see anything. There wouldn't be a chance to cover it up with lies, to buffer what the man saw with a composed expression. All of his weaknesses would be as plain as day.

As the landscape changed from rock desert to salt plains, Squall rested his head against the cool glass of the window. He knew he should be more worried about what he could end up seeing in Seifer's memories, but he felt confident about his hypothesis. Instead his mind catalogued the worst possible memories Seifer could be landed in. His own memories of the war would be the worst. Ellone had been right about that. But apart from that, personal humiliation seemed the most likely risk. It was a price he was willing to pay. Seifer's peace of mind was more important than the man's regard for him.

Glancing at the sleeping blond, he had a hard time imagining any of this would bring them closer. It would be too personal, too raw. The specter of their past had loomed over them ever since they'd run into each other again, and here they were, on their way to dig it all up. Seifer had made it very clear just the evening before that he didn't think they should be involved at all. Squall knew better than to dismiss those words as a temporary lapse in judgment.

It was almost as if two conflicting entities lived within Seifer's skin; the man and the war. One minute Seifer was himself, but then the next... It would be a naive mistake to think Winhill would fix all that.

Looking away from Seifer, he checked his phone when it chirruped.

- Message from Quistis / 12:52 pm / Did you make your train? -

Texting back the affirmative, he kept his phone in hand, knowing to expect a reply.

- From Quistis / 12:53 pm / Keep Seifer in line for me and say hello to Ellone. Don't do anything I wouldn't. -
Huffing at Quistis's message, Squall could easily imagine the playful tone, underlined with a serious gleam to the woman's eyes. He had to admit that as unpleasant as the confrontation had been, he was glad everything was out in the open now. They were good, which made a hopelessly complicated situation a little bit more manageable.

Leaning his head against the window once more, he rested his gaze on the sparkling white expanse of salt rocks and tried to empty his head. Some sleep would be great and definitely more useful than mulling over scenarios that might never happen. Focusing on the muted sound of the train traveling along the tracks, he allowed himself to cave to the soothing calm of Shiva's presence at the back of his mind, something he hadn't done in ages for the purpose of sleep. The moment his eyes fell closed went by unnoticed as salt plains turned into the snowy landscape of his ice goddess's dreams.

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[Ozmone Park, Sphinxara District, Tuesday, 28th of October, 13:53pm]

Seated on a bench in Ozmone Park, Rinoa watched the sunlight glint off the Palace's top tiers that peeked just above the tall trees. Angelo sat obediently by her feet, happy enough to doze in the sun as she waited for her second appointment of the day to show up. First the meeting with Seifer and Odine, and now her ex's overprotective, aggressively meddlesome friend. She knew better than to think Quistis considered her a friend as well. They'd gotten along well enough when she'd still been staying at Balamb Garden, each keeping the peace with polite greetings and inoffensive conversation, but she'd never managed to reach a deeper understanding with the difficult woman. After she'd moved to Esthar with Squall, her relationship with Quistis had shifted from politely distant to strained.

She sighed, considering the wisdom of agreeing to meet the woman. At least by calling her up first, she'd been able to set the terms herself. Better to meet in a place of her choosing; a public park, where Quistis's sense of propriety would force her to behave in a civil manner. After the morning she'd had, she was in no mood to be scolded or lectured any more than could be avoided.

Watching the many passersby as they walked their dogs, jogged or otherwise went about their lives, Rinoa glanced at her phone. Quistis was running late. Though she supposed she shouldn't be surprised. The woman was perpetually busy, just as bad a workaholic as Squall. Those two had always enabled each other in their unhealthy devotion to their jobs, and sometimes she wondered whether Quistis hadn't secretly enjoyed the priority she'd been granted over Rinoa whenever she'd beckoned Squall with an urgent meeting or high stakes mission.

She didn't harbor any disillusion that now that she and Squall had broken up and had severed their bond, Quistis's enmity towards her would disappear. They'd chafed from the first time they'd met, long before she'd started something with Squall. It had been clear from the get-go that Quistis had considered her a spoiled princess with rather fanciful and naïve ideas of becoming a freedom fighter. The woman hadn't been wrong, but she'd also consistently underestimated her ever since. Some people simply never became friends, no matter what.

But if Seifer could withstand her, then so could she. Quistis was no more than a loose end. Just one more unpleasant encounter and she'd be free to go back to her own life, such as it was, to lick her wounds and to try to figure out what to do with her future. She didn't owe the woman anything; she owed this to herself. To face the mess she'd made head-on, so she could start over with a truly clean slate.

When Quistis finally appeared around a bend and walked over to her with that ever confident stride, Rinoa wondered if the woman had ever been caught unawares and looking anything less
than perfect. Now as well, Quistis was the picture of competence and understated elegance, her
SeeD uniform and low-heeled boots adding a martial touch to her upswept hair and flawless
beauty.

"Sorry about the tardiness," Quistis announced her arrival, speaking in a tone that betrayed little
true apology. The woman sat down next to her and gave Angelo an absent-minded pat in greeting.
"I was held up by General Reardon and his cohorts after the meeting. You know how it is."

Sadly, Rinoa did know, but she kept her tongue. "How did it go?" she asked politely. It was the
way they always conducted their conversations; a shallow exchange where neither really cared
about the other's replies.

"As well as could be expected at this stage, but I think we managed to get through to some, plant a
spark of interest in others. There's money to be made after all, and political clout to be gained."
When Rinoa didn't come forward with any more social pleasantries, Quistis turned a scrutinizing
eye to the subdued sorceress beside her. She hadn't seen Rinoa for months, she realized. She took in
the woman's longer hair, her drawn and tired eyes, and a set of magic inhibiting bangles she hadn't
seen before. They were slimmer than the previous ones and could almost be mistaken as
fashionable if you disregarded the fact that they were intended to prevent disaster.

"So," she spoke into the heavy silence.

"So," Rinoa mirrored, sending her an even and cool glance. "You wanted to see me. Here I am."

Quistis almost rebuked the younger woman for her discourteous tone before abruptly thinking
better of it. There'd already been so many harsh words and ugly confrontations the past few days.
The thought of instigating yet another made her feel tired beyond belief. Letting out a long sigh,
she fixed her gaze on the park before her. "I'll be honest with you and say that I had enough drama
last night to last me a long time. I hardly got any sleep mulling it all over, and after today's meeting
I'm just exhausted." She shook her head, recalling just how thoroughly she'd been stonewalled the
night before. "Why do those two always have to make things so damned difficult?"

So the usually astute headmistress hadn't pieced things together yet. Rinoa considered that bit of
information as she replied. "They're both very stupid at times. But they're also good men, and
they're trying."

Quistis huffed as she turned her gaze to Rinoa. "And should I extend that excuse to you as well?"

And there it was. "I know I could've handled things a lot better than I did, but I'm also the one who
was in a relationship with Squall," she said firmly, having rehearsed the words in her mind. "No
matter how entitled you feel about being a part of his life, what Squall and I had and how we chose
to end it was private. It didn't involve you."

Quistis remained silent for a moment, her lips sloping downwards at the corners. "Rinoa, I thought
I made it clear to you that my interest in Squall back then was a misguided one. I never begrudged
you your relationship with him."

"Didn't you?"

"No," Quistis countered, her expression growing tight with disapproval. "I never thought you two
were particularly compatible, but jealousy had nothing to do with it. I moved on from that
childhood crush a long time ago. I tried hard to be nothing but supportive, even when you two
made that damned near impossible." She sent her another glare before looking stiffly ahead at the
people passing by. "I'd always hoped you'd let my past embarrassments stay in the past... Do I
really seem that petty to you?"

Rinoa faltered, the heartfelt words managing to make her feel somewhat guilty. "All I know is that you never liked me."

Quistis snorted before pointing out, "And you never liked me. Should I then immediately suppose that's because you were jealous of my friendship with Squall?"

Not about to admit that sometimes she'd been very jealous indeed when Squall had spent another long night with the woman pouring over mission details or briefings, Rinoa wondered if she'd been the one to treat Quistis unfairly. She'd been so uncertain in her relationship with Squall that Quistis's poorly veiled doubts had seemed like another threat to their already fragile balance.

Sighing at the lack of a reply, Quistis tried not to let her hurt pride derail the conversation. "I'd like to think that we both respect each other enough to admit that our discordance has nothing to do with Squall."

Rinoa looked up at the statement that painted them on an equal footing. "You always had plenty of opinions about Squall and me."

"I have opinions about everything," Quistis pointed out tartly. "Especially about my friends. I could tell you two were spiraling and when you moved to Esthar, far away from anyone who knows you two, I was concerned. I don't think either of you showed a great deal of good judgment up to that point, and clearly you haven't since either."

"You don't understand!" Rinoa burst out, hating how her throat closed up with emotion while Quistis was sitting primly and composed. "It was our last chance to make things work. I hoped that if he spent more time away from Garden, we'd get the breathing room we needed to work through our problems. When he offered to move here with me, it was the first time he ever sacrificed something for me. For us." She drew in a shaking breath, unsure why it mattered so much for Quistis to consider her side of the story. "Our quarters in Balamb Garden were never a safe haven, just for the two of us. Any moment he could be called away, by you or the others, by missions, by whatever urgent matter that cropped up next. He was never off the clock. You know him. Duty first, always."

"What did you expect?" Quistis asked with an eyebrow arched high, unable to understand such selfishness. "He's the SeeD Commander. He has responsibilities."

"He wasn't the SeeD Commander when I first fell in love with him," Rinoa replied quietly. "He was my boyfriend and I saw him once every few weeks if I was lucky. If I was really lucky, we'd be alone without anyone of the gang there. It's not a lot for a relationship to subsist on, Quistis. I needed more than that."

Frowning, Quistis didn't much like the implication that somehow their gang had actively tried to get in Squall and Rinoa's way. "It's not fair for you to blame his friends or his job. Squall chose this life, and you chose him."

"So then you're aware he deliberately chose to spend long hours in his office or that he chose to take you guys up on hanging out, just to avoid me?" Rinoa said evenly, watching Quistis's reaction. She'd always wondered if the gang had known just how little Squall had loved her.

Speechless, Quistis regarded the distraught woman beside her with a small frown. She'd never really spared much thought to the workings of their relationship, never really caring how they spent their time together, but it sounded exactly like something Squall would do. "...I didn't know."
"We didn't stand a chance as long as you and the others were there to provide him with hundreds of excuses not to come back to our quarters. It wasn't just the missions. You know he hardly ever took any leave, even when he easily could have. I had to make him face me."

Quistis's frown grew at the litany, her compassion dwindling as she recalled some of what Seifer had told her. There was one glaring flaw in the woman's explanations. "If you loved him so much, then why did you cheat on him?"

Blindsided by the accusation, Rinoa stared at the woman. "He said that?"

"Seifer did," Quistis corrected, her anger flaring again at Rinoa's injured tone. "He saw you walk out on Squall with another man. Are you telling me that didn't happen?"

"Squall and I broke up months ago—"

"So Squall told me. He might buy that excuse, but we both know better," Quistis interrupted. "He still came running, and you still hoped to keep him by your side." Rinoa's tongue-tied expression did nothing to mollify her. "So then why? How many times did you lead him on with the knight spiel, while you were looking elsewhere?"

Face crumpling, Rinoa tried not to feel put out with Seifer for tattling. There was a point in everyone's life where they had to own up to their actions. Hyne knew Squall would never hold her accountable. "I guess I wanted to test him. To see how he'd react. If he'd get jealous. If he'd fight for me, the way I tried to fight for him," she confessed, looking away. "He didn't. Not even once."

Quistis scowled at the childish reasoning. "No matter how lacking you think his affections were, he didn't deserve that."

"I know," came the heartfelt reply. "I made a lot of mistakes."

"You did," Quistis rebuked in clipped tones. Infidelity was the least of the woman's transgressions. "Some graver than others."

Rinoa winced at the chill reply she should have expected. She wished she could deny the implied accusation and say she'd never hurt Squall at all. "Will you ever forgive me for that day?"

Quistis stiffened and glanced away. She'd never forget how she'd been called to the infirmary by a panicking Zell, would never forget the sight of Kadowaki's gloved hands drenched in blood as she frantically worked on Squall's back. They'd had to set up an IV for blood transfusions, something that was rarely necessary because of curative magic. "Squall already has, so I see no point in holding grudges."

Letting the lie slip, Rinoa fell silent and patted Angelo when the dog placed her head on Rinoa's lap with a soft whine. Quistis's silence roiled with judgment and racing thoughts, warning her the conversation was far from over. She waited for the woman to regain her calm, and steeled herself against the barbs of her coming words.

It took immense effort for Quistis to steer her thoughts away from that awful day. She'd wanted to yell at Rinoa then as well, but the sorceress had been a blubbering, crying mess, unable to process any of her questions or demands. Zell had been the one to steer her away from the distraught woman. Everything had changed that day. Inexplicably, the moment Squall had recovered, he'd declared to all that Rinoa and he were moving to Esthar.

A lot of good it did them.
Rinoa's reasons did nothing to placate her. If their relationship had been that much of an uphill struggle, then they should've broken up ages ago. It seemed beyond naïve that Rinoa had believed a move to another city or flirting with other men could fix it all. If anything, it sounded like Squall hadn't been all that interested in romance, only maintaining the knight part of their relationship. It fit the man's self-sacrificing stupidity to a T.

At least it was over now, she tried to soothe herself. Their short time living together in Esthar, however misguided, had been the last spasms of a dying relationship. As terribly as it had come to an end, with far too many unnecessary risks and injuries to her commander and friend, Squall was finally free of her. Rinoa would never hurt him again.

She knew she was being harsh and unfair, understood all too well the unprecedented circumstances that had shaped Rinoa against the woman's will, but she still had trouble letting go. It seemed Squall was the most sensitive and forgiving one of them all. Her first instinct had been to lash out at both Seifer and Rinoa, but Squall had extended his hand to them and had tried to help them. Was still trying to help them.

"What's your take on Seifer?"

The question that broke the long silence caused Rinoa's eyebrows to climb high as she met Quistis's dissecting gaze. "I thought you wanted to talk about how Squall and I broke the bond."

"I suppose that was my initial intent, but Squall and Seifer already bludgeoned me with their stubborn reasoning and lack of remorse. You three made a fine mess together. If he'd lost his magic — " Quistis cut herself short, forcing the anger out of her voice. "I might have been less accommodating if he'd suffered any permanent damage, but I'm tired of talking about it. I'm tired of people telling me it's none of my business."

Now there was a novel and welcome thought; the woman realizing when to hold back. Rinoa tried not to show her relief too openly. When Quistis looked at her expectantly, she sighed and considered what to say. "You saw Seifer yourself. You talked with him. I doubt you need my input to make up your mind."

"It was confronting," Quistis said slowly, regretful of how she'd stormed into that reunion, full of righteous anger and distrust. "He's very different from how I remember him."

Recalling Seifer's replies to Odine's questions and all the suspicions they had triggered, Rinoa fortified herself against the return of sorrow and guilt. "He went through things you can't even imagine. Of course he's different."

Quistis's sharp gaze locked onto her face. "So you agree with Squall's theory then? That Ultimcia controlled his actions?"

Rinoa frowned at the woman's raised eyebrow and the doubtful way in which she posed the question. "Of course I do, and if you don't, you're not as smart as I thought."

"I believe them. It's just that I've been getting conflicting impressions from you," Quistis said calmly, studying Rinoa's reactions. The woman was already getting agitated. "Everyone's been telling me that you're the one who came up with the idea that Squall should stay with Seifer for his recovery, but every time I mention Seifer's name, you tense up. It was the same thing over the phone a few days ago. I didn't know Squall's mystery friend was Seifer at the time, but even then you didn't sound like you liked him very much. I thought that maybe you were unsure about him."

Gritting her teeth, Rinoa forced herself to meet Quistis's gaze without flinching. "I know firsthand
what it's like to be used by a sorceress. I accompanied him this morning for his appointment at Odine's lab. I'm not unsure about anything at all."

"He went to see Odine?" Quistis asked, straightening at that new bit of information. "And you went with him?"

"I did. Squall asked me to. He couldn't go himself, because of the meeting."

Quistis raised an eyebrow. Squall and Rinoa still had to be close for the prideful man to ask her for help, and for Rinoa to agree to it. Or perhaps they were able to set aside any disagreement for Seifer's sake. Rinoa had dated the arrogant cadet long before she'd started to date Squall after all. She shook her head, wondering how someone as solitary as Squall had become embroiled in such a tangled web.

"What did Odine say?" she demanded. "How come I didn't know about this?"

Stifling the petty stab of satisfaction at Quistis's ignorance, Rinoa kept her voice even and unassuming. "They didn't tell you they're training together? That Seifer's magic was affected as well?"

"Squall mentioned it briefly. I didn't know it was bad enough for Seifer to go in and see Odine as well."

Rinoa nodded, trying to find common ground in the fact that they both cared for Seifer. Quistis's voice was full of concern, which was a good sign. Seifer needed people on his side, to champion his cause even if the man wouldn't himself. "He's in good shape, physically and magically. Odine's pills are working for him too."

"That's a relief," Quistis said slowly, growing thoughtful. When Squall had told her he was retraining his magic together with Seifer, she hadn't really considered what that meant, too distracted by her anger. She tried to imagine it now; how for over two years Seifer hadn't had any access to treatment. The longer she thought about the price Seifer had paid for the war, the more she started to realize just how horribly they'd all failed him. "You know about Winhill as well then?"

Rinoa let out a deep breath. "I do," she said with a nod. Turning to regard Quistis closely, Rinoa could read the woman's guilty conscience in the tense lines of her face and shoulders. "I hope it won't be too little too late. He should've gotten help a long time ago," she stated soberly. "But people tend to need scapegoats. I guess it makes complicated situations easier to deal with."

Quistis looked away, her heart falling. "I suppose I deserved that," she said quietly. "I haven't done right by either of you, have I?"

"No," Rinoa said flatly, before tempering her words. "But I understand. I wasn't sure about Seifer at first either. What he did to me during the war... to Squall... It isn't always easy to see the truth past your own hurt and fear." She looked at Quistis until the woman met her gaze. "So I understand why you doubt me. But here's the thing. There is no normal after Ultimecia. The things I've done, the things Seifer has done... It's hurt as just as deeply." She let out a trembling breath, petting Angelo to pacify the dog's concerned whining. "Please look after Seifer. Don't give up on him."

Accepting the truth of Rinoa's words, Quistis strengthened her resolve. "I promise."

They sat together in silence for a while, some of the tension between them easing. Quistis wished they could leave things off like that and part somewhat amicably, but she couldn't stop certain
suspicions from racing through her head. If Seifer had just been stringing her along with his flirtatious remarks about Squall, then the man was doing a very convincing job of it. She'd hoped for Rinoa's responses to shed some light on matters, but the woman seemed only supportive of Seifer.

"Is Seifer the reason you and Squall broke the bond?" she asked bluntly, unable to phrase the outrageous suspicion any more subtly.

Tensing, Rinoa felt all blood leave her face. "Why would he be?"

Grimacing at Rinoa's offended incredulity, Quistis rushed to explain. "I apologize if it's a callous question and I know I'm probably just imagining things, but there are just some things that made it seem like—well, like they are involved somehow. But that's crazy, I know..." Quistis trailed off as Rinoa's face grew increasingly ashen and hurt, the woman looking stiffly away from her. "No."

"Yes," Rinoa countered in a tight voice, refusing to lie to the woman when the whole point of this conversation was to clear the air. Quistis wasn't a fool. Of course the woman would catch on after spending time with both men. It wasn't Rinoa's fault they hadn't been discreet, nor was it her responsibility to cover for them.

"Squall and Seifer? Really?" Quistis exclaimed, blindsided by the confirmation when she'd been expecting annoyed denial. Too late she realized her rudeness, reminded of who she was talking to when Rinoa stared at her with pained eyes. "Hyne, I'm so sorry. I honestly didn't think—" Failing to find words, she shook her head, perplexed.

"We didn't break the bond because of Seifer," Rinoa said, the words like dry sand in her mouth. It was probably her declaration that she wanted to sever their bond that had driven Squall to seek comfort in the man's arms in the first place. Her ploy to shock Squall out of his complacency had backfired spectacularly, and she only had herself to blame. "Seifer was there to pick up the pieces, I suppose."

Unconvinced, Quistis started to speak but then she suddenly realized the incomprehensible love triangle that was at work. Squall Leonhart, in a love triangle that involved Seifer Almasy of all people. It seemed beyond surreal. How had the two men even found the time to start something? They'd only just met again, and Squall had been with Rinoa until very recently. "Were they involved before? Back at Garden?"

Rinoa masked her feelings and held Quistis's gaze evenly. "I've said all I'm going to say on the matter. Whatever you want to know, you'll have to ask them." Standing up, she smoothed the creases from her jacket and looped her hand around Angelo's leash. "One piece of advice. Back off. Let them figure things out for themselves."

Biting back the urge to protest, Quistis watched as the young sorceress turned and hastened away with an urgency that betrayed her need to escape scrutinizing eyes. Angelo trotted beside her, keeping protectively close to her distraught mistress. Definitely not over Squall yet.

Leaning back against the bench when Rinoa disappeared from sight, she tried and failed to rearrange all she'd thought she'd known about her two most troublesome cadets. So many times she'd seen them fight with a ferocity that had seemed to speak only of ill feelings. She'd had to step in and break them up more than once. She'd seen them locked in deadly battle, so afraid to see either one of them die.

But more recently she'd also witnessed the teasing banter and easy conversation between them. The obvious concern and respect they held for one another. The heartbreakingly honest resolve to help
each other recover from their fraught past. They'd been sharing a bed also, she recalled with a flush to her cheeks. Suddenly all of Seifer's daring remarks and messages were colored with the realization that the man had probably been one hundred percent serious.

Hyne. She wasn't sure whether to expect disaster or a happy ending for them. Their destructive track record sure suggested the former as the more likely path, and she wondered if they'd be able to beat such odds or if they even had the inclination to. She hadn't been able to shake the feeling that both men were at the end of their rope, much in need of some healing and happiness. It was beyond strange for them to be seeking such things in one another. That fact was somehow far more shocking and hard to imagine than the revelation that Squall swung both ways. Bemused, she let out a soft snort at the bizarre thought that Squall might actually have a type: lively and outgoing. Who knew.

She'd just have to observe them more closely the next time she saw them, on the off chance that they might actually be good for each other. From what she'd witnessed it might just be true, and she definitely had several tricks up her sleeve to push them in the right direction. In fact, those two dating might actually improve her chances of reenlisting Seifer and reintroducing the blond into the gang. After all, who didn't want to spend more time with their partner?

Pleased with her plans, she stood up from the bench and stretched in the warm sunlight. *Those sneaky bastards.* She found herself smiling despite all the unnecessary subterfuge and lies, despite all the worries that still plagued her. Life was weird and had a tendency of throwing her curve balls, but this one she could work with.

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**[Fisherman's Horizon, Tuesday, 28th of October, 14:55 pm]**

As the train pulled into Fisherman's Horizon with a sharp whine of brakes, Squall woke up to find all of his foot space taken over by a comfortably sprawled blond. Acutely aware of the cramped confines he'd been trapped in, he straightened in his seat to stretch sore muscles. When Seifer slowly stirred from his sleep as well, Squall's annoyance was met by a playful wink and a nudge to his shins, the bastard's smile only broadening at the unimpressed look he sent the man's way. Around them passengers were starting to slip into their coats and collect their belongings.

Seifer stood up from his seat and rolled his muscles to try and dislodge a kink that had crept into his back. His stomach gave an insistent growl as they moved to gather their things. Unfortunately there was no satisfying meal waiting for them. The sandwiches he'd bought had most likely suffered during the trip and the water would be lukewarm by now.

"Fuck, I'm hungry," he announced through a yawn. "How long is the layover?"

Squall looked up at the question, his bag slung over his shoulder and his gunblade case in hand. "Almost an hour." His gaze moved to the window. He couldn't see the ocean from here, but he itched with the need to stretch his legs and get some fresh air.

"Let's get out of here," Seifer said, grabbing his jacket.

Squall nodded and zipped up his leather jacket as they walked to the exit. The wind was always brisk in Fisherman's Horizon. When they emerged onto the platform, he drew in a deep breath of the briny sea air before he led them through the small station. Despite the expansion of train connections since Esthar's opening, FH's station had hardly any facilities to speak of. He had a better place in mind.
After they stowed their things in a locker, he led them away from the small stream of disembarked passengers that flowed towards the city center and instead took them towards the nearest edge of Fisherman's Horizon. After a few streets and a walkway they came to a 'no entry' sign and a low fence that did nothing to impede their passage. He guided them up two sets of metal stairs that clung precariously to the inside of the massive steel bulwark enclosing the floating city, taking them to the top of the large structure that offered a view of the ocean that stretched for miles.

Seifer whistled lowly in appreciation as he looked out over the horizon and the sheer drop that was only a few steps away. Absolutely stunning, but not nearly as enticing as the view next to him. And they were finally alone. When Squall turned to look at him, he let his gaze slowly peruse the man and took in those serious eyes and slightly knitted eyebrows. There was still an uncertainty to the man's expression, and he knew he only had himself to blame for it. Pulling Squall close, he kissed the man.

Drawn into the kiss, Squall suddenly felt the weight of every hour that had passed since their last one. Only now did he realize how much he'd needed Seifer to do this. All his senses focused on how Seifer kissed him deeply, the touch restoring what a thousand flirtatious texts couldn't. Winding his arms around Seifer's back, he let the man pull him even closer. He returned every single move with equal passion, quickly growing lightheaded.

They kissed like that for a while, until Seifer felt every last remnant of tension in Squall's body disentangle. Moving back, he smiled at the sight presented by one dazed looking brunet. "So fucking perfect," he said lowly, the quirk of his lips turning into a fully fledged lopsided smirk. He wished to Hyne he could get away with more, but they were too exposed, in plain view of several fishermen who had set up for the day on a ledge further down, a quarter mile to their east, equally unimpressed with the warnings not to climb the bulwark. He walked over to the widest section of their own ledge to sit down and looked back out over the sea, taking in a deep breath as he took in the view.

Joining Seifer after a moment of regaining his composure, Squall moved to sit down beside the man and briefly watched as Seifer lifted the bag he'd brought with from his shoulder to rifle through it. Looking away, Squall stared into the distance with a renewed sense of courage. All because of a kiss.

It was a beautiful day. The sky was a clear stretch of blue, a flock of seagulls milling about high above them, their calls a distant ruckus. Strong gusts of wind tugged at his hair and jacket, filling his lungs with crisp, clean air. He loved this place. He'd discovered it during one of his longer layovers, a year ago now. It had proved the ideal spot to try and find some peace of mind when he'd been on his way through to see Rinoa. Something about the vast expanse of water, the knowledge that nothing but a wall of steel was holding back the forces of nature… It made his problems seem less pressing and insurmountable somehow.

He glanced beside him when Seifer held out a sandwich and a bottle of water. They ate together in silence, their peace only briefly disturbed by a seagull's attempt to steal their lunch. Squall couldn't help a small smile from curling his lips when Seifer sent the unfortunate creature fleeing with a curse and a well-aimed Fire spell. They were left alone after that.

After their humble meal Seifer moved to lay on his back, arms crossed beneath his head and snoozing. Squall regarded him briefly before looking back out over the deep blue waters and skies. The crash of waves far below them. The scent of the ocean. The strong, chill wind that stung his face despite the brightly burning sun.

Looking over to the fishermen, he wondered what kind of lives they led to come here every day,
their time filled up with idleness, interrupted only by the occasional bout of activity when something snatched their bait. An easy, indolent life. Peaceful and enviable as it might look to him now, he also knew he'd find it mind-numbingly boring.

The confinement in Seifer's apartment and the time spent away from the field had chafed at him whenever Seifer hadn't been around to provide distraction. Idleness didn't suit him. Despite the inconvenience and long hours of traveling by train, being out on the road again made him feel a little more like himself. To see sights he hadn't just seen the day before. To be doing something more worthwhile than paperwork or trailing after Seifer while the man went about his life.

He let out a soft breath. It would be both rewarding and hard to go back to his missions after his time in Esthar. Harder than ever before.

Ever since the war his career had been an excuse to keep going, to never stop and think and just process for once. He hadn't known how until the broken bond had forced him to. Just a few weeks ago he'd been an incorrigible workaholic, relentless in his drive no matter the cost to his personal relationships. Now... Now he feared what would happen if he made those same mistakes again.

Fighting the urge to look at Seifer again, he breathed in deeply and studied the ocean. The water was ever moving, ever in turmoil, the winds sweeping its surface, but there was a permanence, a stillness that slumbered in its depths. He tried to be still as well, to take enjoyment simply from the pleasant weather, his satiated stomach, Seifer's solid presence by his side.

For a while, it was enough. He looked out over the waters, listened to the lullaby of waves and wind, and felt himself grow calm. Time passed all too quickly like that as he sat thinking of nothing in particular. When the sun crept past the point he'd marked for himself, he checked the time on his phone and repressed a sigh.

"Time to go," he said, getting onto his feet and grabbing his things.

Pulled from his pleasant daydreaming, Seifer pushed himself up into a sitting position. The light dozing while the sun and wind had nipped at him had greatly enhanced his mood. The sandwich and water had helped considerably too. He actually felt refreshed. Looking out at the ocean, he took in the stunning view one final time before getting up to stand next to Squall. When the man started to lead them back the same way they'd come, he followed in silence.

As they made it closer to the station, he glanced at Squall. It would only be a couple of minutes before they'd be back aboard the train with no chance of instigating anything for hours, and the kiss on top of the bulwark had been far too brief and chaste. He took in their surroundings a bit more carefully. Not many people were about, but for what he had in mind, they'd need somewhere away from prying eyes.

The moment he spotted a deserted alleyway, he grabbed hold of Squall's wrist and dragged him off. Squall followed without protest, and when they came to a stop face to face, the man looked up at him expectantly. No surprise, and no more uncertainty. Smirking, Seifer surged forward, his lips immediately finding Squall's.

After the relief of Seifer's earlier kiss, Squall was more than willing to reaffirm their connection with something a little more hands-on. His palms slid across the thick knots of muscle in Seifer's back, his fingers curling into the man's shirt and urging him as close as possible. In just a short few days, his body had learned to react to the feel and scent of Seifer's body with the same sensory alacrity that usually overtook him during battle. Instinct drove him to inhale Seifer's scent deeply, to press up and roll his hips and draw the man's tongue in deeper.
Pushing Squall up against the nearest wall, Seifer planted one of his legs firmly in between Squall's and ground into him forcefully. It was maddening to have Squall like this, all eager and rough. They fought for dominance, their tongues and lips interlocking in an intoxicating play. At the feel of Squall's length growing hard against him, he was quickly losing all notion of restraint, location be damned. He thrust down both of his hands to grasp hold of Squall's perfect ass, kneading greedily.

"Get a room!" a voice called out from not far away, causing Squall to stiffen in his hold mid-grind.

Breaking their kiss and looking over at the passerby, Seifer yelled back in reply, "Enjoying the show?"

The guy just rolled his eyes and walked on, out of sight. Letting out a groan as their surroundings fully registered with him again, Seifer looked back down at the sexy brunet still locked in his arms. One look was enough to know Squall wouldn't be tempted into continuing the exchange, despite the man's very aroused state. His own pants were just as uncomfortably tight, demanding his need be satisfied. "Fuck," he cursed, holding on to the mortified brunet for a moment longer. "Can't believe we'll have to behave for another three hours."

Agreeing wholeheartedly with Seifer's complaint, Squall tried to calm the fire in his veins, a near impossible task while the blond was still pressed up against him. "We'll miss the train," he said in dissuasion when Seifer's eyes dropped to his lips, one of the man's hands sneaking further underneath his shirt.

The only reply he received was a gruff sigh and a lingering kiss that tested the limits of his restraint. When he pushed against Seifer's chest, the man reluctantly stepped back, but not without giving him a thorough once over. Ignoring Seifer's gaze, he tugged down his jacket where it had ridden up and walked back towards the street they'd abandoned once he was reasonably certain his state of arousal was no longer glaringly obvious.

Grudgingly, Seifer followed after the pert ass that was walking away from him. At least he could still easily strip the brunet with his eyes. Not that it would do him or his libido much good. His pants were still far too restrictive and as long as he kept imagining what he'd do to Squall the next time they were alone, there was no way it'd abate. "How long is our next layover?" he asked, hoping they'd have time to find somewhere secluded then. A room with an hourly rate if they were lucky.

"Ten minutes," Squall replied, glancing at the blond. "Our connection in Timber leaves at eight."

Seifer grimaced. That wouldn't leave them any opportunity at all to fit in some fooling around, and they still had more than two-thirds of their journey ahead of them. Hours of being cooped up on smelly trains and unable to get close to Squall. "I hate trains."

Squall hummed his agreement, not eager to return to the confinement of his narrow seat. "I'm booking SeeD compartments for the way back," he announced gruffly. As much as he knew this was his own fault for not telling Quistis the truth before, nothing stood in his way to at least get a little more space and comfort on the return trip.

"They much better?"

"Enough space for you not to get in mine," Squall answered with a quirked eyebrow.

Seifer's lips tugged into a lopsided grin. "If they're private, I'll definitely get in your space,"
"I don't have to allow you access," Squall reminded dryly, keeping his expression unfazed.

"Yet we both know you will," Seifer teased. "Don't try and deny it, you've got it bad for the Almasy goods."

Rolling his eyes, Squall tried not to consider just how worrisome the statement was.

"What time are we arriving in Winhill again?"

"Past midnight."

Seifer hummed lowly in acknowledgement. He didn't look forward to the rest of the day one bit. "And Ellone is picking us up at the station?"

"She is. Should be a thirty minute drive."

Furrowing his brow, Seifer felt a sense of foreboding. Those were going to be thirty awkward minutes from hell. Trapped in a car with someone he had wronged and was meeting for the first time in ages. Hyne, why had he thought this was a good idea again? "We staying at hers?"

Looking at Seifer more thoughtfully, Squall wondered whether Seifer was uneasy about meeting Ellone. "She has a guest room we can use."

"Alright." At least there'd be an upside to them arriving in Winhill. They'd have some privacy again. "We'll have to make up for all these hours of celibacy."

Squall wished he could state with certainty that they wouldn't do anything of the sort under Ellone's roof, but his experience at the palace had taught him more about himself than he'd ever expected to learn. The most he could hope for now was that they would manage to be discreet. Meeting Seifer's gaze, he couldn't bring himself to utter a single word of dissuasion.

Smiling smugly at Squall's very telling silence, Seifer was already planning ahead. They'd have to be quiet, but there were always ways to work around that and he needed to feel Squall against him before they went ahead with their plan. In fact, if he had anything to say about it, it would be another late night. All the more reason to catch all the sleep they could get while on the train.

When they approached the station, he looked about him and committed their time in Fisherman's Horizon to memory. He was certain Squall had shared a favored, private spot with him, giving him a rare glance into the man's inner workings. A stunning ocean view and no one around to bother them.

A perfect moment of reprieve.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hope you enjoyed it! And woot, they're finally on their way to Winhill! Much more fun to come :3 And thank you again so much for letting us know what you think! (>^_^)>
Borrowed Time

~ Chapter Thirty-Six - Borrowed Time ~

[Shennard Hill, Galbadia, Tuesday, 28th of October, 10:05 pm]

On the last leg of their journey, Seifer watched as the train stopped at yet another empty station. For the last couple of hours every stop had been in the middle of goddamn nowhere, with no one getting on or off. Pointless. You'd think it'd mean that the train would stop in Winhill, but no, Winhill didn't even have a train station. Instead he'd be stuck for half an hour in a car with just Squall and Ellone. How the fuck that wasn't going to be awkward beat him.

He looked over at Squall again, the brunet's eyes quick to meet his. It was as if Squall had a sixth sense for when his eyes would stray. It had been like that all day. Even when he'd been certain Squall had been asleep, gray-blue eyes had opened to meet his gaze whenever he'd indulged in a closer study.

He held back a sigh. With only about an hour left on the train, he could no longer push away the thoughts he'd been avoiding all day. He'd slept all the way to FH and then again to Timber. He actually felt remotely awake now. Enough so that he was going crazy at the lack of anything to do. Yet he'd still managed to avoid working through all the things he'd decided to figure out on their way to Ellone's.

It would be odd meeting Ellone again. He'd only seen her in passing during the war. The first time he'd spotted her, their eyes had met while two Galbadian soldiers had taken her somewhere else for holding. Her expression had been composed. No hatred or anger. Fujin had reported Ellone's capture to him earlier that same day. She'd told him the girl had come without a fight once they'd found her. Even though he hadn't been in charge of her interrogation or hadn't done anything directly to harm her, it would still be weird as fuck. That came with the whole 'yes, I was on the wrong side of the fucking war and tried to take over the world' thing. It would be hard to face her. What was he even supposed to say?

Squall's sister, more or less.

Closing his eyes, he tried to remember her from when he was a kid, but couldn't. Everything from that time was still mostly a great void.

He'd follow her lead. Let her set the tone. He'd show his good intentions and gratitude in whatever way he could. She'd already agreed to Squall's request, so he had to assume she'd forgiven him or at least didn't blame him to an extent where she couldn't be in the same room as him.

At least he had a plan on how to deal with Ellone now. The next thing he needed to figure out was what the hell to expect of them going into each other's memories. From what Squall had told him, they'd both get to experience random memories from each other's lives, without any choice as to what or when. They wouldn't be able to abort mid-memory. He could think of plenty memories he'd rather Squall would never see. And those were just the ones he could remember. He kneaded at his forehead, the headache from that morning returning.

Even though Squall had said he hadn't been able to see anything from the war, what if Squall and Ellone's experiment had been a fluke and Squall would stumble straight into one of his horrors? There was no way he'd be able to face Squall after that. He'd disappear and make sure Squall wouldn't follow. If this failed, he would never be able to find any tangible proof; he'd never find
absolution. This was his only chance. If it didn't work, then his ugly past would always be a major rift between them.

His expression turned grim. What would be most likely for Squall to see? Before the war, there'd be memories of Garden; lots of training and pestering Squall for spars. There was his summer fling with Rinoa and him hanging out with Rai and Fu. Not really anything incriminating. After the war was a whole other ball game though. He didn't want Squall to see how pathetically weak he'd been after he'd come to, how unstable his mind had been. Nor did he want the man to see him living as a bum in the darker corners of Esthar. The time he'd spent at Arc's he guessed would be all right. Memories of the menial jobs he'd taken on at the beginning wouldn't be a problem either. Nor any of his travels. There were plenty of safe memories Squall could be landed in during that time.

But after that came the debauchery. Nights of nonstop fucking and drugging up his mind. He glanced over at Squall. As gray-blue eyes traveled from the window to meet his, he held the brunet's gaze. Just what the hell would Squall make of him and Calder screwing?

He furrowed his brow and looked away.

They'd promised they'd tell each other what they saw, but what good would that do? It'd be too late to do anything about it, to forget what they'd seen. Even if their trust extended as far as letting each other see *everything*, there was a real risk of seeing each other's darkest and most private moments. How the hell could they move past that? If he had to experience Squall sticking his dick in Rinoa and telling her sweet nothings, then there was no way he could go back to looking at Squall the way he did now. He'd fucking retch if he had to see that.

But it wouldn't be the worst thing he could end up seeing. Himself through Squall's eyes during the war. D-District. That would be the worst by far. He looked out into the black night and took a steadying breath. Some of what he'd felt straight after returned. The utter self-loathing. The need to end it all. Would those feelings become overpowering again if he had to live through it all once more?

At least they had one more night. As soon as they were in Ellone's guest room, he'd make every last second count. He glanced at Squall, wanting to indulge in a longer study of the man's features, but again his gaze was met almost immediately.

Squall suppressed a sigh when Seifer's eyes darted away from him and settled back outside the window. He took in the man's face, the crossed arms and pensive frown. Ever since their departure from Timber, Seifer had grown increasingly withdrawn and lost in thought. The good cheer that had accompanied the man throughout the beginning of their trip had faded and been replaced with a somberness that was starting to become infectious.

He couldn't really blame Seifer. There were more ways this could end up in disaster than not, but that was the inevitable nature of last resort plans. He wondered what concerns were on Seifer's mind in particular and if they were anything like his own. Every now and then he'd sense the man's gaze and turn to meet it, wishing he could assuage Seifer's misgivings. He had no reassuring words to offer however; all he had was determination.

Looking back out the window, he could see his own reflection more clearly than anything out there. The only thing to illuminate the dark night were the moon and stars overhead and the occasional warm pinpricks of lights rushing by, indicating they'd just passed another small hamlet. The Galbadian countryside was as tranquil and sleepy as Esthar was bright and overwhelming to the senses.

Only a handful of passengers remained, nearly all of them caught in various stages of sleep. Squall
was sure the two of them would be the only ones getting off at Baren Falls, the closest stop near Winhill. The other travelers were most likely on their way to the terminal station. Every station they stopped at now was no more than a lone, deserted train platform, each one as unremarkable as the next. The only thing to set them apart from each other were the signs that named each stop.

He'd come this way by train only one other time and though his mindset had been very different at the time, he'd been in turmoil then as well. He'd bent the truth to Quistis about needing more time for a mission, so he could sneak off and find answers. He hadn't wanted anyone to know he was thinking of Seifer all the time; that he was plagued by questions that wouldn't leave him alone. In the few nightmares that had managed to slip past Rinoa's watchful guard, he'd been the one torturing Seifer just as often as the reverse. In the days before they'd bonded, before her numbing interference, he'd killed Seifer a hundred times in his dreams, only to wake up in cold sweat.

It was strange to travel the same route for similar reasons, but this time with Seifer in tow.

So much had changed since his last visit. So much more was at stake than his own peace of mind. He glanced at his phone when they stopped at the second to last station before Baren Falls. They'd only accrued a small delay, which was miraculous by Galbadian standards, but it meant Ellone was probably already at their stop waiting for them.

He didn't dislike her, the woman easier to deal with than Loire most of the time, but that didn't keep him from feeling ill at ease whenever he was around her. She considered him her brother, but he couldn't say he felt the same. Life had simply turned out differently, but no one seemed willing to accept that fact. Instead they tried to force him into a family unit that had never existed to begin with, making him feel guilty whenever he fell short of their expectations.

They stopped at the last station before their stop, ever drawing closer to Winhill.

There was nothing particularly wrong with his birthplace either, but the small town made him feel just as discomfited as the notion of family did. If it hadn't been for several twists of fate, he would've grown up there, with a mother, a father and a sister. To return to the place felt like visiting the remnants of a stillborn future.

Huffing inwardly at his thoughts, he straightened from his perch and stretched to try and restore some blood flow to his stiff legs. Across from him, Seifer only stirred to get ready when the train finally pulled in at their destination. The man kept quiet as they gathered their belongings. Taking the lead, Squall walked to the exit and stepped out onto the platform that was dimly lit by a single lamp post. The sky above them was clear with bright stars, unlike Esthar's light polluted skies. The air smelled of pastures and cattle.

Ellone stood waiting for them in the meager light of the lamp post, a smile on her lips.

When Seifer showed no sign of taking the initiative, Squall started into motion and walked over to the young woman. Her smile broadened as she met them halfway. Walking right up to him, she maneuvered past the luggage dangling off his shoulders and drew him into a warm hug, her arms tight.

"Long overdue," she said softly, her voice slightly pinched as she withdrew. Her eyes roved over Squall's appearance.

Uneasy with the open show of affection, Squall nodded. "Ellone."

Taking the overly formal edge to his greeting in stride, Ellone moved her gaze to her other guest.
Holding out a hand to Ellone, Seifer stepped closer, some of his tension lifting after what he'd just witnessed. Ellone cared greatly for Squall, that much was clear. When she moved to take his hand, her smile never faltering, he found himself pulling her in for a hug. A slight frown flitted across his brow as his unplanned gesture played out, but all he felt was deep gratitude. Giving her a slight squeeze for emphasis, he wanted to convey how much this meant to him. He wouldn't have had the words to explain.

After a brief moment of surprise, Ellone squeezed right back and breathed a soft laugh. "Now this is worth driving out for in the middle of the night," she said as they stepped back from each other. Her gaze moved to scrutinize Seifer's appearance just as she had Squall's. Finding no faults, she briefly squeezed his hand, as if to confirm he was really there.

"Come on," she said, starting from her thoughts and gesturing behind her. "My pickup's just around the corner. I left the engine running, so it should be nice and warm." Receiving no counter suggestions, she quickly nabbed the tent off of Seifer's shoulders to even out the load before the man could protest. "Follow me." She made for the small set of stairs that were cast in darkness. "Mind your step. The brickwork isn't exactly what it used to be."

Seifer followed her down the steps. "Never been out this way before."

Ellone cast him a smile. "Not many people have. I'm still grateful Uncle Laguna never entered Winhill in his travel journal."

"He wrote a travel journal?"

"He didn't tell you about his stint in journalism?" Ellone asked, surprised. "He published a few articles about his travels, his favorite places. You should see those towns now. Overrun with tourists." When they rounded the corner and left the light of the train platform behind them, she guided the way ahead of them with a flashlight. "Thank Hyne he had the foresight to keep Winhill off the beaten track."

"Would've been good business for your pub though."

"I've already got my hands full with the locals, thank you very much," she said goodnaturedly. "I'll choose peace and quiet over big city manners any day."

Seifer sent her a smile. "Squall warned me that we might be helping out."

Walking up to her pickup truck that was parked only a small distance away, Ellone let out a soft laugh. "Has he now?" She cast Squall an amused look. "I'm opening the pub tomorrow. I'll close early, but I can't afford to spurn my regulars any more than that on such short notice." Rounding the vehicle, she fiddled with the latches to open the back of the truck bed. "I could use a busboy," she baited when the blond joined her side.

"Certainly, Ma'am." Seifer took the tent from her hold and threw it onto the truck bed, adding his duffel bag and Kronos's case. "I'd be happy to help out at the bar too." He sent her his best flirty smile for good measure.

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Wide-eyed for only a second, Ellone brought a hand to her lips to stifle a laugh when she spotted Squall's eye roll as the brunet moved past them to dump his own luggage. "Still a sweet talker, I see," she remarked with a fond gleam to her eyes. "Good thing I'm immune."

Closing up the back of the truck once all luggage had been disposed of, she glanced at the tent she'd carried and the sleeping bags. "I hope you don't think I'll make you camp outside. I'm not that
awful a host."

"Squall already told me you've got a room waiting for us. The travel gear is for later. I have an overdue visit with friends near Obel Lake and decided to drag Squall along."

"I remember Squall telling me something like that," she replied, gesturing them to the front of the pickup as she opened the door. "Either way, you're welcome to my guest room for as long as you like." Waiting until both men were seated on the front bench seat beside her, she turned the key in the ignition, switched on the headlights and pulled out.

Seifer watched the fields pass by as they drove out of the small town of Baren Falls. "So, what time do we start tomorrow?"

"Well, I open at eleven, but I made sure all preparations are already over with. I made a fresh batch of soup to last me the coming two days and the pub's all set up for tomorrow," Ellone said affably, her gaze fixed on the dark road ahead. "Business is always slow to pick up anyway, so you guys can sleep in if you want."

"We'll be up by eleven for sure," Seifer said, knowing very well he couldn't stay in bed with Squall all day. "Can't wait to see the place."

"It was in a bad state by the time I returned here, but I cleaned it up nicely. Looks good as new. You know it used to be Raine's right?"

"I didn't," Seifer supplied, glancing sideways at Squall. If the man had any feelings on the matter, then his expression sure didn't show it. He had to admit it made him a hell of a lot more curious about their stay there. "Does Laguna manage to visit often?"

Giving a resigned shrug, Ellone didn't immediately answer. "He's a busy man. Given half the chance, I'm sure he'd be at my doorstep all the time."

"I was surprised he didn't show up at the train station today to join us. He seemed very keen."

Seifer's lips curled into a smile at the last word.

Ellone's eyes crinkled in fond amusement. "I could tell from his phone call yesterday. He said he was on the verge of declaring Ward as acting president for a few days."

Seifer laughed, easily imagining it. It was beyond strange to consider this part of Squall's life; a father and sister. Both desperately wanting to include the man in their life. He wished he could've met Raine too. The missing piece of the puzzle.

Looking back over at Ellone, he wondered why she'd decided to pick up Raine's legacy. She must have loved her adoptive mother a lot to go back to the countryside and renovate the woman's pub. "Just how small is Winhill, exactly?"

"Very small," Ellone said, glancing at her big city guest. "We're well below the mark of a thousand inhabitants, if that gives you an idea." Turning off the main road, she drove onto a narrow country road that meandered between low hills. "The village proper isn't more than a few streets and the town square. Then there are the farms on the outskirts, and the flower field owners further out."

"So it's a tight-knit community? Where everybody knows everybody?"

"Pretty much," Ellone said with a nod. "I know it's not for everyone, but I've never felt lonely here the way I did in a city with millions of people."
"I bet owning a pub helps too. I can already imagine all the guys lining up to get served by you."
Seifer smiled playfully. "Anyone in particular we should help fend off? ...Or help win over?"

Ellone quirked an eyebrow as she glanced sideways. "Why, Mr. Almasy, with that kind of flattery I
doubt I'll be the one fending off admirers."

"You know, I think we should be more worried about the guy over here getting all the attention."
Seifer said, nodding in Squall's direction. "It's always the quiet, aloof types that get all the action."
Wishing he could openly stake his claim, he had to restrain the urge to move his hand to rest on
Squall's thigh.

Eyes shifting briefly to her unimpressed looking brother, Ellone huffed teasingly. "That may be so, but I've learned my lesson from last time. That one isn't meant for the service industry."

"Could've fooled me," Seifer said with a big grin, wishing he could've been a fly on the wall.
"What tasks do you have lined up for the Commander then?"

"Oh, I've made a list," Ellone said with a twinkle to her eyes. "Some chores around the house I'd
like to see finished before winter starts."

Not in the least bit surprised, Squall met her gaze and repressed the urge to snort at her use of the
word 'some'. He'd learned not to underestimate her after his last visit, but considering the
alternative was serving drunk farmers, he kept his tongue in check and looked away through the
side window. He tuned out Ellone and Seifer's continued chatting, relieved they didn't need his
contributions to break the ice and get reacquainted.

Instead he focused on trying to quell his unease at finding himself back on the road to Winhill. He
hadn't thought he'd ever come back here. The closer they came, the more palpable his misgivings.
He could only hope that Seifer's ability to distract him wouldn't fail tonight. Otherwise he'd never
be able to fall asleep in the house once owned by his mother.

With the pickup not as brightly lit as the train had been, he could better make out the landscape that
passed them by. Herds of cattle lay unmoving in their pastures, huddled together against the chill of
night. A thin fog clung lowly to the fields and meadows, enhancing the stillness of the scenery.
Tall trees lined the edges of roads and grazing lands, their leaves still and not betraying even the
slightest breeze. Though he couldn't tell for certain in the dark, the countryside had most likely
already transformed into a riot of autumn colors.

Squall sighed as he tried and failed to find some appreciation for the view. Everything here was
tamed, picketed and tended to.

At some point, without him noticing, the conversation had lulled into silence. It was quiet out here.
The only discernible sounds were the ones emitted by Ellone's old pickup, the thing on the verge of
dying altogether. The heater whirred gently, the engine giving the occasional sputter as the pickup
hobbled along over gravelly country roads.

"Almost there," Ellone announced into the silence, pulling down the main road that would lead
them into the heart of Winhill, where the pub was.

Squall felt his mood sink further as he regarded the streets he knew better from Loire's memories
than his own. They encountered no lights in any of the houses they passed, the cobbled streets
deserted and quiet. Winhill was asleep.

Crossing a wooden bridge into the town's small square, Ellone brought the pickup to a stop in front
of the pub and turned off the ignition. "This is it," she said with a smile. "The Sleeping Lion."

Seifer chuckled under his breath as he followed Squall out of the pickup. The sounds of the door shutting behind them rang out loudly into the night. Unable to hide his curiosity, he took in the small cobbled square, lined on three sides with picturesque houses and businesses that looked like they'd been built from stone, loam and wood. The only building of any size was a manor on the north side of the square. A gently murmuring river flowed past a stone quay that was built right off the square's south side.

It was so hard to believe Squall had been born here, the man as far removed from the small village lifestyle as possible. He turned his gaze towards the pub. Just above the entrance hung a dark wooden sign that boasted the pub's name in golden letters. "Did you decide on the name?" he asked Ellone with a quirked eyebrow, before sparing Squall an amused glance. "Or was that Raine?"

"Raine of course. I wouldn't dream of changing the name she chose." Ellone opened the pub's entrance and switched on the lights. "Come on in," she said, herding them inside and gesturing around her as she gave Seifer a quick rundown. "The pub takes up the ground floor. Back there, behind the bar, is the door to the storage room. And everything past the other door, up those stairs, is my home."

Seifer took in the inviting interior of The Sleeping Lion. It looked like the sort of place he'd love to stumble into on a cold winter evening, the place radiating warmth and rustic charm. Sturdy wooden tables and chairs were spread out neatly, polished to a soft glow. Several kegs stood lined up beside the bar, glasses and earthenware pitchers hanging from racks and crowding shelves along with bottles of local brews he didn't recognize. The air was redolent with the earthy scents of tobacco, ale and wood. A far cry from the clubs he was used to. "Looks great."

Ellone returned Seifer's smile with a beaming smile of her own. She was proud of what she'd achieved, but she rarely got to share her home with visitors or loved ones. "This way," she said, leading the way up the stairs that led into her home. It wasn't big and it wasn't fancy, but she'd managed it all on her own.

Coming to a halt in the living area, she cast her guests an appraising look. Squall was predictably withdrawn, and both men seemed weary from their travels. "Would you like something to eat before I show you to your room?" she asked, pointing at the door that led to her small kitchen. "I can heat up some soup, or if you want something more filling, there's bread and cold cuts."

"We ate on the train," Seifer said, remembering the unsatisfying sandwiches they'd picked up during their rushed layover in Timber. Proper food would've been great, but he'd much rather be alone with Squall. The man hadn't said a word during the drive and had grown more ill at ease with each passing second. "And I think I can speak for both of us when I say we need a bed more than anything."

Ellone nodded and left the lights off. "I'll show you to the guest room then," she said before leading them up the next set of stairs. She was trying not to feel disheartened by Squall's continued silence, telling herself excuses on her brother's behalf. He'd had a long trip and was tired. He was worried about the coming day.

She let out an inaudible sigh and faced the truth. He still hated it here. Not letting her sadness show, she turned on the landing's light and moved to open the door to the guest room. "It's all yours. I changed the linen and put out some towels for you guys to use." She pointed down the hall. "Bathroom's on the right. My room's on the left. If you need anything, feel free to knock on my door or help yourself to anything." She gave both men a smile and stepped aside to let them
enter. "Make yourselves at home."

Seifer returned Ellone's smile warmly. "We will, thanks," he said, before entering the room.

It looked cozy, with fresh flowers set out on a small side table and potted plants outside on the windowsill. Several pastoral paintings on the walls completed the quaint look. The room's purpose as a guest room was betrayed by a sink and mirror just to the right of the door and a small wardrobe that stood open invitingly with unused hangers. Two single beds lined the walls on either side of the window, plump pillows and duvets making them appear inviting despite their cramped sizes.

"I'll leave you to it then," Ellone said softly from the doorway. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Seifer repeated, waiting for the woman to turn down the hallway before he closed the door. Dumping his stuff behind it, he shrugged out of his jacket and watched as Squall set down his own things beside one of the two beds. Squall still looked withdrawn. Since the moment they'd pulled into Winhill, the man's features had been set into a stark mask. He hadn't anticipated Squall's strong dislike of the place, if that was what it was. Maybe it was the notion of family, but Squall hadn't been this tense back at the palace. It had to be this place. Squall's birthplace.

He walked over to stand right behind the brunet. Squall stilled his movements, but didn't turn to look his way. He slid his hands around Squall's waist and drew him into an embrace. Nuzzling the dark strands of hair at the back of Squall's neck, he spoke softly. "Must be weird as fuck."

Letting out a sigh, Squall leaned back in Seifer's hold and closed his eyes. Like this he could almost pretend they were back at Seifer's apartment, but the occasional creak of the settling building and the different smell to the place ruined the flimsy illusion.

"This room was a nursery once," he said evenly, unable to express the strangeness of the situation any better.

"This very room, huh?" Seifer murmured against Squall's skin. It was difficult to imagine Squall here, an infant, releasing his first cries. With a loving mom, before everything had changed. "Do you miss her?"

Squall snorted at the understandable assumption. It was the way children were supposed to feel about their mothers. "No. How could I? I never knew her."

Reminded of just who he was talking to, Seifer let out a low chuckle and tightened his hold on the man. "Then why do you dislike it here?"

Squall shrugged, unsure how much to admit to. It was difficult enough to put words to the complicated mess of feelings Winhill stirred in him, and others had already told him more than once that he was being unreasonable. "This place… Everyone wants me to care about it, about her, but—" He almost let slip that he was glad he hadn't grown up here, but that particular truth was too ugly to share even with Seifer. "I'll never be the son they want me to be."

"Or brother?"

Letting out an agreeing huff at the astute observation, Squall waited for Seifer to express his opinion on the matter, but the blond didn't say anything else or ask for elaborations. Instead Squall was drawn close against Seifer's body, the hand that had been lying flat against his stomach lifting away to zip his jacket open and caress his chest. Warm lips pressed against his neck in a clear offer of distraction.
The lack of judgment and implied acceptance of that simple gesture were an unexpectedly effective comfort. With Seifer he wasn't anyone's son or brother or even boss. He was simply himself. Relaxing into Seifer's hold more fully than before, he let himself focus on the tension Seifer was sparking in his body until he was starting to feel too hot under the blond's stroking hand. Shrugging out of his jacket, he dropped it on the nearest bed and turned around, back into Seifer's arms.

When Squall's lips sought out his own, Seifer brought his hands up under the soft fabric of Squall's shirt. Squall's focus was no longer turned inward, but right back where it belonged. He kissed Squall more deeply and stroked the man's back. It had been too fucking long. A whole day without anything more than a couple of stolen kisses and a serious case of blue balls. Grabbing the hem of Squall's shirt, he pulled it off and threw it to the bed, his own shirt following seconds later.

Squall's eyes followed his every move as he undid the man's belt and zipper, and slid Squall's pants down slender hips. The moment they dropped to the floor, Squall claimed his mouth again while kicking away his boots and pants. Lowering a hand to cup the man's erection through tight boxer briefs, he brushed his thumb against the tip until a patch of wetness soaked the fabric. His own length stirred in sympathy, a shudder running through Squall's body when he pressed up close and ground into the man.

Certain that Seifer would finally give him everything he'd been denied in FH, Squall took in deep lungfuls of Seifer's scent and felt every last bit of tension in his body melt away. By the time Seifer's fingers hooked underneath his boxers to slip them off, his erection was leaking and straining for attention. He sucked in a tremulous breath when Seifer ended their kiss with a playful nip of teeth at his lower lip, a look of pure sex on Seifer's face as the blond sank down onto his knees and placed a long, messy lick against his erection, from base to tip. His knees buckled at the sight and feel of Seifer guiding him into his mouth, the man's tongue swirling around him while applying firm suction.

He fought to remain upright as the man started into an elaborate display of licks without ever relinquishing his gaze. The visual of his erection framed by Seifer's exploring hands, lips and tongue challenged his endurance to its limits, but Seifer's skill kept him from plunging into an orgasm too quickly. To see Seifer on his knees like this, to hear the wet sounds—

Clenching his jaw to keep from moaning out loud, he twined a hand into Seifer's hair and tugged reflexively when a particularly pleasurable suck overwhelmed him. Seifer growled in approval, the hum of it against his length making his spine go weak. Firming his grip, he couldn't quell the heady rush that surged through him as he stood over Seifer, the man's tongue swirling around him while applying firm suction.

He was getting close, nearing the point of no return. His balls clenched in warning and he nearly lost his footing as the first shock of orgasm surged through him. Fisting Seifer's hair, he let out a breathless moan as he came into the man's mouth with shuddering pulses. All the while Seifer looked up at him exultantly, sucking and swallowing down every last drop.

Licking his lips clean of any remaining come, Seifer came to a stand. He'd loved every uncontrolled jerk of Squall's hips, every sharp tug on his hair. He'd accomplished his mission, the man's expression no longer marred by tense lines, but he was nowhere near done with Squall yet. Pulling the naked man back in for another kiss, he forced himself to keep his exploration of Squall's lips and tongue unhurried, too achingly slow for how hard he was, but he was determined to take his time and savour this night.

Toeing off his boots, he walked them backwards to the bed and guided Squall to lie down with him without breaking their connection. He moaned into their kiss when Squall moved to straddle him in
one smooth motion.

Eager to feel all of Seifer's body pressed against him, skin to skin, Squall leaned back just far enough to make quick work of the man's impeding jeans and boxers. When they were finally discarded onto the floor, he succumbed to a shiver as he lay down on top of Seifer, their naked bodies slotting together perfectly.

Though less urgent than the arousal of sex, it was a feeling that rendered him utterly speechless. Snug, warm and intimate. A feeling of safety even when he was stripped down to his barest self. He hadn't thought it possible to find such a thing in the arms of another, especially not after the uncertainties of the previous night.

One of Seifer's hands traveled up to run through his hair, urging him closer, while the man's other hand kneaded his buttocks with a maddening languor that had him rolling his hips in immediate response. Seifer's cock was hot and hard, pressing against him with slow rutting motions that made him shudder in pleasure, but Seifer didn't pay any heed to his urgency, the man's every move as drawn out as the last. They were kissing so deeply now that he wasn't sure where he was getting the air to breathe.

Enjoying every last moment of their languid making out, Seifer dragged it out until he could no longer ignore his growing need. If they kept this up much longer, he'd end up coming from frottage alone and he was planning on being inside Squall for that. Turning them over in the bed, he couldn't bring himself to interrupt their kiss while reaching for the strap of his duffel bag. Catching hold of it, he blindly located the bottle of lube and smirked against Squall's lips the moment he had it in hand.

Gasping for air when Seifer broke away, Squall felt his length jerk under the blond's hungry gaze. He struggled to stay quiet as the bastard made a show of slowly popping the bottle open and squeezing out a generous helping of the slick gel. Holding his breath, he tried and failed not to startle at the shock of cold lube when Seifer slathered it all over his anus without first warming it between his palms.

The mild stretch of first one finger and then a second wasn't nearly enough to sate him, and he was quickly growing impatient with the unusual amount of time Seifer was spending on preparation. Only when a third finger joined the others, stroking him just right, did he begin to inch closer towards orgasm again, but the touch didn't last long. Seifer moved away again, this time to coat his own erection in slick lube. Squall's anticipation soared at the sight. He only barely had enough presence of mind to remember their whereabouts, and the host who would end up cleaning up after them once they were gone.

"The sheets," he managed in between panting breaths, just as Seifer moved in between his legs.

Letting out a low curse, Seifer scanned the room for something to catch their mess. The towels looked promising but were too far away. No way he was relinquishing his position to grab them. Leaning over the edge of the bed, he reached into his duffel bag again and yanked out the first t-shirt he could get his hands on before shoving it under Squall's ass. The brunet accommodated his every movement readily, raising his legs the moment he was back in position.

It was a fucking sin for anyone to look that Hyne-damned sexy. Propping himself up onto one arm, he leaned in over Squall and grabbed hold of the base of his cock. Squall's face was mere inches away from his own when he pushed inside. Everything was plain for him to see. Every little twitch to dark eyebrows and pale lips. The lust in usually stern eyes. The hunger.

Squall dropped his head back to the pillow with a near groan when Seifer finally filled him to the
hilt. There was no sharp ache as he was stretched wide, his body yielding easily to the smooth thrusts of Seifer's cock. Seifer began to take him unhurriedly, a sudden creak of the bed slowing down the man's moves even further. All Squall could do was to meet every thrust with a slight roll of his hips, lest he shake the bed. His every exhale hitched with the effort of breathing without moaning loudly.

The unusual quiet of Seifer's muted grunts, along with his own labored breaths, brought an exhilarating focus to the sex, sharpening all senses. Seifer's heavy lidded gaze bored into him, studying his every reaction as he was left to the mercy of a gradually building climax. His whole body was wound impossibly taut, trapped between need and restraint, until he felt almost shaky with it. His hands traveled every inch of skin within reach, his legs curling back to allow every thrust to hit him as deeply as possible.

Watching closely as Squall unraveled beneath him, Seifer gave himself over to a kind of sex he'd never had before. He wanted everything Squall had to offer. Every sharp intake of air. Every clear sign of arousal. The surrender of pale thighs that spread wider with each thrust. The man had no filter during sex, no defenses. When they were like this, he could see through Squall completely.

This wasn't fucking. Not by a long shot. This was him sharing every part of himself and wanting everything from Squall in return. He hadn't even kissed Squall after he'd pushed inside, too entranced. Capturing Squall's hands, he pushed them down against the bed and interlaced their fingers, quickly growing drunk on the feel of Squall's fingers clenching around his own every time he thrust into the man.

Holding on tightly, he didn't want this to end. He was getting close now, but he wanted to stay like this. No tomorrow, no end, just this. The honesty of Squall's body pressed close to his, taking everything he had to give. He kissed Squall then, his climax claiming him with a violent shudder.

Squall gasped into their kiss, lost to the sensations of Seifer's orgasm. A sudden quick swelling, a hard thrust and the rush of ejaculate. His breath trembled against Seifer's lips as he bucked for more. The ensuing slickness was better than lube, the sound of Seifer's blissed out grunts filling him with satisfaction. He tugged at the hold on his hands, looking to grab the man's ass and encourage more movement, but Seifer's grasp only tightened.

Reveling in that small, possessive move, Squall had to bite back his moans as Seifer started to settle into a purposeful rhythm, the man's cock still hard within him. Even now, green eyes gave him nowhere to hide. Locking gazes, he let Seifer watch as the man brought him to completion. His orgasm shocked from him with breathless gasps, his world spinning away. It was Seifer's lips that brought him back down to earth, drawing him into a searing kiss.

Caressing Squall's body with slow slides of his hands, Seifer refused to relinquish the man's soft lips for several long moments before he finally broke their kiss and stared at the man in his hold. Drawn in by the depths of gray-blue eyes, he was suspended in a moment of absolute transfixed. He lifted his hand to stroke his thumb lightly against Squall's jawline, then across Squall's lower lip, savouring every little detail of the man before him. Squall's expression only betrayed acceptance, no annoyance or impatience in response to his intimate touches. Growing bolder, he moved his finger to slowly trace the scar that marred the man's forehead, from top to bottom. The uneven skin would always mark Squall as his. Always. Even if they couldn't be together.

Lying still under Seifer's touch, Squall held his breath as he tried to parse the expression on Seifer's face. No one touched that scar but himself, and whenever he did, he irrevocably thought of Seifer. It was beyond strange to have Seifer caress the very same line the man had cut into his skin so long ago. He wasn't entirely sure why his throat felt like it might close up, but the intensity of the
moment passed when Seifer's hand moved to cup his cheekbone instead, those deft fingers carding through his hair until they rested at the back of his head.

The breath he had been holding rushed from him just as Seifer kissed him again. For a short time Seifer's lips and warm hands kept him mired in the simple pleasure, but discomfort kept plucking at the edges of his awareness. Seifer's come was starting to leak from him, but more pressingly, his legs started to cramp up with the need to stretch them out.

"Let me up," he said, his voice inexplicably hoarse when he hadn't uttered a single sound.

When Seifer let go of his hands and started to lean back, he quickly wound his arms around Seifer's shoulders before the man could slide out of him. Catching on, Seifer rocked them back into a sitting position with a bunching of strong thighs. Squall sighed at the relief in his lower back and gave his legs a quick stretch, before wrapping them around Seifer's waist and settling in the man's lap. He let his hands roam where they willed, for once unconcerned with the fact that there was no purpose to these touches.

Holding Squall tightly against him, Seifer was beyond pleased that Squall had been unwilling to let him go. There was still the underlying burn of arousal, his cock still buried deep within the man, but this was so much more. Something he'd never wanted in the past, but couldn't get enough of now.

Squall looked down into Seifer's face, his heart starting to thud faster at how the blond was regarding him. He'd seen that look before, on Rinoa. Afraid to make any assumptions, at the same time afraid it wasn't what he thought, he quickly placed his hands on either side of Seifer's face and kissed his own uncertainties away. Too much had been left unsaid, and there was a tension between them, charged with impending change. As if they were standing in the eye of a storm. He realized he was clinging to Seifer, but he tried to push the returning thoughts from his mind. He didn't want to think. He only wanted this. Uncurling his legs, he planted his feet on the bed and began a slow, tentative motion of his hips.

A low grunt left Seifer at the renewed friction along his length. He closed his eyes, his hands moving to Squall's sides. Every time Squall sank down onto his length, he met the man with a slow roll of his own hips. Squall's cock grew rigid between them; the man's kisses deepened. They fell into a perfect rhythm, neither of them ready to let go. They would stay like this, locked together and as close as possible for the rest of the night. He would make sure of it.

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Dark hair was the first thing that came into focus when Seifer opened his eyes. His face was buried in the soft locks and his left arm lay stretched across Squall's stomach. Curling closer around Squall's sleeping form, he let out a low hum of content. Last night had been the most slow and intimate sex he'd ever had. All of the fucking clichés he'd always rolled his eyes at had proven themselves true. It had been a revelation to be with someone like that.

Moving his free hand against Squall's skin by a few careful inches, he relished the feel before propping himself up onto his elbow and indulging in a closer study. In the days they'd shared a bed so far, he hadn't managed to wake up first even once. He'd make the most of it.

Squall's eyes were closed in sleep, the man's unruly hair all adrift and his chest slowly rising and falling. He carefully brushed away the most wayward strands from the scar he'd inflicted so long ago. He wanted to trace his finger along it just like he had the night before, but it would wake Squall and he had something else in mind for that. Sneaking his hand underneath the duvet, careful not to touch Squall, he inched closer to his goal. When positioned just right, he cupped the man's length, causing dark eyelashes to flutter. So fucking irresistible. Stroking gently, he watched avidly as Squall's features twitched while the man's cock swelled and grew hard.

Elusive dream images coalesced into something more urgent and tangible as Squall woke. He opened his eyes to a room he didn't immediately recognize, a hand familiarizing itself with his crotch. Startled, he grasped his offender by the wrist with bruising force. The hand fell idle, but warm lips pressed to his neck instead.

"Seifer," he murmured, releasing his hold as the short-lived rush of adrenaline left him.

He turned his head, feeling oddly self-conscious to find Seifer looking at him with rapt attention and a wide smirk. How long had the man been awake? Blinking the last vestiges of sleep from his eyes, he didn't feel inclined to move just yet. He was comfortable, warm and apparently, aroused. Lifting his head to instigate a kiss, he was instantly rewarded when Seifer resumed the slow pumping. His eyes drifted shut as the soft press of their lips turned into languid kissing. Unable to stay the motion, he bucked into Seifer's grip, the man responding with faster strokes.

Biting back a moan when Seifer broke their kiss, he remembered just in time to be silent as he thrust into the man's hand. His throat still felt hoarse from the night before, from holding back and constraining his voice. He hadn't known such a thing was possible, but Seifer was still consistently challenging his presumptions about sex. Even now, after another late night, Seifer's erection pressed against his thigh demandingly, the man's eyes darkening with arousal. Shifting onto his side, he gave Seifer's hard cock a firm stroke, the hand on his own length briefly faltering at the touch.

Seifer let out a low grunt, Squall's move effectively derailing his plans. He'd wanted to imprint every single detail of Squall's pleasure into his memory, but there was no way he could focus like this. If Squall was going to ruin his plan, he at least wanted something to show for it. Something he'd only sampled once before. After a few more thrusts into Squall's warm hand, he moved in on top of Squall and raised himself to his knees, his cock jutting out proudly between them.

Stiffening further under Squall's intent gaze, he moved closer and took hold of his cock, angling it down towards Squall's lips. He watched with bated breath as the man shifted to prop his head up.
with a pillow, approaching his request with a practical mindset and focus that was so Squall and entirely too fucking hot. When Squall's fingers took hold of his cock and guided him between those lush lips, he grit his teeth.

He cursed lowly. He was not going to last like this. Squall was alternating between taking him into his mouth and licking along his shaft and tip. *Fuck.* When Squall took in as much as he could, Seifer couldn't stop himself from pushing in further. He grunted and fell into a slow rhythm.

Squall grew unbearably hard as Seifer thrust into his mouth, a fevered edge creeping into the man's gaze. He did his best to accommodate the thick length, sucking and stroking with his tongue to bring the man as much pleasure as possible. He had considerably less control than the last time he'd done this, but he liked this vantage point; the sight of Seifer unraveling as the man fucked his mouth. Seifer was struggling to stay quiet, firm muscles and abs contracting with each barely controlled thrust in a way that had Squall's length twitching keenly with how sexy the man looked.

Seifer pushed his cock deep enough for Squall to feel its tip press against the back of his throat, deep enough to make it difficult to breathe. Still he tried to take more. Soft grunts were starting to escape the blond as his pace picked up the slightest bit, the erection in his mouth growing harder still. An uncomfortably sharp thrust was followed with thick fluid spurting down his throat, coating his tongue and robbing him of his breath. His hands shot up to grasp Seifer's ass as the man rode out his orgasm, heedlessly thrusting into his mouth a final few times. He swallowed every hot lashing of come and greedily let his tongue slide along the length of Seifer's spent cock when the man withdrew.

"Fuck, Squall," Seifer uttered under his breath. Squall's lips were still parted, slick with saliva and tinted red from the friction. Those gray-blue eyes were regarding him with expectation and need. Squall's fingers clenched around his buttocks again and there was no way he'd deny the man. He was going to give Squall exactly what he was begging for. "Turn around," he ordered, grabbing the lube from underneath a pillow.

Painfully hard, Squall turned onto his stomach and fumbled toward the floor for the discarded shirt they'd used the night previous. Not as bothered with precautions, Seifer tugged at his hips impatiently. The moment his hand closed around the rather dirtied item, he rose onto his knees and quickly laid out the shirt beneath him. Behind him he heard Seifer uncap the lube, followed by a rough hand settling on his buttocks, the man's other hand working in a slippery finger without warning or regard for the ache last night's activities had caused. His length jerked in anticipation at the forceful handling, the lubed up finger withdrawing after only a perfunctory few swipes. It told him exactly how this would go.

When Squall lowered his chest and rested his head on the pillow in readiness, Seifer took hold of his cock and pushed inside. He groaned lowly, his eyes falling shut in pleasure, then repeated the move, more forcefully this time. Grabbing hold of Squall's hips, he thrust faster—as fast as the bed would allow without creaking. Squall's breathing was already labored and the man's features flushed. Squall wouldn't last long. He wouldn't last long himself either, despite just having come. There was nothing like a rough morning fuck and *nothing* like being buried deep inside Squall. Mere moments ago the man's pout lips had been spread tight around his cock, and now he was ramming himself into the man's clamping hole.

He sped up, unable to stop himself from settling into a fevered rhythm and chasing every one of Squall's breathless, silent gasps with increasingly rough thrusts. The thundering of his pulse and the slapping of their skin was all he could hear, the squeeze of Squall's ass all he could feel.

Clenching his fingers into the sheets, Squall encouraged Seifer's every move with a backward
thrust of his own, seeking to be fucked more thoroughly. Seifer's cock stroked him deeply and roughly, with a speed that was finally giving him exactly what he wanted. No frustratingly gradual buildup. No restraint. Just raw feeling. He was so close, straining for every sensation that rushed him towards orgasm. When he was plunged over the edge, the strength of his release temporarily obliterated all else as Seifer rode him to mindless completion.

When the last twitches of his orgasm receded, he became distantly aware of the creaking complaints of the bed. The sound of his own panting breaths started to seem loud, and he couldn't recall whether he'd stifled his voice or not. Bitting his lower lip, he tried to gather his wits, but all of his senses were intent on Seifer's pleasure. The man's thrusts were rocking him and the bed alike, faster and faster, satisfying and alarming him in equal measure. He stifled a gasp when Seifer came inside him with the roughest plunge yet. The creaking of the bed stuttered in tandem with Seifer's last few rutting motions, until there was only the sound of their labored breaths.

All of last night's caution and restraint, undone in just one moment of weakness. Propping himself up onto his elbows, Squall hung his head as he reclaimed his breath while desperately hoping their lapse into debauchery had gone unnoticed.

Breathing hard, Seifer gently guided Squall forward. The sight of his cock slowly sliding out of the man, along with the soft hiss that left Squall, had him yearning to ravage the man all over again. His come started seeping out, leaving a white trail down the man's perineum. He slid in a couple of fingers, entirely fascinated by just how wet and loose Squall was after being fucked so hard.

"Cure?" he asked, his gaze locked on where even more come followed his fingers out.

Squall didn't need to think about his reply as he eased himself down onto the bed and turned to look at Seifer. "No."

Smirking, Seifer bent down for one more kiss before pushing off the bed and heading for the sink. Either Squall loved a well-fucked ass, or the man was being a stubbornly principled fuck who wouldn't waste a Cure on something as frivolous as sex. Either way, Squall would be reminded of him all day; a thoroughly satisfying thought. Turning on the tap, he waited for the water to heat up before grabbing one of the towels Ellone had set out. The sound of the gurgling water reverberated loudly in the small guest room, and when Squall pushed out of the bed, there was a definite creak. Everything seemed loud in the silence that followed their loss of composure.

Had Ellone heard them? He hadn't been able to make out any sounds of her puttering about the house after waking up. Maybe she was out on an errand. Then again, he might just have been too wrapped up in Squall for anything else to register. Would Squall be annoyed if she found out? He looked over at the brunet after finishing his quick clean-up. He wasn't going to apologize for losing control like that, not when Squall had clearly enjoyed every last forceful thrust.

He walked over to his duffel bag and grabbed some clothes. Donning them, he watched as Squall grabbed a towel and headed towards the door, on his way to take a shower. "I'll see you downstairs," he said, their guilty gazes briefly lingering on one another before the man left the room. He smirked when a few moments later he could hear the muted sound of spraying water. Squall had looked just as unrepentant as he felt.

Sighing at the prospect of having to keep his hands to himself for the remainder of the day, he swallowed his morning dosage of meds before grabbing his toiletries. It would be hard to pretend nothing was going on between them, that he didn't want to constantly feel Squall up. And that was if Ellone hadn't already caught on. If she had, then it'd be even harder. He highly doubted Squall would approve of him kissing or feeling the guy up in front of his sister. At least he had his initiation as a bartender to look forward to.
It'd be fun to learn how to keep a bar and entertain the patrons. He'd applied for a few jobs as a bartender back in Esthar after he'd first arrived, but no-one had hired him. Probably didn't help that he'd looked like a bum at the time. Spitting minty toothpaste into the sink, he rinsed his mouth and ran a wet hand through his hair as he inspected himself in the mirror. He definitely didn't look like a bum anymore. The locals wouldn't know what hit them. Opening the bedroom door with a wide smirk, he headed downstairs.

When he reached the floor below, he studied the living room that had been obscured by darkness when Ellone had shown them upstairs the night before. In the light of day everything was plain to see. A fireplace with a cozy couch opposite it made up the focal point of the room. Two armchairs were placed to the sides and an arrangement of fresh flowers sat in a vase atop the coffee table. Several bookshelves lined the walls, completing the cozy feel. It felt welcoming and warm, just like every other part of Ellone's home.

The sounds of Ellone busying herself with breakfast reached him from an open door to his right, along with all sorts of appetizing scents, but the mantelpiece drew his gaze instead. A series of framed photographs were placed on it.

Walking closer, he took his time perusing the photos. A recent one of Laguna was the first one to catch his eyes. Couldn't have been taken more than a couple of years ago. The next photo was of a younger Laguna standing next to Ellone back when she was a kid. Then Squall. All dressed up in uniform and looking off camera. It must have been taken shortly after the war, judging by Squall's shorter hair. Probably a post-war gala of some sort. A different life. Ignoring the painful twinge it caused in his chest, he looked at the next photo; the one that took up the central position on the mantelpiece.

His breath stuck in his lungs. The young woman in it looked so much like Squall. Raine. Her eyes were soft and gentle. She'd been caught with a smile on her lips while arranging some flowers. There was no way the president wouldn't be reminded of her every second he spent with his son. His gaze traveled to the photo beside it. A wedding photo. Laguna was dressed in a tuxedo, smiling ear to ear and beaming with pride as he held Raine close to his side. She wore a simple white dress, a bouquet of white flowers in her hands. They looked happy.

He wished he could have met her. The woman who'd given birth to the frigid nuisance of his teenage years and the savior of the world. His rival and sparring partner. The only person to make him fall stupidly in love.

Turning away from the photos, he focused on the promising smell of sizzling meat. His stomach gave an insistent growl, urging him towards the kitchen. Inside, the small room was alive with the clattering of utensils and the loud whirring of the range hood. Loud enough for their morning activities to hopefully have gone unnoticed.

"Morning," he said, testing the waters.

Ellone looked over her shoulder, a smile in place. "Good morning."

The cheery greeting that was completely free of reproach or embarrassment told him they'd managed to dodge that particular bullet. Thank Hyne for the range hood. Happy to be spared any awkward explanations, he strode over to the table laid out with a plethora of options for breakfast. It all looked mouth-wateringly good. "Just when did you get up?"

"What, this stuff?" Ellone dismissed humbly. "I've prepared it so many times by now, I could do it in my sleep." She returned her attention to the sausages frying in a royal amount of grease. "But what about you two? I was expecting you to sleep in."
"We did and Hyne, we both needed it," Seifer admitted, eyeing the freshly made pancakes placed right next to his favorite syrup. "Mind if I tuck in?"

"Go right ahead and help yourself."

"Think I'll be starting with these babies," Seifer said, placing three large pancakes on his plate.

Ellone laughed softly. "Don't forget to leave some room for sausages." As if to provide incentive, she flipped them over with a satisfying hiss of juices.

"Don't worry, I will." Seifer squeezed out a good helping of syrup onto his pancakes and cut off a large bite. "I'll leave some room for eggs as well. Not sure I'll be able to move after this though."

"That's the whole point of a traditional Galbadian breakfast," Ellone said, a twinkle to her eyes. "They'll be done any second now." Spatula held idly in her hand, she waited for the other side of the sausages to brown and looked at Seifer. "So if this counts as sleeping in, what time do you usually get up?"

Seifer poured himself some freshly squeezed juice and took a sip. "I usually don't get up until nine. I start work at ten," he explained. "But with Squall staying with me, we try to fit in some training in the morning."

"Oh dear," she said with a soft laugh. "Squall's routines have already taken over yours then?"

"A bit of both," Seifer said, cutting off another large bite of his pancake. "We're both eager to train and I'm a busy man. Only so many hours in a day."

She gave a thoughtful nod. "Uncle Laguna told me you two are sparring partners. He was quite impressed with the show you gave him. He couldn't stop talking about it."

"The old man had to give up about halfway through though. Missed out on the really good stuff." He paused to wash down the pancakes with another gulp of juice. "When you're completely worn out, when you have to fight just to keep the blade steady, that's when the magic happens." Not that they'd reached that point at the palace. He'd been far too distracted. "That's also when you get scarred," he added with a chuckle, remembering the feel of Lion Heart's sharp edge pressing into his throat.

Ellone shook her head at learning that Seifer shared her brother's brazen foolishness. "Good thing Uncle Laguna didn't have to see that then. That man has a protective streak like you wouldn't believe." She smiled before turning around and moving the frying pan off the fire. "He told me the same thing about you."

"Someone's gotta look out for his ass. And I'm sure you're the same," Seifer returned, looking over at her.

Switching off the range hood, Ellone turned to meet Seifer's gaze. "I suppose I am. No matter what he's told you, he is my little brother."

"Laguna said as much." Seifer smiled softly. "Not sure we've got much to worry about though with him being a world famous fighter and all."

"I suppose so," Ellone said with a smile. Catching the eager look sent the sausages' way, she put two on a small plate and set them in front of him.

" Been a while since I had Galbadian sausages," Seifer said, eagerly replacing his now empty plate
with the one Ellone had prepared for him. He added a big dollop of ketchup. "These smell great. Galbadians sure know how to prepare their meat."

Ellone looked on in satisfaction as the blond started on the sausages. When the water pipes stopped gurgling in the background, she raised her eyes to the ceiling and stirred into sudden movement. "I almost forgot!" If she'd learned one thing from Squall's previous stay with her, it was that coffee made up half of his breakfast. Retrieving a tin of ground coffee, she tipped a royal amount into the coffee machine. "Do you want some too?"

"Don't think I'd survive without it," Seifer said with a smile, before looking at her more intently. He needed a private word with her and he was running out of time. "So before he comes down, I wanted to ask you... You sure you're okay with this? With what we're planning on doing?"

Pausing for the briefest moment before she switched on the coffee machine, Ellone turned around and leaned back against the counter. "...I'll be honest with you. I am concerned. I've stopped looking into the past a long time ago because it's rarely done me any good. But I understand it's different this time. Maybe this time my powers will actually help make a difference. I'm doing this for you every bit as much as I'm doing it for Squall. I want to help."

Unable to find a single reason why she would be doing something of that magnitude for him of all people, Seifer scrunched up his brow. "Why?"

Ellone frowned slightly, the question catching her off guard. She took a moment to form a reply. "In a way my powers caused the Second Sorceress War, and they would have made the first one a lot worse if Uncle Laguna hadn't found me in time... For as long as I can remember, everybody I ever cared about got involved because of me. I know a thing or two about feeling guilty and powerless. I don't want that for you."

Seifer nodded, not having considered anything along those lines. He would never blame her for any of it.

Upstairs a door opened and closed, footsteps moving away from the bathroom. Ellone smoothed out her frown and returned to her seat across from Seifer. Reaching over the table, she placed a hand on top of Seifer's. "We'll figure it out, you'll see," she said, giving a gentle squeeze. "I trust Squall. You should too."

Seifer huffed softly at the advice, before looking up to meet Ellone's gaze. "I do," he said with a nod. "And you." He withdrew his hand and raised his voice. "You'd better hurry, Princess, or the food'll be long gone by the time you get here. Even tastier than at the Palace."

Ellone's smile returned. "Flatterer." When Squall appeared in the doorway, a single eyebrow raised high at the amount of food stacked onto Seifer's plate, Ellone got up to usher him inside. "Let me get you two some coffee."

Giving her a nod, Squall sat down at the table and tried to look unaffected by the beaming smile Seifer sent his way. Behind him, Ellone rummaged through a cupboard, porcelain mugs clinking in her hands. Neither of them seemed put out or uncomfortable, leading him to hope Ellone hadn't overheard them after all.

"Had a good night's rest?" she asked.

An innocent question, completely devoid of any innuendo. Relieved, Squall considered it and realized he'd slept much better than he had hoped to, though he would never admit to the reason. He actually felt awake and alert for once. "I did."
"Is the guest room the one Laguna used to stay in?" Seifer asked, watching Ellone fill two mugs with steaming coffee. "Before he worked his way into the master bedroom that is," he added with a quirk of his lips.

Squall scowled at the imagery he could do without. He'd already seen more than enough from that particular past. As Ellone walked past him to place their mugs on the table, he could tell the blond's remark had flustered her. Unlike the others from their gang, she hadn't had quite as much exposure to Seifer's cruder ways.

"Well," Ellone started, sitting down at the table, "I'm afraid it wasn't quite like that." She poured herself a glass of orange juice as her gaze grew fond. "Raine let him stay in the guest room while he was recovering. But as soon as he was on his feet, he got kicked to the curb." She smiled wistfully at the memory. "She said she could do without freeloaders taking up her time. So he moved in next door and showed up on her doorstep every morning after. Did whatever chore she set out for him."

Laughing softly, Seifer imagined Laguna's eager expression as the man stood there, day after day. It was much easier to imagine than the man leading a country. "He did sound rather whipped when he spoke about her," he said with a big smile, reminded of how Laguna had talked about running errands in Winhill with an air of experience. "Still wears his wedding ring and all."

Ellone rose an eyebrow, mouthing the word 'whipped' with a headshake. "I'd call it romantic," she admonished. "It took him a day to win her heart, but months to get her to admit it." The way she spoke the words betrayed how she considered it an ideal love story. "Let me guess, you're a cynic when it comes to love?" she asked Seifer, whilst subtly nudging the stack of pancakes her brother's way.

"A realist, perhaps," Seifer said, lifting the plate of pancakes that was slowly making its way towards Squall and holding it out to the brunet. "Had three already. You don't want to miss out."

Starting from his absent-mindedness, Squall frowned at the food being practically shoved under his nose. "Looks like you had more syrup than pancake," he commented dryly, glancing at the sticky mess that was Seifer's first plate before taking two pancakes.

"Try it and then talk," Seifer said as he grabbed the syrup and held it out to Squall as well.

"No thanks," Squall replied disinterestedly, reaching for the scrambled eggs instead. He doubted he'd be able to stomach something so tooth achingly sweet.

"Your loss." Seifer returned his attention to Ellone. "So, you're waiting around for Prince Charming then? Believe in love at first sight and all that?"

Ellone shrugged, taking her serving of pancakes. "I've seen it firsthand, so I think it's possible, but that stuff is for the lucky few. If I'd get a say in it, I'd choose a calm love. Someone to grow old with in peace. I don't think I could handle the heartbreak that comes with a whirlwind romance." She didn't ever want to go through what Uncle Laguna had gone through; what he was still going through. To this day he remained loyal to Raine, choosing his memories and celibacy over someone new. Shaking the sad thought, she summoned a smile. "What are the expectations of a realist like?"

"Well, first of all, isn't the whole point of believing in romance and love at first sight that it will last beyond the first couple of weeks of screwing each other's brains out?" Seifer asked, before pointing his fork in Ellone's direction. "Sounds like you're the cynic."
"Seifer!" Ellone exclaimed, wide-eyed, before muttering, "Looks like sweet talk isn't the only thing you're capable of." She pointed her own fork back at the blond. "For your information, I'd describe myself as careful. First see if the relationship stands a chance and then spere—" she grimaced and quickly started over "—move things along." Huffing softly to hide her embarrassment, she didn't dare look Squall's way.

Eyeing Ellone carefully, Seifer got the feeling he was looking at a bona fide virgin. "You're missing out, then." He put his elbows on the table, leaning in. "And what if you find someone who you get along with and everything seems perfectly fine, but then you get to the bedroom and find out they suck. No passion, no fire, nothing. That's way worse if you ask me."

Ellone opened and closed her mouth, before regaining some of her composure. "I guess I'd rather take a gamble with that than with my heart." She leaned in as well, her gaze devious as she met Seifer's. "Not everyone wants the same things from love. You'd do well to remember that, Mr. Almasy."

"Perhaps not. But if there's fire in the bedroom, then it'll be there outside of it too. Quick way to narrow down your options." He smirked at her. "Means you'll have way more fun on the way too," he added with a wink.

Ellone let out another huff and shook her head. "A convenient bit of reasoning. You almost managed not to sound like a hopeless playboy too," she replied tartly. Seeing Seifer's smirk widen at her statement, the man no doubt thinking her naïve, she glanced at her visibly uncomfortable brother and quickly added, "But enough about that. Since you're up earlier than I expected, can I assume you two are free to help out? Or do you have some of that morning training planned?"

"No plans," Seifer said, knowing full well they couldn't cast high tier spells or start summoning in the vicinity of Winhill without drawing a crowd. "Might as well make ourselves useful while we're here." He swapped his now empty plate for the one still covered in sticky syrup. "Right, Commander?"

Squall nodded, glad enough to get started on the day's workload if it meant he could sit out on any more uncomfortable conversation, but his thoughts betrayed him as they lingered on Seifer's statements. It was hard to tell how much of it had been provocation, but he'd guessed enough by now not to have any illusions about Seifer's recent past. Playboy indeed. For once he agreed with Ellone. He couldn't quite imagine going from casual partner to casual partner on a whim. Keeping his thoughts to himself, he focused on his food.

"Well, since you're so eager to go out of your way for me," Ellone started happily, regarding her distracted brother. "Squall, your list's on the fridge. You'll find everything you need in the tool shed like last time." She looked at Seifer then, sizing up her next volunteer. "Hm, if you take the bar, I could make quick work of my inventory and put together my orders and bookkeeping for the next month... Ever worked behind the counter?"

Eager to have landed the chore he'd wanted the most, Seifer smiled at Ellone. "Can't say that I have, but I'll pick it up as I go along. Just show me the basics and I'll be fine."

Ellone glanced at the clock and gave a determined nod. "Then that gives me some time to train you. I'll have to teach you how to tap a decent draft beer, and how to pour as well. It's what you'll be doing most of the time."

"Sounds like a plan. Wouldn't want to disappoint the customers," he said with a wink before filling his plate with a third serving of food.
"As long as you're better at bar talk than Squall was, you'll do just fine."

Chuckling, Seifer finished his mouthful of egg before speaking. "Expect a full pub by the end of tonight. I usually draw a crowd," he boasted. "Can't wait to hear the stories the locals have to tell." He was especially interested in the ones pertaining to a certain president and the pub's previous owner.

"Well, you'll be hearing a lot about cattle then. And flowers. How to prune them, crossbreed them, fertilize them, you name it."

"Maybe I'll be the one telling stories then," Seifer replied with a shake of the head.

"You're probably right," Ellone said readily, already looking forward to it herself. "Winhill folk love to mine strangers that come through for gossip and tall tales." She looked at her brother with a smile. "I wonder if they'll remember to leave you alone after last time."

Squall let out a snort when he recalled the never-ending questions and attempts at conversation. "They can look for their entertainment elsewhere."

"They won't have to look far," Seifer said, happy enough to provide said entertainment, but for now he was more interested in finding out what Ellone had in store for Squall. Getting up as he finished the last bite of his pancake, he walked over to the fridge with his coffee mug in hand and tapped his fingers against the note hanging there. His grin grew along with each chore Ellone had put on the list. He turned to face the man. "Looks like you'll be busy," he said, already imagining the intense focus on Squall's face while the man was splitting wood. Now that was a photo op that shouldn't be missed. He leaned back against the kitchen counter. "You know, Quistis told me to catch some snaps of you."

Looking up from his breakfast, Squall frowned at the comment. So she'd bypassed him altogether, bothering Seifer with the unnecessary request instead. "It's you she wants pictures of," he corrected dryly, not hesitating to throw Quistis under the bus when she'd been going behind his back. "First step in herding you back to the flock."

"And I'll be more than delighted to announce my continued existence that way," Seifer said, feeling the same mischievous glee he'd felt the last time he'd pondered the opportunity. "But Quistis was the one to come up with the album title: Squall's first holiday ever." He smirked broadly at the irked expression on Squall's face. "I think it's apt."

Squall rolled his eyes, remembering how she'd said something along those lines to him as well. Quistis never knew when to leave well enough alone, and Seifer's ill-boding grin wasn't reassuring at all. "Take all the pictures you want," he said evenly. "Just leave me out of them."

"And where'd be the fun in that?" When Squall didn't say anything further, Seifer shook his head. "Shit Squall, don't be such a fucking sourpuss. Just let me take some pictures. You won't have to look at them."

"Why?" Squall asked dubiously. The man had never bothered with such sentimentality in the past.

"Because I want to," Seifer stated clearly. Squall could be beyond dense sometimes and the man was still eyeing him like he was the one acting weird. He didn't have a single photo of Squall, nothing from before the war and with all the secrecy surrounding Squall's identity nothing had made it into the press either.

Having looked on from the sidelines throughout their argument, Ellone felt compelled to fill the
awkward silence that fell between the two men. "I wouldn't say no to some new pictures myself," she said with a smile, hoping to coax her brother into a more tolerant attitude. "The most recent ones I have of you are from Uncle Laguna's birthday party last year."

Squall frowned as both of them ignored his clear objection. He didn't understand this need to capture a fleeting moment and hold on to it long after it had slid into the distant past. "Whatever," he muttered, getting up from his chair and walking past Seifer to take the list of chores from the fridge.

"Could you start with splitting the wood?" Ellone asked, intervening when it looked like Seifer was about to say something incendiary. "The logs have been laying there for a while and I don't want them to start molding." She stifled a sigh when her brother nodded stiffly and walked towards the door without another word to either of them.

"Hyne, he can be difficult," she blurted out once he was out of sight.

"Ain't that the fucking truth," Seifer agreed with a snort. Why the man wanted to avoid having his picture taken was beyond him. No way Squall was that fucking self-conscious. And it wasn't like he was demanding dick pics. Not yet at least. "Maybe he's afraid I'll catch his bad side," he said with a smirk.

Ellone let out a soft laugh. Regarding Seifer's smirk, she was relieved to see the man's good cheer despite Squall's less than stellar conduct. She supposed he was probably far more used to her brother's surly moods than she was. "He's always been peculiar about this," she said with a resigned shrug. "Selphie even put out a big reward for the first person to catch him smiling on camera. That was over a year ago now, but no luck."

Always ready to rise to a challenge, Seifer had just found his new goal for this trip of theirs. Couldn't be that hard to catch a smiling Squall. "Guess I'll just have to make my first photo upload even more memorable," he said with a sly smile, then downed the rest of his coffee and turned around to fill the kitchen sink with hot water.

"I'll raise Selphie's reward and hand over my best bottle of liquor if you pull that off."

"Surely it's been done before," Seifer said as he began washing the dishes. It'd be too fucking sad if there were no pictures around of Squall smiling. Hell, it'd probably become his favorite photo for jerking off.

"If so, I've never seen the proof," Ellone replied, moving to dry the clean dishes Seifer was setting aside. "And Selphie's definitely tried." In the end, anyone in Squall's orbit just had to accept that all of his emotions were filtered through a thick mask and hard exterior, be they joy or sorrow. At least she hoped that was the reason behind her brother's lack of smiles.

"What's Selphie's prize?"

"A hefty sum of Gil. She always has several bets going and she usually wins. She's been putting her winnings into several 'reward' funds. This challenge has been the longest running one, I think. She added a favor, to redeem at any time, if I recall correctly."

"Consider it done," Seifer said, already having a pretty good idea of when to catch his shot. Or rather, when to get Fujin to capture it. Squall had always found amusement in his suffering and he could take the beating to his ego if it meant succeeding where everyone else had failed. Maybe he'd actually be thankful for that pain in the ass chocobo after all. "I'll collect my winnings when we get back from our trip."
Glancing at Seifer as she put away the clean plates, Ellone smiled and found herself hoping the man would succeed, however unlikely. "Good luck."

"Won't need it," Seifer said, grabbing the frying pan to scrub it down. "Just gotta figure out which favor to claim." He didn't know much about Selphie, apart from what little Squall had told him and what he'd been able to put together from his conversation with Quistis and Squall. Apparently she was the kind of girl who loved explosions and extortion. He smirked at the thought. Could come in handy.

Falling into a companionable silence as they worked, they soon managed to clear the kitchen and store away the leftovers. "So, booze time?" Seifer asked, arching an expectant eyebrow.

Ellone nodded. "Let me give you the tour," she said, walking past Seifer and leading the way downstairs. Seifer's preference for bar duty had been rather obvious, but she was more than happy to show him the ropes and introduce him to her world. "First up is the storage room," she announced as she showed him into the dark, cool room that held her entire stock. "I'll be in here most of the morning taking stock, so if you need any help, I'll be right around the corner. Now here is where I store all my imported beers."

As she went over the basics and pointed out where all the different beers and liquors were stored, Seifer listened to her closely, asking perceptive questions that betrayed his genuine interest in her trade. She was pleased to have such a willing student, far more willing than her brother had ever been. If a task couldn't be approached with a gunblade, then Squall rarely cared. He'd always had that indifferent side to him. Seifer on the other hand had always taken notice of the world around him and the people in it, ever since he'd been a little boy at the orphanage. When he hadn't been off somewhere causing trouble or teasing the other kids, he'd often followed her around to bother her with one burning question after the other. Go find Squall, she'd often told him. Go play with him.

Her heart melted a little as that very same mischievous boy now stood before her a man, strapping and broad around the shoulders, his touch careful as he picked up an especially rare and expensive bottle of whiskey.

"Uncle Laguna sent me a whole crate of the stuff," she said with a shake of the head. "He told me it was part of some diplomatic palm-greasing that he couldn't afford to refuse. But there's no way anyone here will ever order a 2000 Gil bottle of whiskey, so I've been handing them out as birthday presents. That's the last one."

"Hold on to it. When I take the winning shot, that will be the best fucking prize," Seifer said with a nod at the bottle. "I have a weakness for whiskey."

"You have yourself a deal! No one will be able to say you didn't earn it." When Seifer let out a laugh, Ellone smiled as well and moved to the door. "I think that's it for in here. Let's head to the bar and I'll teach you how to use the taps."

"Sure thing, Ma'am," Seifer said, setting the bottle back down where he'd found it. Following her into the pub, he couldn't stop his gaze from traveling to where Squall was busy splitting wood in Ellone's backyard. Definitely a worthwhile photo op. Catching his gaze lingering, he moved to lean back against the counter.

Turning around to face her student, Ellone launched into the next part of her teaching. "The coolers behind the bar have all the bottled beers. I'm up to about twenty kinds by now. But most of my patrons will stick to the taps. I've got four fonts; the three usuals and one that I change up when I get an interesting keg." She pointed out each tap as she named the kegs they were connected to. "First up there's Amberval, that one goes fastest. These are Kilika Lager and Gold Saucer, and the
special is an imported Nibelheim ale.

She turned to Seifer and fixed him with a mock stern look. "Now I know that in Esthar and Balamb people like their beers boring and foamless, but here in Galbadia, the rule of thumb is a two finger head for the taps. Each bottled beer comes with its own glass, and the hoppy ones have even thicker heads. If the head doesn't reach the rim, you're doing it wrong. My regulars will complain."

Picking up a glass from the shelves, she demonstrated the proper way. "Open the font nice and easy, glass at an angle, tilt midway for a smooth foam… and close the tap. This foam scraper is for when the head overflows. Probably better not to need it though, if you don't want to be teased." She held out the perfectly poured beer for Seifer's inspection, before unceremoniously dunking its contents into the sink. "Now you."

Seifer looked on with wide eyes as the last of the amber liquid disappeared. "Fucking Hyne, that's gotta be a sin."

"Students don't drink. Not until they master the craft," Ellone said with a knowing smirk. In her experience raising the stakes like that had always been an effective motivator.

Grabbing the glass, Seifer held it below the tap. "Sure. Traumatize your student by throwing away perfectly fine alcohol." Keeping his focus, he tried to imitate her moves, but ended up with far too much foam, loads of it spilling over and landing on the metal drip tray below. Bringing up the glass to his lips on reflex, catching the rest of the overflowing liquid, he downed a big gulp.

A firm smack of the metal foam scraper against his knuckles stopped him in place. Lowering the glass, he looked up with a guilty smile to find Ellone pointing at the sink. Letting out a groan, he dutifully poured the perfectly chilled and exceptionally tasty beer down the drain.

"You were too rushed and you overdid it on the angle. Ease into it," Ellone said, unable to hide her amusement. "Let's try that again, shall we?"

"Let's," Seifer agreed, stealing one more quick look of the enticing view outside before taking the glass from her hand.

His second attempt wasn't much of an improvement. Nor his third. But at least he'd managed to stay his urge to sample the goods. Another few tries and he was getting impatient, despite Ellone's helpful comments and encouraging words. It didn't make things any easier that Squall had taken off his jacket, a sheen of perspiration glinting against firm muscles as the brunet brought down the large maul and drove it deep into a log of wood. Forcing his gaze back to the tap, he tried his best to focus.

Watching approvingly as Seifer smoothly poured the dark ale and created a perfect two finger foam collar, Ellone was about to compliment the man when he tilted the glass a nudge too far and the foam started to spill over the edge. Jolting forward, she righted the glass. "Ah! You almost had it down too," she said with a sigh, before noticing just what had been distracting the blond.

"Crap." Seifer quickly stopped the tap and looked over at Ellone with a raised eyebrow. "Retry?"

"Retry it is," Ellone agreed, hiding the smile that threatened to break free at finding the blond sneaking glances at her brother again. She emptied the glass in the nearby sink, gave it a quick rinse and handed it back to Seifer. "You've got the knack for it now. Just focus."

Seifer nodded and placed all his attention on the task before him, doing everything the way she'd shown him; the tilt, the drop, the timing. Ending the pour just at the right moment, he smiled at the
result. A perfectly smooth foam of just the right thickness, worthy of even the pickiest of patrons. Before Ellone could say anything, he held out his hand to silence her and lifted the glass to his lips. Taking a large sip, he let out a throaty hum. "Hyne, that's good."

Ellone shook her head at his antics. "Let's say you earned that one and not point out how early it is to be drinking already," she said fondly. Leaning against the counter, she watched Seifer enjoy his creation and smiled. "I'll make a bartender out of you yet. Took you only a little longer than Squall to tap a good draft."

"You saying the Commander is more of a natural than me? Can't be."

Ellone's gaze pointedly traveled to the brunet outside and back to Seifer again. "Maybe he was just less distracted," she commented with a twinkle to her eyes. "Afraid he'll chop off a hand if you don't keep an eye out?"

Prolonging his second swig of the ale, Seifer didn't look away from the brunet. "Just never seen him chop wood before. Didn't know he had it in him to do menial chores," he said, a grin spreading on his lips. "I've been cooking, cleaning, and waiting on his ass. Even been doing his laundry."

Ellone let out a soft laugh as she imagined Seifer's plight. Squall had never been much of a domestic type. "He's spoiled that way," she admitted fondly. She looked out the window, to where her brother was pulling his maul free from a persistent log of wood. "I haven't had a chance to thank you yet. For looking after him, I mean."

"It's the least I can do," Seifer said truthfully. "And I like having him around."

Wistful smile in place, Ellone didn't immediately reply. "Wish I could have him around more often too. That man's like quicksilver, impossible to tie down." She quirked her head to study the blond. "I'm impressed you've managed to keep him around this long."

"What, a whole week?" Seifer asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Mhm. And you're going hunting for another week. That's got to be a record," Ellone replied, smiling at such obliviousness. "It's not just me or this place, you know. His friends, his father, even Rinoa... He sticks around for a day or two, until he gets stir-crazy and moves on to the next mission."

"Maybe it's my unfailing charm," Seifer said, sending her a wink.

"It definitely isn't because of your modesty," Ellone huffed, her gaze trailing back out the window. "I guess he just feels best when he's out in the field."

Seifer hummed in agreement as his gaze dropped to his beer. Ellone was right. It was where Squall belonged. Squall had shown that during the war and every moment since. "At the rate he's going, he'll be back out there in no time," he said, unable to back the smile he put on with any real enthusiasm.

Taking another sip of his ale, he tried to ignore the almost palpable feeling of loss brought on by the thought of not having Squall around to pester every minute of the day. For all he knew, today could be the last day they'd spend together. But there was no point in worrying about it when he had no control over it. It was the same with the missions. He'd never be able to deny Squall those. He wouldn't even want to. Squall needed to do what he loved.

Watching as Seifer's smile faded too quickly, Ellone softly nudged her shoulder against his. "Hey, don't make that face. I can tell he cares about you." She stifled a smile when she spotted her brother
quickly refocusing his attention on the chopping block in front of him. "And he's sneaking just as many peeks as you are."

Seifer scrunched his brow at the words. What the hell was she implying? His eyes drifted to Squall again and he immediately cursed the move.

"That fucking obvious?"

Humming a soft negative, Ellone tried to read the blond's reaction. "You might've fooled me, if I hadn't known to look for the signs."

Seifer raised his eyebrows. "You overheard us?"

"I didn't hear anything—" Ellone began, before catching on and flushing a deep red. "This morning I just wanted to check in on you guys and see whether I should start on breakfast early or not," she admitted, wincing in embarrassment. "I didn't knock because I didn't want to wake you in case you were still asleep. I didn't know I'd be intruding like that... Sorry."

Letting out a delayed chuckle, Seifer took great pleasure in imagining her expression upon opening that door. Any later and she would've walked in on something a lot more incriminating than them sleeping. "You missed out on the real show then."

Cheeks heating even further, Ellone looked away, only for her traitorous gaze to fall on her brother. So they had been naked underneath the duvet. Shaking the inappropriate thought, she instead recalled how endearing they'd looked, curled closely together in sleep on the narrow single person bed.

"...You and Squall," she said with a smile. Once the shock had worn off, she found she liked the idea of them together. There'd been more affection in that one sleepy embrace than in all of the rather one sided interactions she'd observed between Squall and Rinoa. "Am I the first to know?"

Seifer moved to lean back against the counter. "Almost."

"Uncle Laguna?" Ellone guessed. Even though the president hadn't hinted at anything of the sort after the two had stayed at the palace, she knew he could be observant.

A chuckle was Seifer's immediate reply. "Fuck no, Squall would have my balls if Laguna found out." His eyes danced in mirth as he remembered just how much they'd lost their composure, how he'd fucked Squall against the ballroom wall. "You think I'm going to have to flee Esthar if the President finds out?"

Ellone shook her head in reassurance, certain Uncle Laguna would only be accepting of Seifer. "He might have some back-pedaling to do though. He's concluded the two of you must be best friends, reunited at long last. The way he's got Kiros and Ward."

"A leg cramp?" Seifer asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yup. His right leg cramps up when he gets very nervous or overwhelmed," Ellone said, smiling broadly. She'd seen it many times firsthand, especially when Uncle Laguna had been courting Raine. "He's gotten a good handle on it since he became president, but Squall's managed to bring it out more than once."

Laughing at the very personal intel on the president, Seifer almost felt tempted to out Squall to his
"Bet the Commander's glad it isn't genetic."

"Hyne forbid," Ellone said with an amused huff. "Sometimes it's a wonder they're related at all. Nature versus nurture, I suppose." She met Seifer's gaze with a wistful edge. "He can remind me so much of Raine though."

"Yeah?" Seifer asked, the comment immediately stirring his curiosity. "In what way?"

It was impossible to put into words some of the slight mannerisms that overwhelmed Ellone whenever she witnessed them. It went beyond the obvious physical traits Squall shared with his mother. A certain set to Squall's mouth when he felt cornered. The stubborn shine to his eyes. The way he could stare off into the distance.

"He wouldn't like to hear me say this, but he's just as impatient and stubborn as Raine was," she started with a smile, leaning back against the bar counter. "Uncompromising as well. Raine had her beliefs and she lived by them, no matter the cost. And she always preferred actions over pretty words." She laughed and met Seifer's gaze teasingly. "Uncle Laguna chose the right approach to turn up every day and show her he meant business. Might just be a good tip for you."

"Don't worry, I can be stubborn too," Seifer said with an easy smile, then quirked an eyebrow as he realized he'd been played. "You knew," he said, looking at her in playful accusation. "When we talked about love earlier you fucking knew about us. Even had me saying those things in front of him too, you sly minx."

Ellone shrugged with slight embarrassment, not feeling much guilt over the matter. "What kind of sister would I be if I didn't grill you?" she said, smiling again. "And whatever you said, you said all on your own. I actually tried to stop you from digging yourself in deeper."

"And what a great help you were too," Seifer said with a roll of his eyes. "I've got a reputation to maintain, you know."

Ellone shook her head at such counterproductive antics. "Well, you weren't impressing anyone." She jostled his elbow and gave him a pointed look. "And I doubt Squall shares the same philosophy."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. He's sure as hell enjoying my philosophy for now," Seifer said with a mad grin.

Blushing a scarlet red, Ellone wondered how on earth she'd be able to put on a straight face when her brother came back inside. "You're a menace, Seifer Almasy," she chided. "You can try to shock me all you want, but you can't fool me. I know besotted when I see it."

Seifer held up his hands in mock capitulation. "I'm not denying anything."

"That's more like it," Ellone said, smiling broadly. "I have to say, I'm curious. How did you end up together?" To the best of her knowledge, Rinoa hadn't been out of the picture that long.

"Pure coincidence," Seifer said, trying not to think back on the exact circumstances too much. "We stumbled into each other in Esthar and one thing led to another. Wasn't exactly all sunshine and roses, but we pulled through," he said, looking at the man in question, unsure why he was telling Squall's sister any of this when things were still so precarious.

"Coincidence, huh?" Following Seifer's gaze out the window, Ellone studied her brother. The man was more impulsive than she had expected of him, getting involved with someone so quickly after the end of his last relationship. "So it's all still new?"
Seifer huffed, realizing just how ridiculous it all was. How smitten he was for how little time they'd spent together. And they weren't even together, hadn't discussed anything like that. They just had mad sex at every opportunity. "Four days," he admitted, not about to count their mishap with Avalanche and the days of confusion that had followed.

"Less than a week?" Ellone exclaimed, her eyes growing wide. "You guys sure move fast, don't you?"

"No point in wasting time," he supplied with a grin.

"Well, I suppose you've known each other for a long time," Ellone conceded with a shake of her head. Four days ago. That was around the time Squall had called her to ask for her help. It all made more sense now; his willingness to come to Winhill, his agitated words over the phone. The first time he'd visited her here had also been because of Seifer. Had he been in love with Seifer even then?

When Ellone didn't say anything further, Seifer eyed her closely. "Neither of us really knows what the hell is going on yet, so it's probably for the best if you keep this between us for now. Not sure how he'd react to anyone knowing."

"I'm no gossip," Ellone reassured, well aware that Squall wasn't the easiest of people. "I can pretend ignorance a while longer."

Seifer nodded, but couldn't suppress his growing frown. He didn't like keeping Squall in the dark and knew it would most likely come back to bite him in the ass, but there was no point in getting it out in the open when it might all be over in a matter of hours. "I'll be honest with you. If he sees anything from the war... I'll leave."

The serious statement brought a frown to Ellone's brow. "Do you mean you'll leave Winhill?" she asked, hesitating before adding, "... or him?"

"Both." His expression faltered, all of his earlier joviality gone.

Startled by the brevity of the reply, Ellone didn't immediately speak. She'd been nervous about using her powers for the first time in ages, but now the stakes were much higher than she'd previously assumed. Did the past pose such an insurmountable rift between them?

"I don't know everything about what happened," she started slowly, "but I do know what sorceresses are capable of and I know what I felt when Squall first asked me to find you." The hair on her arms raised at the memory of the eerie void she'd encountered and the wrongness that had emanated from it. "We'll get you the proof you need. Nobody will have to leave."

Hoping she was right, Seifer met her gaze. "You absolutely sure you're okay with this?"

"I am," Ellone said, sending him a reassuring smile. "I want to do whatever I can to help."

Seifer nodded slowly. He didn't look forward to it one bit, and talking about it or dreading it wouldn't make it any easier. "So what else do I need to know before your patrons arrive?" he asked instead, wanting to put the whole ordeal out of his mind.

"Next up would be the bottled beers, though I can't have you practicing with those," Ellone said, letting the man move on from the tense topic. "It's mostly the same technique as the taps." Resuming her explanation, she followed Seifer's return to a more lighthearted mood, but this time both of their gazes sporadically landed on the brunet laboring outside.
She vowed that this would not be the end of anything, not if there was any way she could prevent it.

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[The Sleeping Lion, Winhill, Wednesday, 29th of October, 1:17pm]

Stacking the last piece of split wood in its proper arrangement underneath the lean-to behind the pub, correctly exposed to the sun and winds to dry, Squall wiped the sweat of his brow and shook out the stiffness in his arms. Looking at the fruits of his labor, he didn't feel much satisfaction. Used as he was to wielding a heavy gunblade, the repetitive motions of lifting and dropping the large maul had given him little challenge and little to distract his mind. One of Ellone's early patrons had even pointed out it was quite late to be chopping and seasoning wood, a task usually reserved for spring.

Apparently Ellone knew as well, a large stack of dry wood sitting neatly next to the freshly chopped one, covered with a tarp and ready for winter. Retrieving the crumpled note with instructions from his pocket, he eyed Ellone's list with a frown. Busywork, designed to keep him from running up the walls.

Letting out a sigh at the prospect of hours of tedious labor, he figured it was better than the work Seifer had been drafted into. Though from the looks he'd cast through the windows, the blond didn't seem to mind in the slightest. While he'd toiled away, splitting wood and ignoring errant greetings from the steady trickle of Ellone's arriving customers, Seifer had turned a slow weekday morning into the event of the year. Somehow word was spreading that Ellone had a 'handsome young man' tending the bar, or so an older woman had exclaimed animatedly as she and a friend had passed him by, into the pub.

The ease with which Seifer could carve out a place for himself in any setting was astounding. An excitable din of conversation and raucous laughter had reached him through the pub's front door all morning, and every glance through the windows showed Seifer smiling that charming smile of his as he entertained the curious locals and manned the taps with the confident swagger of someone who'd been running a pub for years. And his audience was eating it up. When presented with far more entertaining fare, most of Ellone's customers had gladly ignored him in favor of the new bartender. Seifer was the perfect lightning rod, allowing him to retreat into the background unchallenged.

Walking back to the chopping block to retrieve the maul and other tools, he considered what task to do next. Might as well dig out the dead tree root, and get it over and done with. Storing the tools he no longer needed in the shed, he was about to take the digging fork in hand when he heard the door to the shed open behind him.

"Lunchtime, Princess," Seifer said, letting his eyes roam the sight he'd been ogling all morning. "Ellone's made us beef skewers."

Squall suppressed a sigh as he turned to regard Seifer's broad smile. In order to avoid Ellone's patrons he'd hoped to sneak upstairs during a lull in the action at the pub and grab a quick bite in the kitchen, but no such moment had presented itself.

When Squall predictably didn't say anything, Seifer walked closer, quelling the strong urge to lean in and kiss the brunet. "Miss me?" he asked with an teasing glint in his eyes.

Squall held Seifer's gaze evenly at the far too assuming question. Every step Seifer took closer made it more difficult to maintain an unaffected front. "Hardly."
"Well, I've been waiting for this all morning," Seifer said with a mischievous smile as he grabbed hold of Squall's waist and pulled him closer—close enough for a deep kiss.

Allowing the forceful move, Squall met Seifer's lips eagerly. The man tasted of beer, a faint scent of smoke and tobacco clinging to his skin and hair, but Squall quickly became incapable of paying attention to such things as Seifer's tongue stroked against his demandingly. Groping hands grew overly daring in their path down to his ass, escalating matters further. Unable to stop himself, he wrapped his arms around Seifer's shoulders and indulged in a heavy make-out session.

When Seifer began to shuffle them backwards toward an old tool bench however, the blond's hands traveling lower to hook underneath his thighs, Squall had just enough presence of mind to break the kiss and halt the man in his progress.

"Lunch," he reminded.

"Spoilsport," Seifer said as he looked Squall up and down. "Guess you can't walk in there with a limp, looking well fucked."

When Squall rolled his eyes and pushed past him, Seifer didn't follow. There was something else he wanted to discuss first, while they were still alone. "I don't have any photos of you."

Frowning at the return of an issue he thought they'd put to rest, Squall let his hand fall away from the door handle and turned back around to face Seifer with a dissuading stare.

"Just what's the harm in a photo or two?" Seifer said, feeling increasingly exasperated.

"It never stops at one or two," Squall said evenly, not in the mood to explain. All pictures were doomed to become relics of the past, and in his case, those reminders were more often painful than not. And whenever he was confronted with more recent pictures that included him, it always made him feel like the odd one out. The awkward addition to a group of smiling people. "Why does it matter?"

Grimacing at the question that betrayed just how little Squall understood what this meant to him, Seifer looked at him earnestly. "I want to remember this. I want more than just the scar."

Even if it ends badly? The question lingered on Squall's tongue, but he couldn't bring himself to utter it. Not when Seifer's honest words resonated with him more than he wanted to admit to. The gentle touch Seifer had trailed along his scar the evening before gained more significance, and he almost raised a hand to the marred skin between his eyes.

Seifer took a step closer, encouraged by the lack of immediate dissuasion. "I won't bother you with them."

Feeling self-conscious in the face of Seifer's adamancy, Squall didn't know what to think of the man holding on to pictures of him like that. Like the pictures Loire kept of his long dead wife, or the pictures taken at the orphanage, cherished by all his friends. He hated the thought of ending up as nothing more than a still image when all other connection was lost.

He also hated the thought of them disappearing from each other's lives, no trace left of what they'd shared.

Unable to reconcile the contradicting feelings, Squall let out a sigh and decided to follow Seifer's lead, as he had ever since they started this thing. "Do what you want. You always do."

A grin grew on Seifer's lips. "And you rarely complain about it."
Before Squall could say anything further, Seifer closed the remaining distance between them and snuck in another kiss. It was a rush every single time Squall gave into him, be it photos, kisses or mad sex, but just as he felt his length stir, Squall stepped out of reach. The man had clearly caught on. If they stayed a moment longer, then he'd have Squall on that tool bench regardless of how incriminating it'd look.

Letting out a disappointed groan, he followed Squall out of the shed and towards the pub, where he could see Ellone waving them in impatiently through the window. Her gaze was followed by the villagers he'd just been talking to, all of them perking up at their approach.

"No rest for the wicked," he said with a grin, jostling Squall's shoulder as he opened the door to the pub.

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[Winhill, Wednesday, 29th of October, 2:26 pm]

Cobblestones gave way to unpaved dirt roads as Squall crossed the small wooden bridge that led out of town. The gaze of curious onlookers prodded his back, adding speed to his trek across the small plaza and out onto the road. Beneath the bridge the shallow river murmured quietly, swaying the few boats moored to the stone quay. He ignored the lone fisherman seated in one of them, waving him over, as he had ignored all other people trying to strike up a conversation with Ellone's visitors. It was a small saving grace that Seifer had attracted most attention so far. Most of Ellone's regulars still remembered him from last time, but Seifer was a true novelty. New faces were a rarity in Winhill, and the locals seemed perpetually hungry for a change of pace.

It grated at his nerves like nothing else. He was just one well-meaning encounter away from snapping at some hapless flower breeder or farm hand like he had last time. On top of that, Winhill was peaceful and wholly unremarkable, which meant the town had nothing to offer in the way of distractions. If not for Seifer or the many chores Ellone had set him up with, he'd have been bored out of his mind. Even the Bite Bug populations had dwindled down to nearly nonexistent thanks to monthly SeeD sweeps of the surrounding countryside.

But what the town lacked in local fauna, it surely made up for in annoying townsfolk. News had traveled even faster this time and it seemed like the whole town had shown up, feeling entitled to a piece of their time and attention. Whatever hope he'd had for a quiet lunch had quickly been crushed the moment they'd stepped inside the pub. While they'd sat down at a table off to the side, Seifer's new friends hadn't caught the hint and had insisted on continuing their earlier conversation with the blond, even if they had to loudly convey it from where they were seated at the bar. At least Seifer had been there as a buffer.

He hadn't missed how the man had deftly steered the focus of conversations away from him whenever he'd neared the limits of his patience. The locals had warmed to Seifer almost instantly and somehow the man's likeability had rubbed off on him by mere association. So far he'd been met with decidedly less disapproving looks than during his last visit, his aloof nature forgiven more readily. All of it made their stay slightly more tolerable than when he'd been here by himself.

Jaw locked tight, he dug his hands into his pockets, a strong autumn wind pulling at his jacket and throwing his hair into disarray. Seifer wasn't the only one running interference either. The moment he'd finished his food, Ellone had hustled him out of the pub with a reminder of where to find Raine's favorite flowers. That had taken him off guard. He'd grown used to Ellone tiptoeing around the whole family farce, but it seemed that Seifer's presence and the promise Loire had wheedled out of him had made her bolder. Pulling his fur collar closer around his face, he quickened his step. Better to get it over with, rather than withstand the sad looks and mountains of reminiscing stories
his refusal would inspire.

Stepping into the small flower shop just out of town proper, he managed to silence an animated conversation between the elderly shopkeeper and another local. Both women stared at him unabashedly as he walked up to them, much as everyone else had up to now. The shopkeeper blinked when he pointed out the white flowers on display by the window.

"A bouquet of those."

The old woman spent another moment staring at him, studying his face a bit too closely for comfort, before she smiled wistfully and started an elaborate process of fussing and picking through flowers that all looked identical to him. All the while he could feel her friend's gaze on him. By the end of the unnecessarily long ritual, the shopkeeper's eyes had moistened as she presented him with a delicately wrapped bundle of flowers.

"Those are on the house."

Frowning, he reached for his wallet. "I'll pay—"

"Nonsense," she said, pushing the flowers in his hands with a firm shake of her grey head. A pinched quality crept into her expression as she met his gaze. "You remind me of someone. She used to drop by to get these every week," she murmured, a faraway look entering the shopkeeper's eyes. For a moment he feared the woman had realized who he was and would cause a stir, but she simply smiled again. "What's your name again?"

"...Vargha."

She huffed at that, pursing her lips before she herded him towards the door. "She's out on the hills past Wimbelreed farm," she whispered, just out of earshot of the townsfolk that was looking on with avid interest. "Down the road, second right, past the flower fields."

Squall faltered, staring at the shopkeeper. "I don't—"

The woman clucked her tongue in impatience and pushed him out the door. "Go on!"

Forcibly relaxing the taut set to his shoulders, he set down the road the shopkeeper had pointed out. So far no one in town had thought to connect Ellone's reluctant visitor with the previous owner of the pub, even though he'd been told several times he looked a lot like her. A fake name and an introduction as Ellone's friend had been enough for Winhill's locals to take his presence in stride. It seemed that though Raine was fondly remembered, her lost son had vanished from collective memory. Or perhaps it was one of those well guarded small town scandals, discussed only behind closed doors. Maybe there was more to all the gazes following him than mere curiosity.

He pushed the thoughts from his mind. Soon enough they'd be gone anyway, and the villagers would forget all about them. Turning down an even narrower road, both sides encroached by shrubs and weeds, he took in the snowy peaks of the distant mountains, and closer by, the flower fields and hills. Now that the town lay behind him, a few farms the only pockets of human presence, he felt some of his restlessness leave him. He could appreciate the serenity of his surroundings, even if he preferred the desolate wilderness of the Behema Sands or the dramatic cliffs near the orphanage.

Too soon he came upon the area where his mother's grave was located. Climbing several hills and meandering between others, he finally found the unassuming marker nestled at the crest of the highest hill. The small slab of stone was partly obscured by tall grass and hard to spot from a
distance, but it was so devoid of any dirt or moss that he was sure people came up here regularly to clean it. Probably Ellone. He stared at the memorial stone that only bared her name and the dates of her birth and death. No epitaph to comment on her life or any loved ones she had left behind, no last statement or goodbye.

The absence of her seemed much louder here than it did anywhere else in Winhill. There was nothing here, only bones beneath earth. This place wouldn't tell him about who she had been—her hopes, her aspirations, her fears—if he cared to find out. It became all the more clear to him that this place was for the sake of others, for people who had known her and mourned her. He felt like an imposter, acutely aware of his lack of emotion.

Staying at Ellone's pub was much more unsettling than this, the place containing numerous reminders and memorabilia of the woman that had been his mother for only a short few days. It was like staying at a haunted house, every room steeped in memories, some of which he'd lived through himself, and colored by the stories Ellone and Loire had told about them.

The room where Raine and Ellone used to build pillow forts. The room where she and Loire had first kissed. The room where she'd given birth to him. The room where she'd stubbornly tried to nurse him despite her waning health. The room where she'd died, weakened beyond recovery.

At her gravesite however, he failed to feel anything at all. He supposed the landscape of gently rolling hills helped others process their grief with the fantasy that she was resting in a better place now. He held no such fanciful beliefs. Dead was dead, his mother never to be reclaimed no matter how often he showed up at her grave. Remembering the flowers, he placed the bouquet on the simple stone slab. An empty gesture intended to appease others.

He knew how others dealt with grief. He'd been to enough funerals to know all the small rituals, the dramatic railings against fate, the quiet tears. He'd spoken at all the internal Garden memorial services for SeeD operatives lost during missions following his installation as commander. The large gathering right after the conclusion of the Second Sorceress War had been the most grueling, introducing him to the special brand of torture that came with losing operatives under his command. Powerlessness, a sense of failure, and finally numb resignation. But by some unfathomable coincidence he hadn't yet lost someone he actually cared about deeply. He couldn't imagine how he'd deal with it once that day came.

Would he feel compelled to speak to the deceased as so many people did? Ellone had told him once how she liked to come up here on sunny days with a picnic basket, chatting about her daily goings-on as she ate. Something about still feeling connected to the dead. It was a concept that disturbed him enough to have put down cremation on his official file back at Garden. Without any remains to visit, his ashes scattered to the wind, his death would not culminate in a final guilt trip from the grave.

But he hadn't always felt that way. He huffed at the memory of storming out of a waiting room in Galbadia Garden upon hearing of Seifer's supposed execution. In retrospect he wondered how much of that had truly been existential panic concerning his own mortality and how much of it had been grief. He'd run through the hallways, aimless, breathless, until his mind had gone numb.

Feeling awkward standing around in front of the memorial stone, he decided to sit down in the tall grass. If picnicking was fine, then taking a rest had to be acceptable as well. If not for the cutting wind, it would have been a perfectly mild autumn day. Lying back, he looked up at the thin wisps of clouds that hastened across the windswept sky.

He definitely hadn't always been this comfortable around death, but the war and years of being an active SeeD had put a quick and necessary end to his youthful naivety, right along with any
romantic notions of an afterlife. People had died under his command in the field, right before his very eyes. People had died faraway and out of sight, because of decisions he'd made. People had died by his gunblade. It made death seem like a very inevitable part of life, and trying to avoid or escape it seemed foolish. He'd made his peace with the knowledge that he probably wouldn't grow old. His friends' deaths he refused to think about. He'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

Loire had once stated that when it was his time to pass away, he'd like to be buried alongside his late wife. Squall wondered if he'd feel more compelled to come here then. His father had become a real person rather than a childhood fantasy. That was part of the reason why he couldn't truly think of Loire as his 'father'. The term was an abstraction, a hopeful remnant from his days at the orphanage that didn't seem to fit the man that had barged into his life. The president's last name was something safe to call him by, creating some much needed distance. But he couldn't very well refer to his mother as 'Leonhart'. Besides, she'd forever be a stranger to him, so even after he'd found out her identity, in his mind he'd kept calling her 'mother'—the abstraction, the childhood fantasy he'd outgrown.

Stretching back his arms to cradle his head, he tried to imagine growing up in this place; a game of what if's that had bothered him the last time he'd come to Winhill as well. It was so far removed from his actual experiences that he couldn't picture it. Sitting at the dinner table with parents and a sister. Growing up in a place where the most exciting thing was the annual livestock fair. Going to a normal school, taking normal classes. He couldn't imagine what kind of person he would've become, or if he would've even liked that person.

Coming to Winhill was like peering into a bizarre alternate reality. A confrontation with the kind of person he should have been, the kind of person his self-proclaimed family wanted him to be. For all the times he'd been told he looked just like his mother, sounded just like her, even scowled just like her, at the same time he was never enough like her. She'd been kinder, not a violent bone in her, a pillar of the community. It strangely made him feel less like himself, like he wasn't living up to some unseen but keenly felt standard.

As always, a stab of guilt twisted his gut as he examined the relief he felt at all the turns of fate that had brought him to Garden. Somehow it felt like finding his purpose in life had been bought with the death of his mother. Being a SeeD was such an integral part of him that losing his status as a fighter would strip away his whole identity. The mere thought of possibly having become a farmer, flower breeder or barkeep made him scowl.

He'd never voiced any of this to Loire. The man was already heartbroken enough without knowing that his reluctant son was secretly happy he'd grown up without a family or parental supervision. Sure, his childhood and cadet years had been tough, but never would his life be as meaningless as it would've been living in the backend of nowhere. Ever since he'd started to move from mission to mission, seeing the world and honing his skills along the way, he knew it was exactly what he wanted, even if he hadn't initially chosen this life for himself.

Loire had trouble accepting the violent nature of his life, even though the man himself had joined the army and had become a soldier in order to see the world and find his limits. He had trouble imagining Loire living out his days in domestic rural bliss for that matter, the president too full of energy and ambition. That was probably why Loire had stuck around Esthar to fight someone else's war in the first place. From stories he'd surmised that his mother had been unhappy with Loire's profession and restlessness, so however blissful a picture Ellone and Loire tried to paint, he knew it hadn't been perfect. He doubted his mother would've condoned his own lifestyle much either.

Like father, like son indeed. He huffed at the thought. The idea that he had anything in common with Loire at all was alien to him. But somehow the man had weaseled his way into his life,
because here he was, at the president's behest.

Shaking his head, he pushed up from the grass that had dampened the back of his clothes. He patted down his clothes to dislodge any dirt or grass and cast a final glance at his mother's gravestone, the flowers he'd placed there already looking worse for wear after the harsh play of the wind. Still nothing more tangible stirred in him than a vague sense of guilt and regret.

_Sorry for causing your death. Sorry for not caring more._

No richer in closure or insight than before he'd come up here, he walked down the hill towards the road. He would've rushed back to the pub to try and get Seifer to distract him, if it wasn't for all the unwanted attention he'd receive the moment he stepped inside. Other than that, his only prospects for the day were more chores and their plan to go into each other's memories. Letting out a resigned sigh, he shrugged himself deeper into his jacket and started the short trek back to town.

~ o ~

_[The Sleeping Lion, Winhill, Wednesday, 29th of October, 10:17 pm]_

"Come on, you heard the lady. It's closing time."

Supporting the drunkest customer, Seifer herded the old farmer to the door along with the other stragglers.

"For... for as long 's I remember," the gray-haired man lilted drunkenly, wagging a lecturing finger. "For as long as I 'member, The Sleepin' Lion don't kick out folk when they still wanna be drinkin'."

"Now, you know that isn't true, Tedwin," Ellone corrected with a smile from behind the counter. "I remember Raine throwing you out plenty of times."

The old man's eyes misted over as he became slightly more tractable in Seifer's supporting grip. "That she did...That she sure did."

Shaking his head in amusement as the man's drunken muttering trailed off into the humming of a song, Seifer gestured at the most steady and sure footed customer. "Rainar. Make sure he gets home alright."

"I already had that thought myself," the cheerful man said, before calling out a final goodbye to Ellone. "This one's a keeper, Ellone. See ya tomorrow!"

Stifling a laugh, Ellone nodded. "See you tomorrow, Rainar."

Standing in the open door of the pub, Seifer couldn't help a smile as he watched the last of the day's patrons stagger their way home. It had been fun manning the bar for the day, just like he'd expected. Winhill had welcomed him with open arms. Locking up the door, he turned and walked over to grab the glasses that still remained on the tables. "Seemed like a good night."

Ellone smiled at the modest statement. "It was. I can't remember the last time the pub was this packed."

"It was fun. I can see why you like it here."

Humming softly, Ellone dragged a wet cloth along the counter top. "You fit right in too. You sure you've lived in Esthar all this time?"
"I travel often. And I like the country life."

"Well then, you're welcome to stay here any time," Ellone replied fondly. "The place is lively with you around."

"You better watch your words. I might just take you up on that," Seifer said, wishing their evening could be as carefree as the rest of their day had been.

"It's a deal then. Next time you come over, you definitely have to stay longer. I haven't even shown you around yet!" Seifer smiled at her, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I would've liked to have seen more of the town today," he admitted, but he was having trouble filtering out the reality of their situation. There was no saying this wouldn't be the last time he'd ever set foot here, that he wouldn't be leaving her and Squall behind for good in just a matter of hours.

Looking up from the sink she'd been filling with hot water, Ellone regarded the blond as he continued to collect empty bottles in silence. The pensive tone to what he'd just said took her off guard after all the cheerful banter. It sounded far too much as if he didn't expect he'd get the chance.

"You'll definitely have plenty of volunteers to take you on a tour," she said, trying to cheer him up. "You even made Seumas laugh, and he's a surly old man."

"They're a lively bunch," Seifer said, walking past Ellone to place the beer bottles in an empty crate in the storage room. Back inside the pub, he came to a lean against the counter next to Ellone and watched as she rinsed the remaining glasses.

"Where do you think he's at?" he asked, wanting to catch a moment with Squall in private before they got started.

"In the attic by the sound of it," Ellone said, setting aside the glass she'd just cleaned and grabbing a dirty one.

Seifer looked over at the stairs. He hadn't seen Squall at all since the brunet had pilfered a quick dinner from the pub earlier. "Think he could use a hand?"

Looking up from the dishes, Ellone met Seifer's gaze. He was clearly impatient to see her brother, and not in the same way as when he'd gone to fetch the man for lunch. Perhaps some time alone together would do them good. "I did ask him to move down some heavy things. Go on, I'll finish up in here."

"Alright," Seifer said, setting off into a brisk pace, up several sets of stairs.

Entering the attic, he stopped in place just beyond the door. Squall was holding a large lamp in his hands not far off, intent on the task at hand. Several cobwebs lined his clothes and hair, the paltry attic light casting the man in diffuse light and soft shadows, the air awhirl with dust. Spellbound, he didn't move an inch as he watched Squall work, for once not compelled to accost the man. Somehow it felt as if the slightest touch would ruin the illusion.

"...Hey."

Taking his gaze from the attic's disorganized chaos, Squall turned to regard the blond. Frowning slightly, he brushed away his hair from his eyes, his nose itching with dust. "Closing time?"
Seifer nodded. "Ellone's almost done downstairs. You close to finishing as well?"

Squall inclined his head at the remaining items that still needed to be moved down. "That's the last of it."

Taking in the pile of mismatched furniture, Seifer grabbed an old side table. "Where's it going?"

"The backyard."

When Seifer moved towards the stairs with the piece of furniture, Squall was momentarily blindsided by a pang of disappointment. No kiss, no expectant grin, no quips. Smoothing over the frown on his brow, he took a firm hold of two lamps and followed after the man.

As they went up and down from the attic multiple times, moving the last of the items Ellone had marked for a yard sale, Squall tried to convince himself that the silence between them was a companionable one. Any other time and Seifer would've been making conversation or demanding his attention. At the very least he'd expected the man to brag about his success as Winhill's newest bartender. Seifer had been in his element that day, animated and thriving in the limelight. The blond had been more at home in The Sleeping Lion than he could ever be.

He hadn't done so well himself. He'd stayed up on the roof after he'd cleaned out the rain gutters, for longer than he could justify. It had come as a reflex to avoid all people while he got his thoughts sorted. So he'd sat there, watching the setting sun from his solitary vantage point, dreading each second that was slipping away from him while laughter drifted up to him from the pub below.

By the time they closed the attic door behind them and started to carry down the last heavy piece of furniture together, Seifer still hadn't spoken a word. Glancing at Seifer's face as they negotiated the unwieldy couch around the stairs' turn, Squall wished he had the courage to speak first, but even if he had, he wouldn't know what to say.

Holding on tightly as they carried the couch through the cramped storage room, Seifer couldn't let go of the feeling of inevitability that seemed to permeate his every thought. He'd never been a pessimist and didn't want to start now, but how the hell could this end well? He hadn't even managed to sneak a photo of Squall all afternoon, too busy with everything else. And now it was too late. If things ended badly, he'd have nothing of the man standing mere feet away, looking awkward as hell as they placed the couch next to the rest of Ellone's old furniture.

The night had grown dark around them, the evening air cold. Their last chore was completed.

A few more seconds ticked by as they looked at each other. Squall clearly expected him to say something, but no words came to him. Instead he catalogued every inch of the man before him. The messy dark locks, the stoic pose, the scar. Those intense eyes.

When Squall squared his shoulders and turned away to head back inside, he knew it was now or never. Jerking from his stupor, he took quick strides until he reached the man. In between stacked crates of beer and empty bottles, he grabbed hold of Squall's wrist, forcing him to turn around. Squall's eyes met his own questioningly and he answered with a kiss.

*Just one more.*

He moved his lips slowly against Squall's, taking in the scent, taste and feel. He avoided the inevitable for as long as possible, but knew the moment had to end. Pulling back, he watched a small frown wrinkle Squall's brow. "We should go," he said, yet didn't move an inch.
Hating the awkwardness between them, Squall knew they shouldn't stall but he needed more than a chaste kiss to fortify himself against what they were about to do. He needed to feel that things would be okay, even if Seifer didn't seem to believe it. Taking the single step forward that brought him right back into Seifer's reach, he pulled the man's face down to his and kissed him roughly, his tongue seeking access. He poured every second of pent-up desire and every stab of concern that had afflicted him all day into the exchange.

His heart squeezed tightly when Seifer gathered him close and returned his kiss in kind. Their hands groped and tugged, their breaths coming in hard and fast. It wasn't even close to being enough, but it was better than leaving the unease in Seifer's expression unchallenged. He turned every press of his lips into a promise; a confession he could never express in words.

When they finally managed to break apart after a few lingering kisses that threatened to gravitate them right back to each other, Squall looked up at Seifer with renewed determination. He'd be strong enough for both of them.

"Let's go," he spoke against Seifer's lips, before stepping back and leading the way upstairs.

~ o ~
Broken Memories

Squall could make out the sound of a crackling fire as they entered the living room. Ellone was standing in front of the fireplace, a fire hook in one hand and a piece of newspaper used to busily fan the burning wood in the other.

"Ah," she exclaimed, peering over her shoulder and looking them over. "All done?"

Nodding, Squall stepped further into the living room. On the coffee table, Ellone had set out a pitcher of water and glasses. He knew Seifer would probably prefer something stronger, but he himself was glad there was no alcohol within their immediate reach. Sitting down on the couch, he steeled himself.

"There, the fire's good to go. Should keep you two nice and warm while you're out," Ellone announced as she came to a stand. Looking Seifer's way, she elaborated. "When you're off into the past, your body won't be moving at all. Your heart rate will lower too. It's easy to get chilled."

When Seifer only gave a pensive nod in return and moved to sit in one of the armchairs, Ellone took a deep breath and tried to quell a surge of jittery nerves. Sitting down next to her brother, she poured herself a glass of water and gulped down half of it before looking between her two tense visitors. Seifer's silence was palpable after the lively day spent with the blond.

"So, I guess this is it," she started, straightening in her seat. "If anyone has something to say before we start, now's the time."

Seifer looked up from where his eyes had been fixed on the coffee table. "I do. I understand if either of you want out. Just say the word and we end it now."

"I've already told you. We're in this together, right?" Ellone said, looking to her brother. She was pleased to see his immediate nod, the man's gaze firm on Seifer.

"Alright," Seifer said, not really having expected any different. "But like I said earlier, if Squall sees anything from the war in my memories, we stop—" He hesitated briefly, holding the brunet's gaze. "—and I leave."

Squall frowned at the new condition that was added at the very last minute. His stomach dropped when he realized that Seifer meant 'leaving' in the broadest sense of the word. He'd never see the man again. Seifer's earlier awkwardness and silence were cast in a new light, and suddenly there was no other way to interpret Seifer's earlier kiss than as a preemptive goodbye.

"It won't come to that," Ellone reassured, uncertain which man needed to hear the affirmation most. "But… I'll respect your wish."

Holding Seifer's gaze, Squall couldn't bring himself to make the same promise. This defeatist bullshit wasn't why he'd brought them here. He didn't want to hear Seifer give voice to his own worst fear like this, right before they'd even started.

"Squall?"

Brow twitching at Seifer's adamancy, Squall met green eyes in a battle of wills. He'd never be able to forgive himself if he let Seifer disappear with a burden of that magnitude on his mind. But he also knew Seifer would call things off altogether if he didn't yield.
"Fine," he ground out with effort.

Placing his glass of water on the table, Seifer leaned forwards in his chair. However reluctantly Squall had given his agreement, he had it. "Anything else before we start?"

"I have a few things to say too," Ellone said, trying hard to appear calm and steadfast. It had been so long since she'd last done this. "First off," she started, raising a finger in count, "I don't need to know what you see. All I need to know is if you can handle what I show you. If either of you need a break, say so. Immediately. Once I put you in a memory, I can't just bust you out again." She paused, raising another finger. "Second... Don't shoot the messenger."

When no one objected, she looked between the two men. "So, where do we start?"

"The war," Seifer replied firmly, tensing further in his seat. No point in avoiding the crux of the matter. It was what they'd come for.

"Okay, so... Squall's going first then," Ellone said mostly to herself. She stood up from the couch, gesturing for her brother to lie down. "You better get comfortable. We don't want you waking up with bumps or scrapes."

"Like last time," Squall muttered, venting some of his nerves into the grumbled complaint.

"So to make sure we're all on the same page here," Ellone started, looking at Seifer. "First we try and establish how far the barrier stretches? See if it overlaps with Seifer's time as a knight?"

At Seifer's nod, Ellone took a moment to make herself comfortable in the armchair and gestured for Squall to do the same. "Go on, lie down. Better safe than sorry." Breathing in deeply, she waited until her brother had settled in and was fully reclined. "Okay, so, I'll start somewhere at the beginning of the war. Or well, feel my way around that time... Everybody ready?"

Humming in agreement, Seifer felt his muscles tense in anticipation even though there was nothing he could do but watch.

Squall added his own nod of consent and closed his eyes. It was impossible to try and relax when any second now Ellone would drop him in another time, into another body. There was no countdown, no way to prepare for this, and unlike his experiences with Rinoa, there was no sense of someone plucking at his mind, seeking access.

One moment there was the sound of fire crackling in the hearth, the heat of it warming his skin and the glow of it piercing his closed eyelids. The next moment, a dizzying surge of pure disorientation was followed by the shock of someone else's presence, their every thought and feeling broadcasted into his own mind without any filter. He was trapped in a moving body. All he could do was to try and hold on to his own thoughts and keep himself separate from everything he felt, heard and saw.

He was back at Garden. Before the war. He was cussing non-stop and in front of him was one of Garden's steel sliding doors. He held a heavy weight in his arms. Himself.

Lifting a knee to support Squall's ass, Seifer knocked hard on the metal door with his temporarily freed hand. He glared at the dead weight in his arms, only to curse when he spotted Squall's blood dripping onto his coat. Just his fucking luck that the Princess of Balamb Garden had fainted on his ass. "Open up, motherfucker!" Seifer yelled, unable to muster any patience when the burden in his arms only kept getting heavier. Finally the hydraulic door slid open, a sleep-addled Raijin blinking against the bright light of the hallway.

Pushing past his friend and into the dorm, Seifer sent a glare to Raijin's scrawny roommate who
was sticking his head into the common room to see what the commotion was all about.

"Get back to your fucking room!" Seifer barked out before turning his foul mood on Raijin. "And you, get dressed."

Raijin crossed his arms and stared Seifer down.

"Look, he fucking fainted on me," Seifer explained emphatically. "We were sparring and then BAM, he collapsed. Squall fucking Leonhart collapsed."

"He alright, man?" Raijin asked, dropping the pose and walking over to study the unconscious brunet in Seifer's arms.

Seifer sighed. "Yeah," he said, tightening his hold. "Steady pulse, breathing's okay. Like he's taking a fucking nap." Jostling Squall roughly, there was still no reaction. Not even an annoyed glare. "Fuck," he cursed again for good measure. He was in enough shit as it was. Him knocking Squall out was not going to improve his standing with his instructors. "Just get fucking dressed already and bring him to the infirmary."

After a roll of his eyes, Raijin disappeared into his dorm room. "You'll owe me, ya know."

Trapped with Squall in his arms, Seifer eyed the table in the middle of the room, wondering if he could get away with just dumping the brunet then and there. He needed to get back to his own dorm to clean up and get rid of the evidence. It was too late to prevent his injury from scarring. He'd gone too long without healing it and by now a curative spell wouldn't do more than close the flesh. Fuck, how the hell would he explain that? Why the fuck hadn't he brought any Cures along?

"Shit."

Relieved when Raijin came back out of his room, Seifer straightened and renewed his hold on Squall. "Well, shit, come the fuck over, we don't have all fucking day," he cursed. "Princess here weighs a motherfucking ton."

Watching as Raijin raised an eyebrow at him and took his time sauntering over, Seifer grit his teeth.

Raijin's eyes traveled between them. "Matching scars, ya know."

"Yes, motherfucker, I know. Thanks for pointing out the obvious." He glared at him. "Now will you please get his heavy ass to the infirmary or am I going to have to knock you out too?"

"Yo man, relax," Raijin said, finally holding out his arms to take Squall. "I've got your back."

Quickly dropping the brunet in Raijin's arms, Seifer shook out the aches in his tired muscles. "Thanks man."

"He's light, yo," Raijin said with a chuckle, his grin growing at Seifer's deadly glare. "Alright, alright, I'm outta here."

Passing Raijin just before they exited the dorm, Seifer scouted the hallway. "It's empty," he said, his eyes dropping to his unconscious rival. "Don't let anyone see him, alright?"

Raijin shrugged. "I'll do what I can, ya know."

"You fucking better," Seifer said, stalling. "I'll see your ass later. I'm gonna go clean up this mess."
There was blood all over his chest, and a thick smearing of mud coated his pants and trench coat where Squall’s boots had been lolling against him. He turned and left, picking up his pace.

Of course this had to happen today of all fucking days. Stupid little fucker. Who the fuck would collapse on the field exam day?! Typical of Squall to try and make him feel guilty about it. But the sting of the clotting wound between his eyes quickly removed any budding remorse. Shit, if anyone found out, he’d be cutting it close to finding his ass expelled.

Letting out a string of curses, he continued down the empty hallway and rushed down the stairs. Hopefully the route Raijin was taking would be just as empty. Squall looked too fucking weak like that and if it had been the other way around, he would’ve killed Squall if the brunet didn’t make sure no one saw him in such a sorry state.

Keying in the code to his shared dorm, he stalked straight through the common room and into his own room. Untying Revolver and Hyperion, he dumped them on his desk and shed his clothes in a big heap on the floor. Hurrying into the bathroom, he got under the shower, only to shout out a loud curse as the water hit his brow. “Fuck!”

He immediately got back out of the shower and went to look at himself in the mirror. A diagonal cut marred the bridge of his nose, extending all the way from his forehead down to his upper cheek. An exact mirror of the one he’d cut onto Squall’s face. Precise little shit. Leaning in, he prodded at the separated flesh and congealed blood. He should’ve known Squall would try to get him back. An eye for a fucking eye.

Bending down over the sink, he ran some water over his forehead, washing out the wound before he returned to the shower. Making quick business of cleaning up and getting dressed, it was time to get rid of the evidence of their early morning spar. He put his muddy clothes on a hanger in the shower and sprayed them down, getting rid of the worst stains before leaving them to dry. He gave Revolver and Hyperion a quick rinse as well and found himself slipping into the hallway with Revolver in hand minutes later.

Getting a thrill from sneaking around, he was almost disappointed when he made it to Squall’s dorm without encountering anyone. It was with slight annoyance that he keyed in the code that would allow him access to the guy’s dorm. It had taken him a whole week of covert glances to glean Squall’s code, and this was all he’d get for his trouble. Inside, it was dark, the cadet Squall shared his dorm with most likely asleep. Pushing open the door to Squall’s room, he shut it just as quickly. No one would suspect he’d even been there. Apart from one unconscious brunet, perhaps.

He turned on the light and looked around the room. Still as uninspiring as the last time he’d been there to pester the guy. Neat and tidy, not one fucking thing out of place. Placing Revolver on the desk, he couldn’t help himself from taking a closer look and rifling through Squall’s things. There had to be something Squall kept hidden, some secret that he could hold over the brunet’s head. But there was nothing. No booze or porn, just a large selection of non-fiction books and leather apparel. Fucking typical. Maybe there’d be something on the guy’s console.

Flopping down on the uncomfortable chair by the desk, he switched it on and input the second password he’d obtained through his superior cunning. He waited as the console loaded, then looked through the standard Garden folders. All he found were course materials, class notes, essays and the like. There wasn’t a single obscurnly named folder with incriminating files, not even a folder with music or vids.

Sighing, he navigated to Squall’s magic inventory instead. His eyes opened wide. Hundred fucking Cures. Hundred Blizzards. Hundred Fires and on it went. Everything was there, neatly organized.
All the spells they were allowed to carry, with a maxed out inventory on every single one. He arched an eyebrow. Nine Lives and thirteen Flares as well. A smirk curled his lips. Finally some evidence that Squall was human, that the guy could feel strongly enough about something to actually break the rules.

Stocking up on everything he needed to give himself an edge during the exam, he made sure to leave random, uneven numbers behind. Laughing at the mess he'd created, he got up from the chair and flopped down on Squall's immaculately made bed, ruining the military creases of the sheets. He raised his less than clean boots onto the bed, folded his arms beneath his head and stared up at the ceiling that looked the same as in his own dorm. It was odd to realize he was lying in the exact spot where Squall spent his nights, relaxed and unguarded. What did Squall think of when lying here? He adjusted the pillow slightly, sinking even further into the bed, and inhaled deeply. It even smelled like Squall.

He tapped his fingers against the white sheets. Squall would be at the infirmary by now. What if Squall didn't wake up in time for the field test? He needed to make sure the little prick wouldn't miss his test. He sat up in the bed but didn't move. He had a Cure now. The wound would still scar but he could get rid of the pain. Running a finger over the fresh cut, he dismissed the thought. There was no way Kadowaki would waste magic on Squall's injury, not after the lecture they'd both gotten from her last time, and he'd be damned if he'd let Squall think he was too squeamish to stand the sting of some old-fashioned healing.

And it might just be the perfect back-up plan. If he had an equally angry looking cut to throw in Trepe's face, then she couldn't very well expel his ass without getting her favorite little pet into trouble as well.

He'd get away with it. He'd make sure of it. And he was going to make damned sure Squall would be ready for what the day had in store as well. It was the only way he'd get any satisfaction out of outperforming the little shit. Looking around the room one last time, he jumped up from the bed and decided to go find Fujin. He'd make her check up on Squall and report back.

Blinking slowly as the memory faded and a wooden ceiling came back into view, Squall felt a brief moment of relief when his muscles twitched in response to his own command again. He'd never get used to the lack of control that came with this.

But slowly he forgot about the discomfort as the actions of a younger Almasy replayed in his mind, bringing a frown to his brow. As if the universe thought his pride hadn't taken enough of a beating that morning long ago. Pushing up in the couch, he turned to look at the man who'd managed to harass him throughout all of his childhood and years in training. Seifer was sitting at the edge of his armchair, rigid with tension, waiting for the verdict.

"The morning of the field exam," he said evenly. "After our fight."

Raising an eyebrow, Seifer needed a moment before Squall's words sank in. Before the war and after the spar that had landed them both with a scar for life. "After you fainted?" he asked, unable to curb the teasing grin that appeared on his lips.

Squall scowled. "Raijin?" he asked incredulously, not at all impressed with how Seifer had ditched him. To think all this time he'd thought Seifer had been the one to drop him off at the infirmary. No wonder the man's friends had never thought highly of him.

"He was our best bet," Seifer said with a shrug, still smiling. Nevermind that Quistis had told him off for it anyway. "I was in enough trouble as it was."

Squall huffed. At least that much was true. But Seifer hadn't stopped at that. He'd broken into his dorm, snooped through his things and made a mess of his spell inventory, and all the while a
damning mental commentary had run through the blond's head. He couldn't quite quell the retrospective tug of anger he was feeling, however pointless.

"So how was it? Did you have fun experiencing the inner workings of this amazing brain?"

"It was enlightening," Squall replied dryly. "Like listening to a sailor's cussing non-stop." In the past few weeks he'd managed to forget how big of an ass Seifer used to be. But even so, he couldn't deny that throughout the memory there had been a palpable sense of concern underlying every curse and derogatory thought.

Seifer watched Squall carefully, wondering just what the man had gleaned from knowing his every thought like that. He couldn't even remember what had run through his head back then. At least Squall seemed to take it in stride, if a bit annoyed.

"So you couldn't access anything from the war?" he asked Ellone, eager to get on with things.

Ellone's smile faded, the question ruthlessly bringing the tense atmosphere crashing back down on them. "I tried, but when I got too close to the beginning of the war, it took me by surprise, so I sort of just dropped Squall in there." She cast both men an apologetic look. "At least now we know your memories before the war are unaffected. I think I could access any one of them... But I didn't get very far on testing the boundaries of the barrier."

"Okay," Seifer said, nodding. "So we try again? See if you can get more of a feel for the barrier?"

"If you're both ready," Ellone agreed. "It'll probably just be me trying and failing to get Squall anywhere, but it could still take a while."

"I'm ready." Seifer looked over to Squall.

Nodding, Squall moved to lie back down and closed his eyes, more confident than the first time around. The barrier was there, his hypothesis about to be proven true.

"Okay. Round number two," Ellone announced.

Taking deep, calming breaths, Squall waited in silence as time passed and nothing happened. He could hear the wringing of Seifer's hands against the leather armrests, a clear sign of the man's stress as Ellone tried to find him an entry point into the war. He refrained from speaking any reassurances. Not that much longer now, and they'd be able to put all of this behind them.

Bright light shocked through his eyes, catching him unprepared and filling him with panic as he was propelled forward, a torrent of dry hot air rushing into his face and lacerating his skin with abrasive sand. He tried to blink and clear his eyes, but the body he was in refused to heed his command. The mind he occupied jumped wildly between jittery, disconnected thoughts. Pure, unadulterated adrenaline coursed through his veins. He was on the run. He needed to get away.

Seifer's every single muscle pulled taut as he went off road, cutting into the desert at a maddening speed, away from the prison. He'd managed to get out; away from her. Every single second counted. His breathing was ragged, coming in too shallow and too quick. He felt like a hunted animal, every synapse in his body ready to fire at a moment's notice, the impressions of his surroundings frantic as his eyes flitted from point to point. His destination was coming into view. The canyon.

He winced as the memory of Squall restrained to that wall pushed back to the forefront of his thoughts. Electric crackling filled his ears and he bit down hard as he remembered the man's body jolting off the wall in a rigid arc.
The pleasure he'd felt at Squall's pain made him retch again. His stomach was already empty, but the heaving motions still brought bile to his mouth. He'd always viewed Squall as an equal. He'd known he'd miss him when he'd set off for Timber. And he'd fucking electrocuted him. He'd fucking gotten off on it. Wiping at his mouth, he forced the image away.

Another image took its place. His mistress at D-District. After Squall. Poised on a desk and spreading her legs. He'd been riding so high on the pain he'd inflicted that he'd already been hard. The slide into her had been slick. He clenched his fingers against the steering wheel. He'd fucking loved it and his release had been quick. It was only afterwards, when he'd pulled out and she'd tilted her head back with cutting laughter and disappeared again, that everything had felt wrong.

[No.]

Until that moment he'd never vomited over something he'd done.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to go back and check on Squall. He'd turned on everyone he'd ever known. He'd tortured Squall. He couldn't face what he'd done. He had to get out.

With the keys to an off-road ATV, he'd stolen his escape. He'd vowed never to do anything like that again. And there was only one way to make sure.

[Stop!]

The steep drop was only a couple of hundred yards away now. His eyes went wide, his teeth clenched, the bile still fresh on his tongue as he raced across the desert. Sweet fucking oblivion.

[Stop! Now!]

Only a split-second and he'd feel the drop. At least he'd go out with adrenaline pumping through his body; feel the high of flying. But then his right arm disobeyed him, seizing up with tremors before it spun the steering wheel around with a sharp jerk of muscles. He frantically tried to pull free of the possessed limb, but his right hand was clenched around the wheel in an unyielding, white-knuckled grip. The ATV skidded in the sand and turned away from the canyon, just a few steps short of his goal. Panic set in, his eyes burning with unshed tears. She wouldn't even let him have this.

/Vat is this?/

Ultimecia's disembodied voice sounded cruelly kind, cutting deep. She tutted her disapproval, as if reprimanding a child.

"Just fucking kill me," Seifer begged in between gasps, pulling at his frozen arm with desperate effort.

/Why would I do such a horrid thing? I adore you so./ She paid no heed to his sobs as the tendrils of her mind slid into his, poisoning everything she touched. /You had your fun. Now come back to me./

The will to resist bled from him slowly, killing any hope of escape. He fell slack into the driver's seat, his mind awash with fear and confusion as he sank away.

Trapped and suddenly alone, Squall tried to fight against the nauseating, oppressive aura of the sorceress. He struggled to reach Seifer with all his might, but the man's mind was already receding into the shadows of Ultimecia's looming presence. Instead, all of that taint slowly turned its focus on him, causing cold dread to take hold of him.
Ultimecia could see him.

In that moment he had absolutely no doubt this was real. Not just a harmless revisiting of a memory that existed only in Seifer's mind, but a very real and alive Ultimecia staring at him intently across the spans of time. Just as real as when their gazes had been locked on the battlefield. The surge of intense hatred would have knocked him to his knees if it wasn't for his lack of form in this realm.

/I see you got to the girl before I kould./ Her voice was broadcast directly into his mind with the force of a sledgehammer to his skull. /Did you enjoy my Knight torturing you? Have you enjoyed his distress? Do not fret. He will kapture you again and I will take great pleasure in watching him take you apart./

With that parting message, she shoved him out of Seifer's head and reeling back into his own body. Sucking in a greedy gasp for air, his heartbeat battering against his chest erratically, Squall veered upright and stared straight into the fireplace.

"Squall?" Ellone's voice sounded thin, uncertain. "...What was that?"

Exerting conscious effort not to let out a trembling breath, Squall told himself to get a hold of himself, to reassert control. He tried to shut out the irrational fear that the sorceress could've followed through whatever pathway Ellone had created, that she could still get to Seifer. He focused and kept still, but couldn't sense any unnatural presence. His gaze darted to Ellone's eyes. They were their usual dark brown, not even a hint of yellow detectable. The danger had passed.

And then the rest sank in.

He'd known Seifer had tried to take his own life. Seifer had told him in not too many words. But now he had a dammingly complete understanding of why Seifer had chosen to go down that path. Now he'd felt every raw, jagged emotion that had driven the man to the edge of that ravine. It was impossible to relegate the vivid experience to the past when the shock of adrenaline still thumped through his veins.

He'd only just managed to throw around that steering wheel.

Aware of the two sets of eyes on him, Squall ransacked his brain for an explanation that wouldn't immediately have Seifer make good on his promise to leave. He hadn't expected this, hadn't prepared a fallback plan for this kind of outcome.

"Squall," Ellone prompted a second time.

Lifting his legs off the couch, Squall spared Ellone's worried expression a brief glance before turning to face Seifer. The man's face was drawn, as if expecting the worst.

"Hear me out."

Instantly frowning, Seifer kept Squall's gaze. It had to be bad for Squall to say that, for Ellone's reaction to be like that.

"Ultimecia's mind control caused the barrier. I still believe that," Squall emphasized, "but we overlooked something." He paused, looking for a phrasing that wouldn't immediately betray everything to Ellone. "...The few times she withdrew her influence over you."

Seifer narrowed his eyes. Squall meant the times he'd felt remorseful. "What did you see?" he demanded, disliking Squall's evasive words. He'd reach his own damned conclusions.
"Shennard Canyon."

The admission had Seifer out of his armchair instantly, Squall following closely after, but the blond stopped at the fireplace, placing his back to him. The man wasn't running—yet.

"It lasted a minute at most until she took over." Some of the dread Squall had felt crept into his voice. "One second you were there, the next... gone." He'd been absolutely powerless to stop it.

Seifer stared at the flames. He hated Squall seeing what he had. He knew what had been on his mind then; things he hadn't intended for anyone to ever find out.

Glancing between the two men, Ellone frowned. "I don't understand... Isn't this a good thing?" She paused, grimacing at her words. "Hyne, I mean, I know it can't have been good. I felt that... that thing again, but if it confirms our theory—" She turned her gaze on Squall, trying to make sense of things with what little she was allowed to know. "It sounds like you witnessed Ultimia take control of him. Isn't that what we're trying to prove?"

That was exactly what Squall thought he'd witnessed, but he knew he needed to relay what he'd experienced objectively and without assumptions. Seifer was stubborn enough not to accept any other rendering of the facts. "He was in control for a brief while. When she returned it was like she just made him... disappear." He paused, bringing his voice under tight control. "Ultimia knew I was there. She threw me out."

The frown on Seifer's brow grew. He turned to face Squall. "She felt you?"

"She saw me. Knew who I was," Squall clarified, unable to hide his aversion. "I don't think she realized she's dead in the time I'm from." He faced Ellone, the woman clearly stricken by his words. "Your powers, they aren't just a recollection of the past. They're a connection to the past. It's real."

"Like time-travel?" Seifer asked, incredulous.

Ellone shook her head. "That's not possible. It's not time travel if you can't affect things. You're just watching."

"Then why did two sorceresses try to capture you at all costs? Ultimia affected me," Squall countered, hesitating before adding, "I affected Seifer."

That earned him a scrunched brow from Ellone. "How? It just doesn't work that way, Squall. I've tried endlessly to change things, and I always failed. Always."

Squall glanced Seifer's way. This was becoming more and more difficult to explain without the specifics. "I didn't change the past. It already happened. My influence was minor but it was supposed to happen." Watching Ellone's unconvinced expression, he was about to try another angle when Seifer cut him off.

"Just what did you do?"

"I threw the steering wheel around," Squall said after a moment's deliberation, holding the blond's gaze.

"You did that?" Seifer asked, even more incredulous than before. He barely registered Squall's nod. The implications were too big. If what Squall was saying was true... "It felt like Ultimia to me."

Squall frowned. To him, Ultimia had felt vile. "It wasn't. She arrived seconds too late. Ultimia
didn't help you. She suffocated you."

"That wasn't help," Seifer said, his voice harsh. "I made my choice."

The accusation was like a slap to the face. Squall's expression grew blank as he floundered between anger and denial. He hadn't expected Seifer to still stand by his past 'choice'. Did the man still think about it, even now?

He squared his jaw. "I didn't have any." It had been a reflex, born from pure desperation. Choosing between letting Seifer live or die wasn't a choice at all. "I couldn't just sit back and watch."

His fists growing tense, Seifer restrained his urge to punch the brunet. *He doesn't know what you went through. You would have done the same.* Closing his eyes, focusing on his breathing, he tried to push the resentment away, but he couldn't rein in the words. "So instead you forced me to live through it all."

"I forced you?" Squall echoed weakly, his chest constricting as Seifer finally blamed him for everything.

Seifer's voice was low and seething. "You could have prevented it."

"I should have," Squall agreed slowly, his throat tight with the confession, "but not like that."

"There wasn't any other way. It was a simple solution and it would have worked."

"I could have taken you back to Garden. Away from her."

Seifer narrowed his eyes at the determination behind the words, as if Squall actually believed what he was saying. "You didn't have any choice. *I fought you.* She knew where I was at all times. You dragging me away somewhere wouldn't have changed that. She would've put a stop to it. You did the only thing you could."

"Apart from killing you?" Squall exclaimed, voice raw. He shook his head. "Garden has magic wards and perimeters, cells if necessary. We could've contained you, kept you safe until we defeated her. The words left him in a rush and as he spoke them, he realized their futility. He'd played this game of what-ifs and could-haves one time too many.

"You can't really believe that." Seifer said, watching the brunet carefully. "You're not that fucking naive."

"I didn't have to fight you."

"One big flaw there Squall. You couldn't have fought Ultimecia unless you fought me too." Seifer's voice was gaining volume again. "You saved the whole fucking world. *You* ended it."

Squall huffed. He didn't need this hero crap, least of all from Seifer. Countless lives had been lost under his command. He'd come so close to killing Seifer more than once. Nothing he said now could change the choices he'd made. To discuss it so heatedly now was a sentiment offered far too late.

"Don't do that. Don't ever fucking downplay it."

Dropping his hand from where he was rubbing at his brow, Squall met the blond's gaze tiredly. "It wasn't a one person effort, Seifer. I made mistakes."
"All that matters is the end result."

Squall nodded slowly, the reply at least suiting his purposes. "The end result isn't finished yet." He knew now that he'd influenced the past enough to make a difference. Enough to save Seifer's life. He might have to do it again. This was the only chance he'd get. "Do I need to go back?"

"No." Seifer didn't even have to consider it. There was no way he'd let Squall back into the past during the war. No way he'd risk Ultimia sinking her claws into Squall.

At the predictable refusal, Squall stepped closer with a slight frown. "I may already have gone back."

Seifer held Squall's gaze. "Whatever we decide now—you going back again or not—I will survive. I'm here now. You on the other hand... What if Ultimia figures out how to hurt you? You might not come back."

Squall frowned at that bit of reasoning. "We don't know if it works that way. Consequences in the present could become undone if we don't set them in motion in the first place." His gut twisted cold at the thought. Would Seifer disappear? Maybe the present would simply be transplanted with a new one where the man had gotten his wish, not even a memory left from the past few weeks. "Answer my question. Did I go back?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know? I told you, it felt like Ultimia to me," Seifer said, unable to think of any instances when Squall might have been there. If Squall's theory was right, Squall wouldn't have been able to enter the past for more than a few instances during the war. "Look... There's only one other time when I managed to try something and I can pretty much guarantee it wasn't you who saved me. It took healing, and lots of it. Unless you can whip up a Full-Life while you're inside my head, I think we can safely rule that one out."

The blunt answer didn't bring Squall the relief he'd hoped for. A Full-Life. That meant Seifer had gotten as far as hurting himself, badly. "We can't rule anything out," he replied urgently, not willing to play guessing games. "I could have made you cast the spell. You must have carried Full-Life spells back then."

"It would've been too late for me to cast it, so it couldn't have been you." He watched Squall's gaze drop to his chest, the brunet's expression going stark as he connected the dots. "I'm not putting you at risk. We can still prove it by you seeing something after the war and me checking if your memories are intact during your time as a knight."

Gaze lingering on where he knew a scar ran, deep and lethal, Squall had a hard time accepting Seifer's even tone. Whatever had happened, it had been worse than the memory he'd just seen. An old anger rekindled his temper, one that had been dulled ever since he'd watched Ultimia die a pitiful death at his feet.

"I should have made her suffer," he said lowly.

Seifer took a step closer to Squall. He didn't know how Ultimia had died in the end, how things had gone down. He hadn't wished a painless death on her either. He'd always hoped it would've been slow. That she had been made to pay for all the suffering she'd caused.

But he also knew Squall wasn't one to prolong the inevitable, that it would've been clean and quick. Not knowing the details was better. And he was actually starting to believe Squall's theory; that he'd been manipulated all along. If they could get the last proof they needed, he could blame and hate Ultimia for all the things she'd made him do. He could finally try and let go of his past
for good. He stepped closer again, following Squall's gaze as it rose to meet his own. "Let's finish this."

The words brought Squall back into the present, the visions of revenge dissipating as Seifer's eyes bored into his. Ultimecia was dead and Seifer wasn't. Regretting the past wasn't of any use to the man. Slowly, he nodded.

"You sure you two don't need a break?" Ellone asked, eyeing the two men worriedly. Her eyes had misted over as she'd watched their argument unfold, their every word revealing just how much damage had been done. She didn't want to upset anybody any further, let alone accidentally land Squall right in Ultimecia's hands.

Shaking his head, Squall moved to lie down on the couch again, this time steeling himself for any possible outcome.

"Keep it recent," Seifer instructed.

"I'll do my best," Ellone said with a small nod, praying she wouldn't disappoint. Sitting back down, she turned her gaze on Squall. "Okay, here goes."

Closing his eyes and preparing himself for the third time, Squall tried to push away the fear that he'd be landed in another memory of the war. Their experiment wouldn't survive another one of those. His only option was to put his faith in Ellone. At least he was certain she was completely aware of the risks this time around. She'd keep away from the barrier, from the war. There was nothing he could do but witness events as they unfolded.

His frustration grew palpable and sharp, resonating with Seifer's as he jolted into the past. He was at the SCTA training grounds, eager to unleash his full potential, to move and fight, but he was forced to temper himself. His right hand was closed around a gunblade that was too light to be his own, his moves jarringly slow as he knocked his opponent's blade out of their hands.

Calder's blade skidded along the gravel, leaving yet another pause in their fight. Seifer raised an eyebrow. That was the second time he'd disarmed Calder and he hadn't even tried that hard. After tasting what real sparring was like again, he was losing patience with whatever this was fast. He ran a hand through his hair. He should have arranged to spar with Squall tonight instead. Why had he said yes to Calder again? Squall could have come in to meet him at the SCTA instead of staying back at his apartment. Probably would've worked wonders in taking the edge off his annoyance at having to deal with Quistis later as well. Hell, just sneaking in some time to feel Squall up would have improved his mood by miles. But instead he'd agreed to this. He sighed.

"Come on." He jerked his head in the direction of the man's blade. "Focus." He didn't believe in cutting people any slack; not with his students and not with Calder.

The man nodded at him, at least willing to try. But there was no bite to Calder's moves, no speed as they picked up their spar again. He was forced to hold back. Calder managed to parry a few of his blows, but then the man had to leap aside to avoid being hit when he brought down Kronos a tad too swiftly. Calder hadn't even attempted to parry it.

Seifer furrowed his brow and stepped back as he gave the man a moment to recover. If it had been Squall, they would already have been at it again. "Focus," he repeated when Calder resumed his stance.

A hint of uncertainty had crept into the man's features, but Calder readied himself regardless and gave another nod. As they ran towards each other, Seifer forced himself to push away his
annoyance and went into instructor mode, keeping his every move predictable and tempered. There was no enjoyment to be had from this, but he'd promised Calder a spar before he went off to Galbadia and it was too late to go back on his word. More than that, he'd totally and utterly ignored the man for the past week, ever since Rinoa had come knocking on his door and they'd tracked down Squall. Even though Calder had a ridiculous amount of patience, he knew it would run out sooner or later. The sheer number of calls he'd gotten just that weekend was enough of a clue.

He huffed inwardly at the realization that none of his brain power was actually used on the fighting. The barest of instinct was enough to parry attacks or force Calder to retreat. Boring and sedate. That was all it was. All his enthusiasm left him. It would be hard to settle for this when Squall had to return to his missions. Distracted by the unwelcome thought, he forgot to temper his next blow. Calder's blade twisted aside harshly, breaking the rhythm of their spar.

Staring at his exhausted sparring partner, he waited for Calder to raise his blade anew and ran towards him again. The man parried and for a while they exchanged blows until he accidentally managed to disarm the man for the third time.

He shook his head with a sigh. "You're usually better than this." He clung to that small hope even though he knew it was much more likely that it was just his own perception that had changed. Calder only shrugged in reply. It was clear the man had already caught on to the fact that this wasn't anything like their normal spars. Something had changed. Forcing the tip of Kronos into the gravel, Seifer rested his hand on the handle. "Time to call it a night, I'd say."

Calder retrieved his blade and came over to stand in front of him. "There's still half an hour until your class," the man said after sparing his wristwatch a glance.

Still wanting to get a sweat on, Seifer lifted Kronos and turned around to leave. "Then let's hit the gym."

"Wait."

"What's up?" Seifer asked with a raised eyebrow as he turned back around to meet the brunet's gaze.

The man shrugged. "You're off soon. Last chance for me to sate my curiosity," he said with a slight smile.

Seifer chuckled lowly. "So?"

Calder leveled him with a scrutinizing expression before speaking. "Have you always been holding back on me? When we spar?"

"Of course," Seifer said outright. "I'm one of the best gunbladers out there. What did you think?"

Calder shook his head and huffed. "What about him?"

The implication of who 'him' meant was clear. There was only one other person he'd been sparring with as of late. "He wins once in a while," he said with a smirk.

"You're insufferable."

"One of my better traits, I've been told."

Calder chuckled. "That and being able to stay hard for more than one go."
The smirk on Seifer's lips widened. He'd always had a weakness for when Calder played into his ego.

A moment of silence passed between them as Calder's smile grew more wistful. "Will we be able to spar again?"

"Yeah. We did before." He'd learn how to deal with it again even if it wouldn't be anything like when he faced off with Squall. "It's still a decent work-out."

"Thanks," Calder scoffed with a roll of his eyes. "You really know how to soften the blow."

Seifer shrugged. He always called things exactly as he saw them. "Not my fault you were trained in Esthar."

"Am I going to have to start taking that Garden-elitist bullshit from you, now?"

"It's not bullshit when it's the truth."

Calder rolled his eyes again, before growing contemplative. "You think there's a chance I can ever watch you and him spar?"

Seifer chuckled and shook his head. "Nope, not a chance in hell." Squall definitely wouldn't be up for it. The man had always been averse to an audience, and hadn't even made an exception for his own dad. Good thing he'd been there to intercede. No father should be denied such pride.

"We're still going on that hunt when you get back though, right?"

"Sure," Seifer said, already eager at the prospect. Before, he'd only planned on showing Nolan the different items used when fighting monsters that cast magic, but now that he was able to use magic again, he had a whole other show in mind. He'd blow Calder and Nolan's minds. "I'll show you some magic. Maybe even a GF."

"Really?" Calder asked, perking up. "Nolan is going to worship you even more."

Seifer chuckled. "And you?"

Calder snorted out loud. "As if."

Unable to quell his amusement at the expense of the two Madar brothers, Seifer recalled the all-encompassing hero worship Nolan had for a certain commander. "Nolan would piss himself if he knew who he tried to pick a fight with last Friday," he said with a laugh, imagining the look of sheer mortification on Nolan's face.

Calder laughed as well, then shook his head. "It's still too weird."

"You'll get used to it." Seifer had no doubt Calder would take it in stride. In the years he'd known Calder, nothing had ruffled the man. Calder hadn't even freaked out when finding out that Rinoa was a sorceress or when watching him draw a Guardian Force.

"So where are you off to in Galbadia?"

"Obel Lake. That's where we'll meet up with Rai and Fu. First we're going to stop in Winhill though, to visit Squall's sister." Just under two weeks ago he'd complained to Calder about his fuckup with Avalanche, about how he'd thought he'd seduced a one hundred percent straight man, and now said man was taking him across continents to meet his sister and see his native town. If
that didn't come with bragging rights, then he didn't know what did.

"He has a family?" Calder asked, quirking a brow. "I'm sure I heard that he was an orphan."

Seifer nodded, the same being true for most cadets at Garden back then. "He only found out recently. A dad and a sister."

"What about his mom?"

"She died. A long time ago."

"And now you're going on holiday to visit his dad and sister?" Calder asked, his eyebrows climbing even higher.

"Just his sister. His dad lives here in Esthar." It took all of Seifer's willpower to stomp out the gigantic smile that threatened to break free at just who Squall's dad was.

"You met his dad?"

The maddening urge to grin won out. "Had dinner with both of them just last night."

"So that's what the suit was for." Calder shook his head and let out a low whistle. "I thought you had it bad, but this definitely takes the cake." He laughed softly. "I have to say, you never struck me as the type to have dinner with the in-laws or tag along for a family visit. I really don't know what to expect anymore. End of the world?"

Seifer just smirked even more widely. "Perhaps."

"Well, enjoy your honeymoon."

Seifer rolled his eyes, but it quickly turned into a shit-eating grin. He would enjoy every single second of having Squall to himself. In Winhill and during their hunt, he'd make sure to make Squall pant and squirm in pleasure every chance he got. Nothing beat that look of ecstasy on Squall's face or the sight of soft moist lips when they let out hitching breaths. Too fucking addictive. "I will," he said at length, trying and failing to temper his grin. "I'm sure you won't be keeping idle either. Which reminds me, I still have eight pills for you."

Calder quirked an eyebrow. "You haven't taken any since?"

"No." There was no way he'd take Avalanche with Squall again. At least not anytime soon. Not after that first fucking atrocious night. "Just take the rest. They're where I usually keep them."

"Appreciated," Calder said before laughing softly. "So no drugs and no sleeping around." He shook his head as he clicked his tongue. "Seems the Commander isn't just good at keeping his troops in line. What's next? A chastity belt?"

The words rubbed Seifer entirely the wrong way. "I can fuck whoever I like."

"Which is entirely beside the point when you don't want to."

Reminded of Squall's lean but muscular body and perfectly shaped ass, Seifer couldn't object.

Calder smiled. "Point made."

"Point taken."
"Well, whenever you're back, give me a call," Calder said, hoisting his blade over his shoulder, getting ready to go.

"Will do," Seifer said, relieved they were able to make this new balance between them work, despite the lack of sex or satisfying spars. It would seem that with Squall around everything else was quickly losing its appeal.

"Take care, Seif."

Seifer nodded in return, watching the man leave. When Calder was out of sight, he glanced at his phone. He still had time to kill. Enough to finally get a sweat on.

Falling into a frenzied warm up, moving as fast as he could, he lunged as hard as possible while throwing all his weight and strength behind his attacks. It felt much closer to his spars with Squall. Especially when he imagined using the very same moves that had brought out that fiery look in gray-blue eyes. He still couldn't help but wish that he'd blown Calder off for another spar with Squall. In less than three hours he'd be squaring off with Quistis. For the first time since the war. He grimaced. Trust their good old instructor to come and ruin things.

Forcing away all thoughts of the confrontation to come, he focused on executing each move perfectly and gave himself over to what would probably be the last peaceful moment of his day.

Seifer's thoughts faded away, the chilly Esthar evening replaced with the warm interior of Ellone's living room. His muscles no longer burned with exertion, but itched with pins and needles after lying paralyzed for so long.

"What did you see?"

Delaying his answer to Seifer's question, Squall sat up in the couch and stared past him, into the fire. He wasn't ready yet to face the man. He was still processing what he'd seen, the implications hitting him one after the other. How had he been so blind? Keeping his expression carefully even, he lifted his gaze and replied in a non-committal tone.

"Your spar with Calder. Before Quistis's visit."

Recalling some of what had been said after his spar with Calder, Seifer frowned as he studied Squall more closely. Squall's reply was way too dispassionate considering what the memory had brought to light. Who Calder was to him. Or had been. Shit. At least Squall hadn't seen them fucking. Some lewd banter at worst. But even though he didn't like the detached quality to Squall's reaction at all, there was no way he was going to start explaining things, not in front of Ellone and definitely not now.

"So things add up so far," he said, feeling none of the elation he was supposed to at this point.

"I knew they would," Ellone said with a tentative smile, trying not to be disheartened by the strained atmosphere. Whatever her brother had seen, it had caused him to retreat behind a painfully blank expression, yet Seifer wasn't saying anything. Who the hell was Calder?

"You're up next, Seifer," she added when neither man spoke or moved.

Squall couldn't muster Ellone's optimism as he stood up from the couch. He was struggling to push away the confusing muddle of his thoughts. At first the memory had seemed benign enough. The knowledge that no one could take his place as Seifer's sparring partner, not truly, had been gratifying at first. He'd felt little sympathy for Calder as Seifer had knocked the man's blade out of his hand time after time.
He hadn't seen the rest coming at all.

Suppressing a frown, he went to sit in the unoccupied armchair, leaving the couch free for Seifer. He needed to focus. Whatever he'd seen, it had no bearing on their purpose here. He tried to convince himself nothing had changed, but the chaos in his head suggested otherwise.

Not for the first time since Seifer's reappearance in his life, he felt like a fool. He'd been oblivious about Seifer's sexuality despite their night on Avalanche, and apparently he'd been oblivious about Calder as well. No wonder the man's little brother disliked him so openly. He was an interloper. An intruder. Calder himself had been remarkably civil with him, considering the situation. The man's presence in Seifer's apartment when he'd first come to made a lot more sense now. He'd been the one out of place, not Calder.

He tried and failed to make sense of the relationship between the two men. He'd known from the start that Seifer never let his bed grow cold for long, but he'd never guessed for there to be an element of stability in the man's ways. Someone closer than a mere friend. A lover. Companionship free of jealousy, unburdened by a heavy past, where talk of drugs and sex and other partners was commonplace. A relationship that felt like it could be picked up right where it had been left off the moment Seifer lost interest in any sidetracks. Was that why Calder had seemed so unconcerned with Seifer's disloyalty? Was this normal for them? How could Seifer's thoughts about him feel so sincere, when at the same time the man was talking to a lover so casually?

A niggling sense of betrayal intruded on his thoughts. Why hadn't Seifer told him?

"So, a memory from your time as a knight, right?"

Looking up, he met Ellone's gaze before managing a belated nod. Seifer had already moved to lie down on the couch, his eyes closed and his brow set in a tense scowl. The sight was sobering, reminding Squall of what was at stake. His feelings mattered nothing at all. Compared to what he'd felt and seen at Shennard Canyon, Seifer's relationship with his sparring partner and lover was nothing.

"Stay away from the war," he reminded Ellone sternly. His memories of the war wouldn't be obstructed, and he wasn't willing to find out whether Ultimcia would be able to sense Seifer's presence in a mind she wasn't occupying. "And Time Compression," he added, not even wanting to entertain the possibility of landing Seifer in that nightmare world or the void that had followed it.

"I will," came Ellone's focused reply. "Trust me."

"Time Compression?" Seifer asked, frowning as he looked up at Ellone. This was the first he'd heard of it, and he wasn't in the mood for surprises.

"Don't worry, there's no way I'll lose you in there," Ellone reassured. "I can tell it apart clearly. It's this weird stretch of endlessness that intersects with Squall's normal memories. It's easy to avoid."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Not now," Squall interrupted with a frown. Seifer didn't know how they'd defeated Ultimcia, let alone how he'd been stuck in Time Compression. What had been a mere week to everyone else had felt like an eternity to him. It was a memory he'd rather not dwell on, and to tell Seifer now wouldn't exactly relax the man either. "I can explain later."

"It poses no danger to you. I'll make sure of it," Ellone chimed in. "Just relax."
Not feeling very reassured, Seifer clenched his jaw. Whatever Time Compression was, he didn't like the sound of it one bit. And he hated not knowing whatever the fuck it had done to Squall to mess up the man's memories like that. What did Ellone mean when she said they stretched on endlessly? He glanced over at Squall, but the man still didn't meet his gaze, just looked determined as fuck. Shit.

Trying to force his thoughts under control, he breathed in deeply. "So I just clear my head or what?"

"That's not necessary for my side of things," Ellone reassured. "But it might help you to make the transition more easily. Just do what's most comfortable for you."

"Okay. Hit me."

Taking in a deep breath, Seifer focused on the quiet of the room and the feel of the couch beneath him. He tried to ground himself in the moment, readying himself for the coming change. He kept his breathing even, until suddenly it came in hard and fast. He was hunting, all senses attuned to the snowy landscape around him.

Lungs burning, Squall stood panting amidst the carnage he'd just inflicted. He paid no heed to the corpses of dead wolves strewn around him, steam rising into the chill winter air from their still warm entrails. Eyes ahead, he scoured the clearing's edge for a subtle blur of movement, a flash of eyes beyond the forest's underbrush, but all was still. Blood pumping fast, he waited a few more heartbeats, the soft sway of pine branches in the wind the only movement around him.

/Shiva?/

Still in his mind like a leave on a pond, poised and ready to act swiftly, Shiva brushed a negative reply against his thoughts. Relaxing his hold on Lion Heart, Squall straightened. These had been the last of the beast's watch dogs then.

Pulling free one foot that had sunk deep into wet snow and mud, he took stock of his condition. A scattering of claw marks covered his body, his jacket in tatters and letting through the cold sting of winter. Inconsequential. The large bite mark just above his right knee however... Stretching his leg, fresh blood oozed from the ragged flesh and soaked his pants further. At least the leg was still holding his weight.

He took quick inventory of his magic, only to scowl at the surrounding Trabian woods. He was stocked to capacity on ice magic, but had had no luck finding any curative magic in this place. The last of his high end spells had been drained three packs of wolves ago, most of them having gone to the ambushed villagers and his now missing party members. He couldn't afford to waste his last Cura on a bum leg.

Drawing on his link with Shiva instead, he directed her numbing cold to the wound. Muscles spasmed painfully and his flesh chilled to an unhealthy blue hue, but the blood loss slowed to an acceptable level. A trick he'd learned during the civil war, one he knew he'd pay for later. With the shredded remains of his jacket he tied off the wound as best as he could.

After a few testing steps, he returned his focus to the tracks he'd been following. It was ruined now, the fresh layer of snow in the clearing reduced to a sludge of dirt and blood, but he remembered the direction. He'd strayed too far to make it somewhere safe before nightfall, the sun no longer visible above the trees. Late afternoon, he guessed. The ominous lack of small forest critters and birds told him the beast was near, stalking him. The only way open to him was forward.
Leaving the clearing behind him, Squall stepped back into the dense forest and let his eyes adjust to the near dark. His senses sharpened through junction upon junction, he listened out for any sound that would betray the beast's location, but there was only the soft crisp of frozen forest soil beneath his boots, the occasional snap of twigs as he moved onwards. His breath no longer lingered on the air, flecks of snow clinging to his skin instead of melting.

If ice was the only resource he could find in these woods, then he would use it. He would become the cold itself. He could feel Shiva's approval, her power thrumming in his mind with a promise that spoke of collapsing glaciers and deadly avalanches. Together they advanced, drawing closer and closer to the beast's den.

After spotting the first frozen carcass of a deer, half-eaten, he quickly found and tracked a narrow but well-defined trail that led deeper into the forest. Gnawed bones were littered about as he approached a south-facing hollow in a hill. Far too large for a normal wolf.

Keeping his eyes on the ground, he feigned a closer study of several abnormally large paw marks. The hulking shadow that had followed him all the way from the clearing drew closer, flanking his right-hand side. It slunk between the trees, its head low against the forest soil. Calm and controlled breaths of air rushed into immense lungs, only barely audible to his amplified hearing. He inched his hand closer to Lion Heart, readying a Blizzaga as he slowly swung his gaze toward the beast.

Great glowing eyes stared back at him.

He sprinted away just as the feral Guardian Force leaped out at him, missing him by a hair's breadth. The beast's angry snarl echoed through the forest, but there was no flight of startled birds. There were no living creatures here but him and the wolf. Throwing the Blizzaga he'd readied in the beast's path, he rushed toward higher ground atop the den. The ice magic barely slowed it, the wolf stalking around him in a wide circle, its hackles raised. Its head was level with him despite his position. The low, menacing growls promised a swift death.

He was ready when it lunged at him, deflecting the wild snap of teeth with his gunblade. The impact of it shocked through his arms, but he remained standing. The wolf retreated with a snarl, a stream of blood turning its bared teeth into a ghastly grin. It took all of his junctioned strength to keep the beast at bay as it circled him, harassing him with attacks that were meant to test the limit of his abilities. The beast had no desire for another slash in its muzzle.

He launched his own barrage of attacks whenever there was an opening, but his Blizzaga spells sank no further than the wolf's fur, doing no more harm than turning its coarse hairs into a spiky, frosty coat. He had no other high tier elemental spells left, only ice.

As if sensing his thoughts, the wolf bared its teeth in a mocking snarl and shook itself wildly, showering him with a spray of razor-sharp flints of ice. Several droplets of blood welled up from cuts on his face. It had been a fruitless attack, meant only to humiliate him. It was a show of intelligence he hadn't known to ascribe to the beast until now.

Narrowing his eyes, he changed tactics and abandoned his position. He ran down the far side of the den, into the forest where the trees were thickest, slinging out just enough Blizzagas in his wake to keep the wolf from catching up and finishing him off. He weaved wildly between the towering tree trunks, using the dense growth to his advantage. The heavy impact of paws thudding against the forest soil sounded out behind him, rushing towards him. Drawing on his every last reserve, he only barely managed to outpace the beast despite his unnatural speed aided by magic.

He kicked off hard to leap over a small forest stream, the lack of cover almost giving the beast the opening it needed to end him. He ducked down and rolled behind the first tree on the other side
just in time, a loud splintering of wood followed by heavy, panting breaths as the beast scrambled up and launched its first magic attack. The cutting torrent of ice was deafening and almost forced him to the ground upon impact, but the cold of it did nothing. Letting out an infuriated snarl, the wolf immediately hit him with another one, stronger this time.

Straightening the moment the barrage subsided, Squall kept his eyes on the beast as it retreated to draw a wider circle around him, disappearing and appearing from behind the trees. He could feel its anger, its impatience for the kill. Holding the wolf's wild-eyed gaze, he made a show of shaking out his hair, dislodging the ice that had frosted it white.

/Insolent human. Prey dares to challenge Fenrir? The king of these woods?/

The bestial voice shook with deep, guttural growls, emanating from everywhere around him.

"I dare," he called out, holding out his gunblade.

At his challenge, the wolf changed its path and leaped straight at him in a head-on attack. He held his ground, channeling all of his strength into his blade. He dug in his feet and twisted to turn the attack aside, but the slam of a Stop spell ground his momentum to a halt, leaving his right side exposed.

Teeth tore through his arm, savaging it and knocking his blade from his hold before the beast jumped away again to gloat. It took all he had to remain still and standing when his resistances and buffs repelled the status effect within seconds after the spell had hit. Not even Shiva's ice could stop the blood that was running down his arm, staining the snow beneath him red.

/Can't move?/ the wolf mocked, stalking slowly closer. /Shall I honor you? Shall I devour your flesh?/

He didn't move a muscle, didn't even blink, not wanting to alert the beast. The thick blanket of fresh snow obscured the rivulets of ice he was drawing towards himself. The wolf let out a victorious howl before it returned its attention to him, its pink tongue lolling and drooling saliva as it sauntered to his side. He waited until the beast stepped over him and lowered its great head, close enough for the stench of its breath to brush against his face. With a swift jerk he thrust his uninjured arm up into the air. A large pillar of ice followed, jagged and sharp as it rushed upward, piercing the wolf's skull with a crack and squelch.

Ducking aside, he watched as the beast stared down at him balefully, a deluge of blood sluicing down the sides of its head before the Guardian Force burst into a bright shower of light that surged toward him. Foreign magic flooded him, burrowing into his brain and leaving him gasping for air.

/Trickery./

"Tactics," Squall corrected the voice that now resided in his head.

Grinning at the GF's surly snort that resounded inside Squall's mind, Seifer felt the switch back into his own body more clearly as the icy surroundings gave way to the warmth of Ellone's living room. It had been one hell of a ride to take part in Squall's fight against the Trabian GF, Squall's every move calculated and precise. And the victory had been sweet, despite the multitude of wounds he'd shared with Squall at the end.

He'd always been right about the man. No one else compared.

Opening his eyes to the soft glow of the fire reflected against the wooden ceiling, he took a deep
breath to root himself more firmly in the present. The immediacy of the memory had taken him off guard. He'd been submerged in Squall's past so completely, there'd hardly been room for any thought of his own. Even now, the rush of adrenaline was slow to dissipate and it was jarring to find himself back here, in this messed up situation, when all he wanted was to return to those Trabian woodlands.

He forced himself to sit up, his eyes immediately seeking out Squall. "Fenrir."

Letting out the breath he'd been holding, Squall sat back as some of his tension left him. A mission. A successful one too, long after the war and Ultimecia's death. He met and held Seifer's gaze. "I was bonded then."

Seifer nodded, having expected as much. He scratched at his chin, having a hard time collecting his thoughts. They'd done it. They'd actually fucking done it.

"Uhm..." Ellone started, looking between the two men uncertainly.

"What?" Squall asked with a furrowed brow.

Ellone bit her lip, hesitating. "Well... It was very brief. I almost missed it. But... there was something that felt off." She steeled herself as Squall's expression darkened. "It felt like—well, not as bad as Ultimecia... I think I could get through."

Seifer frowned, then looked over at Squall. "Did Ultimecia try something during the war?"

Squall shook his head at the disturbing thought. "Not that I know of."

"It's after the memory Seifer just saw," Ellone pointed out quickly. "I couldn't make out much more than that."

"Rinoa then?" Seifer asked grimly.

"...I don't know," Ellone said cautiously, glancing at Squall. Despite what she'd heard about Rinoa's struggle with her powers, she had trouble likening the sweet woman to someone as depraved as Ultimecia.

Squall leaned forward in his seat as he considered the possibilities. There were several instances where Rinoa had lost control over her powers, or worse, her own mind. Any one of those could have left a trace in their bond.

"Any time she did a number on you? Messed with your head?" Seifer asked, already feeling his anger stir.

Raising his eyes to meet Seifer's, Squall didn't immediately answer. "The bond was unobtrusive most of the time," he replied slowly, reluctant to share any of it. "Nothing like what Ultimecia did."

"We should check it out," Seifer said firmly. "If it's got nothing to do with the bond, then we've been doing this shit for nothing."

Squall's brow knitted into a frown. Unobtrusive most of the time didn't mean all of the time. Rinoa had rummaged through his thoughts plenty of times. Towards the end, she'd often shouted her emotions and thoughts directly into his mind. Whatever anomaly Ellone had detected, it would most likely end up with Seifer seeing something as personal and humiliating as Rinoa making a playground out of his head. Those instances had never stood separately from their relationship, from the feelings they'd held for each other, good or bad.
Looking Seifer's way, he let out a resigned sigh. He couldn't refuse the exposure purely out of selfish reasons, not when Seifer had trusted him with his own past, and he wouldn't let anything cast doubt over the theory they'd come so close to confirming. "We need to make sure."

Moving to lie back on the couch, Seifer couldn't let go of the tension that was flooding him, the dread of what he was about to see. Would it be Rinoa that had caused the blip in Squall's memories? Or would there be no fucking reason at all? Would it undo everything they'd just fucking proven?

There was only one way to know.

Waiting for Ellone, he shut his eyes and tried to prepare himself. His heart rate quickened, his muscles clenching uselessly in readiness for danger, but the tension in his body gave way to exhaustion as he awoke to familiar scents and safety; safer than he'd been in days.

Opening his eyes, Squall let out a deep breath and wondered what had woken him. Slow to take in the sight of his quarters, he pushed up and rubbed at his neck. After weeks of sleeping under makeshift shelters, out in the field or under the stars, the couch was too soft to his liking.

"When did you get back?"

His gaze traveled toward the now open bedroom door, where Rinoa stood dressed in one of his old training sweats, her hair tussled with sleep. Ignoring the surprise in her voice, still too bone-weary for an argument, he swung his feet to the floor. "Two am."

"I thought I told you to wake me up when you got in," she admonished, her fine eyebrows curling into a frown as she walked over.

"It was late," he said with a shrug, moving away from her and towards the small kitchenette. "I didn't want to disturb you."

Rubbing at bleary eyes, she followed and came to a halt beside him. Her knowing eyes tracked his every move as he poured himself a glass of water. "If I'd known you'd hide out here, I would've waited up... I've missed you."

"I was tired," he evaded, the twitch to Rinoa's eyes alerting him it had been the wrong thing to say.

"That's why we got a queen sized bed, Squall. Fits the both of us." Raking a hand to flatten her disheveled hair, she let out a soft sigh. "I know better than to expect a dramatic homecoming by now, but... just a kiss would've been enough. Do you know how long it's been since I've slept in your arms?"

Postponing a reply as he drank from his glass, he stopped himself from pointing out she wouldn't have been pleased at all with him secretly slinking into her bed for sleep.

"Fine, I don't want to fight about this," she said after a pregnant silence, her voice tight. "I haven't seen you in six weeks. I really did miss you." Taking the glass from his hands, she pointedly set it aside and gently nudged her shoulder against his. "I mean... Just look at me. I've been wearing your old gear to bed for the past two weeks," she said with a wan smile, meeting his gaze.

Their bond started to brim with an undercurrent of expectation. It was the exact feeling he'd been hoping to avoid a little longer by taking the couch. Her eyes searched his as she waited for his approach. For him to lean in and kiss her.

"Looks better on you," he tried, stalling.
She didn't reply, just ran a hand down his arm, the gentle buzz of her affection becoming more difficult to ignore. When he failed to make the first move, she raised onto the tip of her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Seeking to placate her, he returned her kiss for an awkward few seconds, but her fingers gripped his arm tightly the moment he moved away. Her smile faltered at whatever she saw in his expression. There was no hiding from their bond, no lies to cover up just how much he'd dreaded this.

"Okay... Alright," she managed after a moment, pulling away. Her voice was thick with disappointment, even as she tried to pull herself back together. The expectant swirling of their bond slowly quieted, until she silenced it completely. "I get it. After all that time apart, I guess it'll take some time to get used to this again." She ran a hand through her hair again, before giving a small nod to herself.

"How about this," she exclaimed with a smile that was almost convincing, clapping her hands together. "I'll get presentable while you freshen up, and then we go out to Balamb for brunch. Just you and me. We can go to the beach after. You must've missed the sea, right?"

"I—" Frowning, he paused, feeling like a jerk. "Maybe tomorrow," he continued evenly. "Everyone from the returned party needs to be debriefed today. Quistis is expecting me—"

"This again!" Rinoa exclaimed, her composure finally cracking. "I'm sure you'll be disappointed to hear I talked to Quistis yesterday. I asked her if it was alright with her if I stole you away today. She agreed." Her eyes started to moisten when he said nothing in reply. "You probably have a whole bunch of other meetings planned as well, right? And training? Out until late?"

"... Rinoa," he started, but he had nothing else to offer. He was done with empty promises.

"So now you can't even bring yourself to spend time with me anymore?" she asked, her shoulders sagging, her gaze intent. An unfamiliar current rose in the bond, murmuring in his ears, raising the hairs on his neck. "You're getting further and further away from me. I can feel it. Why are you pushing me away?"

Pressure built inside his skull as his tongue moved against his will, forming words he'd never intended to say. He tried to hold them back but failed. "It's you that can't stand to be around me."

"That makes no sense at all. I want to spend any time I can with you. Always."

She had to be doing this accidentally. Her powers were slipping out of her control again. Suffocated by the pressure of her desperation, he turned towards the front door. He needed to leave before things escalated. There was no point in trying to explain, not when he could barely figure it out himself. Discussing things wouldn't help a thing.

"It would help. It would show me you at least care enough to try!"

At the unwarranted invasion of his mind, one that had definitely been intentional, he turned back around and faced Rinoa head-on. "Why talk when you just dig everything up yourself?" he snapped.

Staring back at him defiantly, Rinoa's fists clenched by her sides. "Don't blame me when you're the one who never tells me a thing." Her chin started to tremble with a wild torrent of emotions that bloomed large in their bond. "What else would you have me do?!"
"Read my thoughts one more time—" he warned lowly.

"—and what? You're already walking away." She held his gaze stubbornly, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her emotions thickened and darkened, falling around him like an enveloping shadow. It was more unsettling than anything he'd ever felt from her before. "Please don't leave," she urged, following after him as he moved to where he'd hung his leather jacket. "Talk to me."

Alerted now to the probing touch of her mind, he tried to keep his thoughts as blank as possible as he ignored her and grabbed his jacket.

"Why are you in such a hurry to get away from me? To ruin what we have? Is it abandonment issues? Fear of commitment? Tell me Squall, which is it?!"

At the harsh words, he carefully curbed his temper and sat down to pull on his boots instead of lashing out. Right now, it would only make matters worse. They could try and figure things out when they both had a chance to cool their heads. Now however, he had to leave and escape the headache that was starting to stab behind his eyes. Rinoa's malcontent was like a roaring sea, wave after wave pounding against his defenses.

"Tell me."

The involuntary compulsion to answer returned, sharper this time, causing him to nearly gag. Reeling, he let the shoelaces drop from his hands. "I'm not what you want." His throat constricted around every forced syllable. "You think I'm cold. Damaged. The more you look into my head, the more you're convinced it's true. I can feel your discontent every time you're with me."

"Why can't you bring yourself to kiss me?" she asked, her every word shaky and frantic. "Why can't you touch me?"

Shaking his head again, he tried to break free from her thrall, his vision blurring at the screaming noise of the bond. "I—I can't separate my body from my feelings."

The reaction was instant, a torrent of heartbreak crashing over him, pressing him into the back of the chair. He gasped for air, managing to meet Rinoa's gaze.

"Are you saying you don't love me?" The soft tremble of her voice was nearly drowned out by the raging fire in his skull, but again his tongue started to move.

"STOP!" She drew in a shuddering breath, her fists shaking. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"...Rinoa... Stop this..." His stomach was starting to turn and heave with the continued assault. "Let me go."

All at once, the pressure lifted, his head suddenly light and free. Flexing away the tremor to his fingers, he swallowed and pushed himself onto unsteady feet. He needed to go, now, before she changed her mind. A line had just been crossed, making him fear for her. She'd never gone this far before, giving into the corruption of her powers like this. Keeping his front to her, he moved towards the exit. He needed to get her help, fast.

She simply stood there watching him, her eyes rimmed red and tearful. "Please don't leave me," she pleaded, her voice small.

"I have to go."

"Don't leave me."
He wavered, thrown off by the sudden change in Rinoa's voice. Soft and compelling. Coming to a halt, he couldn't look away, mesmerized by the sight of his sorceress. Her expression was gentle, sorrowful with tears that his words had brought to her eyes. It made him feel ashamed with guilt.

"Stay," she continued, her gaze burning into his, her suggestion impossible to ignore. As she rose her hand in a beckoning motion, he found himself taking a step towards her.

Her lips curled into a smile, her eyes filled with mad devotion; a devotion he was desperate to return. The moment he stepped into her arms, his name left her lips like a prayer, like rain after a long drought. Her desire was his own. Her fierce love washed through him, leaving him speechless. Wrapping his arms around her tightly, he inhaled the lavender scent lingering in her hair and pressed his lips to her slender neck.

"Yes," she sighed softly into his ear, melting into his embrace with a delicate shudder. The world swirled away from him, a hazy jumble of motion and painful pressure.

Everything went black. No sensory input, no stream of consciousness, nothing. Trapped in a formless void, Seifer wasn't looking out from Squall's eyes anymore. What the fuck was happening?

The world blinked back into existence, filling him with elation and arousal.

Squall stroked Rinoa's hair, breathing in the heady scent of her skin. Her hands were traveling underneath his shirt as they drew closer to the bed.

They were in the bedroom? How had they gotten here?

He shook his head, confused. What was happening? His hands faltered, pain splitting his skull as he tried to clear his head. "...Rinoa. What—"

"Don't stop," her voice whispered in his ear, the words an echo that rippled through the bond.

Again, Seifer was plunged into darkness. He felt his anger growing. This was Rinoa's doing.

Her lips on his.

That was all he saw this time; all he felt.

Her hands pulled his shirt over his head.

He wanted to put an end to this. He would not fucking watch and let Squall be forced through something like that. He pushed against the boundaries of the darkness that had been imposed on him but it didn't budge in the slightest. How the hell had Squall managed it?

Her hands were undoing his zipper. Her face was close to his. She lifted her eyes and looked at him, smiling that soft smile of hers.

His thoughts staggered and he pulled her hands away. His stomach sank with cold dread when he looked down into unnaturally yellow eyes, the pressure in his brain already building again. Adrenaline surging, he broke away and stumbled back. He had to get back-up, had to get Odine here.

"Don't go!"

His head swirled with the power of her command, but he managed to turn on his heels, running
towards the door.

NO!

Her psychic shout filled his mind, silent pain ringing in his ears like the aftermath of a detonation too close by. He blinked, looking up at the wall from a different angle. He'd fallen. How... All his senses told him he was wounded; from the familiar numbness spreading throughout his body, telling him he was losing blood fast, to the sharp crackling typical of a potent magic spell. He rolled onto his back, trying to swallow back the blood that was gurgling its way up his throat.

"No! No no no no no."

The simple denial broke the silence, like a mantra repeated over and over. Soft footsteps rushed towards him, Rinoa falling to her knees beside him and moving within his line of sight. Relief filled him when he saw that her tear-filled eyes had returned to a soft hazelnut brown.

"Hyne, what did I do, what—" Her voice broke, making way for a loud gasp as she carefully pushed him onto his side and glanced at his back. "No no no... Okay, okay." He heard her draw in a sharp, panicked breath. "I'll heal you. Just stay calm. I'll heal you."

The familiar green glow of a Curaga enveloped his body, only to be instantly rejected when a violent spasm racked his body, the burning sensation in his back sharpening to white hot pain.

"I don't understand. It's not closing up. Hyne, why—" Another spell stabbed into his churning flesh, and another. "I—I can't stop the bleeding." The press of her hands against his back nearly caused him to pass out. He fought to straighten his thoughts, to move his lips.

"It'll be okay... Just get—" He swallowed thickly again, blinking heavy eyelids. He was starting to feel cold, spilling a mouthful of blood as he tried to find the breath to speak. "—Kadowaki."

"Yes. Yes, Kadowaki. I'll be right back, okay? I'm right here."

He couldn't focus on her words, only on the barely contained panic in her voice as she spoke to someone else over the phone. He was sinking, the edges of his vision swimming with darkness. He was about to lose consciousness.

"Hey. Hey! Stay awake now. Focus for me. You have to focus."

Don't worry, he told her through their bond. Everything will be okay.

"Squall!"

Seifer's eyes shot open. He sucked in sharp breaths of air and greedily filled his lungs. Dropping his head back against the couch, he closed his eyes and willed his mind to adapt to a body that was no longer dying. He could still feel the fading ghost of pain in his back, but his pulse was strong and no longer struggling erratically as every heartbeat pushed him closer to death.

"Seifer?" Ellone's concerned voice sounded, the woman rising from her seat to hover beside him. "You okay?"

He ignored her and kept his eyes shut.

Squall had come so fucking close to dying.

Not because of a high risk mission gone bad or an assassination attempt. Not because of the
fucking million times the man had put his life at stake to save others. Because of Rinoa. Because she'd needed to feel wanted. Any goddamn hint of the relief he'd felt earlier was fucking gone.

Feeling Squall almost drown in his own blood because of a dissatisfied ex-girlfriend was right at the fucking top of the list of do not fucking go there. He wanted to yell at Squall and tear Rinoa a new hole for something so monumentally screwed up. All Rinoa had been able to think about was herself, while Squall had tried to reassure her when he'd been taking his last fucking breaths.

Sitting up, he couldn't face the man. Instead he glared at Ellone. "Leave us alone."

Uncertain, Ellone glanced from the worked up blond to her brother in concern. Squall met her gaze with a quick nod, his face set in a stark expression. Seifer had looked a deathly pale when coming to, and that desperate gasp for air—

"It's alright. Go."

Nodding numbly at Squall's words, she rose from her armchair. "I'll be downstairs if you need me."

Waiting for Ellone to leave the room, Squall willed his apprehension into submission as best as he could and fixed his eyes on Seifer.

"You almost died," Seifer said tersely, his anger turning the words into an accusation.

Squall frowned. There was only one time during their bond when Rinoa had hurt him physically. He hoped against hope it had been another memory. Any other memory. "What did you see?"

"Rinoa. Your scar."

At the simple reply, Squall fought to keep any reaction off his face as he leaned back in the armchair. Of course. Of course Seifer had to see them at their absolute lowest. At least it had been Rinoa and not some fluke, but the thought consoled him little.

Seifer grimaced. He'd just witnessed Rinoa manipulate Squall for sex and the man didn't even flinch when confronted with it or the disastrous outcome. "Was that the only time? That she fucking controlled your mind?"

"She didn't," Squall replied reflexively. A lot had happened that day, but not that. He frowned, his memory of the exact events hazy.

About to yell at Squall for not realizing he'd been forced out of his own Hyne-damned mind, Seifer bit back the hypocritical words. At least now he knew for sure that Ultimecia had used him. "She forced you. She took over and fucking used your body to try and get off."

Squall's train of thought screeched to a halt at the bewildering statement and the absolute conviction with which it was made. Seifer's anger wasn't just about the injury Rinoa had inflicted. Mind control for sex? He tried to remember, but his recollection of the moments preceding his injury were a blur of volatile emotions and disjointed impressions. He'd blamed the blood loss and lack of oxygen for his inability to remember things properly.

But something wasn't right. One moment Rinoa had been upset and angry with him, and then the next… He shook his head in frustration. "I only remember her eyes turning yellow."

Seifer's gaze bored into Squall's. From what Squall was saying there was no way of knowing if the same thing had happened at other times. He pushed up from the couch and headed for the stairs.
"Where are you going?" Squall demanded as he rose to his feet as well, immediately alerted by the blond's dark expression.

"Ellone," Seifer said without looking back, already past the top step.

Cursing inwardly, Squall followed after him. "Seifer," he hissed, but the man ignored him.

Entering the pub, Seifer spotted Ellone by the bar. She'd already moved their way, looking concerned. Schooling his expression, he closed the distance. "The thing you felt; was that the only time?"

Uncertain, Ellone looked between Seifer and her brother. Squall stood close behind the demanding blond, as if ready to interrupt, but his gaze was fixed on her as well, his expression tight.

"I—" she started, not sure whether her answer would be what they wanted to hear. "It was only the once, I think. I mean, it stood out from the rest." She set down the rag she had picked up to do some pointless cleaning. "It was very short though, so I nearly missed it."

"So if something like it had lasted longer, it would have stood out more?" Seifer asked, relaxing slightly. "You would've felt it?"

Ellone nodded slowly. "I can look again, but yeah, I'm sure I would've noticed." Casting her brother a glance, she felt her heart drop at the mere thought Ultimecia had gotten to him. "What's going on?"

When it didn't look like Squall was going to answer, Seifer decided to do it for him. "Rinoa used her powers against him."

Snapping from his racing thoughts, Squall glared at Seifer. They'd agreed Ellone didn't need to be in the know about anything.

"Her powers?" Ellone repeated, her voice small. "Like… what Ultimecia did?" She hated how it made sense; why she could tell the one memory apart as wrong.

Squall quickly dissuaded her questions. "You know about it," he said in what he hoped to be a calming, reasonable voice. "Rinoa's accident."

Ellone frowned at the vague reply and Seifer's derisive huff that immediately followed it. She'd been told of something of the sort, but nothing to warrant Seifer's reaction. She studied her brother, not missing the brief but pointed glare he sent to the blond. Another warning not to speak.

"I know she had some problems, but she seems so harmless…"

"She slipped once," Squall said evenly, not wanting Ellone to think less of Rinoa. "She never meant to hurt me, and she never has since. It's in the past."

Glancing at the way Seifer tensed at Squall's evasive words, his eyes narrowing, Ellone didn't feel at all reassured. "From someone who brushes off life threatening injury with I'm fine, I'm afraid to know what you call a slip." When Squall only held her gaze stiffly, she reined in her questions and faced Seifer instead. "So… do you guys need more?" She wrung her hands uncertainly. "To make sure?" They all knew she wasn't talking about Seifer's past anymore.

"No."

The terse reply drew Squall's gaze to Seifer as the man strode behind the bar, towards the shelves
that held all the glasses. He momentarily forgot about his own past and troubles when the man proceeded to set out a bottle of whiskey on the counter alongside a lone tumbler. Straight for the hard stuff. Keeping a wary eye on Seifer's movements, he shook his head at Ellone. "We have what we need."

"So then, we've proven it?"

"Yes," he answered with conviction, forcing the evening's events into perspective. Whatever else gritty, intimate truth had been exposed in the process, they'd gotten what they'd come for. The one truth that mattered most.

Ellone sighed when neither man elaborated. Seifer's only addition to Squall's confirmation was to knock back a glass of whiskey that he'd filled to the brim. She'd kept a bar long enough to recognize the practiced and grim ease of that unflinching action. It seemed that despite her warnings, neither Squall nor Seifer had been prepared for what they'd seen; for the powerlessness.

"Look," she started softly, offering them the only advice she could think of. "I reminded you before, and I'll remind you again. All of it happened, but it's in the past. Focus on the now. What you came here for in the first place. It's the only way forward." When again neither man spoke, too wrapped up in their own thoughts to acknowledge her experience in the matter, she pushed away from the counter. "If you can't talk to me, talk to each other."

Snorting at the ridiculous suggestion, Seifer gulped down more of his whiskey and ignored the woman as she left. Like hell talking about any of this would make a fucking difference. So what if they'd proven what they'd come for. Everything was in fucking shambles anyway. He'd experienced firsthand just how messed up Squall and Rinoa's relationship had been. He'd felt Squall almost die and still felt the burning need to make Rinoa pay for what she'd done to Squall. It was enough for him to want to drink and never stop, to try and escape everything they'd dredged up.

"What did you see exactly?"

The question cut through his thoughts. He looked over to where Squall had propped himself up on a bar stool across from him. He grit his teeth, hating every single second of the memory that was now his as well.

"You didn't give her the greeting she wanted," he stated plainly, looking at the amber liquid in his hold. "One moment you were trying to get away, the next you were feeling her up. And then nothing. You were gone. I got snippets of what was happening whenever you broke through. You stopped her. Tried to leave." He took another mouthful of whiskey, focusing on the burn of alcohol. "And she attacked."

Squall frowned at the disconcerting version of something he'd long since stopped dwelling on, something he'd already forgiven Rinoa for. He remembered nothing of the sort, but then again, he remembered very little. He'd gotten home late from a mission and they'd had a fight. After that things became hazy. He remembered her lashing emotions, the pain of the injury, but none of the specifics. Injury was one thing, he was used to that, but this… His stomach dropped uncomfortably, before he reminded himself of Seifer's words. He'd stopped her. Even if he didn't remember, he'd stopped her.

Did Rinoa remember all the details?

Brooding on that unwelcome thought, he had trouble believing it could be true at all. The memory of yellow eyes, the only clear memory he had of that incident, told him otherwise. Perhaps more of
Ultimecia had transferred with her powers than anyone had ever expected. Rinoa herself would never have been capable of such a thing, not without the double corruption of two sorceresses coursing through her veins. He was sure of it.

Something unclenched in his chest as he realized the truth of that. After the incident Rinoa had been devastated, her guilt and fear a living entity that had writhed through their bond. He hadn't needed to ask any questions to know the truth. He didn't need to now either.

Glancing up from the counter, he wasn't sure he'd be able to convince Seifer of that. The man looked outright forbidding, his second glass of whiskey nearly completely drained. He eyed the alcohol warily, hoping against hope he wouldn't have to intervene. And then it hit him all over again.

Ultimecia had succeeded at what Seifer accused Rinoa of. More than once.

The intruding thought stole the breath from his lungs, bringing him far more pain than anything Rinoa had ever done. He swallowed thickly, his eyes trained on Seifer's white knuckled grip on the glass.

"I had to talk her out of cryostasis," he found himself saying, not seeking to excuse but to explain. He'd felt the dark spiraling of her thoughts, and had feared for what she might do; not to others but herself. Sometimes he suspected the fact that her powers would never die with her was the only reason she'd chosen to fight. "She's never taken off her inhibitors even once. She never misses a meeting with Odine. If he manages to find a way, she wants to get rid of her powers for good."

Seifer shook his head, not really giving a fuck about such useless reassurances. There was no way he could forgive her. No matter how fucking contrite Rinoa and himself were, they'd hurt Squall. Between the two of them, it was a fucking miracle the man was still alive. He downed the rest of the alcohol and grabbed the bottle again.

Frowning as Seifer kept his grim silence and poured himself a third glass, Squall found that for once he agreed with Ellone's advice to talk. Silence wouldn't cut it anymore. They'd made such a mess of things, all the little hurts and horrible truths laid bare between them. If they tried to bury them again, they would ulcerate and fester. There was nowhere left to hide.

"Don't blame her," he said into the suffocating atmosphere Seifer had imposed on them. "She was used and she's had to deal with the consequences ever since," he continued evenly, hoping the man might understand better from that perspective. "She was never meant to have those powers."

Seifer moved the tumbler from his lips, just long enough to speak. "That doesn't make it right," he said testily as he eyed Squall in contempt. Another gulp of burning liquid ran down his throat. "Her. Me. It's all the same. We should pay for our fucking crimes."

"The only one who committed any crimes is Ultimecia," Squall disagreed immediately. "We proved that tonight."

"Then why do I still feel the fucking same?!!" Seifer demanded, slamming the tumbler against the counter.

Squall eyed the small display of aggression with dismay, recalling all too well how Seifer had shattered a glass just two days ago. He should've anticipated that knowing he'd been used wouldn't make it any easier for Seifer to digest his past. The abuse and assault hadn't disappeared, all of the pain that had already been there suddenly thrust into the fresh perspective of a victim.
"Because it still happened," he said softly. "But it wasn't your fault. None of it was."

Seifer snorted. He'd been too fucking weak. Unable to stop any of it, he'd been used to hurt and maim. Not even his suicide attempt had been successful. His anger still simmered at Squall having made that decision for him. "You weren't supposed to see anything from the war."

Flinching at the accusation, Squall knew he'd been too sure of himself and his theory; so eager to repair his wrongs that he'd failed to see the pitfalls. "I miscalculated," he admitted, but he couldn't bring himself to regret it. Seifer might never have agreed otherwise, preventing his interference at Shennard Canyon.

Seifer caught his tongue just in time, about to lash out. There was no way Squall could've predicted what they'd ended up seeing. Grabbing the bottle of whiskey again, he refilled his glass once more, the motion already slightly off kilter. "You think I'm a coward?" he asked bitterly.

Squall frowned at the question and the unkind memory it stirred of how he'd provoked Seifer into speaking of the war for the first time. He'd been so focused on his own hurts, accusing the man of running away, of cowardice. He regretted a lot of the things he'd said that night.

"No," he said soberly. "It's not always possible to fight back. I've sent SeeDs on missions with a poison capsule as their only fallback."

Not endeared in the slightest by Squall's response, Seifer grit his teeth. "Yet you wouldn't let me die."

Squall was stunned by having his own words turned against him. In that memory, Seifer hadn't been an operative far beyond his reach and aid. The man had been right there, suffering, and every last second of it had driven him to desperation.

"No," Squall replied firmly, his voice nearly choking on the single syllable. "I never could."

The heartfelt words pierced through Seifer's anger, their sincerity briefly obscuring all else, but he recognized it for the dangerous sentiment that it was. It was that exact expression, those imploring eyes stirring all manner of feelings in him, that had made it impossible to force Squall away before. He cursed under his breath and looked away. "It would have prevented a lot."

Squall shook his head, not as willing to weigh Seifer's life against those of others. "She would have used someone else, issued the same orders. People still would have died."

"But not because of me. And it would have set her back. Maybe enough for you guys to get to her."

"You're reasoning after the facts," Squall replied firmly. "We didn't know where she was at the time. We had hardly any intel at all." He'd replayed such thoughts over and over in his head as well, and was familiar with their special brand of torment. "It's easy to see opportunities when thinking back, but the fact is she was strong. Too strong for any one person." Goosebumps lined Squall's skin as he thought back to her abode in the future, the wasteland, the dead SeeDs. "She planned everything, probably years in advance."

Of course she would have had a contingency plan, Seifer realized darkly. It had just been more convenient for her to keep him alive. Probably more amusing too, to see him fall apart. He emptied his glass and ran the back of his hand across his mouth to catch any spills.

"How did she die?" he asked, looking up from the empty glass.

Unsure of how much detail Seifer wanted and why, Squall considered his answer. Whenever he'd
tried to impart some new knowledge concerning the war, the man hadn't taken it well, but he deserved to know. "She kept jumping hosts. We were running out of options. When we realized she was from the future, there was only one solution. We had to let her start Time Compression."

"Which is?" Seifer demanded, remembering how Ellone and Squall had brought it up before.

"A spell. A powerful one. The collapse of time and space into one singularity, with Ultimemia at its center. She wanted to assimilate and recreate all of existence. It was the only way for us to get to her in her own time; to kill her before she could complete the spell." Squall's brow knotted at the remembered fight. It had been relentless, Ultimemia's spells slowly punching holes in their defences, leeching them dry of their own magic. "She fled when she realized she was losing, but I managed to follow her. Somehow she led us to the orphanage, into the past." He'd been too disoriented to fully appreciate the importance of that moment in time. Maybe if he'd tried, he could've stopped events from coming full circle somehow. "A dying sorceress's powers are volatile and dangerous. They target the nearest viable host." He paused, certain the final part of his explanation would be ill received. "Edea took them willingly, to keep the children from becoming hosts. Ultimemia bled out after that."

Seifer's brain was reeling with the amount of new information. It seemed like an impossible story, but Squall never lied or embellished the truth by even a little. If anything, he'd probably downplayed the sheer insanity of it all. Seifer tried to imagine his sorceress slowly bleeding to death as the sick cycle of his Matron becoming his tormentor started all over again. He took his next mouthful of whiskey straight from the bottle, hating how Squall had actually sounded like he was trying to defend Edea. "To spare the fucking children?" he pointed out derisively. "That's rich."

Squall couldn't keep the frown off his face at the unfair words. "Ultimemia could have dumped her powers on one of the girls. Quistis, Selphie, others. You've seen what happens when someone isn't prepared to handle them. Edea already had some powers of her own. So yes, she protected her children." Ignoring Seifer's growing scowl, he continued. He needed Seifer to understand it hadn't been Matron's fault. "Ultimemia possessed her. It was never Edea's choice. She was used just as much as you were."

Filled with an anger that had nowhere to go, Seifer tightened his hold on the bottle further. He couldn't believe Squall had just compared him to the woman who'd used him. It was her face he saw when he thought of his sorceress, it was her body he'd felt. She was the one who starred in his nightmares. How the hell was he even supposed to distinguish Edea from Ultimemia when he'd never even seen her real form?

Seeing Squall's frown deepen as the brunet watched him, he'd had enough. "Do you expect me to forgive her? I don't even know what the fuck Ultimemia looked like," he said, gesturing wildly with the bottle. "To me, her and Edea are the same. She was the one who used me." He clenched his jaw. "To know she was anywhere near me as a kid is fucking sick."

Left speechless by the outpour, Squall failed to find any words when Seifer stared him down with wild eyes. Explanations were only making things worse, but he wasn't sure what else to offer. Seifer looked like he'd bristle at the slightest gesture or remark.

"I need some fucking air."

When Seifer grabbed the bottle and rounded the counter towards the front door, Squall knew he had to stop the man from drinking himself into another stupor before things escalated further. He did not want this to go the same way as last time. Getting up from his bar stool, he followed Seifer outside.
Hearing Squall's footsteps on the cobblestones behind him, Seifer grit his teeth. Squall couldn't
take a fucking hint. Bringing the bottle to his lips again, he arched back his neck and took several
greedy gulps, then spoke over his shoulder. "Leave me the fuck alone."

Squall frowned at the harsh words, everything about Seifer's demeanor becoming alarmingly
familiar. He stepped into Seifer's view, forcing the man to acknowledge him. "We're not doing this
again."

"You're right. We're not," Seifer said balefully, pushing past the man.

Undeterred, Squall followed and prepared himself for the inevitable backlash. He had to try.
"You've had enough," he said firmly, holding out his hand. "Hand me the bottle or I'll take it
myself."

Seifer turned back around, his eyes flashing with anger. "Try it."

When amber light flared in Seifer's eyes, Squall junctioned just in time to deflect the Silence spell.
Within the same breath, he singled out Diablos and channeled the demon's gravitational forces into
a single, deliberate pull. The bottle was yanked from Seifer's grip and landed in his awaiting hand.

Wanting to fucking punch the brunet, it took all of Seifer's self control to stay his hand. "What the
fuck do you want from me, Squall?"

Unjunctioning when no additional spells were flung his way, Squall frowned at the hostile way
Seifer asked the question. It was something he hadn't dared ask himself. Instead he chose to apply
the question only to their current situation. His fingers curled around the half empty bottle in his

"Talk to me."

"About what?" Seifer spat, stalking closer. "About how you've fucking seen everything? Or the
fact that my past still makes me feel fucking sick, that this was all for nothing?" He grimaced and
swallowed hard. "Or maybe you want to talk about how you were always too fucking weak to end
my misery. All those battles, you beat me down just enough to keep me on her leash, but you could
never deal the killing blow." He glared at Squall. "Or how about you being willing enough to
believe the lie, that you actually thought I was capable of doing it all?" His eyes narrowed
dangerously. "That sound like something you want to talk about?"

"Whatever it takes," Squall said evenly, determined despite the pain Seifer's words caused him.
He'd failed Seifer utterly and if this was to be his reckoning, he'd face it squarely.

"You're still not getting it, are you?" Seifer snarled, grabbing hold of Squall's shirt and balling it up in his fist. "You cling to whoever
you think needs saving. Here's a hint for you. You're not fucking helping." He pushed against
Squall's chest, forcing the man to take a step back as he released his hold. "No matter how many
times you spread your legs."

When Squall looked at him in a way that fucking tore his heart apart, he couldn't stop himself from returning the pain in kind. "Wasn't the war enough? You had to rip open old wounds. Play with the ex-knight, make him feel it all again. Bring him to his fucking knees." He looked down at Squall with a sneer. "I hope you got what you wanted, Squall. Everything fucking hurts."

Seifer's lashing words extinguished the last spark of hope Squall had been stubbornly holding onto. He didn't put up a fight and let his fingers fall slack when the man took the bottle of whiskey from his hold. Something inside him went very still as he watched Seifer turn his back and walk away from him. Something irreparably injured, begging him not to prod and expose it. He wouldn't be able to function if he gave this pain room to breathe.

He walled it off, pushing it down as far as he could. He forced his gaze away from Seifer's retreating back and turned around to head inside. The dim interior of The Sleeping Lion was all the more empty without Seifer's presence filling it, without the laughter and animated voices that had reached his ears all day. The silence that greeted him now was deafening.

Leaving the door ajar in case Seifer decided to come inside to sleep it off, he headed up the stairs as quietly as could be managed on the creaking boards. He didn't want to stir Ellone's scrutiny or invite any attempts at conversation, but when he emerged into complete darkness at the top of the landing, he realized with relief that she wasn't waiting up for them. He went up the second flight of stairs without turning on any lights and slipped into the guest room like a wounded animal returning to its den. Hide, recover, get himself together.

He closed the door behind him, only for his eyes to fall to the bed they'd shared just that morning. He'd straightened the rumpled sheets before he'd gone downstairs for breakfast, tidying away all signs of their indiscretion. His heart gave a hollow lurch before he managed to clamp down on the surge of emotion. Moving to the other bed that wouldn't have Seifer's scent lingering on it, he sat down and tried to make sense of what had happened.

It was over.

He let that fact sink in for a while. Part of him had known this would happen right from the start, but he'd been woefully unprepared for the brutal reality of it. It didn't seem possible he could feel this way after so short a time spent with Seifer. It shouldn't hurt like this. Not even severing his bond with Rinoa had felt like this. Not even close.

He'd fallen hard and fast.

Examining the thought, he allowed it to form fully for the first time since he'd started down this path. He'd been a fool to think that he could somehow safeguard himself by refusing to label his feelings; that he could sleep with Seifer while at the same time maintaining any meaningful distance. The truth could no longer be denied when it burned its way through him, choking him with grief. He loved the bastard. His chest ached with it.

Too late. It was too late for that now. With a rashness that was totally unlike himself, he'd tried everything he could think of, had given all he had to give, and it hadn't been enough. He wasn't enough. Again.

The realization stung. He'd actually bought into the naïve fairytale that if he made a genuine effort, things could turn out differently than they had with Rinoa. In the end it had only made things worse. There was no salvaging anything. Seifer had been ruthlessly clear on that front, his accusations harsh but true.
Perhaps it was for the best that Seifer refused to let things drag on, the way Squall had with Rinoa. Better to end things now than to find out what this pain would feel like years down the line. Better to let Seifer go back to his life, unencumbered by constant reminders of his past.

Blinded by infatuation, he'd bullied the man into facing memories that should never have seen the light of day. He'd needed to reinsert himself into Seifer's life so badly that he'd ignored what his very presence was doing to the man. He didn't deserve Seifer's forgiveness or regard. He'd made so many mistakes, but no more. Before he'd come along, Seifer had been doing well. He could only hope that the man would be able to return to that. A job he excelled at. An apprenticeship that filled him with pride. A lover that would welcome him back.

His throat constricted as the only true way forward revealed itself. He'd heed Seifer's repeated requests for him to leave, sparing Seifer the trouble of having to demand it of him again. The man would go on to meet Fujin and Raijin; two loyal friends who'd never doubted or failed him. They'd be able to give Seifer the support he could never offer.

He'd made his decision. He'd leave.

Blinking, he stirred as if from a daze and lifted his eyes from where they had been fixed on the floorboards. He took his phone from the bedside table and glanced at the time that had passed. He'd sat there thinking for well over an hour. Straightening from his stiff perch, he listened out for any sounds but heard nothing. He walked over to the window, but saw no one move in the dark of night. Winhill wasn't lit at night, and the crescent moon provided only paltry illumination. He'd have to wait until the first light of dawn.

Sitting back down on the bed, he knew he should catch whatever sleep he could get before facing the next day. Instead he moved to rest his back against the wall and crossed his arms. There'd be no sleep for him tonight, not while his thoughts were intent on cataloguing every moment he'd spent with Seifer these past two weeks, turning them this way and that, wondering where he'd gone wrong. As he recalled all the dizzying hours spent in bed together, all the ways they'd grown close, he discovered those memories had already become razor sharp. Still he couldn't stop himself from replaying them in his mind.

He didn't know how long he'd sat there when the bang of a closing door resounded through the house. He held his breath, his heart erupting into fast beats, as stumbling footsteps came up the first flight of stairs. Going by the occasional thud and faltering lull in Seifer's progress, the man had most likely finished off that bottle of whiskey. He prepared himself, moving to the edge of the bed. There were a few more fumbled steps, a clearly discernible curse, and then silence. Squall frowned, listening carefully, but Seifer didn't come up the second flight of stairs. He looked at his phone again. 4:11 am. About the same hour as last time.

He waited, frozen in place. He waited until long after he'd started to realize Seifer wasn't coming to him this time. No reconciliation. No second chances. He swallowed thickly, hating how that tiny scrap of false hope had managed to niggle its way past his defenses.

Rising from the bed, he firmed his resolve. Once he made a decision, he didn't go back on it. He glanced at his things and frowned. He hadn't even packed yet, the reason for that glaringly obvious and pathetic now. Ignoring Shiva's dismay, he moved quickly as he gathered his scattered possessions and stuffed them into his duffel bag. Walking to the small sink, he freshened up without looking into the mirror. Within minutes, he was changed into a fresh set of clothes, his duffel bag and Revolver's case in hand. It was still dark out, but he'd manage. Another false reason he'd concocted to delay the inevitable.
Stepping out into the hallway, he kept his steps light and careful as he ghosted down the stairs, but he shouldn't have worried. Deep snores sounded from where he knew the couch to be. Seifer was fast asleep. From where he was standing, he couldn't make out more than the man's shape in the dark. Any clearer view of Seifer's face would require him to step out onto the creaking floorboards and draw closer than he had the heart for. Quelling the urge to linger on the landing, he forced himself down the next flight of stairs and out of the pub.

He inhaled deeply when he emerged outside into the last stretch of night. A few early birds were already making a ruckus, heralding the coming dawn. The breeze was mild, telling him it would be an unseasonably warm day. Just as well. It would be a long hike to the train platform in Baren Falls.

Balling up his feelings and making them as small as possible, he set out and walked away from The Sleeping Lion. He was done with this heartache. He didn't want to feel like this ever again. He would become an island, self-contained and impervious. Quickening his pace, he imagined his attachments unraveling with each step he put between himself and the source of his distress, willing it could be that easy, willing the tightness in his throat away.

Life had finally driven home the one lesson he'd been too stubborn to learn until now. Love was pain.

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Wake-Up Call

[The Sleeping Lion, Winhill, Thursday, 30th of October, 8:04 am]

A pounding head. Thirst. Glaring light piercing through his eyelids. Drool crusting at the corners of his mouth.

The world was forcing Seifer to acknowledge every single unpleasant sensation, a sudden rush of cold air coaxing a shiver from him and the sound of nearby footsteps waking him further. He wasn't passed out in a ditch somewhere; his perch was too soft for that. Had he made it back?

Squinting open one eye, he could just about make out Ellone's living room against the blinding daylight that spilled in from open windows. He was on the couch, his legs slung over one of the armrests, his body aching from being confined in such a cramped space. Everything hurt.

He heard footsteps nearby and opened his eyes again. Ellone's disapproving gaze landed on him as she walked past the couch, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I'll have breakfast ready in a bit, if you think you can keep it down."

Not replying, he focused on sitting up in the couch without throwing up and fought to exist through the debilitating headache that threatened to tear open his skull. The moment the pain subsided long enough for him to manage a full thought, he was immediately assaulted with one particular memory; Squall's expression when he had taken the bottle from his hold. Squall had given in. Had he let Squall walk away.

He crouched over, elbows on his knees and fingers kneading his forehead. Ellone was making a racket in the kitchen, each grating noise cutting through his jumbled thoughts.

What the fuck have I done?

Anger was quick to follow. It was Squall's fault for pushing him. He'd tried to walk away, had made it clear that he needed space, but Squall had pushed and had even demanded that he stop drinking, had yanked the bottle straight from his hands as if the man had any fucking right to meddle. No one made that decision for him.

He swore as the image of Squall's distraught expression remained stubbornly clear and unyielding. After a horrible night of revisiting memories, he'd actually managed to do even more damage. Squall had been willing to talk. Squall. Talk. To fix things between them. That should have been the first fucking clue as to how affected Squall had been. And what had he done in return? He'd fucking pushed Squall away in the lowest way possible.

After Squall had gone back inside he'd gotten so drunk, he'd just fallen unconscious on the nearest passable surface, reeking of sweat and alcohol. He hadn't even tried to put things right. And Squall hadn't come for him either. He dug his fingers harder into his brow, tried to will the headache away as he slowly came to terms with what he'd put Squall through.

He'd fucked up totally and utterly. He could hardly believe the abuse he'd hurled at the one fucking guy who'd done everything for him. It fucking hurt to know that he was capable of something like that. This hadn't been Ultimécia's work. This had been entirely his own doing.

Squall had been right. He should have stopped drinking, should have thrown the bottle to the gutter the moment Squall had implored him too, but he'd already been too far gone, too trapped in
confusion and filled with an irrepressible anger that had needed an outlet. He'd seen and learned too much. Everything ugly within him had welled up and become more volatile with every sip he'd taken. But never fucking again. He owed Squall as much. And himself. He would never act that way to anyone ever again.

Would Squall be able to forgive him this time?

He took a deep breath and pushed up from the couch. He needed to face Squall, needed to give the biggest apology of his life. Because there was no fucking way he'd let it end like this. He wasn't going to give Squall up. He'd fix this and get his shit together. He refused to be a victim and he had to stop throwing shit at the one person who was actually trying to help him through this.

Pushing up from the couch, he staggered his way towards the stairs. He still felt like a stinking pile of Blobra guts and the sight he currently presented definitely wouldn't inspire Squall to feel any goodwill towards him. He needed to clean up and get his head on straight. Once he was somewhat presentable, he'd give his apology to Squall and pray to Hyne that the man would understand.

Upstairs his gaze lingered on the closed door to the guest room. He stopped briefly in his tracks, resisting the urge to just open the door and seek forgiveness then and there. He couldn't hear any movement coming from inside. Squall was probably still asleep. Continuing down the hall, he closed the door to the bathroom behind him.

He rinsed the stale taste from his mouth and shrugged out of his clothes. Putting a dollop of Ellone's toothpaste on his finger, he vigorously rubbed his teeth and tongue. His gaze fell to his reflection in the mirror, to the large scar that cleaved down his chest. Spitting out the toothpaste, he tried not to let the memories overcome him again. At least Squall hadn't witnessed him getting that scar; his second failed attempt. Shennard Canyon had been bad enough. As he turned on the shower and stepped under the spray, his doubts grew again. Could he live with Squall knowing just what she'd done to him? What she'd made him want?

The remembered taint of her touch invaded his mind, followed quickly by the nauseating memories of his own pleasure. Disgust rolled through him like a wave, pulling him under.

His hand shot out to punch the wall, a loud crack of tile following the snap of his fist. Staring at the blood in the cracks, he took several strangled breaths before closing his eyes and focusing on the soothing flow of hot water to calm himself down.

Squall would never hold it against him.

Squall had wanted to help him.

Hell, it was far more than that. In the last memory he'd seen, Squall had barely been able to kiss Rinoa, yet every time he and Squall kissed there was unadulterated passion. What Squall had shared with Rinoa was nothing compared to what they had. However messed up the memory had been, it had made that fact crystal clear. He still recalled the admission Rinoa had forced out of Squall. I can't separate my body from my feelings. Those had been Squall's exact words. What Squall felt for him was real.

Guilt and unworthiness overwhelmed him. That newly gained insight had done nothing to stop him. He grimaced as his mind repeated the hurtful words he'd spoken the night before once again. He was such a spiteful drunk. Callous. Cruel. Never fucking again.

But what the hell was he going to say? Why the hell had Squall still wanted him after seeing all those memories? He was a shadow of a man. The only way he knew how to deal with his pain was
to inflict it on others. He closed his eyes, his breath catching in his lungs. Why had he pushed away the one person who meant so much to him? Again. His hands clenched against the cold tiles. He turned off the spray.

No more. He needed to show Squall how repentant he was. Drying himself off in a rush, he wrapped the towel around his waist and hurried to the guest room. Opening the door, he looked to the bed they'd shared, but it was pristinely made. Shooting his gaze to the other bed, he froze into place. No one was there either. Squall's things were gone.

His heart erupted into a thundering beat as his world was pulled from beneath his feet. He stood paralyzed as he stared at the inexplicably empty room. He'd been so sure Squall would stand by him no matter what. Reliable fucking Leonhart. Dropping his towel to the ground, he grabbed his bag and yanked out a shirt and some pants. Dressed within seconds, he bounded down the stairs in huge leaps.

"Your pickup keys," he demanded as he barged into the kitchen.

Looking up from the eggs she was stirring in a frying pan, Ellone turned and frowned at Seifer's haggard appearance. The look of panic on his face and the crusted blood on his knuckles had her instantly worried. "What happened to your hand?"

"Just give me the fucking keys," Seifer reiterated harshly, beyond capacity for tact. His eyes shot around the room, looking for any sign of them. He walked over to the drawers next to the fridge, yanking open one after the other.

Shocked by the language, Ellone set aside the frying pan and turned to face the hungover menace that was ransacking her kitchen. "Until you tell me what's going on, you're not going anywhere."

Squaring his jaw, Seifer glared at the woman. "Squall left," he bit out.

"What do you mean, Squall left?"

"What the fuck do you think I mean?! His things are gone. He's gone." He grit his teeth and stepped closer. "Give. Me. The. Keys."

A stab of disappointment lanced through Ellone's heart. She tried to come up with a plausible reason for Squall's absence, but came up short. He'd left, just like that. Meeting Seifer's gaze, she ignored his quickly darkening expression and outstretched hand. "I've got some Antidotes stocked for the worst drunks. They're in the pub downstairs, in a kit underneath the sink. Take one and clear your head. I can't have you driving in this state."

Seifer scowled at the blackmail that would delay him even further. "Just get the keys," he ordered before rushing out of the kitchen and down the stairs, heading straight for the cupboard beneath the sink. Grabbing the kit, he snatched an Antidote and swallowed its contents in one great gulp. A wave of tingling heat swept through his body, purging him of toxins and shocking his brain into full alertness. Hunger and exhaustion replaced the pain that had been pounding against his skull, but he had no time to deal with either.

"When's the first train out?" he demanded when Ellone came up behind him. He tugged his phone out of his pocket and checked the time. 8:27 am.

Ellone glanced past him at his phone screen. "First one leaves around six, I think. The next one at nine." She looked at Seifer in concern. "Do you know when he left?"

"No. Fuck," Seifer cursed, his sense of urgency rising even further. If Squall had left right after
their argument, then the man would be long gone by now. "I have no fucking clue when he left."

"You might just make the nine o'clock train if you leave now. The keys are in the glove compartment."

Not bothering with a reply or a word of thanks, Seifer broke into a run and rushed out onto the town square, to where Ellone's pickup was parked. If there was even the slightest chance of intercepting Squall, he'd damn well grab it.

"Head left at the bridge, then follow the signs," she called out after him from the pub's entrance. "Don't push the pickup over fifty miles an hour. The engine will die on you, if you don't crash into crossing cattle first! These are narrow country roads!"

Only barely taking in Ellone's words, Seifer yanked open the door to the pickup and leaped inside. He immediately located the keys and jammed them into the ignition. Spinning the steering wheel around with a harsh jerk, he reversed into the square and thrust down hard on the accelerator, startling a woman into jumping aside as he sped across the narrow bridge. He clenched his teeth and kept his eyes open for any unlucky villagers that might cross his path. He wanted to reach Squall in time, not accidentally run over some idiot.

What if he didn't make it on time? What if Squall was already on a train heading towards Timber? His grip on the steering wheel tightened. Grabbing his phone, he quick-dialed the man, but it wouldn't even connect. Keeping half an eye on the road, he frantically typed out a message instead.

- Message to SexLion / 8:35 am / Come back right fucking now. Don't you dare fucking leave. -

Tossing the phone on the bench seat beside him, he grit his teeth. Would Squall ever reply? Every muscle in his body tensed. This couldn't be it. He had to get to Squall. At least he was out of town now, away from any hapless pedestrians. He pushed down harder on the accelerator, amping up the speed right to the pickup's limit as he raced past cattle and flower fields.

There was no room for thought, only the all consuming determination to reach Squall. When the road stretched out in front of him, straight for miles, he grabbed his phone and cursed out loud before throwing the damn thing down on the bench seat again. His message hadn't gone through either. His phone signal was dead and he had less than ten minutes before the nine o'clock train would leave. Fuck.

Forced to a brief standstill by a farm tractor that was slowly chugging its way across an intersection, he nearly ripped off the steering wheel. The moment the ungainly vehicle cleared the road, he floored the gas pedal again. The pickup threw up clouds of dust as he launched it down winding roads and sharp bends at speeds that made the engine sputter in complaint.

He'd tear down this rust bucket if it dared die on him. He'd fucking tear everything down. His pulse thrummed with adrenaline as his eyes searched the road for any sign of Squall. The man was a trained SeeD and would make good time in such clear weather. His eyes dropped to the gas meter. Still over half full. Squall would be heading back to Timber first. What was the stop before Baren Falls again? He could follow the tracks if necessary.

His head was swarming with panicked thoughts of following Squall all the way back to Timber when he spotted a dark silhouette in the distance, walking by the side of the road. He'd recognize that stoic gait anywhere. The fucker didn't even slow down, didn't as much as look over his shoulder as Seifer got close. Pulling in right behind the man, off the side of the dusty road, he jumped out of the pickup and strode over, red hot anger steering his pursuit.
Looking behind him at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, Squall blanched at the sight that greeted him. Before he could even begin to form a coherent thought, Seifer's fist had curled into the front of his jacket and pushed him back. The incomprehensible snarl on Seifer's face stirred a new layer of hurt, piercing through the numbness that had pervaded most of his morning. The man's other hand shot up to yank at him as well, nearly lifting him off his feet as he was shoved more forcefully, momentum sending him stumbling off the road and into an open meadow, his gunblade case flying from his hand as he reeled with shock. Ignoring the ringing in his ears, he shrugged his duffel bag off his shoulder and dug in his heels. Enough was enough. When Seifer advanced, he struck him.

Deflecting the blow, Seifer sidestepped and raised his fists. Launching himself into an attack, he grabbed hold of Squall's waist and sent them both rolling into the wild grassfield, his grip hard and unyielding. Squall didn't even try to wrest himself free. Instead an unforgiving punch impacted straight with his throat, the pain of it blinding Seifer to everything else and forcing him to release his hold. Coughing and spitting, he glared at Squall and went in for a second tackle.

It was nothing like their recent spars. Squall was landing bruising kicks and punches, countering his every attempt to lock the man into a hold. They grappled and rolled along the ground, crashing through tall grasses that lashed at his face. He grunted in pain when Squall managed to use their momentum to slam his head down against something hard. Enraged, he threw the smaller man off him, just in time to avoid the head butt that would surely have floored him.

Squall rolled away from him and sprang to his feet, knocking his arms aside as he tried to land a punch. Balance off-kilter, he only just managed to grab hold of Squall, sending both of them tumbling to the ground again. Moving in to straddle the brunet, he landed a blow straight to Squall's face.

Fist raised for a second blow, he froze at the sight of blood pooling in Squall's mouth, a trickle of it running down the man's cheek. Time stood still as he watched Squall raise his arms to shield his face against any further assault. Somewhere along the way the man had lost his jacket, the pale skin of his arms livid with red scrapes. A numb dread took hold of him as he catalogued every mark he'd put on the man, without provocation. It became hard to breathe, his gaze misting over as his chest squeezed painfully.

What the fuck was wrong with him? What the hell had he just done? Dropping the hand he'd raised in attack, he sucked in deep, ragged breaths. If he'd ever doubted before, he was certain now. He was a fucking monster.

Chest heaving, Squall was slow to lower his arms when no additional blows rained down on him. Pain radiated throughout the left side of his face, the taste of blood filling his mouth, yet Seifer was looking down at him as if he'd been the one to unjustly attack the man. He watched in consternation as Seifer's expression transformed into misery, the man's eyes wet with tears. The sight shocked him to his core.

Tugging at the hand still curled into his shirt, he somehow managed to muster a sense of calm in the face of Seifer's naked distress. "Let me up."

Seifer tightened his hold, not yet ready to let the man go. When Squall tugged at his wrist more firmly and moved to sit up, he reluctantly released his grip and staggered up from the ground. Squall came to a stand before him and spat out a mouthful of blood before meeting his gaze warily. He looked away, too ashamed.

"Shit Squall. I'm so fucking sorry." His voice was hoarse, his right hand throbbing with pain.
Squall stared, awash with confusion. He didn't know what to do with the apology. He still didn't understand why he'd been attacked in the first place. "Why are you here?"

Rubbing at his face, Seifer wiped away the wetness from his eyes. "To find you," he said, grimacing at just what he'd succumbed to instead. He hated every single fucking moment since they'd left Ellone's storage room the night before.

"I just..." His throat closed up. The moment he'd realized Squall had left... "I lost it," he admitted, clenching his teeth. "Your things were gone. I didn't think I'd make it to Baren Falls in time. The thought of losing you—" He sucked in a shaky breath. "I didn't mean to do this. I never mean to fucking hurt you." He exhaled shakily. *But I always do.* He looked at Squall then, too exhausted to care about hiding his weakness.

Stomping down the part of him that surged with hope, Squall was tongue tied as he tried to process Seifer's heartfelt words. He didn't doubt their sincerity. They were just as convincing as everything the man had said the night before. He distrusted such a swift change of heart, distrusted his own ability to deal with it clearheadedly. "I don't understand," he began, faltering. "I thought this was what you wanted."

"I didn't want this," Seifer said emphatically. "I don't fucking think things through. I act. And yesterday was too much. Feeling you almost die, knowing what you saw—" He stopped, the words choking the breath from him. "Until you, I never spoke to anyone about the war. Not once. I pushed it back as far as I could." He grimaced and brought a hand up to run through his hair. "It's hard. So I lash out."

"I made things worse."

"You tried to help," Seifer corrected, the distinction small but important. "All I did was push you away."

"With reason." Squall forced himself to speak the words that would release the man of any perceived attachments or obligations between them. The slight lift of his heart at Seifer's initial statements was already dwindling, the reality of their situation intruding. "This is me taking responsibility. Go back to Esthar. Pick up your life."

"I don't want that life anymore. I want you," Seifer said heatedly, his pulse spiking. "I meant what I said at the palace. You're the only thing that makes sense anymore."

The declaration was outrageous and impossible. Squall tried to steel his faltering resolve, torn between the injured part of him that advised caution and the foolish part of him that loved this man. "We can't always have what we want."

"Fuck that!" Seifer snapped, growing tired of Squall's martyred reasoning. "Do you even know why I came to Winhill? I wanted a shot at being with you so fucking badly, and coming here was our only chance." He drew in a deep breath and walked closer. "Don't fuck this up, Squall. Don't you dare dig it all up and then just leave me to pick up the pieces."

"What happens if I stay?" Squall challenged, his voice tight with conflicting feelings. "More nights like last night? Where does it end?"

"I don't know," Seifer said through gritted teeth, his shame growing anew. "But I'm done with going for the bottle. I'm not doing a repeat of last night or the night Quistis came over."

The unexpected resolution, so vehemently declared, caught Squall off guard. "...Good," he said
carefully, wanting to encourage the decision without creating expectations. "But it doesn't change that I failed you, that I remind you of the war."

"You never fucking failed me," Seifer shot back, unable to blame Squall for anything after D-District. "And I'd rather face the memories of the war every single fucking day than never see you again. When I realized you'd gone... It hurt more than last night. I couldn't fucking think."

Seifer's words sparked an echo of what Squall had felt when walking out of The Sleeping Lion. It did hurt more to be apart. Even now this conversation was better than nothing, despite the barbs and cuts that laid his feelings bare. It was then that he realized he'd walked closer to Seifer, his body drawing nearer even as his arguments tried to put distance between them. He looked away to try and collect his thoughts without the sway of Seifer's earnest gaze.

Less painful to remain in each other's orbit than to break apart. It seemed like a poor basis for them to build on. It also sounded like a fallacy. They were both capable of inflicting grievous injury on one another. The days they'd spent together had proven that. He'd failed Seifer utterly in the past, and he'd failed him here in Winhill.

"I'm sorry." The useless words were past his lips before he was even aware he was going to utter them.

"Whatever the fuck you're sorry for, don't be. Just stay."

Lifting his gaze to look Seifer in the eye, Squall felt that he stood at the edge of a precipice. A thousand premonitions played through his mind, warning him to strengthen his defenses and leave while he still could. Only one reason prompted him to stay.

But love was pain. He'd learned that lesson well and now he had to make the impossible decision whether Seifer was worth that pain. He was still certain the man would be better off without him. Nothing Seifer had said had convinced him of the opposite, but the man remained adamant.

"You can't speak to me the way you did last night," he began, feeling as if he was stepping onto thin ice. "Say what you have to, but never like that."

The demand sent Seifer's heart beating faster with hope. "Never again," he hurried to say.

Squall fought to calm the flush of heat that spread throughout his body the moment Seifer stepped within his reach. "If it becomes too much, if you change your mind, tell me," he said firmly, allowing the man an escape route. "I'll go."

Seifer raised a hand to run his thumb along Squall's jaw, ghosting gently over the beginning of a nasty swelling. "Never gonna happen," he said gruffly, pulling Bahamut into a junction and casting a Cure.

The surge of magic knitted the cut in Squall's mouth back together, along with a whole other host of scrapes and bumps he hadn't noticed until they were washed away. Seifer's eyes lifted from their inspection of his left cheek and reclaimed his gaze with a scalding intensity. The remaining distance between them was charged with desire and uncertainty.

He nearly startled when Seifer's hand moved to the small of his back, gently coaxing him closer while at the same time giving him the chance to pull away. He didn't. The very moment Seifer's lips alighted against his, so uncharacteristically cautious, Squall felt something inside him melt. Self-preservation ceased to matter, the paralysis that had taken hold of him yielding to the kiss.

He raised his arms to pull Seifer closer and deepen their kiss. Seifer responded by drawing him into
a crushing embrace, the fragility of the moment giving way to something more urgent. The testing caresses of their hands devolved into groping touches that demanded recompense for each of their hurts. They clung to one another as their lips met in a frenzied reunion.

He was breathless and dizzy with the strength of his relief, his fear of the future. He knew all resistance would be futile from here on out. He'd sealed his fate, and had placed his heart squarely into Seifer's palm, for the man to do with as he pleased. It was a price he was willing to pay, as long as the bastard never stopped kissing him like this.

Seifer took everything he could, everything he'd taken for granted. The passion of Squall's responses erased all reason or thought. He pressed forward, needing even more. Squall understood his intent and answered readily, the both of them tumbling to the ground in an intimate tangle. His kisses were sloppy, his fingers fumbling with the buckle of Squall's belt. All of his feelings crescendoed into a roar of primal need. Squall aided his efforts to yank down the man's pants, and kicked off impeding boots. Within seconds Squall was naked against him from the waist down, hard and ready.

He popped open his fly and shoved down his pants just far enough for his cock to spring free. All of his practiced finesse fled him as he drove himself deep on the first thrust. Squall moaned against his lips, the man's fingers digging harshly into his biceps. The way Squall clung to him, the man's breathing growing increasingly labored with each harsh thrust, told him the only truth that mattered. Squall was his.

Squall gasped for air as Seifer fucked him with deep plunges, rushing him swiftly towards release. He was too weary and starved for touch to last long, his body coiling tight in surrender. He breathed deeply of Seifer's musky scent and basked in the pleased grunts that brushed against his ear. He hadn't thought he could ever have this again. Unraveling willingly, he spread wider and let out an almost sobbing moan when his orgasm shocked forth from him. Seifer rode him through it without slowing, pushing into him mercilessly until Seifer too shuddered and came deep inside of him.

Seifer didn't let him catch his breath and began to kiss him again with bruising force. Wrapping his arms around the man, he curled his fingers tightly into short blond hair, hungry for the smallest scrap of closeness. Prickly bits of vegetation prodded his back, where his shirt had ridden up, but he didn't care. He kissed Seifer back with matching fervor, their tongues twining deeply, their groping hands laboring to coax and pull one another even closer.

When Seifer finally broke their kiss, his lips trailed after Seifer's like a magnet seeking its counterpart, resentful of the sudden distance. He opened his eyes at the feel of Seifer's forehead touching down gently against his own. The man's strained breaths rushed against his lips, those green eyes searching his. He found himself staring at Seifer's face, framed by blue skies and waving grasses. It was a moment of utter stillness as they regained their breaths and wallowed in each other's presence.

Their awkwardly joined position forced the moment to an end. Seifer pulled out and moved off him, spilling most of their mess onto the ground beneath them. Gaining acute awareness of their surroundings, Squall propped himself up onto his hands with a slight wince and peered above the tall grass that had hopefully obscured their activities from any passersby. They were farther out from the road than he'd realized, their struggle betrayed by a wandering path of flattened grass and swaths of upturned earth that led right to their current, poorly hidden location.

At least there were no sheets to worry about, he supposed. Shrugging back into his underwear and pants, he tried to ignore the uncomfortable wetness of their combined release. Not all of the
morning dew had evaporated yet when they'd grappled and tumbled through the grasses, so his
clothes were uncomfortably damp in some places and scuffed green in others.

"Come here."

The gruff request, thick with need, pulled his gaze right back to the man beside him. He wondered
how Seifer made the little clearing they'd carved out in the meadow seem inviting despite all his
discomforts. The man had already tucked himself away and was sprawled out on his back,
stretching out a hand in invitation.

The moment Squall moved to lie down next to him, Seifer drew Squall into a tight hold and kissed
him with a desperation only Squall could ease. He'd come so close to ruining everything. They
held onto each other like that for a while, Squall's touches and kisses enough to ward off his
spiraling thoughts. When they drew apart to breathe, he coaxed Squall's hand across his chest and
guided the man to stay snuggled up against him. Drawing in a deep breath, he felt the reassuring
weight of Squall's head on his chest and ran his fingers through the man's dark tresses.

Squall melted into the pleasant strokes raking against his scalp despite his self-consciousness at the
position Seifer had maneuvered him into. They'd lain close together before, but never quite like
this, and he definitely had never been touched like this. It reminded him of how Angelo had often
trotted up to him, begging to be petted into scratchy contentment. He nearly huffed at himself for
the unflattering similarities, but he was too tired to care when it felt this good. And he greatly
preferred this over punches to the face. The fraught emotions of their fight had drained the last of
his reserves. All that mattered was the warm, solid presence of Seifer's body against his, and the
steady pulse that was beating beneath his ear. His eyes drifted closed as he lost himself in all the
sensations that made up Seifer.

Seifer felt Squall's hold on him loosen as the man's breathing slowed down. He raised his head for
a better view. Squall's eyes were shut, the man looking and sounding asleep even when it didn't
make any sense for Squall to let down his guard like this. Only a few moments of relaxing in his
arms and Squall had actually drifted off. The man looked beyond exhausted. Probably hadn't slept
all night. Seifer ran his fingers through Squall's dark locks again, then trailed them down the bare
skin of the arm laying across his chest.

It was oddly intimate to hold Squall close and keep watch while the man slept. Squall had never
been the careless type; a fighter through and through. This lowering of guards spoke volumes,
hinting at a level of trust he didn't deserve. It should feel like a victory for Squall to allow this, yet
any relief he felt was shallow. Underneath it all, he could still feel the despair from less than an
hour ago. He could've lost Squall for good. It was a fucking miracle he'd managed to persuade him
to stay. He pressed his nose into Squall's hair and inhaled. There was no way he'd ever let him go
again.

The thought made him smile. There was no doubting how strongly he felt about it; how right it
felt. When they'd set out for Winhill, he'd been dreading the end; had been willing to take whatever
the hell he could get even if their end had loomed right ahead. He'd pushed Squall away just the
night before. It couldn't be more different to the hope that was growing inside him now. He finally
felt like maybe he could allow himself to have this.

Used by a madwoman, he'd been battling guilt and shame for years. He still had trouble letting go
of those feelings, but the memories they'd both seen had made things abundantly clear. He'd been
forced out of his own mind and *used*. He'd experienced it first hand in Squall's memory. And
Ultimecia had known his weaknesses much better than himself. D-District had been a test to see
how much he could stomach, how quickly he'd turn against her if left to his own devices. And it
hadn't taken long. The moment he'd had the reins himself, he'd wanted out.

Shennard Canyon had been one of the worst fucking memories for Squall to experience. It had laid everything bare. Every intimate part of his relationship with Ultimecia as well as the vile things she'd made him do. But at least it hadn't been for nothing. They now had unequivocal proof that he'd been controlled. He breathed in deeply and allowed the thought to settle fully.

It wasn't me.

Every time one of his past horrors intruded on the fledgling idea, accusing him and threatening to pull him under, he clung to the new knowledge and repeated it like a mantra, over and over.

It wasn't me.

He repeated it until the suffocating pressure that had been with him since the war began to release its chokehold on him, leaving him weak-kneed and reeling.

He had been used. He may have been too weak to resist her and he'd carry every damning memory with him for the rest of his life, but he hadn't been the one to do it. Not truly. The blood on his hands wasn't his to atone for.

He breathed in deeply again, felt the hard press of the ground beneath him, the gentle breeze of the air flowing against his skin, and the weight of the man resting against him. All this time he'd blamed himself, had hated himself even, for what he'd done. He closed his eyes. The indiscriminate killing, the hunt for Ellone and the attack on Trabia. None of that had been him. Nor had he been the one to torture Squall. She'd made him do it all.

And he would never have known. If he hadn't stumbled into Squall, if they hadn't started something, and if Squall hadn't been so Hyne-damned stubborn, they would have never made it here. He would have spent the rest of his life in the firm belief that he'd been the one to blame. He'd have carried the self-loathing with him to the grave. Squall had been the one to lift his burden. Squall and Ellone.

He tightened his hold on Squall. He could have this now.

Squall could be his.

He might be a lowlife, nothing like the SeeD commander, but if Squall wanted him, then there was no looking back. In all his life he had never wanted to be with someone like this. Of course it had to be Squall who showed up and changed everything. He'd never push the man away again.

With that bit of resolution, he picked a wildflower from the tall grass and pushed it in between dark strands of hair. Squall would kill him for it, but he'd kiss the deadly frown right off Squall's brow. And then he'd tell Squall all about just what the man's future held in store. An honest-to-Hyne relationship with none other than Seifer Almasy.

Part of him wanted to jostle Squall awake then and there, to seal the deal, but he could hold out a little longer if it meant having the sleeping beauty draped all over him. Squall was definitely going to be embarrassed about that. He amused himself with plucking the few other flowers within his reach and arranging them in Squall's disheveled hair, before he settled down and watched the clouds sweep by. For the first time in a long while he was filled with an eagerness for the future that was free of doubt. Giving the man in his hold another squeeze, he found himself smiling up at the blue sky.

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Blinking blearily as light and sounds chased away his fading dreams, Squall froze when he looked up to find Seifer regarding him with a smile. He'd somehow managed to fall asleep, trapping the man beneath him. Flustered, he pushed up into a sitting position and frowned when Seifer immediately proceeded to shake out the arm he'd had pinned, as if to restore blood flow. How long had they been lying there? Why hadn't the idiot woken him up? By the look of things, it was already past noon.

Regarding Squall's back, Seifer sat up as well. He'd let Squall sleep despite his growing hunger and the slow numbing of the arm that had been cradling Squall's weight. Not even the clamorous twittering of birds nor the occasional passing of rickety vehicles on the nearby bumpy road had been able to wake the man, and he hadn't had the heart to wake Squall either. If anything, he would've preferred a few more moments of closeness, but instead he had to figure out a way to talk to Squall about everything he'd decided on. Not the easiest task.

"You should have woken me."

Seifer shrugged. "You needed it." There was no fucking way Squall would have passed out like that if the man hadn't been utterly exhausted. He brought a hand up to knead at his temple, then met Squall's gaze earnestly. "We need to talk."

Squall grew still at the declaration. He hadn't expected any more talk. They'd brokered a precarious agreement and had sealed it with sex. For now, he'd stay. He'd already made his promise. He didn't want to think too hard and consider the ways he might come to regret it. His apprehension rose as he waited for Seifer to continue. The man wasn't usually one for mincing words.

"I really fucked up last night," Seifer began, then looked out over the fields. The panic from mere hours ago still felt fresh. Right along with the all consuming fear of never seeing Squall again. He dropped his gaze to his legs, steeled his resolve, then looked back at the brunet. "But I know what I want now and I'm ready to fight for it."

When Squall didn't say anything and just looked tense as hell, Seifer sat up straighter. "I know you just came out of a long relationship and we have one fucked up history, but I want this," he said, holding Squall's gaze firmly. "So I'm going to stay off the bottle, and I'm going to get my shit together. I've never been in a proper relationship before so I'm bound to drop the ball, but I'll do my Hyne-damned best. I want this to work. Long-term." There. He'd said it. No turning back now.

Squall stared at Seifer as he struggled to process the man's words. When Seifer had refused to let him go, he'd cast off all expectations in favor of what he could have in the here and now. Another day, a week, a month. He hadn't dared to be greedy for more. "A relationship?" he repeated, suspecting he'd misunderstood horribly.

"Yeah," Seifer nodded, pressing on. "I know you have to return to Garden soon, but we can figure it out. You can come to Esthar in between missions. I can meet you in the field."

Squall's thoughts floundered as he tried to smother the premature leaps of his heart. Seifer made it sound so simple, so obvious. Too good to be true. "But—" He paused, searching for words that wouldn't immediately have the man take back his offer for more. "I'll be away for weeks at a time."

"I know. But all that matters is whether you want it or not," Seifer said, waiting for some sort of indication of what the hell was going on inside Squall's head.

That was definitely not all that mattered, but Squall didn't know how to give voice to his misgivings without betraying too much of himself. "It mattered to Rinoa," he said soberly,
remembering all too well how his prolonged absences had been the beginning of the end.

"Don't fucking compare us," Seifer shot back. He was nothing like Rinoa and what they shared was nothing like the farce he'd experienced in Squall's past. "What do you want then? To keep things casual? Drop by for a spar and a fuck when you feel like it?"

Frowning at the crude language, Squall realized that he was blundering already. "No," he stressed, his stomach dropping at the unappealing picture Seifer painted. Based on what he'd gleaned from Seifer's memories however, it was also exactly how he'd expected Seifer to view sex and partnership. The man's closest experience to a relationship was a far more casual arrangement than Squall had the heart for. A surge of misgivings made him feel queasy. How had he managed to forget about Calder? What exactly did Seifer plan for either of them?

"I—" He hesitated, but then noticed the tense set to Seifer's shoulders as the man waited for his answer. He could either protect himself and wall off his feelings as he always had, or repay courage with courage. "I don't want that, but I thought maybe you would."

Seifer sighed at being so thoroughly misunderstood, but he should have seen it coming. "Shit, I know I don't have a great track record. Like I said, I've never done this before. Before the war the only people I tried anything with were Fu and Rinoa. I never even considered the alternative back then." What had been supposed to be a relaxed and curiosity fueled experiment between himself and Fu had turned out an awkward affair from start to finish; one they'd laughed off afterwards with lots of booze. His fling with Rinoa hadn't turned out any better. He rolled his eyes at himself. "I was too damn busy chasing your ass around. Should've been the first fucking clue."

Wary at the sudden divulging of information, Squall wasn't sure what Seifer expected him to do with it. Things were difficult enough without reminding him of the messed up triangle between Seifer, Rinoa and himself. Learning about Fujin just made him realize how little they'd known one another back then. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to hear this," Seifer said firmly, unwavering. "I'm done with leaving things unsaid." When Squall just looked at him with a slight frown, giving no indication of his thoughts, he pressed on. "Nothing changed after the war. Not for a while at least. I just kept to myself after I moved to Esthar. Didn't really talk to anyone unless I absolutely had to. When Calder came along —"

"This is none of my business," Squall interrupted sharply, moving to get up, but Seifer's hand closed around his wrist, keeping him in place.

"Yes, it is." Firming his grip, Seifer watched Squall closely. His next words would be the hardest for Squall to hear. He would have fucking blown a fuse if he'd have to listen to the same thing from Squall. "He was the one to show me what it was like. It's been nothing but sex and drugs since then. I finally felt alive again. I don't even know how many I've been with." Squall was looking stubbornly away from him, his face a blank mask. "I don't regret anything, but Calder and I were never a couple and never exclusive. And then you showed up. After we took Avalanche together, I haven't been with anyone else. I haven't looked back since. You're all I can fucking think about."

Squall took in a deep, steadying breath as his gaze roamed the waving grasses that stretched all the way to the horizon. Seifer's hand was still closed around his wrist in a tight grip, the man awaiting his response. He disliked the tempestuous nature of the feelings Seifer's words had unleashed inside him. Part of it was jealousy, he admitted. A pointless, petty sentiment that he discarded the moment he identified it. More pressing was his fear. Somehow it had been easier to accept Seifer's insistence that he stay when any future together had been left hazy and undefined. A relationship
on the other hand came with responsibilities and expectations and a potential for heartbreak that would grow exponentially the more invested he became. He didn't understand why someone like Seifer would want this; someone whose modus operandi until recently had been to party, take drugs and sleep around. His stomach fluttered with fear and want.

"Give me something here, Squall. Tell me if I'm being a fucking idiot or if you think this can work."

He turned to meet Seifer's gaze, the thunder of his heart increasing tenfold as he did so. "You want us to be a couple?" he asked, needing things to be absolutely clear and unambiguous. "Exclusive?"

"Yes," Seifer said emphatically, relieved he'd finally managed to ram home his point.

The reply was so unflinching, it nearly prompted Squall to inflict Seifer with his remaining doubts, but they no longer seemed to matter as much. Not when Seifer was offering him exactly what he wanted; what he'd been too afraid to admit to wanting. It felt dangerous to even contemplate the possibility, yet here Seifer was, proclaiming his hopes so boldly. Reason was failing him, as it always did with Seifer.

"...Okay," he heard himself say, a flush of panic and disbelief surging through his veins.

Seifer couldn't quite believe his ears, his heart erupting into a fast pace at the softly spoken one-word reply. "Okay?" he echoed, needing confirmation. When Squall gave a slight nod, he couldn't help the huge smirk that grew on his lips. He was still smiling like a lunatic when the next second he surged forward to occupy as much of Squall's space as possible. The rush he got when his lips found Squall's beat any fucking drug. He'd done it. However hard-won and taciturnly phrased, Squall had given his word. Squall was his now and he'd do anything to keep it that way.

Squall poured himself into their kiss completely, to try and quell the insistent nerves that were plucking at his stomach. He couldn't keep up with the rapid changes. Had it really been less than a day since he'd thought he'd walked away forever? How could he be so fickle? How could they be this insane? He kissed Seifer harder, deciding to chase only the exhilarated part of his feelings. Moving from his perch without breaking their kiss, he straddled Seifer in one smooth motion and rolled his hips. The welcome friction and Seifer's approving groan blew all uncertainties from his mind. This was something he knew.

Breath hitching as Squall continued to rock against him, Seifer firmed his grip and moaned into their hungry kisses. He was getting impatient for more, his cock hard with need, making it near impossible to pull back. "We don't have any lube," he spoke lowly against Squall's lips. He wanted to be inside Squall already, but the man had to be sore. He'd already fucked Squall raw once, too blinded by his own need.

Ignoring the useless observation, Squall lowered his hands to open Seifer's fly, spat in his hand and gave the man's length several firm strokes. He only moved to work free of his own belt and pants when Seifer was suitably breathless and panting for more. A little pain didn't matter when the rewards were far greater. Within the span of one toe-curling kiss, he'd managed to shove his pants down just far enough to lower himself onto Seifer's length, slowly and achingly good. His pants were an uncomfortable restraint in their position, giving him little freedom of movement, but it was enough to rock up and down, enough to give them both pleasure.

He liked this position. There was something inexplicably thrilling about claiming Seifer like this, out in the open, the sun bearing down on Seifer's face as the man looked up at him with shameless appreciation and met his heavy, panting kisses.
The thought bubbled up from his deepest core, defying all logic or propriety, demanding that he sear the knowledge into Seifer's flesh. He moved faster, driving Seifer as deep as he could, his fingers clutching Seifer's skin harshly when the moans spilling between them told him they were both close. Seifer grabbed his buttocks and slammed up into him, forcing their rhythm into a frenzied race to completion. They shuddered in each other's hold as they came together, their breathing satisfyingly labored.

Feeling like his entire body had turned to jelly, Seifer couldn't help but smirk in satisfaction. So fucking perfect. Leaning back to take in the breathtaking sight in front of him, he couldn't suppress a low chuckle as his eyes caught on the flowers that were still arranged in Squall's hair. One had strayed from its perch and was hanging loose between messy locks, threatening to fall. Reaching up, he plucked it free. At the man's bewildered expression, he smiled. "Couldn't help myself earlier. What's a guy to do with a passed out commander in his arms?"

Before Squall could manage more than an unimpressed roll of his eyes, Seifer fished out his phone from his pocket. Squall's gaze followed his every move intently, the man's brow furrowing as he held up his phone and aimed the lens at Squall's face. "First photo has to be a memorable one," he teased and gave a slight thrust with his hips, his cock still buried within the man as he tapped the screen to catch the shot.

Stifling the moan that threatened to spill from his lips, Squall scowled at Seifer for his tasteless prank, but the bastard smirked at him without a shred of repentance. "Smile for me, Princess." And then the shutter sounded out again, another picture joining the previous one.

Leaning forward to snatch the offending item from Seifer's hands, Squall nearly tipped them over when the bastard deftly moved it out of his reach. Their precarious position prevented him from putting a quick stop to his predicament, his legs tied up in his pants. Just as his fingers closed around the phone, he blinked as several more flowers tumbled from his hair onto Seifer. Taking advantage of the distraction, Seifer chuckled and kissed him, the man's lips lingering just long enough for his pique to dwindle.

"You want a shot?" Seifer asked after one last nip at Squall's lower lip, then pressed his phone into Squall's hand.

Of course the bastard would ignore all Squall had said on the matter of photographs and do something like this. Taking the phone, he held it up and watched Seifer's smug face appear on the screen. Was there an appeal to this? He wasn't too sure, but they could definitely do better than the swelteringly seductive expression Seifer had summoned for the occasion. With one firm push, he sent Seifer sprawling back onto the flattened grass and kept the man in place with his one hand as he made his own picture.

Letting out deep laughter, Seifer tried to snatch back his phone even as Squall threw it into the grass, just out of his reach. When he felt Squall's hips move as if to push off him, he grabbed hold of the man's waist and held him still. "Wait," he said, shrugging out of his shirt and shoving it under Squall's ass. Better to ruin just the shirt than to walk around with a drenched crotch. "There," he said, his gaze returning to Squall's face.

As they finally disentangled, he tried to catch any spills, wiping both of them clean, then moved to scoop up his phone from the grass. He thumbed through the photos, a huge smirk spreading on his lips. The two of Squall were the best fucking photos he'd ever taken. Pocking the phone, he looked back over to where Squall had come to a stand, the man busy dusting himself off and shaking the remaining flowers from his hair.
He huffed softly, loving how fucking obvious it was that Squall had just gotten laid. There was no way Ellone would miss it. "Don't worry too much about preening. She already knows."

Looking up from where he'd been wiping futilely at his stained knees, Squall met Seifer's amused gaze, immediately losing all hope that the man had been playing another joke on him. "How?" he asked, blanching at the thought that Ellone had overheard them after all.

"She walked in on us yesterday morning. Before we woke up."

Having detected nothing of the sort in Ellone's behavior, Squall frowned as he pieced together the very incriminating scene they would've presented. They'd both been naked and crammed into a single narrow bed, leaving no room at all for a plausible cover story. "And you know this how?"

At the no-nonsense question he should've expected, Seifer sent the man an unrepentant smirk. "Because she caught me checking out your wood chopping skills one time too many and called me out on it," he said, his expression growing more serious as he realized just what Squall's next question would be. "I asked her not to mention anything to you because I wasn't sure how you'd feel about anyone knowing. Everything was still up in the air as well." A large part of him had feared that Squall's theory would turn out to be a mistake. "I really was going to leave if we couldn't prove your theory." Instead he'd pushed Squall so far that the man had been the one to leave.

Squall didn't immediately reply as he realized how narrowly they'd escaped that outcome. He couldn't fault Seifer's reasons for not telling him; he might have even done the same. He frowned, unsure what to think of Ellone having found out. "So she knows," he ventured, steering clear of the raw feelings Seifer's reminder had stirred anew.

Seifer hummed in affirmation. "Do you mind?"

Merely an hour ago Squall would have said he did mind, but everything was different now. A proper relationship, as Seifer had called it, wasn't something to hide from others lest it become disingenuous and tainted somehow. Still his first reflex was to keep this to themselves. He couldn't quite imagine telling anyone how he'd ended up with Seifer, let alone how people would react. At the very least there'd be those who'd object. Did he even care about that?

"No," he finally replied, meeting Seifer's gaze.

"Good. I don't care who you tell. Fu and Rai will know though," Seifer said, an amused smile growing on his lips. "I told them I'd be bringing my boyfriend along."

Eyes narrowing, Squall knew better by now than to assume he'd misheard the man. There seemed to be no limit on the surprises Seifer would spring on him at any given time. He was quickly running out of the capacity to deal with them gracefully. "When?"

Only slightly intimidated by the ominous twitch to Squall's brow, Seifer carried on. "When I spoke to Fujin. Just before you went down on me for the first time."

Unable to react to all aspects of that infuriating statement all at once, Squall recalled the conversation well enough and he'd heard Seifer make no mention of boyfriends. The assumption had to have been Fujin's then; one Seifer hadn't even thought to dissuade. And then something else clicked. "Your bet," he said, scowling. "What is it?"

Unable to keep back his laughter, Seifer briefly looked away. "Fu didn't want to listen to us going at it in the tent. I made the argument that she probably would once she found out who you were."
He walked closer, his smile growing softer even though he knew Squall was most likely battling the urge to skewer him with Lion Heart.

Not at all endeared by the stupid smile that ran completely counter to the man's scandalous admission, Squall wondered whether he'd been made a fool of somehow. How was he supposed to meet Fujin and Raijin with a straight face? "Why? You didn't know how things would turn out."

Seifer shrugged. "I knew that if you were going, there'd be no way in hell I'd be able to keep my hands off you. No point in hiding it."

Only accepting the truth of the first part of that explanation, Squall resented the matter-of-fact and confident way in which the bastard could say such things. As if there had been nothing staggeringly premature at all about declaring him his boyfriend at that time.

Hyne. Boyfriend.

Was that what they were now? The unlikely epithet managed to make his stomach lurch all over again, reminding him that their current bizarre argument was of little import compared to the seismic shift that had just occurred in his life. He might as well get mad at a dog for barking.

"When we see them, you still plan on introducing me like that?"

Seifer furrowed his brow at the thought of holding something like that back. "Of course. Might not be what I'll open with, but if Fu demands to know, then yeah, I won't lie." He smiled again, already looking forward to seeing Rai and Fu's gobsmacked faces. "You can have the Bluewhistle."

Squall snorted. After their night on Avalanche, he was cured of ever wanting another glass of Bluewhistle again. "No thanks," he said dryly, much more concerned with what Seifer's friends would make of him. Of them. The prospect of tagging along for the DC's annual hunting trip had suddenly become a lot more awkward. "Anything else you've forgotten to mention?"

"Hmmm… Don't think so," Seifer said, pretending to think hard even as his smirk grew. "How about the fact that you now have me at your disposal anytime, anywhere? I'll fulfill every last one of your dirty little fantasies, so don't hold back on me. Whatever you want, just tell me."

Blinking at the lewd offer, Squall couldn't envision what else he could possibly want that had been lacking in their encounters until now. He was certain he'd be no match for Seifer's imagination in that department. "How generous," he remar ked, stepping closer. "Not self-serving at all."

Laughing, Seifer brought up his hand to curl around the back of Squall's neck and into the man's soft hair, then leaned in for a kiss. Holding him close, he moved his chin to rest at the man's temple. "This is going to be good, Squall," he said, tightening his embrace.

Maybe it would be, maybe it wouldn't. Less inclined to make statements of that nature, Squall let himself enjoy the here and the now; a moment full of promise, untainted by any mistakes they might yet make. The scent of Seifer's skin was musky and pleasing, the press of the man's hands against his back reassuring. For now, things were good.

"We should go," he said reluctantly, pushing away. He'd lost track of time, but he was fairly certain they wouldn't make their one o'clock train to Obel Lake.

Humming in agreement, Seifer followed as Squall started to head back towards the pickup. It was confronting to follow the trail of flattened grass and spot all the traces of his attack. He remained silent as Squall located his dirtied jacket in a particularly badly marred area and slung it over an arm. They wove their way back towards the pickup, Squall's duffel bag lying damp and hidden in
the tall grass, the man's gunblade case tossed carelessly by the side of the road. The pickup door still stood open, completing the damning picture. The urge to apologize grew again, but he pushed it back. He'd already laid everything bare.

While Squall moved to the back to load up his things, he went to the driver's side and got in. As he patted his pockets for the keys, he spotted them still hanging from the ignition. He brought up a hand to scratch at his temple, the clear reminders of just how close he'd come to fucking it all up beginning to take their toll. He was such a fucking bastard. It was a wonder Squall had agreed to anything at all. But one thing was certain, he was not going to fuck up again.

Getting in the front, Squall sat down on the bench seat and glanced at Seifer. The man had grown noticeably quiet as they'd made their way back. He thought he understood. In less than a few hours they'd gone from deepest enmity to highest hopes, and for a little while it had been easy to forget all that had happened since the previous night. Now, as Seifer turned the key in the ignition and pulled the pickup around, back onto the road towards Winhill, they'd be taking all their pretty promises into the real world. Life tended to be harsher than a green meadow basked in sunlight.

Turning his gaze to the landscape that was rushing past them, he looked with new eyes at the fields and pasturage he'd passed by just that morning. All those hours of forcing himself to keep walking, to push down the hurt, blind to the beauty of a sunny autumn morning, and now he sped across the same road, feeling both lighter and more nervous than he had in a long time. He now noticed the bright fall colors that festooned the trees, the deep blue of the sky, the peaceful timelessness of the countryside. It should scare him how profoundly Seifer affected him, but for now he was content to let Seifer lead the way.

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Ellone sighed as another expectant customer stood frowning at the closed sign she’d put up at the pub’s door before peering inside the dark interior. She’d seated herself upstairs in her living room, by a window that looked down onto the town square and where curious passersby wouldn't be able to spot her. She hadn't been able to think of an explanation to give any of them and she'd quickly abandoned putting around the pub when some concerned folk had knocked on the window to try and catch her attention. She’d only been pretending to be industrious anyway, in an attempt to distract herself from her worries.

So now she sat by her window, leafing through one of Uncle Laguna’s journals with only half an eye. It had been a long time since she’d been this on edge, with nothing else to do but wait. It reminded her of the times Raine had sat by this very window, highly pregnant and silently pining for someone who'd never come back for her.

It had been like that all morning, since Seifer's panicked flight from her home. Memories of the past had been weaving in and out of her thoughts, filling her with a wistfulness she managed to overcome most days. She should have known that raking up the past would only make things worse. It always had. But she'd been so glad Squall had asked her for help, so eager to prove herself as only a sister could.

Whatever had happened after she'd left them to talk, it hadn't gone well. She'd overheard elevated voices for a while, but those had died down. She'd hoped at the time that meant they'd talked things through. Finding Seifer passed out on her couch had quickly corrected that hopeful assumption. One night he'd been snuggled up with her brother for sleep, so clearly in love. The next he'd drunk himself unconscious, while Squall had walked out on them. Her powers had wrought that horrible change.

Squaring her jaw, she fought down the tears that wanted to run freely. She'd been able to piece together some of what they'd seen last night in those memories, rehashing over and over all they'd said to one another. Seifer had been hurt so badly. She could scarcely believe the drunk she'd herded out of her couch that morning was the same lively man that had tended her bar just the day before. If she hadn't known him as she did, his behavior would have frightened her. The smashed tile and blood she'd found in her shower hadn't done anything to reassure her either.

After that discovery, she'd decided to keep the pub closed for the day. She had no idea what state Seifer would be in when he returned and had judged it for the best that he be kept at a distance from anyone less understanding than herself. She glanced at the clock and sighed again. Seifer had been away for hours already. She wasn't sure whether to consider that a good sign or a bad one. It was only a half an hour drive to the train platform, so he should've been back hours ago, whether he'd intercepted Squall or not. Was he alone somewhere, freaking out? Had he found Squall?

Disappointment welled up in her again. How could Squall have left, never even thinking to talk to her first? She couldn't think of anything that might justify such a selfish choice, especially in light of what they'd intended to do and prove. When Seifer brought him back here, she'd have some stern words for him.

If Seifer brought him back.

Looking down at the book in her hands, she lifted her hand from the page that had wrinkled in her
clutching hold and set the useless distraction aside on the side table. If they were going to keep her waiting, then she might as well do something useful. Seifer had dashed outside without breakfast, and her aggravating little brother would be hungry as well. There were no food stalls or diners out here, her pub the only place for miles where people might eat something they hadn't cooked themselves.

She strode into her little kitchen, pulled ingredients from her pantry and fridge and got to work, stubbornly refusing the thought that she might be preparing all this food in vain. She'd always loved to cook, taking pleasure in the calming ritual of cutting ingredients and stirring pots. By the time she'd filled up the first casserole pan, ready to pop into the oven at a moment's notice, she felt much calmer and prepared.

She was layering the second one with meat and sauce, adding spices and tasting, when she heard the distant sound of a sputtering engine. She'd recognize that sound anywhere. Hurrying out of her kitchen, she could hear the doors of her pickup slamming closed when she was halfway down the stairs. Both doors!

Rushing to the entrance of the pub, she yanked open the door and stared at the two men that had seen fit to worry her all morning. The lecturing she'd planned died on her tongue as she took in their disheveled appearance. Squall's clothes were stained with dirt and grass, his hair even unrulier than usual. And Seifer…

"Where's your shirt?" she asked, eyebrows rising high as they approached.

Holding back the quip he was dying to speak, Seifer walked closer. "Had to take it off," he supplied simply, knowing she'd connect the dots soon enough. She had to have been worried, the way she'd hurried out to greet them, a forgotten cooking spoon held tightly in her hand betraying as much. "Sorry for the rough morning."

Speechless for an additional few seconds, Ellone stepped aside when she spotted several curious faces turning their way. "Come on, get inside," she urged, her eyebrows climbing further as both men filed past her. Seifer had what looked like a nasty bruise just off his right temple and another one along his throat, and a myriad of red scratches and welts peppered his face and arms. What clothes he still wore were nearly as dirtied as Squall's, both of them stained in peculiar and telltale ways. She'd seen it often enough on Winhill's youths as they slunk back into town, full of smiles and drunk on puppy love. It just seemed too unlike her brother to fit. She waited until she closed the door behind her before speaking again.

"What happened?"

A large lopsided smirk grew on Seifer's lips. There was no way he could contain his glee, despite Ellone's concern. "We made up."

Ellone blinked at Seifer's drastically improved mood, his smile far too incongruous with his injuries, before turning her gaze to her seemingly unharmed brother. Squall met her gaze noncommittally, not even attempting to add to Seifer's statement or explain their conspicuous appearance. Hyne, the local rumor mill would be in a tizzy after this. Fighting against the blush that threatened to color her cheeks, she kept her gaze strictly on Seifer's face.

"Why are you hurt?" she asked worriedly, stepping closer to inspect the bruise that discolored Seifer's temple.

"It's nothing. My own fault."
Ellone frowned at the evasive reply. Seifer's cheer had lessened some at her question, and Squall was standing far too stiffly. Both men looked guilty, just as they had as little boys when they'd shown up at the orphanage with split lips and scuffed knees. Only Squall wasn't hurt this time. "Did you two fight?"

"We did," Seifer admitted, not proud of what he'd done at all. "I was fucking livid after chasing him down. Needed Squall to knock some sense into me."

None too happy with the explanation, Ellone glanced at her brother and his lack of injuries. He must've healed himself then. Not liking the thought one bit, she raised a hand to examine Seifer's bruise and ignored his wince. "I don't think I like your way of making up," she said with a soft sigh. "To think for a second there I thought you two had a roll in the fields—" Catching herself, she cursed her distracted mind, but Seifer only sent her a sheepish smile. This time she blushed well and truly as her eyes darted to Squall, the man's expression incriminatingly even.

"Don't tell me you've never heard of make-up sex," Seifer remarked with a teasing smirk.

Hearing her initial suspicions confirmed, Ellone couldn't immediately think of something to say that wouldn't lead to her blushing even more fiercely. A glimpse of her brother told her he was highly unimpressed with the remark, but he still wasn't denying anything. At least she could be done with any ruses then. "Not preceded by a brawl, I haven't," she said with a shake of the head, pretending like her face wasn't a burning furnace. "You two had me worried sick."

Seifer nodded softly. "I know."

The simple acknowledgment soothed Ellone some, but Squall's continued silence kept her from letting go of her concern entirely. She still didn't know what had happened the night before; how things had gotten dire enough for Squall to deem it necessary to leave. She held her brother's gaze, trying to coax some comment out of him, but his lips remained locked. She sighed. "I just wish you would've told us you were leaving. A note. *Something.*" Her hands clenched as she recalled Seifer's distress upon discovering Squall's disappearance. "I was sure my powers ruined everything again."

Feeling a stab of guilt, Squall knew Ellone was right to be angry, but he couldn't imagine actually having told her anything. He'd needed to escape so badly, he hadn't spared her a single thought. Even now he wanted to say it wasn't any of her business, but he couldn't, not when they owed her so much. "They didn't."

Seifer scratched at the back of his neck, then glanced at Squall before adding his own two cents. "What you showed us was rough, but it proved Ultimecia's to blame. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but I would never have known if it wasn't for you."

Ellone's eyes misted over at Seifer's words. "I knew it from the start." She wasn't sure what she would've done if Seifer hadn't gotten the assurance he needed, if her powers had just made things worse. Exorcising the dark thoughts that had been running through her head all morning, she found a smile for the two exasperating men before her. "Hyne, I'm so glad you two worked things out."

Seifer smiled in return, heartened by her words and her faith in him. "We had a lot to figure out," he said softly, then turned on the charm. "How can we make it up to you?"

*Almost* pulled in by Seifer's smooth talking ways, Ellone put her hands on her hips. "You can start by not tracking in all that dirt on your shoes. You're both covered in filth!" Ruining the stern reprimand with a curl to her lips, she waved them towards the stairs. "Go wash up while I get lunch.
"Yes, Ma'am," Seifer said, kicking off his boots before walking towards the stairs.

When Ellone fixed him with an expectant stare as well, Squall quickly toed off his shoes and let himself be herded up the stairs after Seifer. Just like that, Ellone had forgiven them, returning to her mother hen ways without a second thought. It left him bewildered and feeling guilty. Another discomfiting surprise was the relief he felt at her easy acceptance of them, telling him he cared far more than he'd anticipated.

"Better pop your clothes in the washer right away or they'll stain," Ellone spoke behind them, lingering on the landing as they continued up. "And don't ruin my towels!" With those words she whisked off towards the kitchen, leaving them to the task she'd set them.

Following Seifer up the second set of stairs, he tried to sort out the jumble of his thoughts. So much had happened in such a short time. Unlike Seifer and Ellone, he had trouble making the shift to talking openly about any of it. It was one thing for Ellone to know about them, but another entirely for Seifer to shock her with the sordid details. Though it seemed like Ellone had recovered quickly, far less perturbed by it all than himself.

He couldn't deal with the punches quite as smoothly. Part of him was still in denial. Slowly the reality of what they'd agreed on was settling in and he still had no idea what to expect. Opening the door to the guest room, he stepped inside. His gaze lingered on the unused beds and the spot where he'd sat thinking for hours. He couldn't quite reconcile the disconnect between his mindset then and now. Sensing Seifer's scrutiny, he remembered to walk in further and set down his gunblade case and the duffel bag he'd packed in a hurry.

Seifer watched Squall move about the room, the guilty conscience he'd managed to push away reasserting itself tenfold. He hadn't missed the slight stiffening to Squall's shoulders or the brief falter in his steps. Had Squall waited up for him in here? Had he managed to catch any sleep at all before deciding to leave? The man's impromptu nap out in the fields and the pristine state of the bed linens left little doubt as to the answer.

Shaking the unpleasant thought, he reminded himself it was behind them and that mulling it over only risked dragging him right back into yesterday's dark thoughts. Instead he walked up behind Squall and leaned in to press his lips against the nape of Squall's neck, his hands alighting softly on the man's hips to give a brief squeeze. Another promise. And apology.

Glancing behind him when Seifer pulled away wordlessly, Squall struggled to quell the rapid beating of his heart. His gaze lingered on Seifer's back as the man went to grab the two fresh bath towels Ellone had set out for them. He was quickly starting to realize he had no idea of how to behave. He'd only just gotten used to the sex. Suppressing a frown, he retrieved a change of clothes from his duffel bag and straightened to find Seifer waiting for him in the doorway.

"Come on," Seifer said, leading the way into Ellone's small bathroom. He hurried out of his stained clothes and threw them into the washing machine along with his soiled shirt. "Just throw your stuff in there. I'll get it going," he instructed with a soft smile, remembering just how clueless Squall was when it came to laundry. Realizing he might as well throw the come crusted shirt from the night they'd arrived in there too, he wrapped one of the bath towels around his waist and walked past Squall. "Gonna go grab my other shirt as well."

Alone in the bathroom, Squall finished peeling off his own clothes, the items looking even worse when gathered together in a messy pile. Glad to ignore the multitude of confusing buttons on the washing machine, he threw his clothes on top of Seifer's and headed into the shower. As he turned
on the spray of water, the normality of it all suddenly struck him as strange. Their clothes washed together. The implicit understanding that Seifer would join him in the tiny shower stall. The self-evident ease of it.

When he heard Seifer reenter the bathroom, he ignored the nervous flutter of his stomach and focused on the flow of the water, the gurgle of the pipes, the soap underneath his hands. He was failing to stem his anticipation, until his eyes fell to a cracked tile. Behind him he heard Seifer fiddle with the washing machine, the man not yet joining him. He brought up a hand to touch the sharp break lines, a dark red still staining the deepest cracks despite obvious efforts to scrub it away. When had this happened?

He startled when Seifer slipped in behind him, the man's arms snaking around his waist and a deep hum of contentment brushing against his ear. Relaxing into the hold, he briefly succumbed to the feel of their naked skin pressed together before recovering himself. He reached down and lifted Seifer's right hand for inspection. The knuckles were badly cut and bruised, the flow of hot water eliciting a wince from the blond. Turning Seifer's hand further into the water, he waited until the last of caked dirt and blood was washed away before junctioning and casting a Cure.

As the blue light of the Cure faded in the small cubicle, Seifer felt every last one of his cuts and bruises tingle and disappear. He couldn't help a small frown. It was obvious enough that Squall had linked the cuts on his knuckles to the cracks on the tile, but why such an injury warranted a Cure was beyond him, especially when the added swelling was the result of punching the guy. "You're going too soft on me," he said, tightening his hold on Squall.

Frowning at the unflattering accusation, Squall corrected the man. "You're too hard on yourself."

Seifer sighed. He may finally have been able to shake some of the guilt he'd been carrying around since the war, but his transgressions since the evening before had been entirely his own. "Someone has to be."

Not liking the self-reproaching tone, Squall turned in Seifer's hold and held his gaze. "No," he said simply, before kissing the man. It was easy to do, the flutter of his nerves calming the moment their lips touched.

Closing his eyes as Squall kissed him slowly, Seifer allowed himself to be soothed by the man's steadfast presence and pushed all thoughts of cracked tiles and ugly fights from his mind in favor of kissing and caressing the man in his arms.

Very aware they were inching closer and closer to the point of no return, Squall still couldn't help himself from pressing close to Seifer's naked body, to indulge in the wet glide of his hands along the man's broad back and buttocks as they kissed. By the time they pulled apart for air, both their lengths were hard, slipping together wetly. When Seifer smiled and grabbed the soap, Squall regarded him in suspicion. The other two times Seifer had lathered him up in the shower, sex had immediately followed.

"Ellone's waiting," he dissuaded halfheartedly.

Squeezing some shower gel into his hand, Seifer didn't bother countering the rather breathless protest when they were so very clearly in agreement. Instead he slid his hand along Squall's length, eliciting a soft moan, then pressed closer until his cock was sliding against Squall's again, his hand stroking them both languidly.

Squall shuddered and gave up on the unappealing notion of stopping just when things were getting good. He stepped deeper into the spray of water, closer to Seifer's heat, close enough to feel the
The strong thud of Seifer's heart. Raising himself further onto his toes to make up for the difference in height, he layered his own fingers over Seifer's, their hands squeezing in tandem as they moved together through hitching breaths and gasping kisses, tipping slowly towards release.

Steadying himself by wrapping his free arm around Seifer's neck, his fingers curling into short wet hair, he was unable to completely stifle his voice. The feel of their erections sliding together with every thrust of their hips left him dizzy. Seifer's cock was hot and hard against his own, the man's hand rough and perfect.

Holding Squall's increasingly heavy-lidded gaze, Seifer gathered the brunet tightly against him and picked up the slack when Squall's hand faltered, those moist lips releasing a tell-tale sound he'd quickly learned to hunger for. Squall was close, grey-blue eyes screwing shut as he stiffened in Seifer's arms, the man's come spurting forth and coating both their hands. Seifer cursed as his gaze flicked down, his pumping hand greedily spreading the milky liquid along their lengths. Sensing Squall's hand was about to fall away, he withdrew his own and guided Squall's fingers to close around his throbbing erection. He needed Squall's touch now.

Coming back to himself as his orgasm receded, Squall needed only one lustful look from Seifer to firm his grip and resume the smooth glide of his hand. He still couldn't quite believe he was the one who could make Seifer look like this. Rough breaths, dark gaze, impatient rolls of the hips. Running his thumb over the swollen head, he ignored Seifer's obvious need and gave in to the urge to experiment, ranging from soft flutters of the fingers to firm tugs, testing Seifer's limits until the man pushed him up against the wall with a growl, his mouth claimed in a demanding kiss. Yielding, he pumped Seifer's cock with fast strokes, in time with the man's thrusts. He breathed in each of Seifer's panting moans as the man finally came in his hand.

"Fuck," Seifer cursed, his body jerking against Squall's one last time. Breathing in slowly, he relished the clean scent of Squall's skin mixing with the floral notes of the soap they had used. He grinned at the unlikely combination, recalling the arrangement of flowers in Squall's hair that morning. "You're getting way too fucking good at that."

Raising an eyebrow, Squall tried not to feel a sense of accomplishment over a comment like that. Then again, not so long ago he'd doubted he'd ever measure up. "I'm a quick study," he said boldly, drawn in by Seifer's lopsided grin, equal parts lewd and content. Somehow it was deeply satisfying when Seifer looked at him like that.

"Always have been," Seifer agreed, before tipping up Squall's chin and guiding plush lips closer to his own.

Squall allowed the proprietary touch that should've felt insolent, only it didn't. Seifer simply took what he wanted, and apparently he loved to let him. Their lips meshed in a gentle sharing, his continued participation assured by the nudge of Seifer's fingers beneath his chin. The man's two day's worth of stubble chafed him, but not nearly enough to motivate ending their kiss.

The thought of Ellone waiting for them however did.

Breaking their kiss, he summoned the resolve to end their already far too lengthy shower and reached for the shower curtain after one last look at the gleaming expanse of Seifer's wet skin. Suppressing an inappropriate expression at Seifer's knowing smirk, he kept his face even as he got out of the shower and stepped into the chill bathroom air.

"I'm heading down. You should too," he reminded when Seifer showed no signs of following.

"I will. Gonna enjoy this a bit more and then shave. You guys go ahead and get started."
Shaking his head at the predictably laidback response, Squall figured that staggering their entrances was just as well. He could do without Ellone suspecting what they'd been up to in her bathroom. Making quick work of drying off and getting dressed, he cast a quick glance in the mirror to make sure Seifer hadn't left any new tell-tale marks on him. When he turned on the sink tap to brush his teeth, he couldn't help a smile at the immediate curse that sounded from behind the shower curtain.

"Fuck, that's hot!"

"Old pipes," he excused with a quirk to his lips before rinsing his mouth and closing the tap. "You'll run out of hot water soon," he added in warning as he headed for the door.

"Got plenty of fantasies to keep me warm, Princess."

Rolling his eyes, Squall could imagine the man's lewd expression all too well, even when he couldn't see Seifer's face. It didn't help that his imagination happily added its own scenarios of what they could be getting up to instead of lunch. Steeling his resolve, he closed the bathroom door behind him and left Seifer to his extended bathroom rituals.

At the top of the landing, he took a moment to assume a proper state of mind before heading down to deal with Ellone. Too much time spent with Seifer tended to skew his train of thought towards the gutter. So far it didn't seem like their new agreement had changed things all that much. Seifer was still a hedonist, and he himself was still worrisomely susceptible to the bastard's charms. Just like before. The thought shouldn't be as reassuring as it was.

Shaking the imagery of Seifer naked in the shower, he walked through the living room and into the kitchen, where Ellone immediately turned from the stove to look at him.

"Looking better already," she said with an approving nod, before gesturing at the table. "Have a seat. I'm almost done here."

He sat down and watched as Ellone pulled two casseroles out of the oven, the appetizing scents in the kitchen intensifying. Silence fell between them, the absence of Seifer's distracting conversation making it seem all the more jarring. That's when he realized it was just the two of them for the first time since he and Seifer had arrived. Finding absolutely nothing to do or say, he poured himself some water from the pitcher and turned the glass in his hold as he waited.

"Hungry?" she asked, regarding him as she placed the two pans on the table.

"…Yes."

"Well, tuck in then." Ignoring his awkwardness, she nudged the serving spoon towards him with an expectant gaze. "Baked potatoes with cheese and ground beef casserole, Winhill style. It's got more grease than is healthy, but it's delicious."

It did look and smell good, his hunger pangs returning with a vengeance. Filling his plate with the home-cooked food, he kept his face impassive as he took the first bite.

"Good right?" Ellone leaned forward, seeming far more pleased than a single bite should warrant.

"…It's good," he offered, earning himself a smile.

"I knew you'd like it."

Relieved when she turned her attention to filling her own plate, Squall only managed to get a few
bites into his meal before he felt Ellone's eyes flit towards him again, studying him surreptitiously. They ate in silence for a while, but the atmosphere was thick with the questions he knew she still wanted to inflict on him. He made no overtures, praying to Hyne Seifer would be down sooner rather than later. Of course it had to be now of all times that the bastard bothered with a thorough shower and grooming.

Across from him, a soft sigh was followed by the restless scraping of Ellone's spoon. "I really do wish you'd tell me what happened last night." Her gaze settled on him again, more insistently this time. "It's not like you to bail like that. Not when it matters. I'm sure you noticed the tile in the shower by now. The state Seifer was in this morning—" She shook her head. "Why did you leave like that?"

Squall frowned at her interpretation of events. "What happened is between Seifer and me," he deadpanned, lifting his eyes from his food. "I won't leave again, if that's what you want to hear."

Ellone sighed at the defensive tone to Squall's words. She should've known he'd raise his hackles the moment she tried to dig a little deeper. "It's something, I guess," she said with a soft shake of the head. "He needs you right now. You see that, don't you?"

Unable to deny the ring of truth to her words, Squall nodded slowly. He'd already decided to do whatever he could to help Seifer, without Ellone's cajoling. "I know."

"I'm glad to hear it." Somewhat mollified, Ellone picked around the food in her plate and glanced at her brother with a budding smile. She still couldn't quite believe how he'd shown up on her doorstep, his appearance broadcasting he'd been fooling around in the fields to anyone who clapped eyes on him. She would never have suspected him to be the type. "When you guys say you 'made up', what does that mean exactly?"

Frowning, Squall furiously wished Seifer would come downstairs and take over. No doubt the man would clear up the situation with a few aggravating quips and innuendos, while somehow making it sound like a very normal development at the same time. "We've decided—" He faltered, uncertain of how she'd react, uncertain even of how he himself felt about the change, but he'd agreed with Seifer not to hide this. "We're... together now."

Ellone let out a soft cry. "Really? Together together? Officially?"

"That's what I said."

The effect of his statement was immediate. He watched in bewilderment as Ellone's expression transformed into a beaming smile at the unlikely news.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed, grasping his hand and giving it a squeeze. "After last night and this morning I wasn't sure what to expect anymore. I was afraid—" Shaking her head, she cut herself short. "I'm so happy for you two!"

So then he hadn't imagined her easy acceptance earlier. He wasn't sure what to do with her adoring smile, confused as to how anyone could be that excited when not directly involved themselves. "I want to tell people in person," he warned, not wanting this particular bit of news to travel through the grapevine.

"Of course," Ellone reassured, her mood much improved. "Laguna would definitely want to know."

Sighing at the prospect of telling the president anything at all about his personal life, Squall didn't reply. With some luck, Seifer would be the one to spill the news, saving him the trouble.
Catching himself at the overly optimistic thought, he tried not to let his doubts overwhelm him all over again. It was premature to make any assumptions only hours into their fledgling relationship. He couldn't even quite accept that it had really happened, that Seifer truly wanted this after everything that had been said and done. To talk about it so openly felt foolish, daring fate for Seifer to take it all back.

He'd felt like this only once before, or at least something similar, when Rinoa had bonded them. The depth and nature of his current feelings were vastly different, but the hope was the same. A tentative hope that his future might just be better than his past, laced with the fear that he was wrong. Back then Rinoa had showed just as much confidence as Seifer when making her promises.

He wasn't sure how he'd ended up in this situation again, this time with a lot more to lose. A lot more of himself invested. And then another thought occurred to him. He'd have to tell Rinoa at some point.

"Ah, that'll be him," Ellone interrupted his unwelcome thoughts, the sound of creaking stairs reaching his ears.

Walking into the kitchen with a confident stride, Seifer grinned at the disgruntled look Squall sent him upon his entrance, the man most likely miffed at being left to fend for himself in a social situation. He didn't feel the least bit repentant when it meant he'd gotten to enjoy an extended hot shower while still buzzing from Squall's touch. Looking from the unimpressed brunet to Ellone, he raised an eyebrow at Ellone's broad smile and answered it with one of his own. She'd definitely cheered up. "So, what did I miss?" he asked as he sat down. His gaze fell to not one, but two casseroles, his stomach complaining at the lack of sustenance.

"Squall told me the good news," Ellone replied, watching with satisfaction as Seifer dug into the food she'd made with gusto.

"Did he now?" Seifer asked with a wide smirk. The thought of the tight-lipped brunet telling anyone else about them definitely stroked his ego.

"Only under duress," Ellone clarified, taking pity on her visibly cringing brother. "But I actually got a straightforward answer for once, so I suppose congratulations are in order."

More than proud to have landed the reticent man as his boyfriend, Seifer winked lewdly at the man in question. "Guess we won't have to keep things on the down-low anymore, huh?"

Squall frowned at the bewildering statement that implied the man thought they'd been exercising restraint so far. He was somewhat afraid to find out what Seifer deemed acceptable behavior in front of others. No doubt it would exceed his own boundaries.

"He looks worried," Ellone interjected with a laugh. "With reason, I'm guessing."

"Well, he'll have to get used to it. He should definitely know by now that I like to flaunt and cop a feel whenever possible."

Stifling her laughter when Squall's expression darkened further at the prospect, Ellone wondered all over again how two such different people had fallen in love. She wasn't sure who to wish good luck. Squall had never been very receptive to Rinoa's attempts at public displays of affection after all. On the other hand, he'd never emerged from a spontaneous roll in the fields with her either.

"A risk taker, huh?" she commented good-naturedly, her gaze cataloguing the lack of nasty bruises and cuts. "At least you had the sense to heal up."
"Courtesy of the boyfriend," Seifer said, sending Squall a teasing smile. He'd always hated other people fussing over him, but it turned out he loved it when Squall was the one doing it out.

It took all of Squall's composure not to betray his self-consciousness as he met Seifer's gaze. As if it was a perfectly normal thing for Seifer to call him by. The incredulity he'd expected from Ellone was still failing to manifest, the woman still all smiles, instilling the budding hope that maybe them together wasn't quite the freak occurrence he'd thought it to be.

"So, are you guys still planning on heading out today?" Ellone asked, grabbing Squall's plate to refill it while she talked. "You're welcome to stay as long as you like of course. The guest room is all yours."

Preferring somewhere with a large bed and no chance of being overheard by his boyfriend's sister, Seifer briefly glanced Squall's way. The man was still tired no doubt, but the train ride wouldn't be that long. "My friends are already waiting in Wendel, so we should probably head out sooner rather than later. If we get a train out this afternoon, we can still make it there before nightfall."

Ellone nodded, unable to fully hide her disappointment. "You shouldn't keep them waiting then. I'll be sorry to see you guys go, though."

Seifer felt somewhat guilty for letting her down, the woman looking deflated. She'd opened her home to him and had taken him in without any reserve. She even seemed to approve of him as Squall's new partner. "Maybe we can visit again soon. Or I can, in case the Commander's too busy catching up on his missions. I'd be more than happy to spend a weekend manning the bar."

"I'd love that," Ellone said eagerly, letting slide how Seifer had given Squall a way out of the agreement. Squall was Squall. She'd be lucky if he ever visited again. Seifer on the other hand seemed genuine in his suggestion. "Like I said, you're always welcome. And I did promise you a tour of the area, didn't I?"

"You did and I'll hold you to it." Seifer paused for a moment, then faced her squarely. "I'll help make back what you lost by keeping the pub closed today and I'll pay for that tile."

Ellone raised an eyebrow. Until now she hadn't been sure either man had even noticed she'd closed shop in order to wait for them. "Don't worry about any of that. A day off won't put me out of business," she reassured with a soft smile. "I'm just glad everything turned out alright. A broken tile is a small price to pay."

Nodding, though still firm in his resolution to make up for what he'd done, Seifer reached over to take hold of her hand. "Thank you."

"Don't mind if I do," Seifer supplied easily, holding out his plate.

"So when you come back this way, you'll have to come caving with me."

Seifer swallowed his mouthful of food before speaking. "There are caves around here?"

"Yup, the area has some of Galbadia's best caving complexes," Ellone replied with a smile. "Should be right up your alley."

"Sounds great," Seifer agreed jovially, already looking forward to the visit. "I'll bring my gear along."
"You have your own gear? And here I thought I could show you something new."

"I'm a weaponsmith. Sometimes my boss sends me out on trips to collect materials, so I've dabbled in caving to get my hands on some rare metals. How about you? How did you get into caving?"

Ellone cocked her head, considering the question. "A friend took me caving when I first moved here and I got hooked, I guess... I felt proud of myself when I resurfaced. A novel feeling after all that time on the run." She smiled, pleased with how far she'd come since those first difficult weeks after the war, when she'd only just returned to Winhill. "I have most of Galbadia's caving systems under my belt by now. I even got certified, so you'll have to stay on your toes to keep up."

"I'm self-taught, so I haven't really tried the deeper caves. You'll have to show me the ropes."

Squall listened and ate in silence as Seifer and Ellone launched into a discussion on the finer points of caving. He was glad that whatever initial concern Seifer had harbored about meeting Ellone was now completely absent, that the two could talk like this even after the night they'd all had. He was grateful for Ellone taking things in stride the way she had, for giving Seifer a chance. Once reunited, it seemed that they got along great. Another rift from Seifer's past mended.

As long as he never had to come back to Winhill and join them, he was content to simply listen to their vague plans for future visits. It was good to see Seifer smile and talk so animatedly again. Whenever the blond looked his way, those eyes glinted and those lips curled up in a way that hinted at secret meanings intended just for him, even if the conversation was about something as inane as climbing gear. He'd almost decided he had to be going daft and imagining things when Seifer's foot nudged against his one time too many for it to be coincidental. Only a day ago he would probably have kicked it aside.

Was this what it was supposed to feel like? A bubble enveloping only the two of them, even when other people were around. He was eager to be away from Winhill all over again, to be someplace where he could act on the impulses that surged through him now. Instead, he had to settle for the warm press of Seifer's leg against his own and the knowledge that they'd be leaving soon.

Unable to help another lopsided smirk at the closeness Squall was allowing underneath the radar, Seifer finished his last bite, then met Ellone's gaze. "This was really delicious, Elle, thanks."

"Local Winhill fare," Ellone managed, flustered by the unexpected nickname. While not the same as the one he'd used to call her by so long ago, it sounded better. New. "I'm glad you liked it."

Seifer emptied the remainder of his water as well. "Is it alright if I use your landline? I have fuck all reception out here."

"Sure, help yourself." Guessing the purpose of his call, she added, "I'm not sure when the next train out is. You'll have to check with the local railway services. I have their number on the pin board above the phone. You can reserve seats with them too."

"Alright, I'll get to it then."

Watching as Seifer left the kitchen, Ellone let out a happy sigh and got up from her chair to start clearing the table. Both oven pans were almost empty, Seifer's appetite in particular having made the biggest dent. Nothing was more rewarding than cooking for a ravenous friend. Beside her, Squall was collecting the plates and utensils in an effort to be helpful. She smiled at such courtesy, wondering whether Seifer was rubbing off on him.

"You can wash the dishes," she announced, twisting open the tap to fill the sink with hot water. "I'll
dry them and put them away. Soap's under the sink."

Receiving only a nod in reply, she transferred the leftovers to smaller containers and popped them in the fridge. All the while she watched on in amusement as Squall scrubbed away at a stubbornly dirty pot. If only his operatives could see him now.

She almost decided to shelve the subject that had been on her mind ever since the previous night. Things were finally pleasant again. She'd helped them, and they'd be on their way soon. All was well. It should be enough, but still she couldn't shake the thoughts and hopes that yesterday's revelations had stirred in her.

"Squall," she began, uncertain on how to broach the topic. "Last night you said some things that… If they're true, then the implications…"

Looking up from the sink, Squall frowned when he was met with a drawn expression. "What things?"

Ellone sighed and grabbed a kitchen towel, putting her thoughts in order as she dried a plate. "You said that my powers create a real connection to the past. That Ultimecia was aware of you. That you changed the past."

Tensing at the hopeful tone to her words, Squall set down the pot he'd been washing and turned to regard her fully. "My interference was small—"

"However small, you did it, and the consequences were huge," Ellone immediately cut in. "I can read between the lines well enough," she added when her brother gave her a troubled look. "What are you saying?"

Ellone bit her lips, alerted by Squall's deadpan tone. "All the times I've tried to change things, I always failed. I tried everything. I tried going into the past myself, I tried sending other people. I hammered at the same events over and over." She heaved a deep breath. "Every time I came up empty, but last night, somehow, you did what I couldn't. If we can understand how you did it, maybe we can change more."

"I don't know how I did it," Squall dissuaded, disturbed by the fervor he heard in Ellone's voice. It was the same fervor that had caused her to send him into Loire's past against his will. "I just did."

Nodding, Ellone considered the possible explanations she'd been mulling over all night. "Maybe it's because you used to be a knight. It changed your magic, didn't it?" she theorized, unperturbed. "Maybe it's because of the time you spent stuck in Time Compression, maybe it changed how my powers interact with you. Or maybe it's because you were connecting with a mind inhabited by Ultimecia. She was trying to meddle with time as well. Maybe—"

"Stop."

"But—" Unable to understand why Squall was frowning at her, she set aside her kitchen towel and faced him head-on. "Don't you want to change things?"

"What you're suggesting is reckless. Your powers are far more dangerous than we realized. We don't understand how they work. We'd risk undoing all that we fought for in the war."

"How can you be so sure?" Ellone persisted, her heart beating rapidly.

Squall shook his head, loath to be the voice of reason when he wanted nothing more than to erase
Ultimecia from their past. "In the few seconds I had control, I only managed to move his arm. I couldn't reach him or make myself be heard. I couldn't hold onto him after Ultimecia returned. Those parameters are far too narrow to apply successfully to any other circumstance." He steeled his voice despite Ellone's crestfallen expression. "It would take a lot more than what I did to make a difference, and by using your powers to return to the war, we'd risk offering her an escape into our time. I can't let that happen."

"Even if it means you might miss the chance to keep Seifer from becoming her knight in the first place?"

Squall scowled at the low blow that squeezed his chest with pain. "All I know for certain is that he's alive now. He made it through the war, against all odds. If we risk going back, there will be no certainties. No amount of wishful thinking will make me gamble with our lives like that. I will never let her get her hands on him a second time. Do you understand?"

Aware that she was talking to the Commander now and not her brother, Ellone squared her shoulders. She hated how he was making sense, hated how he was killing her hopes one after the other. "What if we went back farther than the war? To before Ultimecia ever showed up?"

"You still want to save her."

The deadpan reply sounded too much like an accusation, and not for the first time, Ellone wondered if he'd still be able to be this callous if he'd known his mother at all. "If there was a chance, then yes, I would."

Trying not to betray how disturbed he was by the thought of Ellone rewriting his history like that, Squall kept his voice even and calm. "The same limitations still apply. A few seconds, without communication. She had no magic for me to access."

"But if we could get Uncle Laguna to stay, if we could get her to the hospital in Baren Falls in time…” she trailed off, realizing she was grasping at straws even as she spoke the words.

"Even if you could do those things, it would change our paths in unpredictable ways. We would've grown up here in Winhill or in Esthar. Either way, we would never have met Edea and she would never have put us on the necessary path to win against Ultimecia. I wouldn't have gone to Garden. I would never have faced her in battle. You wouldn't have been protected by the White SeeDs. Loire might not have ended up as the President of Esthar. And all of this leaves Adel out of the equation."

Ellone dabbed at her eyes, Squall's every word cutting into her heart. For one horrible moment she could envision it exactly; Ultimecia finding and slaughtering her defenseless adoptive family the same way Adel had found and killed her birth parents. "So you're saying the wars were won with her death?"

"We were who we needed to be, where we needed to be, in order to win. Any other path could lead to our defeat. The smallest change could risk everything."

Releasing a tremulous sigh, Ellone moved to sit down at the kitchen table. Hyne above, why did he have to be right? It didn't help that he was standing right there in Raine's kitchen, looking so much like her, even sounding so much like her. She'd been the pragmatic and levelheaded type as well.

"Do you understand?" Squall reiterated, not reassured at all by Ellone's continued silence.

Looking up to meet her brother's gaze, Ellone nodded. "… I do."

"You can't ever take anyone back to the war again. We can't allow her to get a hold of you. We
can't give her even the smallest chance.”

"I know,” Ellone replied more firmly, shaking off the last of her hopes. "I thought I'd given up on preventing the wars and saving our family a long time ago, but last night… I just wish I could see her again. That Uncle Laguna could find happiness again. That you could meet her."

Squall frowned at the heartfelt words and the implication that Loire was anything other than happy. The man was always smiling and surrounded with people. Once more he was plagued with guilt. "…I'm sorry."

Taken off guard by the unexpected apology, Ellone looked up from the table and blinked her tears away. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Avoiding her gaze, Squall was sure she'd disagree if she had any idea of his true feelings and thoughts. He couldn't hold back the truth any longer, not after what she'd done for him. "I can't give you back what you lost. I can't be who you want me to be."

Fresh tears slid from Ellone's eyes as she pushed up from her chair. She enveloped her brother in a crushing hug, unable to stand his despondent expression for another second. "You said it best yourself. You're exactly who you need to be," she declared firmly, emphasizing her words with a squeeze. "The things I lost… None of that is your fault. I'm so sorry if I ever made you feel otherwise." Ignoring how he stiffened in her hold, she gave another squeeze just because she could. "I'm just grateful to have you in my life."

Pulling back, she looked him straight in the eye. "Just be yourself. That's more than enough for me."

Squall had heard those words before, and while people rarely meant them, Ellone seemed sincere enough. She was still grasping his shoulders firmly, waiting for some sign of acquiescence. He was unable to speak, unable to tell her things would work out the way she wanted. She only firmed her hold in response.

"I know it's hard for you to come here. That it's hard for you to trust people," she said past her tears. "But you can trust me."

"...I know I can."

Ellone smiled at the careful admission. "I can't promise I'll ever think of you any other way than as my little brother. No matter what you say or do, no matter how you feel about me or this place. It's that whole unconditional deal, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me." Her nose was starting to run, but she refused to let go of Squall until she got her point across. "I don't need you to behave in a certain way or to give me any special treatment. When you are happy and thriving, I'm happy. It's really that simple." She drew in a quivering breath. "Raine would've felt the same way, you know that, right?"

Frowning, Squall didn't know any such thing. His mother was dead. She didn't feel anything anymore. It was a pointless thought exercise to imagine what she might think of him. He waited for Ellone to inundate him with stories of Raine's undying love, but she only shook her head and smiled at him again.

"Such a brooder," she chided gently. "I just want you to understand. I love you. Not some idea of the perfect brother. Not even my memories of the little boy that used to follow me around." She tapped her finger against his chest. "You. The man you've become. I couldn't be more proud."
With those words, she stepped back and retrieved a piece of kitchen paper to blow her nose. "Hyne, just look at me. You must think me such a crybaby." Dabbing at her eyes with another bit of paper, she tossed it in the bin and looked his way with red-rimmed eyes and a dapper smile. "Well, we should probably get on with the dishes, shouldn't we?"

Squall nodded, at a loss for anything to say. He still felt the poke of her finger, the power of the word she'd invoked echoing in his thoughts. Love. So freely voiced and offered, expecting nothing in return. It had once been an abstract concept to him, something to treat with suspicion, but since Seifer's reappearance in his life, he couldn't dismiss the sentiment quite as easily as he had before.

Ellone took up her abandoned kitchen towel and looked at him expectantly, waving him towards the sink. He complied and together they worked through the dishes. The silence no longer felt as stifling, her company not quite as chafing. Above them the floorboards creaked as Seifer moved about the upper floor, the familiar cadence of his footfall an oddly reassuring sound. The man was probably packing.

It was a moment of peace, as he'd rarely known in his life. Not the silence before the storm, but the deep breath of relief that came after.

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[Baren Falls, Winhill, Thursday, 30th of October, 4:57 pm]

The sun was still warm as they said their goodbyes on the train platform at Baren Falls. Ellone's fingers were clutching on to Squall as she gave the man a firm squeeze, her lips forming a wide smile even as her eyes glistened. Seifer adjusted the strap of his duffel bag so it rested further up on his shoulder again. He'd expected she'd have trouble saying goodbye. They all knew chances were slim Squall would ever return here. Even though they both owed her so much, Winhill was too steeped in unpleasant reminders when it came to Squall's past. The last twenty four hours probably hadn't helped Squall's perception of the place in the slightest.

When Squall and Ellone drew apart, Seifer watched as her gaze lingered on Squall a moment longer before it met his own. He took a step closer and pulled her in for a hug. "Thanks," he spoke softly.

Firming her hold on Seifer, Ellone doubled down on her fight against the tears that pricked her eyes when she heard their train approaching in the distance. She'd already done enough crying that day and she was determined to see them off with a smile and nothing but happy feelings. "Don't be a stranger, you hear me?"

"I promise." Seifer gave her one last squeeze, before stepping back. "And call me next time you visit the palace."

Ellone nodded quickly, drawing courage from the prospect. "Of course. I'm always there for Uncle Laguna's New Year's party in any case. I'm sure you'll get an invitation this year as well."

"Really?" Seifer asked, smirking widely as he seized the opportunity to pull Squall to his side, hooking his arm around Squall's back. "Guess I'll be your plus one this year," he added, looking down into glaring grey-blues. The sight was too much to resist.

Blindsided, Squall froze into place when Seifer ambushed him with a brief peck to his lips, too quick for him to dodge gracefully. He pulled free with a frown, his self-consciousness only increasing when he spotted the blush on Ellone's cheeks. Just another minute and they'd be on the train with the relative privacy of anonymity, leading him to realize the deliberateness of Seifer's
"And so the flaunting begins," Ellone teased, hiding her smile. It was good to see a glimpse of their improved relationship, and even better to see her brother's almost embarrassed reaction. It was a great deal more heartwarming than the cold snubs he used to give Rinoa.

Seifer hummed in agreement, somewhat distracted by imagining Squall dressed in a suit for an upscale party. The high-pitched whine of brakes pulled him from his fantasy as the train pulled up next to them. Grabbing hold of Ellone's hand, he gave it one last squeeze. "Take care, Elle."

"You too." Watching the two men turn away to board the train, Ellone cleared the thickness that was settling in her throat and called out to them. "You two have a good time on your hunt!"

"Will do!" Seifer yelled over his back as he stepped onto the train.

Relieved to finally board the train that would take him away from Winhill, Squall nodded his goodbye to Ellone before following Seifer to their seats. Outside Ellone walked alongside the windows, waving at them even though the train hadn't started moving yet. Such a display would've annoyed him in the past, but after all she'd done for them, he felt she deserved more from him than to be dismissed with a scornful thought.

Smiling at Ellone's antics, Seifer skimmed over the numbers as they continued down the aisle. "This is us," he said, shoving his stuff up onto the overhead rack. "You can have the window seat," he added, nodding at the seat in question with a smirk. Ellone was still standing just at the other side of the glass, eagerly waving them off.

Squall let out a sigh and sat down by the window after stowing his things, resigned to humor Ellone in her overly zealous goodbye instead of ignoring her as he once would have. The seat next to him jostled as Seifer sat down and immediately crowded into his space to wave back at Ellone when the train started into motion. He gave her a final nod before she finally slipped from their view as the train gained speed.

Leaning back, he frowned when Seifer remained in the seat next to him, closer than either of their seats necessitated. There were two perfectly serviceable and unoccupied seats facing them. He looked beside him with a raised eyebrow.

Seifer shrugged, an easy smile on his lips. "Much more comfy this way. And I'll need a pillow." Settling into his seat, he brought down a hand to rest on Squall's thigh and spread his fingers in a loose hold.

Tensing as the heat of Seifer's hand seeped into his thigh, Squall suppressed the urge to shift away, uncomfortable with feeling even the smallest flicker of attraction in front of strangers.

It was an entirely different conundrum than his past experiences with Rinoa. Back then he hadn't cared much for her stolen touches in and of themselves, whoever was watching them be damned. The more she'd tried to claim him, the more uneasy he'd felt and the more he'd been criticized for his coldness. He understood the why of that better now. His current misgivings stemmed from a different source. He much preferred to keep his feelings private, and it was impossible for Seifer to touch him without stirring some manner of feeling. It cracked his exterior, making others privy to how affected he was. But perhaps that was exactly Seifer's intent.

Glancing at Seifer from the corner of his eyes, he was instantly met with a knowing smile, the bastard looking far too satisfied and unconcerned with his inner turmoil. Frowning, he slowly began to understand that this was probably what things would be like from here on out. Either he'd
learn to roll with the punches, or his stress levels would soar exponentially.

Seifer watched as Squall looked away again, the man's eyes briefly flitting over the other passengers in the car before looking out onto the stretching fields on the other side of the window. A small frown was still present on Squall's brow, but the stiffness that had claimed the man at his touch was starting to lessen. Squall was giving in and he'd be damned if it wasn't another turn on.

"Can't wait to have you all to myself again," he spoke lowly, his gaze dropping to the exposed skin at Squall's neck. He wanted to lean in and nibble at it, but knew without a doubt that'd be where Squall would draw the line, revoking all future thigh grabbing privileges.

Neck heating under Seifer's gaze, Squall turned to fix Seifer with a distrusting look. "The key word being wait."

"I know," Seifer complained, the image of Fu and Rai waiting for them at the inn quickly coming to mind. There'd be no time to sneak off to their room first and if they did, then so help them Hyne, Fu would track them down. Better not to introduce them to his new boyfriend mid-fucking.

Stifling a groan as more explicit fantasies asserted themselves, he pushed them all away. He wasn't about to sport a raging hard-on on a train, definitely not when any chance at relief was still hours away. He'd just have to get used to being constantly oversexed, just like Squall would have to get used to him constantly pestering the guy for kisses and touches in public. There was just no way around it with a boyfriend like Squall, launching his libido to unprecedented heights. Good thing Fu and Rai would be running interference soon, or they'd never emerge from the bedroom.

He glanced at Squall, the frown from earlier gone. So was the tenseness he'd felt from the man and it hadn't even taken that long. He couldn't believe it. Here they were, on the other side of it all. A couple. Not even in his wildest dreams had he thought something like that possible. He'd hoped desperately, but he'd never thought it could actually become his reality. Letting go of Squall's thigh, he took hold of the man's hand instead. He had no fucking clue why it made him feel both eager and calm at the same time, but he indulged the urge nonetheless. When Squall's gaze fell on him as expected, he looked ahead, a smile on his lips.

Squall's heart started beating faster at the most innocent touch yet. The mischievous bastard really was testing him, timing each new venture perfectly to weasel past his defenses. While there was nothing overtly flirty or sexual about this particular move, it didn't seem any less potent for it.

Allowing the touch, he turned to look out the window again in an attempt not to seem conspicuous, as if the entirety of his awareness wasn't intent on the warmth of Seifer's hand curled around his. The landscape flitted by his eyes unseen, Seifer's mere proximity making it impossible for him to focus on anything else.

Smirking broadly at Squall's taciturn permission, so very telling, Seifer drank in the moment before he moved his head to rest on his boyfriend's shoulder and closed his eyes. If Squall was allowed to fall asleep on top of him in the middle of a field, then he was definitely allowed to drift off like this.

Best perch ever.

~ 0 ~
The Stowaway

[Wendel Township, Obel Lake's Southern Shore, Thursday, 30th of October, 8:17 pm]

The walk from Wendel's small train station to the town's center was a short one, but Squall was grateful for the opportunity to stretch his legs after another long train ride. His shoulder still had a crick in it from where Seifer's weight had leaned on him. In the end he'd nodded off as well, resulting in a sideways slump that had been uncomfortable to wake up from when the train had arrived at its terminal station. Of course Seifer had suffered none of the consequences, having no doubt slept like a baby. He looked to the man beside him, unable to feel any ire when Seifer seemed in such good spirits.

"I've been here a fair number of times already. Usually meet up with Rai and Fu in this town. It isn't much to look at, but it's a great place to strike out from. None of the tourist traps like you'll find by the northern lake shore."

Squall nodded, looking about him. He'd been to the greater Obel Lake area a few times before, but he'd never spent the night in one of the townships dotted around the continent's largest freshwater lake. Wendel was larger than Winhill and far more lively even at this time of day. As they walked through the well-lit main street, several small inns, shops and pubs touted their business with large wooden plaques. The locals were out and about, looking to enjoy the mild autumn evening. Even though he hadn't been able to spot the lake during their walk through town, the evening breeze carried the scent of the water with it.

A thriving fishing and hunting industry, as well as the untamed beauty of the surrounding forests and mountains, had turned the once impoverished area into a prosperous travel destination, but Wendel seemed to have clung to its authentic roots and had escaped the fate of the northern townships. Streets paved with packed earth, chocobos tied up beside several of the establishments they passed, raucous laughter pouring out from busily attended pubs, racks of dried fish jerky lined up outside them. This was the Galbadia from Loire's stories, the president's travel journals partly at fault for Obel Lake's rising popularity. To Squall it seemed a town like any other, albeit with slightly more odors.

"After our hunts we usually celebrate at one of the local pubs. Think I've earned myself a serious hangover in every single one on this road," Seifer said with a smirk, proud of the achievement. "Guess we'll have to find a new way to celebrate this time around."

Glancing beside him to find a lewd expression on Seifer's face, Squall realized that the type of celebration the man had in mind was not meant to include Raijin and Fujin. He returned the once-over he received with an even look, determined to raise his immunity to such lechery. After all the innuendos and outright seduction, the bastard had better make good on his promises. He missed the seclusion of Seifer's apartment, the coming days offering little in the way of privacy. Just one night at the inn, and then it would be tents for the remainder of their trip.

Halting mid-thought, he stifled a groan at the realization that he was judging accommodations by how loudly one could have sex in them.

Smirking at the almost guilty expression on Squall's face, Seifer looked around him and breathed in deeply. He loved this place and the anticipation that came with it. Days of hanging out with his friends while roughing it. The lure of the hunt and the satisfaction of taking down prey. "Can't wait to be out on the trail tomorrow. Been cooped up for too long." He glanced sideways, his gaze dropping to Lion Heart's case. "We'll have to make up for our lack of training too. Burn through
some spells. Fit in a spar."

Squall eyed Seifer eagerly at the prospect. He'd gone far too long already without the rush of adrenaline that only Seifer could draw out. "I'm still ahead in our tally."

Grinning at Squall's audacity, Seifer felt even more impatient to face off against the man. "Not for long, Princess. I always fought better out in the wild."

Squall snorted at the age old excuse. "A good fighter adapts to the situation."

"And what if I said that I let you win at the palace just to get my rocks off?"

The infuriating retort had Squall keenly missing the feel of Lion Heart's weight in his hands. "Are you willing to put that theory to the test?"

"More than willing. You've always been more fun to fight when you're pissed off."

Unimpressed by the bastard's smirk, Squall vowed to rid Seifer of any delusions the man might harbor. The day he forfeited a spar in favor of sex was the day he threw away his gunblade. "Seems like you need more incentive to win," he deadpanned, determined to make Seifer pay for that bold-faced lie of his in the only language the man would understand. "First to yield loses. As for who gets their rocks off... Winner's choice."

"You planning on blue-balling me?" Seifer asked, surprised by the gumption of Squall's bet. Not so long ago the man had blanched at the mere idea of a game of Triple Triad determining whether they'd indulge in sex or blowjobs.

"I'm saying winner takes all," Squall baited, meeting Seifer's gaze. "Not up to the challenge?"

"Oh, I'm up to the challenge alright," Seifer said in amusement. There was no fucking way he'd let Squall win now. "I'll make you take my cock, come inside you, then leave you hanging. You reap what you sow, Princess."

Looking ahead with a snort, Squall fought to control the satisfied tug at the corner of his lips. He'd go all out, fight however dirty he had to, until he had Seifer eating his words. Preferably while the man was on his knees before him.

Wondering what dirty thoughts were running through Squall's head to make the man look that eager, Seifer felt the urge grow to have his way with Squall then and there. If they weren't so close to having their own room for the night, he would have led Squall down another alleyway and this time he wouldn't have let the man get away. He was still grinning at the fantasy when his gaze landed on a pub he knew all too well. He jostled Squall's side. "They have a picture up in there of Fu holding the head of a supersized Grendel. The spoils of our trip last autumn," he said, nodding his head at the worn building. "She got shitfaced, enough so to let the owner take the picture. They stuffed and mounted the Grendel's head too. Bet it's still up there on the wall, right next to the picture. Don't remind her, or she'll take off your head as well."

Squall quirked an eyebrow at the unlikely trophy. Grendels had no body parts worth scavenging, so to lob off one's head and carry it all the way back to Wendel seemed like a peculiar endeavor. "A bounty?"

"Yup, just about enough to cover our trip. That and bragging rights," Seifer said with a relaxed smile. In the two years he'd been coming here with Fu and Rai, they'd managed to make themselves known in the area. "We'll ask around tonight, see if there are any new bounties going around."
Squall nodded, unsurprised that the local bounty business was still alive and kicking. Out in the more remote parts of Galbadia people were far more likely to hire a cheap, local fighter than to commission a Garden contract. Areas like Obel Lake had no regular sweep contracts with Garden, something that was only possible because most of the nearby monster populations had little or no magic to speak of. Considering Seifer's trouble with junctioning after the war, that was most likely the reason Seifer and his friends had chosen Obel Lake to begin with.

Deeper into the primordial woodlands however things became a lot more hazardous. Even so, SeeDs were only rarely called in and when they were, it was usually when something dangerous had left its den to venture too close to the towns. "I could check with Quistis as well," he offered, curious to see how the local grapevine compared to SeeD intel.

Seifer quirked an eyebrow at the tempting prospect. "To see if there's anything more feisty in the area? I like your thinking, Commander."

"I'll call her after dinner," Squall offered, fairly certain Quistis wouldn't protest this time around. The woman was on a mission to lure Seifer back to Garden, so if there was anything A-rank roaming the area, they'd soon know about it.

"That's The Stowaway up ahead. Second inn on the right," Seifer announced when he spotted their regular inn. It had been only a few months since he'd last met up with his friends there, but he quickened his pace all the same. "Decent food, decent beds. Fu got us a room there. Double bed. They serve meals and drinks in the tavern on the ground floor. Rai and Fu might be waiting there, so prepare for your grand entrance," he added with a wink.

Squall tried not to visibly tense at the prospect as they approached The Stowaway. Seifer's good cheer suggested he was overthinking things, but now that he was actually here, on the cusp of meeting Fujin and Raijin, he couldn't help but question the wisdom of accompanying Seifer for this part of the trip. The last time he'd seen them was inside the Lunatic Pandora. Now he was intruding on a reunion of friends; none of whom had ever been his friends to begin with.

As they walked into the small reception area of the inn, a large double door stood open to their right, emitting a din of conversation and laughter, along with the smell of too many human bodies in an enclosed space. There seemed to be a merry atmosphere, bawdy enough to rival the neighboring pubs. A bright-faced woman came out to greet them, her apron and clanging ring of keys announcing her as the innkeeper.

"Welcome back to The Stowaway! I've been expecting you," she said cheerfully, immediately moving behind a small wooden desk to rustle in a cabinet with even more keys. "Your friends have settled in for a while now. The small one's none too pleased with your tardiness either. They're waiting in there," she relayed with a nod toward the adjacent room.

"I'll just have to treat her to some of your homebrew. You don't get stuff like that in Esthar," Seifer said, putting on a charming smile.

The innkeeper looked pleased with his words as she placed their room key into his hand. "I've put you up in 203, nice fresh bedding as always. If you're hungry, we've got some good beef pie tonight, and our Obel fish stew is still the best you'll find in all of Wendel," she rattled off in a pleasant tone, her Galbadian accent as thick as they got. "Just holler should you need anything."

"We will," Seifer said, nodding at the woman. If she was at all curious or scandalized about him and Squall sharing a room with a double bed, she didn't betray it in the slightest. He sent her one last warm smile before eagerly walking over to the open doors that led to the tavern, his eyes searching the room for his friends. About four tables down Fu and Rai were right in the middle of
their dinner, their half empty plates and glasses placed in front of them.

"Sweet Cheeks, Beefcake!" he yelled out with a wicked smirk, startling them from their meal. "Miss me?" They immediately looked up to find him; Raijin with his usual dopey smile, and Fujin with an alacrity that betrayed her impatience. The moment their gazes trailed from him to Squall was fucking priceless.

Following Seifer further into the tavern, Squall faltered when the looks of shock on Raijin and Fujin's faces failed to soften into something more welcoming. Either unaware or unintimidated, Seifer walked up to his friends and sat down at their table with the smuggest smile he'd seen on the man yet. The brief silence in the room lifted, conversations resuming after Seifer's boisterous entrance, but both Fujin and Raijin had yet to speak a word in greeting. Fujin's one red eye was locked on him in an unyielding stare.

When Squall didn't immediately join him, Seifer looked over his shoulder and frowned at the tight expression that had found its way onto the man's features. "Come on, sit down," he said, nodding at the chair next to him.

"I'm not sure I should."

Seifer looked back over at Fujin. Her gaze had shifted to him, but there was none of her usual warmth. "Shit, Fu. Ease up." He indicated the chair next to him. "And you, sit down," he repeated over his shoulder.

As Squall reluctantly sat down beside him, he watched Fujin's good eye follow the man's every move. He had no fucking idea what her problem was, but one thing was for fucking sure, he wasn't going to put up with it. Next to her, Raijin stirred in his seat, the man looking uncomfortable as hell.

"Hey man, good to see you." Raijin cleared his throat before looking over at Squall. "You too."

The loud thud underneath the table and the instant grimace on Raijin's face told Seifer that Fujin hadn't outgrown her habit of physical punishment yet.

"HIM. HERE. WHY?" Fujin demanded tersely.

Seifer narrowed his eyes. "I told you I was bringing someone along."

Fujin snorted loudly at the preposterous suggestion that Squall was the aforementioned boyfriend. "LEFT YOU. DEAD," she accused, scowling at the frown her words caused on the commander's features. If Squall had wanted to be treated with respect, he should have shown them the same courtesy back when she'd released Ellone in exchange for leniency. How wrong she'd been.

"He left to save the fucking world," Seifer spat, tensing further. "We'd all be dead if it wasn't for him."

Fujin looked between the two men, unwilling to accept any excuses for how Squall and the rest of the gang had left Seifer behind. Seifer had been a bloodied mess, on the very verge of death. "FORGIVE, HOW?"

"Nothing to forgive. He didn't start the war. Either you stop attacking him, or I promise this is not going to end well."

Ignoring Seifer's tirade, Fujin scrutinized the deeper frown that had appeared on Squall's brow. She hadn't missed the furtive glances, the way he'd flinched at her words, all further proving his culpability. It did nothing to placate her. It took a lot of gall to show up alongside Seifer like this.
and to assume that they would just look past everything that had happened.

Alerted by Fujin's quickly narrowing gaze, Raijin cleared his throat and interceded by waving over a waiter. "She needs a triple scotch. Neat," he said, indicating Fujin with a nod of his head, then looked at Squall. "He'll take a—" He cocked an eyebrow, waiting for Squall's request.

"...Water," came the deadpan reply.

Nodding, Raijin pointed at himself and Seifer. "Whiskies for us." He looked at Seifer and Squall. "Quite the surprise, ya know."

Ignoring Raijin, Seifer kept his eyes trained on Fujin and leaned in close. "Anything he did to me, I did a hundred times worse to him, so just lay off."

"SHE DID. NOT YOU," Fujin corrected, unable to stand Seifer talking about his part in the war like that. She had seen Seifer's guilt eat away at him, had seen it cut deeper than any of his physical injuries.

"I don't care who was to blame for what I did. It happened. And in case you fucking forgot, you were on the wrong side of the war just like me. Show some fucking respect."

"FOLLOWED YOU. PROTECT."

Seifer reeled with disbelief. If it hadn't been for his two friends, he wouldn't have survived, but that didn't mean they could treat Squall like this. "Fuck! It's in the past. Either you move beyond this or the hunt is off."

Having trouble reining in her anger, Fujin clenched her hands. The way Seifer was defending Squall and the way Squall was perpetually glancing at Seifer made her gorge rise. What Seifer had told her over the phone couldn't possibly be true.

"BOYFRIEND?"

Seifer held her gaze with an unwavering intensity. "Yes."

The woman's one eye narrowed. "Rinoa?"

"They broke it off half a year ago." Even though it wasn't really any of her business, Seifer wanted her to understand. He'd expected her approval; not whatever this was.

"COUPLE. HOW LONG?"

Seifer shrugged, not really wanting to give Fujin even more to throw in his face. "Couple of weeks."

Dissecting the dart of Squall's gaze and the brief twitch to the man's frown, Fujin was quick to call Seifer out on his bullshit. "TRUTH," she demanded.

"Fuck," Seifer cursed, leaning back in his chair. "Couple of days." There was no way he was going to admit they'd only made the official decision that very same day. "What the fuck is up with you? What's with the interrogation?"

"PROTECT."

Seifer rolled his eyes. "I don't need protection." At the woman's incredulous snort, Seifer felt close to losing it. "What would I even need protection from? Squall? That's fucking ridiculous, Fu."
Refraining from a retort, Fujin tapped her fingers against the table. If Seifer wasn't going to give her any straight answers, then she'd have to try Squall. "INTENTIONS?" she demanded, looking straight at the man.

"Fuck!" Seifer swore loudly, not giving Squall any chance of answering her preposterous question. He was officially pissed off, only a second away from losing his shit. "There's no fucking way you're doing this."

"SQUALL. YOUR WEAKNESS. ALWAYS."

It had always been obvious, even back when they'd been no more than cadets. The intense way Seifer had always looked at Squall, the way he'd always granted the boy his attention above everyone else had been a dead giveaway. The derision Seifer had subjected Squall to back then had been a thinly veiled cover, but she'd never dared to call her friend out on it. When Seifer had finally announced his sexuality to them last year, she hadn't been surprised in the least. But even knowing all this, there was no way she could approve. No matter how Seifer felt, Squall would never be good enough.

"HIM. NO WAY," she said, shaking her head. She pinned Seifer down with a fierce gaze, needing him to face the truth. "SQUALL, END WAR. ONLY GOAL." Squall had always been a man of duty above all else. That's why she'd foolishly decided to trust him in the first place. "FOUGHT YOU. DESTROYED YOU," she said, the distress of the memory seeping into her voice. "NO COMPASSION. NO LOVE."

Seifer pushed up from his chair, wishing he could somehow unhear Fujin's words. Anger and pain warred in his chest, but one thing was certain. He couldn't stand to be in her company any longer. Picking up his luggage, he turned on his heels and strode away.

Unsurprised by Seifer's angry departure, Squall knew better than to call the man back. He'd watched the entire confrontation unfold with an increasingly heavy conscience, unable to blame Fujin for her blunt opinions when he mostly shared them. Turning back to Seifer's friends, he drew some consolation from the fact that Raijin at least seemed willing to take his presence in stride. The man looked more concerned than anything, but Fujin was still regarding him with open dislike.

"I'll talk to him," he announced, standing up despite Fujin's disbelieving snort. He refused to come between Seifer and his friends. Leaving his luggage by the table, he ignored the sharp feel of their gazes as he left the tavern.

Stepping outside into the chill evening air, he was overcome by a sense of déjà vu. A small distance away, Seifer had dropped his luggage onto the road and was kneading his forehead in a visible effort to calm down. Walking up to the man, he hoped he wouldn't inadvertently cross any of Seifer's boundaries this time. A glance was all he received before Seifer looked away again.

Letting out a curse, Seifer hated how fucking messed up everything had become. Fujin treating Squall like that, throwing such shit at him... It was nothing like the amused surprise and awe he'd expected. He grit his teeth. "I didn't fucking see this coming."

"I should have," Squall spoke into the cutting tension, lingering just outside of Seifer's reach.

"Why? Don't tell me you actually agree with any of that crap."

Squall tried not to frown. Despite Winhill, it seemed that Seifer still had a stubbornly huge blind spot when it came to his part in the war. "She's not wrong," he stated evenly. "I did what she..."
accuses me of."

Refusing to acknowledge Squall's words, Seifer looked away. "You don't mean that."

Squall forced himself to speak despite the uncharacteristic lack of emotion to Seifer's reply. "It's the truth. I won't let you push your friends away because of it."

Seifer shook his head. "Adel was on you right away. There was no time for you to stop."

It was a tempting excuse, but Squall refused to take the easy way out. If he wanted Seifer to truly accept him, then the man had to accept all of him, his worst mistakes included. Anything less wouldn't cut it. "A Curaga doesn't take long to cast," he countered with a shake of the head, his throat constricting. He looked back at the inn, to where the man's two protective friends waited. "I owe them a debt. They saved you when I didn't. When I should have."

"My life wasn't yours to save. You don't owe them anything," Seifer retorted immediately. After D-District he couldn't blame Squall for anything at all.

Squall winced at the words that betrayed just how lowly Seifer valued his own life, even now. "Your life should've been a priority from the start," he said firmly, stepping closer and willing Seifer to face him. "I failed you. You need to accept that fact."

Frustrated at the hurt that was steadily building in his chest, Seifer took a deep breath. Back when Squall had fought him with a steely-eyed gaze, it hadn't fazed him in the slightest. Under Ultimecia's influence, he'd been crazed with the determination to win and hadn't given his old sparring partner any leeway himself. It was only now that he was finally starting to feel the sting of Squall's past lack of faith. "What difference does it make? It won't change anything."

"If you can't acknowledge I failed you, I can't ever get your forgiveness."

Searching Squall's gaze at the quietly spoken admission, Seifer realized that the man was being serious. He recalled Squall's heated words back at Ellone's place; the way he'd spoken about saving him then as well. He wanted to repeat that Squall hadn't done anything that required his forgiveness, but everything about Squall's demeanor told him the opposite was true. Squall needed this, as much as he'd needed Squall's faith in him. He took a step closer, the words that would absolve Squall rising to his lips. "I for—"

"Don't," Squall deadpanned, hating that Seifer would placate him over something as important as this. "I don't want empty words," he warned with a frown. "However you feel in the end, I can handle it."

Seifer fell silent at Squall's words. He couldn't think of anything to say to make Squall think otherwise. There was nothing left to add when Squall wouldn't accept his forgiveness nor the simple fact that his life hadn't been the man's responsibility in the first place.

Forcing himself to relax when Seifer didn't say anything else, Squall drew in a deep breath and looked back to the inn. "We should go back inside."

Following Squall's gaze, Seifer wasn't eager to return to his friends' side. He wanted them to be able to hang out as usual and for them to accept Squall, but he was fresh out of goodwill after how Fujin had treated Squall. "I'm not going to play nice if she talks to you like that again."

"I don't need you to defend me," Squall said firmly, not about to point out he'd already heard far worse from Seifer. "She's concerned. Give her time." Softening his tone, he added, "We needed time as well."
Realizing the truth to Squall's words, Seifer sighed. "Shit, can't you let me take the easy way out just once?"

Squall raised an eyebrow at the self-pitying line. "I thought you said I was going too soft on you," he reminded as he turned on his heels. "Let's go."

Running a hand through his hair, Seifer steeled himself before picking up the luggage he'd dropped and following Squall inside. He should've guessed the man would force him to deal with this, just as with everything else. He couldn't help but feel childishly peeved as he was led back inside the tavern, to the table he'd stormed away from.

Raijin looked subdued, and Fujin like she could definitely do with the triple scotch placed in front of her. As they walked over, neither of the pair stirred. They just watched their approach in silence. The stern and foreboding glint to Fujin's eyes had lessened at least. Letting out a heavy sigh, he sat back down at the table and leaned back into his chair. "So. He thinks you're right. I don't, but he does. So here we are."

Fujin quirked an eyebrow and looked over at Squall. She hadn't expected Squall to try and intercede on their behalf, let alone succeed. If she'd learned anything from her past fights with Seifer, it was that they both needed a long time to cool their heads afterwards. She frowned at the illogic of Squall's actions. If the man agreed with her even remotely, then what did he stand to gain from convincing Seifer to stay? How could he even bring himself to sit there, expecting their forgiveness? Growing certain all over again that his ass wasn't worth their time of day, she grit her teeth and held her tongue. Raijin was eyeing her nervously, but she knew Seifer wouldn't stick around a second time if she said what was truly on her mind.

"UNDERSTOOD," she relented grudgingly.

Seifer didn't say anything in return. The awkward silence that fell around them was unlike any of their usual interactions. After the war there'd been plenty of strained silences, but over time they'd turned into companionable ones again. He sighed, hating to think back on that time and just how much he owed the pair. He knew better than to disregard their concern for him, but there was no way he'd relent in this. They owed Squall everything. Eyeing the tumbler of whiskey with an annoyed frown, he wished he could take a long draught. This was going to be way harder than he'd imagined. With a brisk move, he placed his glass in front of Raijin and waved down the waiter.

"Water," he ordered when the man came over. Watching as one of Fujin's eyebrows rose high again, he waited for the waiter to leave. "Gave it up," he said with a shrug.

Not missing the way Seifer's gaze lingered on the glass he'd refused, Fujin suspected there had to be a very good reason why the man had laid off the booze. He'd always had a weakness for the stuff and when he'd been staying with them just after the war it had quickly become his way of dealing with anything that cut too close to home. Those had been some of the hardest moments to witness. That and the man's heavy guilt, even if he'd never spoken about it. They hadn't even known if he'd pull through at first, the man's mind trapped in the past, reliving memories of the war. She wanted Squall to know, wanted to make him feel just a fraction of the heavy burden Seifer had carried with him every day since the war. About to lift her glass, she thought better of the impulse and stayed her hand. She'd stand by Seifer's side. Always.

Unable to take the heavy silence any further, Raijin cleared his throat. "So, erm, been a while, ya know." He'd never really spent any time with Squall in the past, so he had absolutely no clue how to talk to the man. "You still at Balamb?"

When three gazes settled on him with varying degrees of friendliness and hostility, Squall battled
the age old instinct to simply walk away. "I'm still based there," he replied, skirting the issue of his current lack of accommodation.

"Sounds like Garden is doing well, ya know. Always hear about SeeDs being called in. Must be making a fortune."

Unsure what to do with such a general statement, Squall forced himself to make an effort. "We do well enough."

"Same here. Kept busy, still do mercenary stuff. Odd jobs for the local construction companies as well."

Squall nodded. "Seifer told me."

When no more words were forthcoming, Raijin realized this was going to be quite a different trip to what he'd imagined when they'd first set out from home. One of the world's most taciturn men accompanying them. A man who also happened to be the world's most renowned fighter. And Seifer's boyfriend apparently. He downed a good third of his whiskey.

Regarding Raijin with a stern eye, Fujin plucked the glass of whiskey from his hand and placed it off to the side, along with the other two glasses of alcohol. "RESPECT," she said, nodding at Seifer.

Surprised by Fujin's choice, Seifer felt some of his resentment at her earlier behavior start to slip away. She'd always supported him no matter what, and as Squall had pointed out, she'd need time to adjust. "None of you have to stop drinking on my account," he stated plainly.

Fujin nodded tersely, while Raijin tapped his fingers on the table, the man clearly uncertain of what to do. Taking pity on his two friends, he picked a harmless topic for now. He'd go insane if he'd have to put up with this strained silence for much longer. "You reserved the chocobos?"

"Yeah, sorted it out this afternoon. They're all ready to go. Waiting for us at the stables."

"So we'll head out early?"

"Yeah, man," Raijin agreed. "Just need a plan of attack."

"No rumors yet?"

"There are a few that lead to an area up west, but no bounties."

"Squall will check in with Garden. See if they have any intel we can use."

Quirking an eyebrow at Seifer's casual mention of Garden, Raijin figured the two had to have come to an arrangement somehow. Either Garden knew, but didn't care about Seifer and his posse, or more likely, Squall was keeping his current company a secret. He nodded, trusting Seifer's judgment. "We'll play it by ear then. See where the morning takes us."

"AFFIRMATIVE."

"We brought along some gear for you," Raijin added, looking at Squall. "A rifle and skinning knife."

Grateful for the neutral conversation after all the tension, Squall nodded his thanks.

"I'll show you how to use it," Seifer supplied smoothly, the corners of his lips lifting slightly.
Sending Seifer an even look, Squall was certain there was a stab at his ineptitude in that offer somewhere. He remembered the arrangement Seifer had told him about well enough; how the worst hunter ended up with cooking duty.

At Fujin's quirked eyebrow and Squall's silent warning not to run his mouth, Seifer had to elaborate. "He's never hunted game before, never even skinned an animal. You're looking at our brand new chef."

"That smirk doesn't inspire much faith, ya know," Raijin said with a shake of his head.

"Don't worry. If we end up starving because of these two, they'll just have to make it up to us."

Raijin let out a low chuckle, even more amused when he heard movement underneath the table and spotted the grimace of pain on Seifer's face.

Recovering quickly from the pain radiating up from his shin, Seifer smirked even more widely. "Keep the reprimands to your side of the table, Fu. You don't want to feel the wrath of my new guardian." He'd forever flaunt the fact, regardless of his audience.

Blinking at the wildly bizarre remark, stated with pride of all things, Raijin quickly kept up the banter when he spotted Fujin's one eye twitch with annoyance. "We'll hold you accountable, ya know, if it isn't edible." Seifer's look of mischief warned him Squall's cooking wouldn't be that much of a step up from Fujin's. "No offense or nothin'," he said, turning his gaze to Squall. "Seifer just isn't selling it very well."

"You know I'll take pity on all your asses and cook for us after the first bout of food poisoning. Maybe even after the first night of tossing our dinner into the bushes."

"Hey man, I can hold my own. You've never complained about any of my dishes," Raijin said emphatically.

"Only your old lady's," Seifer countered, his glee resurfacing from teasing the pair. "I guess we'll find out who's the worse cook." Next to him, Squall looked mightily unimpressed. "You haven't cooked for me yet, have you?" he baited, addressing the man with a broadening smile. "And no, coffee doesn't count."

Giving Seifer an even look, Squall was feeling less and less embarrassed at the prospect of presenting Seifer with his cooking. At this rate, the bastard deserved a case of food poisoning. Even so, the exchange would've heartened him if it hadn't been for Fujin's silence. The woman sat quietly observing them, making him feel uncomfortable under the weight of her scrutiny.

"Who knows, maybe you'll surprise us," Seifer continued smoothly. "I'm sure it can't be that bad. Hell, he might even fake liking it, if it would make Squall more likely to join him for some rough fun in their tent afterwards. He grinned as an idea occurred to him. "How about a new rule to spice things up," he started, already looking forward to putting his cunning plan into effect. "The first one to down the day's prey gets to choose the chef."

"DEAL."

"Whatever floats your boat, ya know?"

Squall narrowed his eyes, Fujin's deliberate tone a tad more worrisome than Raijin's happy shrug. It had been a long time since the posse had ganged up on him at Seifer's request, let alone over something as inane as Seifer wanting to poke fun at his cooking. He had no doubt all three would appoint him as the evening's chef in the event of his failure. He let out an unintimidated snort.
"Whatever."

Unable to tear her gaze away from the wide grin that grew on Seifer's face, Fujin was more than a little apprehensive about the way Seifer was devouring Squall with his eyes, as if the man was dinner rather than the hoped for chef. She tried not to glower when Seifer asked if Squall was hungry, immediately making suggestions for what they could order when the commander nodded.

It felt scandalous to watch Seifer fawn over Squall like that, but the most infuriating part was the bland expressions that Squall met Seifer with. Was Seifer so blinded by his old obsession that he would just willingly take whatever scraps of attention Squall felt like doling out? Baffled, she wished Seifer had warned her beforehand and had tried to make her understand. None of it made any sense. When Raijin's large hand came to rest on her leg in a silent show of support, she wanted to push it aside as usual, hating unnecessary displays of affection, only she couldn't bring herself to.

"So, what've you been up to?"

Pulled from her thoughts by Seifer's question, she refocused her attention on the conversation at hand. A waiter was walking away from their table with another food order, which meant that she'd have to sit through the unlikely couple's dinner. Stifling a groan, she replied, "PRACTICE."

"Weapon's practice? Stamina? Or kicking Raijin's ass?"

"RAIJIN EASY," Fujin said with a stern frown, ignoring the snort that sounded next to her. "WEAPONS."

Seifer nodded, his eyes lighting up. "Which reminds me. I got your new babies with me." He knew Fujin had been looking forward to getting her hands on the smaller pair of dual-wielded chakram since the moment she'd shown him her rough sketch. "Time to get good with both hands." At the eager look that broke through Fujin's tight expression, he leaned down to fish the leather wrapped chakram out of his bag and handed them to her. He watched as she slowly unwrapped and revealed the weapons he'd been rushing to finish just days ago.

Running her fingers along the flawless circles made of steel, Fujin held her breath at the intricate inlay. An azure and navy blue pattern swirled seamlessly along the inner rim of both chakram. The outer edges were sleek and spikeless, yet dangerously sharp. They were simple, but beautiful, while light and small. Exactly what she'd wanted. She nodded her gratitude.

"You're welcome, Sweet Cheeks."

For once Fujin let the nickname slide even if the weapons were an obvious ploy to get her to lower her guard. "IMPRESSED," she spoke at length. Seifer's skill was impeccable. It was hard to believe he had only been Arc's apprentice for less than two years. He was a natural, and judging by the way he talked about his trade with pride, he'd finally found his place in life. Nothing like the endless complaints they'd had to suffer through during their time at Garden. "NEW BLADE?"

Shaking his head, Seifer smiled. "Still working on the technical drawings. Haven't managed much since Squall showed up," he said, sending Squall a roguish smirk. "He's been staying at my place."

A crease returned on Fujin's brow at the lechery lurking in that statement. Even worse was what Seifer had actually said. "HOW?"

"It's quite simple, Fu. He brought over some of his stuff and slept in my bed."

About to pop a fuse, Fujin groused out her reply. "IDIOT." The idea of Seifer and Squall sharing Seifer's apartment, being intimate and Hyne knew what else, just refused to form in her mind. Ever
since coming out, Seifer had proven himself to be a hedonist through and through. He would not be satisfied if he wasn't getting laid. She glanced at Squall, unimpressed by the discomfited expression that met her. "ANSWER," she demanded of the blond.

Thoroughly enjoying having shocked his friend, Seifer embellished the truth. "We stumbled into each other at a nightclub, made amends. One thing led to another."

Fujin snorted at the thought of Seifer putting the moves on Squall at a club. "RIDICULOUS." She looked over at Squall, knowing he'd at least refute if it wasn't true. "CONFIRM?"

More than a little uncomfortable with the turn the conversation was taking, Squall cursed Seifer's wagging tongue. "More or less," he forced himself to reply, unwilling to either lie or elaborate.

"ABSURD," Fujin said with a shake of the head.

Privately agreeing with Fujin's assessment, Raijin was grateful for the interruption when their waiter stepped up to their table and served two plates of fish stew. He would normally respond to Seifer's outrageous statements by taking the man down a notch, retorting in kind, but his brain froze up at the mere thought of Seifer and Squall shacking up together. It didn't seem real.

He couldn't blame Fujin for her outrage. She'd never forgiven Squall or the others who had fought Seifer at the end. She'd sat by Seifer's bedside for weeks when the man had been healing, reassuring him as much as she could with her mere presence. He'd often been kept awake by Seifer's pained voice next door when the man had spoken through fever fuelled dreams.

It was beyond surreal to watch the natural ease with which Seifer and Squall interacted now. As if they'd always been like this, as if there hadn't been any animosity between them throughout their teenage years. There was a definite fondness in Seifer's eyes as the two men started to dig into their food. "Did you two ever, ya know, hook up back at Garden?"

Amused Raijin had the guts to even ask the question, Seifer was going to give as good as he got. "Rivals by day, fuck buddies by night? That what you're asking?"

"I guess," Raijin said, curious enough to ignore Fujin's glare.

"Would've been a sweet fucking life, huh, Princess?" Seifer sent Squall a lopsided smile, only to chuckle at the downward curl to Squall's lips. He looked back over at Raijin. "But no, we didn't. Never put my hands on him. Wish he'd fucking seduced me back then, but no such luck. Guess it's good he came along again when I was able to fully appreciate his ass."

Eyebrows twitching at the crude language, Squall was unamused by Seifer painting him in the role of the seducer. He didn't know what the bastard's intentions were, but now Fujin and Raijin were looking at him as if he'd sprouted a second head. "Tone it down."

"Sure thing, Love," Seifer said, about to burst at the seams with glee.

"Don't call me that," Squall warned lowly, reminded of the last time Seifer had used the nickname, when everything had still been so raw after their night on Avalanche. Just like then, it was no more than an insincere ploy to get a rise out of others. "This isn't a joke to me."

Alerted by the man's chill tone, Seifer was quick to backtrack. "Shit, I know, Princess." Of course Squall would hate him playing their relationship for laughs. The man was nothing if not serious, even about this. About them. A thrill of realization shot through him at the thought. That was why Squall had been so pissed off the other time as well. He'd been joking, when Squall might have been looking for something real.
Squall glanced Seifer's way only to be met by a broad smile. His annoyance was quick to deflate in the face of such disarming cheek. He ducked his eyes back down to his food, uncomfortably aware of the gazes that had followed their exchange with rapt attention. Feigning indifference, he resumed eating.

Reeling at what had just transpired, Fujin couldn't take her eyes off the two former rivals. Somehow the use of those nicknames hadn't ended up with the pair of them chasing each other down with their gunblades. That's how it had worked in the past, the nickname 'Princess' one of Seifer's surefire ways to get a rise out of Squall. Today it hadn't caused much of a stir, if any. The much more intimate nickname 'Love' had been the one to get the brunet's ire going, and then only because Seifer had said it in jest. It was too much for her to take in.

Seeing the shock plain on Fujin's features. Raijin cleared his throat nervously. "Man, I shouldn't have asked, but it's just, ya know, you seem very familiar and all."

"WHIPPED," Fujin chimed in loudly, causing Raijin to cringe.

Seifer shrugged, unfazed by the accusation he'd already heard a couple of times by now. "And what if I am?"

Fujin furrowed her brow, not liking where this was going at all. For Seifer to say something like that meant things had to be serious between the two men indeed. But how had that happened? When? They'd only been together for a couple of days.

"NO DRINKING. WHY?" she demanded, suddenly very intrigued by the correlation between Seifer's new resolution and the man by his side.

"Because I can be a bastard when I'm drunk."

"AGREED," Fujin said with an assessing eye. "RECENT?"

"Well guessed. I'm done being an ass to the people I care about. That and spooning Squall in bed is a thousand times better than passing out in a ditch somewhere. Smells way better too."

"Shit, you've got it bad, man," Raijin said with a low chuckle.

Squall set down his fork in favor of pinching the bridge of his nose. "Seifer."

"What? It's the truth."

Faced with Seifer's far too relaxed attitude, Squall realized the brief peck in front of Ellone had been no more than a tame prelude. His stomach flipped uncomfortably every time the man opened his mouth. How could Seifer be so confident when his every word was met with incredulity and scorn? Fujin's opinion of him only seemed to worsen with each statement.

Fujin watched closely as Squall forewent any further complaints, the man still not deviating from his uncharacteristically tolerant reactions. At least she wouldn't have to endure this for much longer, both Seifer and Squall's plates nearly empty. It was torture to sit through and Seifer's tactic was so transparent she almost rolled her eyes. By inundating them with the most outrageous remarks he could think of, he was trying to get them used to the idea of him and Squall together. As if that would ever happen.

She'd just have to find a way to deal with it all that wouldn't end up with her pushing Seifer away. There was no way she would jeopardize her friendship with him over Squall. And Seifer still seemed confident they would have a good time, had already been talking about their hunt as if
everything would proceed as planned. Just with the slight difference that Squall would be present for it all. She tried to subdue her bitterness at this new addition to their trip, to what was supposed to be their time. She'd just have to ignore the man as much as she could.

"So, what's new with you guys?" Seifer asked in between two mouthfuls of food. "Did you get that fishing boat you were talking about?"

"Nah, man, couldn't find anything worth while. Only rust buckets or ones where the timber was rotting up. Gonna save up a bit more and try again next year."

"Still planning on taking that trip round the northern isles?"

"Yeah, mapped out a route and everything. Just have to get the boat."

"Well, good luck. Can't wait to come see it."

"You'll have to drop by Dollet sometime soon, ya know. See what I've done with the place."

"What, you managed to fit in even more shelves?" Seifer asked with a teasing smirk, looking over to Fujin for confirmation. Sure enough, the woman rolled her one eye and nodded. Their place had always been cramped, but somehow Raijin always managed to fit in another shelf for his ever increasing collection of tools, materials and trinkets.

"FIVE," Fujin said with a huff, causing Raijin to scratch at the back of his neck in embarrassment.

Squall tuned out Raijin's excuses as he quickly finished the last few bites of his meal. It was the perfect opportunity to duck out and catch a moment of reprieve. Seifer could probably do with some time alone with his friends, and the less he had to listen to the man's scandalous remarks, the better. He moved to push up from his chair. "I'll give Quistis that call."

"Wait." Halting Squall by the shoulder before the man was fully out of his seat, Seifer tugged Squall close enough to plant a kiss on unsuspecting lips. He smiled as Squall stood awkwardly frozen before remembering to straighten all the way. "Say hi for me," he said with a smirk, unrepentant.

Smoothing over the slight frown that had made its way onto his brow, Squall didn't dare glance Fujin and Raijin's way as he turned away from the table. Damn that bastard for making him feel like a blushing wallflower. How was he supposed to handle this for several days in a row? Would he just grow numb to it in the end, as he had with the nicknames? Little chance of that, considering Seifer's kisses still managed to set his stomach aflutter.

He gave his scowl free reign the moment he was out of their sight, adding speed to his walk out to the street. The moment he emerged outside, he took a deep breath of the fresh evening air and tried to loosen the tension that had crept into his back and shoulders. Fujin's disapproval was like a physical force, pushing him out of the room.

Reaching for his phone with a sigh, he huffed at the thought that a phone call with Quistis was the more relaxing option and started thumbing through the multitude of notifications that had apparently come through the moment they'd arrived in Wendel. There was a message from Ellone, asking if they'd arrived okay, and several messages from Loire that he didn't bother reading. Rinoa had sent one too, asking for an update. Thumbing to the next message, he frowned when his gaze landed on Seifer's name.

- Message from Seifer / 8:28 am / Come back right fucking now. Don't you dare fucking leave. –
He stared at the words that brought their morning right back to the forefront of his thoughts. Seifer had tried to reach him. The anger that had preceded the man's attack leaped up at him from the screen. It drained him of the evening's frustration, leaving him feeling tired and strangely chastised. The slightest difference in events and he would've been on his way back to Balamb, alone. His fretting over unwarranted kisses and lewd remarks seemed foolish in comparison.

He'd chosen this, he reminded himself. He'd chosen Seifer and all that entailed. He'd promised to stay.

Firming his resolve, he deleted the message and navigated to Quistis's phone number.

"Squall? I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon," came the quick greeting, his call answered after only a few rings. Quistis's voice was laced with apprehension as she cut straight to the point. "How did it go? Did you prove your theory?"

"We did," Squall confirmed, leaning back against The Stowaway's facade. "He's innocent, and now he knows it."

He could hear Quistis take a deep, shaky breath before she replied. "Thank Hyne for that... How is he dealing?"

Squall considered what to say without lying outright. "Better today."

"Can't have been easy," Quistis said quietly, for once not asking for more details as they both fell silent for a while. "Are you still in Winhill?"

"We left this morning. We just met up with Fujin and Raijin in Wendel."

"Good. Might help to get him out of his own head a bit."

"Maybe." He'd hoped the same, until the reality of their actual arrival. He could only pray that Fujin and Raijin would come around to the idea of having him around. Leaving was no longer an option; not if he didn't want to hurt Seifer again.

"... Things aren't going well then?"

Letting out a sigh, Squall glanced back at The Stowaway's entrance. "He didn't warn them I was coming along."

"I can see how that might've made things awkward," came the careful reply. "Those three have always been a tight clique."

Squall raised a hand to knead his brow. "It's fine," he downplayed. "We're setting out in the morning. I could use a good lead."

"Now that I can do!" Quistis replied with a sudden enthusiasm that caught him off guard. "... Actually, not right now. I'm still at the palace. It's been one private meeting after the other. I'm on my way to meet with Farkas right now, but I'll look into it once I'm done. I'll message you the intel before morning. Obel Lake, right? Are you hiking?"

"Chocobos and tents. We can make good time while tracking."

"Okay, I'll see what I can find," she promised readily, with none of the suspicion that had accompanied their recent phone calls. "Obel Lake isn't exactly a hotbed of monster activity, but I might as well make use of you guys while you're out there."
"I don't care about pay or commissions. Just find something good."

Quistis huffed with amusement. "Yes, Sir."

Feeling a familiar stab of guilt at asking so much of the woman, Squall wondered if she was getting any sleep at all. "How are the meetings going?"

"Ah, well, you know. The usual," came her disgruntled reply. "I've finally made some headway with the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, and I think Farkas will come around when I get him alone. Give me another week or two and we can put it to a vote."

Squall raised an eyebrow. "So soon?"

"All we need is a majority," Quistis said confidently. "It's easier to smoke out their real concerns and demands when I have them one on one. Most of them can see the benefits after I lay it out for them in person. The only problem is Zautra and his cohorts. They're refusing to even see me."

"Don't waste your time on them."

"...You're probably right."

A brief sigh sounded over the phone, causing Squall to frown. "What is it?"

"I've tried to make some covert inquiries, but they've closed ranks. ...I think they're up to something."

"Up to what?"

"His lobby is being unusually silent. Too silent," Quistis replied warily. "It's not Zautra's style to bide his time. And there's been a few articles about Garden in the Estharian media that aren't too flattering. Mostly op eds, nothing major, but the timing is too conspicuous to be mere coincidence and they're starting to get some traction. Laguna's refusing to use his influence to get to the bottom of who's behind them. Free speech and all that. But I can make a good enough guess. The woman took a deep breath before laying out her final suspicion. "I think Zautra knows he's losing votes. So he's trying to work public opinion instead. I need to force an early vote, before he can put whatever plan he's hatching into motion."

Squall scowled at the convoluted tactics and foul play of politics. At least he had Quistis to navigate it all. He himself would never have the patience or tolerance for any of it. "Keep a close eye on him."

"I'm on it," the woman promised firmly. "Rest assured. Our ship won't sink on my watch."

Squall couldn't help a quirk to his lips at Quistis's intensity. "I wouldn't trust anyone else at the helm."

"Glad to hear it."

Hearing the smile in her reply, Squall knew all too well how lucky he was to have a right hand like Quistis. Her insight and contributions were priceless, central to Garden's recent success. "Thanks. For everything."

"Of course. You can count on me. For now, just focus on your recovery. And Seifer's. Look after him for me, will you?"
Snorting at the unnecessary request, he pushed back from the wall. "You know I will. Bye, Quistis."

"Bye, Squall. Do try to have some fun while you're out there."

Lowering his phone when Quistis hung up, Squall was relieved all over again that they'd managed to clear the air. Throughout the many months of hiding the truth from her, he'd gotten accustomed to being plagued by a certain level of apprehension and uneasy guilt whenever they spoke; none of it her fault. Its sudden absence was a considerable weight off his shoulders, and he promised himself that soon there would be no more secrets clouding their friendship at all.

Next time he saw her face to face, he'd tell her about Seifer and him, along with the rest of his friends. He could only hope their reactions would be better than Fujin's. He wasn't sure what he'd do if they'd meet the same resistance with them as they had here. He cared little about people disapproving of himself, but he doubted Seifer would handle rejection like that well. Not a second time, not from the very people he'd grown up with.

Letting out a deep sigh, he decided to cross that bridge when they came to it. He was done with worrying about other people's opinions for the night. No matter what anyone else did or said, his feelings wouldn't change.

He pocketed his phone and moved to sit down on an abandoned hitching post for chocobos. It wasn't the most comfortable perch, but it was quiet out here. The earlier bustle had died down to the occasional passerby, no one bothering him as he sat staring up at the night sky. He wanted to go wherever his feet would take him and empty his head, but not enough to face Balamb Garden's former Disciplinary Committee just yet. Boyfriends, as he understood it, weren't supposed to disappear into the night without a word of explanation.

He snorted at himself for the thought. Things used to be easier back when he was walking away and burning bridges on a daily basis.

Easier, but not necessarily better.

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[The Stowaway, Wendel Township, Thursday, 30th of October, 9:42 pm]

Fujin's thoughts were miles away from Seifer and Raijin's animated conversation. She'd heard Raijin's detailed plans for their epic boating trip a hundred times before, and while she usually loved to listen to his enthusiastic ramblings, she was far more preoccupied with the other exasperating man in her life.

Seifer was laughing and jostling Raijin good-naturedly. As if nothing odd was going on and he hadn't just brought along the unlikeliest of boyfriends. She couldn't get the disturbing visual of the two men kissing out of her head. Or rather, the one-sided kiss Seifer had inflicted on Squall. Squall's lukewarm reactions and outright warnings were a far cry from the loving relationship she'd hoped to see when Seifer had mentioned a boyfriend. To think she'd actually been happy to hear he'd finally found someone he was invested in enough to bring along for one of their trips. She'd even thought she had known whom she'd be meeting.

"BOYFRIEND," she cut in ruthlessly, drawing both men's gazes. "EXPECTED ESTHARIAN."

Seifer sighed at the abrupt end to the relaxed conversation, no matter how predictable. Fujin was about as subtle and patient as a raging bull, especially when she had something on her mind. "So
we're back to that, huh?" he said with a roll of his eyes. He should've seen her question coming. Calder was the only person he'd ever mentioned aside from Arc, and he'd never bothered keeping the exact nature of his friendship with the man a secret. "Calder was fun, sure, but he never blew my mind like Squall does." Seeing the crease in Fujin's brow deepen, the beginnings of a protest forming on her lips, he doubled down. "I know it doesn't make any kind of sense, Squall and me. But it just feels fucking right. I've never wanted to be with anyone like this. I'm not interested in random fucktoys anymore. Just him."

Raijin shook his head in amusement again. "Definitely got it bad."

"UNHEALTHY," Fujin chimed in.

Seifer grinned unrepentantly. "Sure doesn't feel that way to me."

Wishing she could somehow understand what the hell had happened, Fujin looked at Seifer imploringly "WHY HIM? WHY SQUALL?"

"You said it yourself. It's always been there," Seifer said with a shrug. "Just took a while to figure it out. Never had any fucking idea he wanted it too." The climbing arch to Fujin's eyebrow was a clear indicator that the woman still wasn't buying any of it. "Why would he be here then, tonight, on this trip, if he didn't have a stake in this?"

"TRAP," Fujin accused bluntly.

"Shit Fu, don't be ridiculous. If Squall wanted me in a cell, I would've fucking been there already, together with both of your asses. He's here because he wants to be." Realizing that his friends couldn't possibly know everything that had happened, everything he had just recently learned as well, he spoke more softly. "No one's after us. There was a treaty after the war. A general exemption article. All hush hush. Anyone acting under her command has been absolved. All the big nations signed it. Galbadia, Esthar, even Garden. We're off the hook."

"SERIOUS?" Fujin demanded.

"Why would I lie about something like that? There's no reward on our heads. No order to capture us. We're free to do as we like."

"Squall told you this?" Raijin asked, his heart thudding fast with excitement.

"Yup, and before you start to doubt him, it's the truth," Seifer said quickly. "Think about it. How else did I manage to live in Esthar for two years without getting arrested? I applied for residency with my real name."

Fujin frowned at the stupidity of such a move. "FOOL."

"I didn't want to hide," Seifer said with a shrug, downplaying the choice he'd made. Back then getting arrested had seemed preferable at times over working up the will to start a whole new life.

Raijin couldn't quell his elation. He shared another look with Fujin, unable to believe their luck. "We never registered outside of Garden, ya know? With our real names," he explained eagerly. "Meant we could never make things official."

"What things?" Seifer asked with a frown.

Rolling her good eye when a moronic grin spread on Raijin's lips, Fujin looked over at Seifer. Going by the blond's clueless expression, she'd have to spell things out for the dumbass.
"MARRIAGE."

Unable to fully process the word Fujin had just spoken, Seifer's eyebrows shot up. He'd never expected Fujin to agree to something like that, but it didn't sound like this topic was new to the two. In fact, he was getting quite the vibe that this was something they'd decided a long time ago. "You've been planning on getting hitched?"

"AFFIRMATIVE."

"And you're accusing me of being whipped?" Seifer asked with a wide smile, truly happy at the news. There was something comforting about knowing his two best friends would always stick together, married of all things. "When did you decide?"

"After that mercenary job in Altair that went south. But I always knew, man. Wanted to make sure Fu knew too though. That if things had been different, I would've asked her already. If it'd been an option, ya know."

"Then I guess congratulations are in order, guys," Seifer said, gesturing at the glasses filled with whiskey and scotch. "Go for it." When his friends relented and grabbed their drinks, both of them radiating excitement, Seifer raised his glass of water in a toast and smiled warmly at the pair. "To Beefcake and Sweet Cheeks."

Setting her drained glass back down on the table with a satisfying smack, Fujin finally felt herself relax. For just one moment, things felt right, the three of them sitting together and the mood good. "TO US."

"Next thing you'll be telling me there'll be offspring coming along soon," Seifer said with a lopsided smile.

Fujin shook her head adamantly while Raijin coughed nervously by her side. "NEGATIVE," she said, but the idiot next to her just shrugged with a giddy smile. There was no way she was going to grow a parasite inside her, shoot it out of her vagina and then spend the better part of the coming years looking after it. No fucking way.

Laughing at the altercation, Seifer grinned. "Doesn't look like Rai is quite in agreement there, Sweet Cheeks."

Spotting Fujin's red eye looking like it was about to catch on fire from pure anger, Seifer chuckled then looked over at Raijin. "Might wanna watch your bits," he warned the bulky man.

"She's too fond of them, man," Raijin teased as well, then held back a groan at the harsh impact of Fujin's left boot against his shin.

"Shit, I know," Seifer said. "Can't count the number of times I've had to listen to you guys going at it in the tent. Fucking gross. At least this time there's a pretty good chance of payback," he added with a lewd smile. "Just wait until you hear the Commander come. Sexiest fucking moans ever." Just thinking about it was getting him hot.

The near-choking sound that left Fujin along with the woman's face turning a ghastly white fueled Seifer's glee to no end. "Believe it or not but yours truly even persuaded him to get down and dirty in a public place. At the Palace no less."

"PALACE?" Fujin demanded, Seifer's words sounding more and more deranged by the minute. Unfortunately she knew there was always a kernel of truth to Seifer's grand statements.
"That's a long story," Seifer said as he realized just where this conversation was leading. "Too fucking long for tonight. You guys need to get going on your celebration and I need to go track down one very irresistible Commander."

Fujin both snorted and rolled her eyes. "BLUEWHISTLE. MINE."

"You sure you don't want to hear those sweet sounds?"

Grimacing at the mere thought, Fujin wasn't going to listen to any more of Seifer's crap. "REGROUP. MORNING."

Seifer nodded. "Sure. I'll go snuggle up with Princess while you guys celebrate." He would have loved to go out with them, but mixing Squall and these two for a night of fun seemed like a recipe for disaster. And Fujin and Raijin definitely needed to have a night to celebrate. "Make tonight a memorable one," he added, holding up his glass of water.

"Of course man, we will. Great news, ya know?" Raijin said with a wide grin, bringing up his own glass for another toast.

"See you tomorrow morning then," Seifer said, finishing his glass of water. "Meet up at eight o'clock?"

Fujin nodded, just as Raijin spoke up. "We'll ask around. Check out the pubs tonight, see if we can dig up any more intel."

"Sounds like a plan," Seifer agreed, grabbing his own things as well as the luggage Squall had left behind. "Night." He sent his friends one last nod and headed out into the lobby, feeling surprisingly at ease considering how the evening had started off. He'd miss hanging out with them tonight, but he sure as hell would enjoy some alone time with Squall as well. He'd definitely be able to change their minds about Squall. They just needed time. Just like Squall had said.

Looking down at the room key he'd managed to fish out of his pocket with laden arms, he glanced at the number inscribed on it and headed up to the second floor. The upstairs floors were just as rustic as the ground floor was, with thick wooden floorboards and paneled walls throughout. When he unlocked the third door on the right, he stepped into a room that was a clean variant of standard Wendel fare. No road dust or dirt, no vermin, and freshly laundered linens. The innkeeper ran a tight ship and while the sparsely decorated room lacked the homely feel of Ellone's guest room, it made up for it with the gloriously big bed that stood against the far wall, perfect for the reprieve Squall and him needed. He couldn't wait to spend the rest of their night here, just the two of them. But first he'd have to find Squall.

Setting down their luggage, he left the room again and locked the door behind him. Back when they'd been teenagers, it had always been an annoying habit of Squall's to wander off and lose himself to thought. Considering how the man had left Odine's lab not so long ago, it seemed the habit had stuck. Hopefully his friends hadn't managed to scare Squall off completely. Only one way to find out.

Heading down the stairs, he felt an unparalleled level of anticipation. One he could only ascribe to being completely fucking nuts for a certain Commander, Fujin's reactions and comments be damned.

He had a boyfriend now and he was going to enjoy the hell out of it.

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[The Stowaway, Wendel Township, Thursday, 30th of October, 10:16 pm]

Stepping out into the fresh evening air, Seifer didn't have to look far for Squall. The man stood leaning against a nearby hitching post, staring off into the distance with his hands stuffed in his pockets and a foot planted back against the post in a casual show of grace. Picture fucking perfect. It was that exact dreamy, absentminded look that had attracted the gaze of many fawning cadets back at Garden, along with his own. Hyne, he used to be just as clueless as Squall back then. Smiling at the memory, he walked closer, thinking his approach had gone unnoticed when Squall's gaze turned to meet his own.

Squall took in the curl to Seifer's lips and lack of tension in the man's gait with relief. It seemed that in his absence the old posse of friends had been able to maintain an amicable mood. Straightening from his lean, he waited for Seifer to draw within reach. Their surroundings were deserted apart from a few pub-crawlers that were migrating from one den to the next.

"Good phone call?"

Ignoring the question, he curled a hand into Seifer's jacket and pulled the man in close for a kiss. After the evening's many stressors and some very vocal opposition, the sudden need for something tangible overwhelmed him. He allowed Seifer to wrap strong arms around his lower back, the press of his lips matched with enthusiasm. He lingered for as long as his sense of propriety would let him before breaking their kiss.

Seifer smirked at Squall's boldness. "I'll take that as a yes," he teased before sneaking in another brief kiss.

Squall let out a soft huff and pulled away to a slightly more respectable distance, hiding his self-consciousness at being called out on his zeal. "Quistis will get back to me with intel before morning."

"Is she back at Garden?"

"She's still in Esthar. Meetings for the new Garden."

"Can't say I envy her." Seifer shook his head. "Sounds like you owe me for stealing you away," he added, trying to reel Squall back into his hold.

Squall raised an eyebrow at the skewed retelling of facts. "As I recall, I stole you away."

"Hn, and I recall you driving like a madman to make that train," Seifer countered, leaning in for another kiss, breathing deeply of Squall's scent at the press of their lips. "Admit it. You just can't get enough of me, can you, Commander?"

Rolling his eyes, Squall bit back the petty 'whatever' that lay at the tip of his tongue. He couldn't actually deny any of what Seifer had just said. He'd run several red lights, but he wouldn't tell Seifer that. Steeling himself against the lopsided grin that suited Seifer so well, he refused to play into the bastard's charms.
Smirk widening, Seifer knew better than the unimpressed look Squall was fixing him with. The mere fact that Squall hadn't escaped his embrace yet was more than proof enough. Still, Squall wouldn't allow much more in public, so he pulled him close for a final kiss and enjoyed every last lingering second of it before breaking away.

Silence fell between them as he regarded the man he'd known for as long as he could remember, and apparently even further back than that. He hadn't lost his ability to read Squall in the years they'd spent apart. The phone call had been a flimsy excuse for Squall to escape dinner, and he knew without a doubt that the man would've bailed much sooner if it hadn't been for the promises they'd made that morning. Hell, back at Garden Squall would've wandered off to a place where even Seifer couldn't track him down. But here Squall was. Waiting. For him.

Shit, Squall had already done so much for him today, putting up with Fu's bullshit for his sake. And that was after Squall had put up with his bullshit, giving him a second chance he hardly deserved. The least he could do was to show Squall some Hyne-damned appreciation in return. The fun in their room would just have to wait a little longer.

"Let's go for a walk," he said, turning to lead the way. "There's something I want to show you."

Raising an eyebrow, Squall followed after Seifer as the man walked down the street, away from the inn. He'd expected a quick retreat into their room once Seifer's business with his friends was concluded, and while he didn't doubt the man would've quickly distracted him from his thoughts, after the day's tumultuous events he preferred some time to process all that had happened.

Wondering at Seifer's motives, he let himself be led north along increasingly narrow streets. They traded Wendel's center and its rowdy pubs for quieter neighborhoods, the curtains drawn on the houses they passed. The scent of the lake thickened as they drew closer to the harbor, betraying Seifer's destination. The residential streets opened up again into wider streets, marked by heavy traffic and the lingering scents of the day's catch. As they emerged onto Wendel's quayside, a place that would've been bustling with activity during the day, Squall felt a sense of calm take root in him. Street lights illuminated their path, and faint moonlight rippled atop the dark water beyond the quay. The stands of the fish market they passed were empty and abandoned. Several large fishing boats lined the wharfs, anchored and tied down, bobbing gently on the calm waters. Their crews were nowhere to be seen. Even the gulls were silent.

Reminded of Balamb's harbor at night, Squall had always liked the eerie sense of quiet that could descend on even the busiest of districts, as long as the hour was late enough. At Garden, privacy and solitude had always been hard to come by, so the night had often given him refuge from nosy roommates, well-meaning instructors and one vexing rival. He couldn't even recall how many times he'd ignored curfew in favor of sneaking out. It felt strange to be on a similar nighttime outing, this time with Seifer beside him.

Their footsteps rang out into the quiet evening as Seifer continued to lead their walk, turning west along the quay. The man had yet to speak a word, his hands stuffed into his pockets and a relaxed set to his face that seemed to suggest Seifer appreciated the calm just as much as he did. When they arrived at the end of the quay and the street lights' illumination, Seifer guided them down a set of stairs and a pebbled slope that led onto the rocky lakeside.

The dark made for a tricky walk across the uneven terrain, small critters scuttling away from their path and disappearing beneath rocks. Ahead of them, a dark shape loomed big in the night. The farther they moved away from the town and its lights, the clearer it became as his eyes adjusted to the dark. It was a hill, overlooking the lake and the town. Seifer steered them up its side, rocks and pebbles slipping beneath their feet as they navigated their way up. After a short climb, they crested
the hilltop, revealing the sight beyond.

Squall held his breath, briefly stunned by the view. Obel Lake's craggy lakeside harbored many large coves, and apparently Wendel was nestled in one of them. The town and Wendel's cove now behind him, he was looking out over Obel Lake's massive expanse of water. Not a single cloud obscured the bright scattering of stars overhead, and as far as the eye could see, tiny lights floated on the water's surface, as if mirroring the splendor of the night sky. They were varying shades of green and white, some blue. Unsure what he was looking at, he turned to glance Seifer's way.

"They're small boats, one or two fishermen a piece. They use lights to attract fish, rods to catch 'em. Nighttime fishing is a popular pastime here. More for sport than anything. During the day, the big boats with nets come in, but at night you get this."

Giving up on counting the number of boats on the water, Squall took in the beauty of a nighttime view he'd never seen before. How had Seifer known to take him here?

Seifer moved to sit down and pointed out towards the lake. "See how they cluster together in places? That's where the fish are. If you're anchored in the wrong spot, you can go all night without a catch. It's a pain to fish in the dark; takes skill. No daylight and the lights you use to attract the fish are submerged in the water, so it's tricky to handle your gear. It's all in the feel."

"You've been out there yourself?" Squall asked, sitting down as well.

"Yup. Raijin roped Fu and me into it. Raijin's always had a fetish for fishing. Even back at Balamb. Used to drag Fu and me into it back then too." Seifer looked back on those times with fondness, his two best friends always managing to cause a stir and find fun wherever they went. "You ever gone fishing?"

Unsurprised when Squall shook his head, he looked back out over the water. For someone who loved solitude and getting lost in their own head, Squall had an unexpected impatient streak that was most likely incompatible with something as drawn-out as fishing.

He never would've tried it either if not for Raijin, and he definitely appreciated how it had led him to this spot, perched high above the lake. He'd walked up here only once before. They'd rented a boat for the day and while the sun had still been out he'd spotted the hill. He'd ventured up here afterwards. He hadn't told Fujin or Raijin that he'd snuck out here. It had been a moment filled with awe at being alive and able to experience something so stunning. He could tell Squall was enjoying it now too. The cold breeze was ruffling the man's locks, throwing them into disarray, but Squall paid it no heed as he regarded the waters, his thoughts no doubt already miles away. His own gaze was stuck too, but on the man by his side.

His lips quirked up at the corners as he watched Squall's profile. No doubt he looked like a fucking love-struck fool. When Squall's gaze broke away from the lake to meet his own, his grin changed into something more sincere as he leaned in close and kissed him. A slow caress of lips and tongues. They remained like that, locked in each other's warmth. When they moved apart, he kept his arm wrapped tightly around Squall's back.

It felt so natural, yet so unlike anything he'd ever imagined. A month ago he would never have expected to willingly give up his life as a bachelor. He'd expected his future to be filled with one night stands, no strings attached. Now he knew exactly who he'd be with at every given opportunity and he had absolutely no regrets. And he was a free man. Free of his guilt, free to enjoy every second of this and not feel unworthy. Squall had given him this.

His boyfriend.
He repeated the word in his mind, unlikely as it was for Squall to have agreed to this. He didn't even know what it all meant, not truly. This was a first for him, in every way that mattered.

What did Squall expect of their relationship? Probably not much, knowing Squall. Or at least the man would keep any wishes and hopes very close to his heart and never speak them out loud. Then again, Squall had surprised him these past few days. While still taciturn, the man had changed from the loner cadet he'd once been. There had been a melancholy kind of hardness to Squall back then. A self-imposed disinterest in forging any kind of bond. An impenetrable exterior.

Not so much anymore.

Wondering what their childhood had been like to have instilled such solitude in Squall back at Garden, he tried to remember, but all he managed to conjure up was the sense that somehow this moment felt familiar, them sitting next to each other, overlooking the waters.

Faint images teased at the edges of his recollection as he tried to force the sense of deja vu into something more tangible. He recalled a beam of light, ever turning, illuminating the night. The lighthouse. Water had been in front of him, just like now, and Squall had been by his side, much younger. It had to be a memory from their time at the orphanage. It felt like something they'd done more than once, the memory unfurling with increasing clarity but different details appearing that didn't mesh. Daytime, nighttime. Different clothes. A toy sword in his hand. A collection of seashells and rocks.

"Did we use to do this? At the orphanage?"

Pulled from his musings by the unexpected question, Squall turned to look at Seifer. Was Seifer trying to remember? Hope rising at the thought, he still decided to tread carefully. "We did," he confirmed, thinking back to those days. "The cliffs near the orphanage. Sometimes the lighthouse nearby, when the tides were low enough." And when Matron had been too busy to keep track of them.

"I remember the lighthouse," Seifer said, dropping his hands to the stone behind him as he thought. When he focused on his memories, the details gained a crispness. He could see it in his mind now; the tall structure and the bright light it had cast into the night, guiding their path. He recalled the effort of wading through the icy waters to reach the lighthouse, the pull of the tides, his shoes and pants soaked. It had been a long climb up the stairs. It felt odd not remembering more, especially when Squall knew much more about his past than he did himself. "What's your favorite memory? From back then?"

Squall frowned, unsure of how to answer. Even the best of memories had eventually been overshadowed by the events that had followed. The relatively happy days of following Ellone around had lost their shine after her abandonment of him. Or at least so he had perceived it at the time. Playing with the other kids only for them to leave one by one; that had quickly become an unalterable reality to him even as a child. Even the times spent with Seifer held a bittersweet edge. Part of him had always been waiting for the next blow, waiting for Seifer to leave as well. Just as with photographs, he found it difficult to quantify the value of such double-edged memories, let alone single one out as his favorite.

"I've never thought about it like that," he finally said.

"But you remember lots from back then, right? Like the stuff you told me about?"

"I do," Squall said slowly, wondering at the reason behind Seifer's questions.
Seifer looked down at where his legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. On the one hand he wanted to remember how those years had shaped him, where he had come from. His roots. On the other hand he had a feeling he'd never fit in at the orphanage any more than he had at Garden, and any memories of her weren't welcome at all.

When Squall didn't say anything further, he looked back out at the shimmering lights on the lake. "I knew I was in that photograph Quistis showed me. I could tell by the way she talked about it, but I couldn't recognize myself. Don't even know what I looked like as a kid."

Squall studied the man beside him. No wonder Seifer's reaction to the photograph had been so lukewarm. Focused as he'd been on avoiding the topic of Matron, he hadn't even considered the finer points of Seifer's confusion. "Few would, without photographs."

Seifer nodded. "Guess I'm curious. Probably a lot of stuff that's better left alone though."

Suppressing a frown, Squall didn't know how to advise Seifer in this, especially since the man might not even have a choice in the matter. "The memories might keep coming, now that you've started to remember," he warned. "It was like that for me."

"You didn't work on remembering them then?"

"Not at first," Squall admitted, thinking back to those hectic days. "It started with random flashes. No context. But after a while..." He'd started to look for answers about himself and the mess his life had become. "I had to know."

Seifer stole a glance at Squall. "Had to know what?" He dreaded the answer, knew he shouldn't ask the question when the whole point of bringing Squall up here had been to give Squall a chance to unwind, but there was no way he could leave this alone.

Squall's brow wrinkled as he looked for the right words. He'd never talked about this, and he didn't know how to deliver an explanation without touching on sensitive topics. "I didn't... trust who I was by the end of it," he started after a moment's hesitation. The choices he'd made, the lives lost, the orders he'd followed with naive stupidity. The knowledge that his childhood had been manipulated by forces through time. His growing misgivings and suspicions concerning Seifer. All of it had created such a confusion in his mind. "I needed to figure out why things ended up the way they did. To understand myself and the people around me." He looked away, keeping his voice unaffected. "I had a lot of time to think... afterwards."

Seifer felt the familiar stirrings of anger and powerlessness start to rise inside him, as it had so many times before. He'd always assumed Squall had been celebrating after the defeat of Ultimecia before being thrown back into the fray. "You were stuck in the past?"

Seifer took a slow breath and looked out over the lake as well. "You mean after the war," he stated plainly, not wanting Squall to pussyfoot around this. He knew he'd blown up at every other mention of the war, but he was going to fight it this time. They'd make it through this conversation without him lashing out or heading for the nearest bottle of booze. He was determined. "How come you had lots of time? Weren't you thrown straight into the Lunar Cry clean up?"

Squall glanced at Seifer, assessing the man's expression. "Yes and no," he started, loath to think back on any of it. "I was trapped inside Time Compression after Ultimecia died. The others got out, but I followed her too far. The spell collapsed with me inside." He frowned at recalling the moment he'd first realized there was no way out. No escape. Aware that Seifer would need more explanation than that, he forced himself to continue. "For everyone on the outside it was a week. For me... An eternity. "...longer."

Squall glanced at Seifer, assessing the man's expression. "Yes and no," he started, loath to think back on any of it. "I was trapped inside Time Compression after Ultimecia died. The others got out, but I followed her too far. The spell collapsed with me inside." He frowned at recalling the moment he'd first realized there was no way out. No escape. Aware that Seifer would need more explanation than that, he forced himself to continue. "For everyone on the outside it was a week. For me... An eternity. "...longer."

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Squall shook his head. "Someplace else, outside of time." Even Odine had only been able to theorize and speculate about the nature of his entrapment. "A black sky and cracked earth. Dark mists. Nothing else."

A deep frown settled on Seifer's brow. "Nothing?" Squall's silence was the only confirmation he received. "How did you survive?"

"There was no passage of time," Squall replied evenly, suppressing the remembered dread. "No change." He'd been unable to sleep, or even die in that place. His body had been suspended in time, his wounds from the final battle never closing or healing, but no longer bleeding either. The constant throb of pain had been his only tether to the reality he'd left behind. That and his memories. "I just… existed."

"Fuck, Squall… How long did it feel like you were there for?"

Battling a frown, Squall forced himself to shrug. "Long enough. In the end it doesn't matter. I got out."

Seifer huffed, but didn't press any further. "Must have been an absolute headfuck. Can't believe you had to go through that."

Squall almost demanded for Seifer not to pity him, but after all the man had bared of his own pain… He couldn't. Glancing beside him, he noticed the suppressed anger in the lines of Seifer's face. "It's long in the past now," he reminded quietly.

Seifer sighed. Even if nearly three years had passed since then, an experience like that had to have left its marks. Hell, for all he knew, Squall could have been trapped in that place for what had seemed like years. Ellone had described it as a weird stretch of endlessness. All of his protective urges kicking in, he wished he could turn back time. "I should have been there with you. From the start, until the end."

Squall frowned at the mere thought of anyone else having been trapped alongside him. On his own, he'd at least found some measure of peace in the knowledge that the others had most likely made it out. "I made my choices and faced the consequences," he said evenly. "I regret a lot of things, but I don't regret chasing her down."

"Even though you had to go through hell," Seifer commented under his breath, still hating the fact that he hadn't been there by Squall's side. Instead the man had been trapped in that place with fresh memories of war and torture. He swallowed thickly, realizing he would have featured heavily in Squall's thoughts during that time. "Just how many times did you relive D-District in there?"

Alarmed by where the conversation was going, Squall equally disliked the physical distance that had grown between them. Seifer was no longer sitting close, his arms wrapped around his knees instead. "I went over my whole life a thousand times in there," he pointed out evenly. "I remembered how we used to play together just as often. The times we trained together... I remembered the real you."

"That's why you went to see Ellone?"

Giving a nod at the reluctant question, Squall could guess Seifer's thoughts well enough. Too little, too late. Watching Seifer's body turn in on itself a little more, he felt a stab of regret stronger than any he'd felt before. Uncertain of how to bridge the distance that had grown between them, he wished he could tell Seifer he'd had his doubts all along, that he'd tried to find a way to help him.
When Seifer asked no further questions, he followed the man's gaze out over the waters, their thoughts no doubt traveling similar paths. The more he thought about his past decisions regarding Seifer, the less sense he could make of them. Spending time with the man again these past few days had only served to remind him of the respect that had always been a part of their rivalry, the intensity that had laced their every interaction. Back at Garden, he'd never attempted to analyze his odd bond with Seifer, too entrenched in the fiction of his lone wolf persona. He'd held fast to the belief that no one mattered to him, and thus he couldn't possibly matter to anyone else in return. It had been a preferable, safe status quo.

D-District had rid him of such a childish belief and had taught him a pitiless lesson that he'd spent the rest of the war trying to forget. The day he'd learned he cared about Seifer had also been the day he'd lost him in the most painful way imaginable. Ever since escaping Time Compression he'd avoided recalling the time spent in that dark interrogation room. To try felt like prodding an unhealed wound.

Involuntary tears had slipped from his eyes as shocks of electricity had torn through him for the umpteenth time. Seifer had mocked him for that. He'd lost track of time, his clothes wet with sweat, blood and his own waste. Pain that intense stripped away all dignity, all sense of time. It was only afterwards that he'd learned he'd only been in there for three days. It had seemed far longer. Pain in battle was different from pain in torture. In battle he could fight back, and any pain was brief—he'd either live or die. Torture was death denied. It was a feeble consolation that he hadn't begged. If Seifer had returned to take over from his henchmen one more time, he probably would have.

At first he'd clung to the belief that Seifer wouldn't truly harm him. Amidst the pain he'd even briefly entertained the delusion that the man would reveal himself as a double agent and ally any second. Seifer would turn on his underlings and free him, he'd stop looking at him like that, would stop pretending like he hated him. Finally everything would make sense again. Once that hope had faded, every jolt of electricity had further instilled the heartrending knowledge that he'd been wrong about Seifer. So wrong about himself.

Afterwards he'd recovered from his injuries easily, but not from the shock. Those three days spent in D-District Prison had changed and shaped him into someone capable of anything. Someone capable of hardening their hearts and winning wars.

He'd forced himself to stop thinking about Seifer altogether. In the end, it hadn't been about betrayal or hate. It had been about survival. He'd pushed on, never stopping until the end. If he'd stopped long enough to question the madness of what he was doing, of what had happened to him, then he would've frozen, unable to act at all. His loss, his wounds, would've become all too real and wouldn't have stopped bleeding.

His time stuck in Time Compression had been a rude awakening to reality. No more foes to defeat, no world to save, not even a single person to talk to. At first he'd kept on walking, desperately trying to find a way out, refusing to let all the repressed memories and thoughts take shape in his mind. But there had been no distractions to be found in that dark and empty wasteland. The only thing he'd encountered there had been himself, and he hadn't cared for the confrontation.

Every action that had seemed so necessary at the time had come back to haunt him. Thoughts of Seifer in particular had refused to leave him alone. Inside Time Compression he'd had ages to analyze the war and dissect it from every possible angle. Ages to recall all his memories of the orphanage, of Seifer as the rude but good kid he'd been. For all the times they'd fought and argued, there were also times they'd sat together pouring over weapon magazines, talking about gunblades, and in Seifer's case, vague future plans. Every kind feeling he'd ever felt towards Seifer, every kind thing Seifer had ever done, had come rushing back, piercing through the confusion of the war.
Eventually, after ages of picking apart his life, no new conclusions or insights coming to him, he'd fallen into a catatonic state, his mind inhabiting the least painful memories of his life and clinging to them. Why recall the pain of torture when he could relive the thrill of sparring? When even that strategy had begun to fail him, there had been nothing left to occupy his mind. He'd been empty, utterly and completely. Loneliness itself.

He'd been deeply confused in those first days after he'd been freed. It had been too much at first to process. Rinoa had been the one to shelter him and reintroduce him to the normal world. Slowly, his mind had returned to him.

A sense of directionless and uncertain guilt had been his constant companion since then. He'd gone to see Ellone as soon as he possibly could. Without the memories and insights gained inside Time Compression he would never have done so. He would not have pursued Seifer's side of the story, nor would he have stopped long enough to rethink his mistakes and misconceptions. He would've remained ignorant to the biggest error of his life.

Glancing beside him, Squall was overcome by the improbability of Seifer sitting next to him like this, as they once had as children. So much had gone wrong. So much still could. Seifer's expression was still set in stark lines. He himself still had no acceptable excuses to offer. He only had the unflattering truth.

"I was a fool before Time Compression," he confessed quietly, breaking the oppressive silence that had settled between them. "I would never have realized how meaningless life is without people. I would've made the same mistakes over and over… I wouldn't have ended up here tonight, with you. So I can't regret my time there." He looked at Seifer, meeting the man's gaze. "I wish I could give you something better than that."

Seifer looked away from Squall's searching gaze, over to where he could see the silhouette of the wharf in the distance. Squall's words gave away so much. Yet he still felt a spark of hurt grow. "You didn't have any doubts before then?"

Squall frowned and averted his eyes. "No," he forced himself to say. "During the war… I didn't let myself feel anything at all. I… didn't try to understand the changes in you. I couldn't." Trailing off, he refused to contribute to Seifer's feelings of guilt by blaming D-District for his heartlessness. He wouldn't blame the stresses of war either. The fault was entirely his own.

Silence settled around them again as Seifer tried to come to terms with the truth. He had no idea what to do with this new knowledge. He'd tried to end his life because of what he'd put Squall through. He'd done horrific things and Squall had thought him capable of them all. He lowered his head and kneaded his forehead. He'd been naive to think that Squall saying yes to being his boyfriend would suddenly make things easier between them. They had a bitch of a past and it would take time to work through it. He could tell Squall felt guilty about this, ashamed even. That's why he had been granted so many words on the matter. "That's what you apologized for earlier today, wasn't it? Out in the field?"

Catching Squall's nod out of the corner of his eye, he hated to see the stark lack of expression that had taken over Squall's face, a sure sign of the man's distress. He hated how the past kept rearing its ugly head whenever he thought they'd gotten over the worst of it.

"You always meant a lot to me," he admitted. "I think she knew that. That's why she chose you. No one else from the attack in Deling went through the same."

A chill went down Squall's back at Seifer's words. They shed a terrible new light on the events that had scarred them both. Had she foreseen exactly how little it would take to break their complicated
bond and keep them from joining forces? Had she known his blindness and used it against them? Against Seifer? She'd had access to Edea's memories of them as children, most likely Seifer's memories too... She would've known much of what they hadn't yet remembered themselves. Heart sinking at something so malicious, he knew he had nowhere to direct his anger but at himself.

"Maybe she sensed the same in me," he said quietly, feeling traitorous for even speaking the words. Seifer would no doubt find them hypocritical, but when he thought about it, she couldn't have chosen a better torturer. Seifer had been the closest thing he'd had to a friend. Someone he'd grown close to without even realizing it.

"Maybe," Seifer echoed weakly, unable to take much heart from Squall's words. That he might have mattered to Squall was meaningless in the face of just what Squall had thought him capable of. It cut deeply; an entirely different kind of hurt than anything he'd felt before. Until Winhill, any pain had been overshadowed by remorse and guilt. But this... Squall never having questioned the changes in him until he'd been absolutely forced to... And then only because he'd been trapped in an unnatural hellhole of a prison...

He brought up a hand to knead at his forehead and tried to will the darker thoughts away. When Squall had apologized out in the meadow that morning, he'd had no idea how much had still been lurking beneath the surface. Less than a few hours ago, he'd been so quick to forgive when he'd sensed Squall had needed it. He was only now beginning to understand why Squall had refused.

The words to absolve Squall would no longer form on his lips. He had no fucking idea what to say, nothing coming to him that wouldn't rip apart what they'd so carefully stitched back together.

Squall's throat closed up as the tension and distance between them refused to give way. Somehow the enduring silence was far more terrible than facing down Seifer's anger. At least he knew how to stay strong in the face of threats and insults, but he was absolutely powerless when faced with Seifer's sorrow. The cowardly part of him almost wished for a violent confrontation like that morning; the eruption of a fight followed by rough make-up sex. Something physical. Something he could understand. But in the end there were no shortcuts for something like this. No quick fixes.

This painful silence was a necessary evil. It meant Seifer was finally realizing the full extent of his failure, and the man was under no obligation to deal with it in a way that accommodated him or made him feel better about it. That burden rested on him.

"Should I go?" he forced himself to speak, leaving it up to Seifer how to interpret that offer.

"No," Seifer said immediately, the mere thought of Squall leaving sending cold dread coursing through his veins. At the same time so many conflicting thoughts were racing through his mind, his hope for the future vying with his hurt over the past. "I mean... Shit. I don't know how to forgive you for not questioning the change in me. It's cold. And fucking rough to know that I was enough of a bastard to you back at Garden for you to think that way." He clenched and unclenched his hands, drawing in a long, deep breath. "But it's in the past and that's where it's going to fucking stay. It's our turn to get what we want. Not hers."

Squall went very still at the contradictory declaration. The harsh condemnation wrenched his heart, making it near impossible to stay put as Seifer had demanded. Part of him hadn't expected to be allowed to remain by Seifer's side once the man finally accepted the truth. He didn't see how stubborn bravado would be enough to defy their past. Just wanting something didn't make it so. Blind hope alone wasn't enough.

The beauty of the night turned sour, the wind that tugged at his hair and jacket suddenly harsh, but he quickly pushed down the troubled emotions that Seifer's words had unleashed.
"You were no more of a bastard than I was," he finally brought himself to say, refusing to punish Seifer for his honesty or to burden the man with his own distress.

Seifer huffed at the solemnly spoken words that offered no consolation. Was that the key lesson here? They'd both been assholes, too blind to see what had been right in front of them? If only they had realized what they could have meant to each other. They would've fought side by side. They would have kept each other safe.

Only they hadn't.

Without the war, Squall wouldn't have made it past his icicle stage of development and he himself would still be an arrogant delinquent, picking fights wherever he went. They simply wouldn't be here together, sitting next to each other, just as Squall had said. The thought that it had taken sheer fucking misery to bring them together was a hard truth to accept.

Letting out a sigh, he looked at the man beside him. Squall's gaze was firmly locked on the horizon, a somber air about the man. But despite everything Squall was still here. Ever since they'd stumbled into each other again, the man had done everything in his power to rid Seifer of his guilt while only adding to his own. That simple fact dulled some of the sharpness of his hurt.

"You could never be a bastard, Squall." While the man was cold and aloof at times, he didn't have a single malicious bone in his body. "And you were right… At least we're here now. The rest doesn't matter."

Glancing beside him, Squall swallowed thickly. Had he sounded just as unpersuasive when he'd said those same words to Seifer on top of that skyscraper? Had Seifer been just as desperate to believe them as he was now? Of course all of it mattered. How could it not? Even so, Seifer was still willing to move forward and he couldn't bring himself to question that. It was more than he deserved.

Perhaps there was grace in simply accepting his guilt and bearing it for Seifer's sake. He tried to convince himself he didn't need forgiveness; that he was okay as long as Seifer was okay. Frail promises were the only thing that kept things together now, so he refused to be the one to tip the scales against them. This would have to be enough.

Whatever this would turn out to be.

Suddenly feeling beyond exhausted, he was tired of the distance between them. So tired of all the doubt. So tired of not knowing where they stood. He couldn't leave, but he couldn't draw closer either. The strain between them was too heavy to allow for any of that. So he remained seated, staring at the lake without really seeing any of it. The arm's length they'd kept from each other might as well have been miles.

Stealing another glance at Squall, the man still not having said a single thing in reply to his peace offering, Seifer released the tight lock his arms had formed around his legs and tried to loosen up the rigid tension in his shoulders. He couldn't let their evening end like this.

"Fuck, Squall. This wasn't my intention for bringing you up here," he started with a shake of the head. "I wanted to do something nice. I thought you'd enjoy this," he added, nodding toward the lake. "But… you were right back in Winhill. We need to talk about our shit. And I just… I can't help wanting to know more about you. About us. Our childhood. However fucked up our past is, there's gotta be good stuff there too." When Squall didn't say anything, didn't even look at him, he felt a stab of regret at being back to needing to prompt even the most basic of replies. "Right?"
Squall let out a tightly held breath, unable to withstand Seifer's immovable gaze or the unusually tentative tone to his voice. Looking the man's way, he felt his heart tug in his chest despite himself and suppressed a sigh. He had little desire for more conversation about the past.

"What are you asking?" he said, unable to reply with the affirmative Seifer no doubt wanted to hear.

"Tell me about a memory. Doesn't have to be your favorite. Just a good one. Of us. As kids."

Squall frowned at the straightforward request, unsure of what to say. "We lived in an orphanage after a war," he stated soberly. "A lot of kids. Few resources." A past like that didn't exactly lend itself to many heartwarming tales.

"We also lived in a mercenary school. Doesn't mean I don't have good memories of Garden."

Hearing the truth in Seifer's reply, Squall fixed his gaze back out on the lake. He wasn't surprised the view and the company had sparked Seifer's memories of the orphanage. Of their past. He felt it as well. "...There were good days," he admitted, the same melancholy washing over him as it always did when his thoughts touched on them. He'd tried to remember exactly the same kind of thing during Time Compression, so he could understand Seifer's need. It didn't feel right however to color Seifer's understanding of the past with his own interpretations. "You should try to remember for yourself."

Seifer furrowed his brow. "And spend ages before getting to a good memory? I only get glimpses, and short ones at that." Whenever he tried thinking about the past, those brief disconnected moments were all he'd see. And there was still so much he didn't want to see.

Squall didn't know what to say without disappointing. Recalling one memory usually led to the resurfacing of other snippets of the past, like a chain reaction that could lead them anywhere. Even if he told Seifer something harmless, he'd have no control of what it might trigger.

"I just want to focus on something good for a change. Don't you need that too?"

Nice as it sounded, Squall wasn't sure they were capable of something like that, not when it concerned their past. Even so, it was clear by now that Seifer wasn't going to let this go, the man stubbornly trying to salvage the evening instead of just allowing them to nurse their bruised feelings in silence.

Squall frowned as he contemplated the minefield of their shared memories. His tired brain failed to come up with a candidate for a 'good memory' of the kind that Seifer might expect. There had been no trips to amusement parks, nor any lavish birthday parties. An unsubsidized orphanage with a surplus of orphans had led to the far more humble reality of eternal hand-me-downs, crowded sleeping halls and just enough food on the table, despite Matron's best efforts.

Any fun they'd had back then, they'd made for themselves. Or at least, the other kids had. Squall had always been more of a silent spectator at the periphery of games that had never quite involved him. The beach had sufficed most days to keep the orphanage's children content, but he himself had quickly grown bored with the rules and the grounds they were never allowed to leave.

Seifer too had chafed at their limitations, but unlike Squall, the boy's courage and imagination had easily risen to the challenge of dreary orphanage life. And for some reason he still didn't understand to this day, Seifer had insisted on involving him in a lot of it. One night in particular floated to the surface of his memories, causing his heart to clench at the long forgotten innocence of those days.
"You've got something," Seifer interrupted his train of thought, scarily observant. "Tell me."

Delaying an immediate reply, Squall met Seifer's gaze uncertainly. Ever since escaping Time Compression, he'd never let himself linger on those memories. To do so had meant to invite certain pain. He knew things were different now, but the reflex still remained. "There were cliffs near the beach," he began, not even all that sure why he was indulging Seifer in the first place. Little good could come of it, but his thoughts and words traveled back in time all the same.

"We weren't supposed to go near them, but you always did anyway," he continued, looking away as he spoke. "You found a cave in the cliffside. It was high up, only climbable during low tide." He still remembered the day when Seifer had excitedly burst into their shared room, telling him about his amazing find. The very next day he'd been involuntarily drafted into a grand cave expedition, only for the rising tides to have halted their ill-timed adventure. They'd waited a whole week for another chance to sneak away, but that had only heightened their anticipation. "Pirate cave. Dragon nest. Bandit lair. That cave was whatever you wanted it to be. You usually needed a foe for your games. I suppose that's why you dragged me along."

A soft smile grew on Seifer's lips as he imagined the two of them as little boys, sneaking off and exploring, no doubt causing mayhem. Just like they had at Garden. It was comforting to know that this dynamic between them had always been there, even if he had most likely always been the one to lead Squall astray. "Never could leave you alone, huh? Always had to get you into trouble."

"I always let you," Squall confessed, answering Seifer's widening smile with a brief quirk to his own lips. His life would've been a lot more boring without Seifer in it. "I got you into trouble too," he added, nodding at Seifer's lower left arm, where he knew a faded scar ran along its length.

"You mean this beauty?" Seifer asked as he pulled up his sleeve and looked at the scar that ran in a ragged semicircle from his elbow to wrist. It was the very same scar Squall had pointed out to him when the man had first told him about their shared past.

Nodding, Squall could still remember the dizzy rush of fright he'd felt at seeing the nasty injury. And the relief. "We got into a stupid fight one day. In the cave," he recounted, his eyes lingering on the well healed scar. Seifer had been adamant that he play a princess instead of the usual villain, forbidding him to partake in any play fights and banishing him instead to an imagined cage that Seifer would then heroically save him from. He'd bristled at such an unfair deal. "I pushed you without looking. You fell off the edge of the entrance. Down onto the rocks."

Wincing, Seifer couldn't help but grin even wider. He knew Squall would never have done something like that on purpose. At least it meant things between them had been a two-way street, and not just him dealing out the punches. "Just how far was the fall?"

"Fifteen feet, give or take," Squall replied, though it had seemed much higher to him as a child. "You got lucky."

"Ouch," Seifer said, trying to imagine it. "What did we fight about?"

"You wanted me to play the princess. I refused," Squall replied with a shrug, wondering if all the fights they'd had throughout their lives had been just as foolish in hindsight. He'd been so angry at the time.

Seifer chuckled lowly. "Fight back and get stuck with a nickname for the rest of your life," he ventured with a curl to the corner of his lips. "Gotta hand it to me, I never do things by halves."

Snorting, Squall knew he only had himself to blame for reacting poorly to the mocking pet name,
inviting Seifer to repeat the successful strategy for angering him. That evening by the cliffs had meant the world to him. Whenever Seifer had called him 'princess' to provoke him after that, it had felt as if the boy was purposefully cheapening the connection they'd made that night. Even when the GFs had long caused him to forget all about it, the anger had still come reflexively each time Seifer had wielded that nickname.

That night had been so much more than just fodder for jokes. So much more than their usual fights and arguments and he wanted Seifer to realize that. Now as much as then.

"I was sure I'd killed you," he said softly, recalling the sick dread that had sunk into his stomach as he'd scrambled back from the edge of the cave entrance. One second Seifer had been there, and then the next gone. Because of him. "I froze. Couldn't move. You climbed all the way back up for me. With that injury." He glanced at Seifer's bared arm, the memory still so vivid. He'd never seen so much blood in his life, but the older boy had barely flinched, putting on a brave front despite his pale face and the steady dripping of blood. "You weren't angry, just helped me down. You got us back home, to our room."

"Our room?" Seifer asked, that new detail sending his imagination spinning.

Squall nodded, conflicted about having to confirm something that was so integral to who they'd been. "Only for the last two years we were there," he explained, glancing Seifer's way. "We were the last two kids of our age group. The oldest ones there." Everyone else had long since been adopted or fostered off, except for them. "You got tired of our sleeping hall, of the younger kids. You complained until we got a room of our own."

Letting all the details sink in, Seifer was struck by how much just this tiny amount of knowledge changed his understanding of the past. He hadn't known what to expect, but he hadn't imagined this. They must've forged a deep bond going off into caves together, breaking the rules, sharing a room. It even sounded like they'd looked out for each other. "We were close then?"

Close. Squall considered the description. Whether applied to their time at the orphanage or at Garden, it seemed true enough. Truer than labels such as 'friend' or 'rival'. They'd been forced into each other's orbit through circumstance, their days filled with each other, for better and for worse. Even after the war, he'd never been able to break free of his memories of Seifer.

"We were," he finally replied, recalling all the ways Seifer had made the orphanage survivable for him. The boy had been an expert at disguising kind acts as happenstance, but it had made all the difference.

Seifer's curiosity turned into a burning wish to remember upon Squall's confirmation. It seemed so surreal, yet so fitting. He tried hard to focus on remembering, but all he could see was that poor kid crying his eyes out in the rain. "I can't remember any of it," he said, some of his frustration slipping into his words. "What was the good memory then? Of the cave?"

Furrowing his brow, Squall met Seifer's enquiring gaze. "I just told you."

Seifer smiled and asked with an arched eyebrow, "Your good memory from our childhood includes me falling off the side of a cliff?"

Feeling self-conscious when Seifer put it like that, Squall didn't know how to explain without giving away too much of himself. That night he'd finally stopped feeling alone after Ellone's disappearance, but while Seifer had become a crucial necessity to him, he'd never been quite sure if the reverse had been true.
Somehow, like magic from the stories, the older boy had managed to take the safety he usually felt in their shared room and had wrapped it all around him on the scariest night of his life. It was then that he’d realized the room was just a room. It was Seifer who'd made it a sanctuary.

"You promised we'd stick together," he said quietly, unable to qualify the impact it'd had on him with mere words. "That if they took our room as punishment, we'd run away together." Nobody had ever liked him or chosen him over anything else before. Even at that young age he'd already accepted that people left him for all sorts of reasons, or sometimes no reason at all. But he’d believed Seifer. That the older boy wouldn't abandon him.

Seifer’s heart squeezed tightly in his chest as he realized just what Squall was saying. How much he’d mattered to the man, both then and now. And he'd never even realized, or at least he'd forgotten along the way. Maybe it had been the same for Squall, the onset of their GF usage erasing their memories of each other and their connection. Or maybe it had happened earlier. Maybe the divide between them had grown when they'd first arrived at Garden.

He didn't have it in him to ask, no longer wanting to focus on what had torn them apart. Instead he focused on Squall's words and how they bared the man completely. Squall hadn't been able to look his way. His voice had barely been audible. Squall had known exactly how much of himself he would expose by saying those things, yet he'd done so anyway. Just like earlier when they'd talked about Time Compression.

Pushing up from the cold ground, he crossed the small distance he'd put between them. Grey-blue eyes followed him, questioning him, but at least they were looking at him again. He didn't say anything as he lowered himself to sit right behind Squall, placing his legs on either side of him. Squall was tense against him, the man's spine rigid. Undeterred, he wrapped his arms around Squall, closed his eyes and breathed deeply as he pressed his cheek to brown locks. "We're sticking together this time."

A thickness settled in Squall's throat as he felt Seifer's body heat envelop him, seeping into him until it suffused him entirely. The man's words kept echoing in his mind. To his relief and trepidation, Seifer had puzzled together his meaning exactly from what little he'd said. He hadn't meant to coerce the man into making any more promises, but Hyne, he'd needed this one. Letting himself accept the offer, he leaned back in Seifer's hold. The fell wind still tugged at them, but it couldn't reach him anymore, sheltered as he was. In the end, it seemed he didn't need much. This was enough. He could handle whatever Seifer threw at him, as long as they'd honor the first promise they'd ever made.

Tightening his embrace around Squall, Seifer looked out over the dancing lights on the lake. However rough hearing the truth was, this thing between them felt more real now than ever. Even if he still felt like a blind man fumbling in the dark because of this gaping hole in his memory. Squall had relived all the emotions and knew of all the ties that bound them together. Seifer swore to himself that he'd do everything in his power to remember now too. No more running away. He'd take the bad with the good. He wanted to know. Wanted to remember the memory that meant so much to Squall, along with all the other ones he knew Squall would never have the patience or words to tell him about.

He wanted to see how they'd interacted as kids. How things had changed when they'd become teenagers. At what point they'd drifted apart. And why. He could finally understand Squall's need to know. It also had to be strangely lonely for Squall to be the only one with all the memories, knowing that they would’ve been lost forever if Squall hadn't recovered them. Seifer's mind was still reeling at the few facts he'd learned of.
They'd been together since they were kids. They'd been close. No wonder he felt a kind of belonging with Squall he'd never felt with anyone else. And apparently Squall had always felt something similar as well. That was why they were sitting here, together. Not because of war or misery. Not because of the sick games of a demented sorceress. What they had was stronger than any of that.

He wasn't going to let go of this feeling. Resonating with so many of the thoughts he'd had since Squall had come back into his life, what he wanted most of all was to make Squall happy. He'd taken a shot at it tonight and had failed miserably. Yet he had to believe they were stronger for it. That talking things through had made a difference. That they could begin to move on now, with somewhat mended wounds and so many things to look forward to.

He smiled into Squall's soft hair, then brought up a hand to steer the man's chin just close enough for him to capture pliant lips. It felt like coming home when their lips sought and found each other, his arms tightening even further.

Melting into Seifer's embrace, Squall felt like he was sinking away, his thoughts scattering until nothing mattered but Seifer's mouth taking complete possession of him. The kiss was charged with a bittersweet longing that reached all the way back to his childish need for the older boy's company. Those days had been the last time anyone had ever protected him from the harsh realities of life. To feel a glimpse of that again now… It shook him. Scared him. He'd believed he was long past needing anything like this. His independence was all he had.

There was no undoing this. His old self was being dismantled with every nip and caress of Seifer's lips. He gave up on trying to process the wild turmoil of his thoughts. Seifer's hold on him was satisfyingly tight, his own hands layered on top of the man's arms, encouraging the embrace. His heart pounded against his ribs, beating out the truth of his feelings.

Time swept by as Seifer was lost to the simple movements of their lips. To feel Squall pressed so tightly against him, holding onto him like that, kissing him back so eagerly... It filled him with a deep want for more, for all of Squall laid out before him, naked and writhing in pleasure. The beginnings of arousal starting to cloud his mind, he tried to pull back, only for Squall to chase his retreat with another kiss. Placing a firm nip at the man's bottom lip, he whispered hotly, "Let's head back."

Like a powerful invocation, the low rumble of Seifer's voice rushed along Squall's skin, raising goose pimples all the way down his neck and back, leaving no doubt as to the man's intentions. Entirely in agreement, he demanded a final kiss before pushing up from between Seifer's legs.

Casting one last look towards the myriad of dotted lights on the lake, Squall waited for Seifer to come to a stand behind him. The memory of this place would be forever linked with the feelings Seifer had stirred in him tonight, both good and bad. Turning away from the view after a moment's pause, he located the narrow trail that had led them up here, his eyes well-adjusted to the dark by now. Seifer followed, making no move to take the lead.

Silence accompanied them as they walked down the rocky hill, something lingering in the air between them, humming, brimming and keenly felt even when they didn't speak a word. He could still feel the press of Seifer's lips, those arms drawing him into safety. Pebbles slipped beneath their feet just as they had on their way up, the sound of the wind and the scent of the lake exactly the same as before, yet everything felt changed. He felt changed. He'd been too honest. Too vulnerable. But even so, all he wanted was for Seifer to lay him down in bed, miring him even further in this tangled web of theirs.

As they made their way back up the stairs to the quayside, the bright streetlights broke some of the
spell, but not entirely. They glanced at one another, a small smile curling Seifer's lips. He didn't want to know just how naked his own expression was. They walked side by side, close enough for him to feel Seifer's body heat brush against his arm.

They didn't encounter a soul as they retraced their steps back into town. The windows of the houses they passed had turned dark, most reputable establishments shuttered and closed. Only a handful of the most hardy pubs were still open, but they emitted none of their earlier ruckus. They'd stayed out on that hill longer than he'd realized.

The day's events were catching up with him, as well as his own choices, which under normal circumstances would mean no sleep for him whatsoever, but Winhill had shown him that Seifer had the uncanny ability to lull his ever churning mind to rest, be it out in a grassy field or in the room that had once been his nursery. Even more vulnerability.

But for every inch Seifer had taken from him, the man had given something in return. With every layer of pretense and lifelong self-protective habits stripped back, something new had been revealed, until suddenly it felt good to let himself look forward to something as simple as falling asleep in another's embrace. And so he didn't shy away when Seifer's fingers brushed against his, briefly, a flutter of a touch. He didn't panic when his heart beat a little faster in response. He didn't attempt to stomp out the wealth of feeling that welled up in him.

They made it back to the inn without any detours or words between them. The tavern on the ground floor was dark when they passed it, the fire in the hearth banked down to a soft glow. Seifer led the way, key in hand, as they climbed the creaking stairs to their room for the night. When Seifer stopped to unlock one of the doors, he felt his exhaustion deepen, in that odd way that happened before finally reaching safe haven.

Stepping inside after the man, he gave the room a cursory glance. His gunblade case and gear sat neatly on a table, and the bed looked serviceable enough. He didn't care about any other amenities. Turning around at the sound of the key turning in its lock again, he didn't need to wait long before Seifer pulled him close and kissed him.

Drawing Squall's tongue in deeper, coaxing and twining with his own, Seifer guided them straight towards the bed. He couldn't get enough of the feel of Squall's smaller frame, pressed close to him, fitting together so fucking perfectly. His hands traveled the width of Squall's back, instinctively seeking the touch of warm skin instead of the leather jacket Squall was still wearing. The moment he slid his palms to Squall's shoulders, the man guessed his intention and let him take off the jacket. His own fell to the floor seconds later.

Boots and clothes were discarded as they got onto the bed, their movements feeding off of each other seamlessly. Any initial awkwardness or stiltedness that had come with Squall's inexperience was long gone, the man chasing his every initiative readily, not leaving any space between them. When he finally had Squall naked against him, he let his eyes greedily peruse firm muscles and pale skin, his erection growing more rigid at the sight. He hastened off the bed, the distancing move made all the more difficult by the soft sound of complaint that left Squall's reddened lips. He quickly ruffled through his duffel bag until he located the bottle of lube and jumped back onto the bed with a wide smile at finding Squall's impatient gaze locked on him.

Leaning down for another deep kiss, he flipped the cap open and poured some into his hand. Taking hold of Squall's hard erection, he slowly spread the sticky gel along the man's length. A hiss of pleasure interrupted their kiss as he continued the wet stroking. Lowering his hand, he spread some lube around Squall's anus, then pushed two fingers inside. He loved every single one of Squall's panting exclamations as he slowly retracted his fingers only to slide them right back in.
Sinking into the mattress with an arch of his back, Squall moaned plaintively into their kiss when all ministrations stopped after only a few strokes. Thankfully the movement of Seifer's arm, brushing against his stomach, reassured him the man was hurriedly coating his own length, all without ever relinquishing their heated kiss. He was ready when Seifer lowered his body flush against his own, his hands moving to Seifer's buttocks to encourage the dizzying slide of Seifer's cock into him. His own erection slipped wetly between the close press of their bodies with each of Seifer's thrusts, aided by the lube Seifer had applied. The new sensation, layered atop the many he'd already come to crave, had him arching against Seifer in search for more.

They moved in tandem, every held breath and gasp providing a map for where to guide their touches, every thrust countered with a roll of hips, their joining a perfect synergy that left him lightheaded and shuddering with pleasure. Seifer knew exactly when to plunge in deep, when to kiss him until he couldn't breathe, when to gentle his touch. And somehow he knew that the moan he'd just let escape had brought Seifer closer to the loss of composure. So very close himself, he wrapped one leg around Seifer's and forced their coupling into the end rush.

Sliding into Squall a few more times, Seifer felt his own ecstasy build as Squall wound taut against him, the man unable to focus on their kiss, those grey-blue eyes wrenched closed and the man's breath held tightly in his lungs. Fresh wetness rushed against his stomach, his own cock burning with pleasure at the tight friction. Breathlessly speaking Squall's name as he moved his lips against the man's cheek, he rode out his own orgasm with stuttering jerks of his hips.

Capturing Squall's lips again with light nips and licks, he smiled softly. Squall looked entirely blissed out, the man's eyes alternating between drifting shut and cracking open again to regard him with a sleepy kind of longing that made his spine tingle. "I'll get a cloth," he said as he slipped out of Squall and rose from the bed.

Unable to stifle the yawn that overtook him, Squall stretched out his legs and arms, settling just in time to watch Seifer emerge from the en-suite with a small guest towel in hand. He fought his drowsiness to watch Seifer approach the bed, allowing himself the simple joy of studying the man's form. The lopsided smirk and the hint of swagger that entered Seifer's gait upon noticing his gaze suited the blond to a T.

The bed dipped as Seifer sat down beside him and leaned in for another kiss that quickly devolved into a lazy sharing of tongues and lips. He didn't protest when Seifer slowly ran the wetted guest towel along his length, over his stomach, and down between his thighs. Nor when Seifer sidled up close to him after throwing the cloth to the floor.

Inhaling deeply of Squall's scent, Seifer proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible. Chin resting against Squall's shoulder, he lay his arm across Squall's midriff, his entire body pressed close. His thumb stroked lazily against Squall's side while he felt Squall's chest slowly rise and fall beneath his arm. It didn't take long before Squall's breathing evened out, the man drifting off to sleep.

Filled with fondness, Seifer enjoyed every bit of intimacy between them. Squall's implicit trust in him. He would never have thought it possible, but apparently that morning hadn't been a fluke after all. Letting his gaze drift over the man's features, he was still in awe of being allowed to see this side to the private man. No mask or defenses. No pretense. He'd be damned if he didn't treasure every single moment of this.

He didn't say or do anything to pull Squall back from sleep, didn't try to prolong the evening with more talk, no matter how tempted he was. He knew Squall needed this, that the man was beyond exhausted. His own tiredness was creeping up on him, but despite the calmness that had descended
over him the moment he'd gathered Squall close to him on the hilltop, his mind was still buzzing. So many new things had come to light, filling him with a need to remember more. Much more.

Focusing on the brief glimpses he'd recalled from the lighthouse earlier, of the two of them sitting next to each other, he tried to bring those images to mind again. He was certain it had been triggered by the similarity of the situation. Then perched up high, overlooking a body of water. But no matter how hard he tried, those brief snippets failed to become any clearer. The more he chased them, the more they seemed to slip away. He sighed, then pressed his lips to Squall's shoulder. He would remember eventually, just like Squall had, but until the memories unfurled in his mind he would have to make an effort to remember and not just avoid thinking about his past like he had so far. Maybe once they were back in Esthar he'd ask Squall if he could see those photos Quistis had mentioned. Maybe those would somehow kickstart things.

He concentrated as hard as he could on the scar that ran along his left lower arm, hoping to see more of that particular memory but nothing came to him. No images or flashes from his past. No remembered pain or images of rock faces or caves. No Squall. His frustration grew even further.

Other frustrations bubbled to the surface as well. The hurt that had been exposed. Whatever his aim had been for bringing Squall up onto that hill, he hadn't been able to stop himself when Squall had actually allowed and indulged his questions. Squall had finally let him catch a glimpse of what the war had been like for the man. He knew now what Squall had thought of him going rogue. Or at least that Squall had thought everything he'd done plausible.

He hadn't expected such a deep wound to emerge after such a long time, but in light of just how much Squall meant to him both now and in the past, it wasn't all that surprising. That small inner voice that told him that Squall should have known, should have been there for him just like Fujin and Raijin had, became louder. But he couldn't blame Squall. Not when he'd been so confused himself. If he hadn't been able to tell what he'd been her, then how could he expect more of Squall? The change had been incremental. She'd slowly twisted him, made it look as if he was gradually losing control, each horrible thing she'd made him do just that bit worse than the last. Still… The moment he'd sent electricity coursing through Squall... How could Squall not have questioned it truly being him?

He took a deep, steadying breath. The past. It was in the past. It had to stay there.

Yet the pain didn't budge. Especially not when imagining Squall trapped and alone, walking through an endless desolate wasteland. His heart ached for Squall. Tightening his hold on the man, he pressed another kiss to the man's shoulder, his lips lingering this time. He'd known to some extent that Squall's life had been rough ever since the war, but his assumptions had only scratched the surface. After surviving said war and torture, the man's reward had been imprisonment in a timeless hell. And after that, a girlfriend he'd clung to but hadn't wanted sexually, simply because of Squall's constant compulsion to do what he thought was right; what was expected of him. What Rinoa wanted. What everyone else wanted. The man never did anything just for himself.

Seifer winced. It had been the same for them. He'd been so caught up in his own thoughts and feelings, his guilt over the war, that he'd completely failed to consider that same pattern emerging between the two of them. After Squall had reentered his life, the man had done so much for him. Squall had brought him along to Odine's, and to see Ellone. Everything just to help him. And in the process the man had bared so much of himself, had even asked if he should leave just that evening. All to ease Seifer's feelings, not his own. His heart twisted in his chest as he realized just why Squall had left Winhill the previous night. It hadn't been because he'd been an utter bastard and had treated Squall like shit. From what he could piece together from Squall's fucking apology that morning and the man's promise to leave if it ever became too much for Seifer... Squall had left
for his sake. Sacrificing whatever he'd hoped for between them; the Hynedamned love Seifer could feel and see so clearly now in the man's every action.

No longer. No more of that self-sacrificing bullshit. He wanted to teach Squall how to take what he wanted. He wanted Squall to know that his own needs didn't have to come after everyone else's. He moved his hand from where it had been lying at Squall's side to rest right above Squall's heart.

He, Seifer fucking Almasy, was going to put someone else's needs first for a change. He was going to take all the scars and hurt in Squall and turn them into something good. He'd be the best fucking boyfriend out there. After all, he didn't do things by halves.

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Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much to anyone who's still reading! And please check out this amazing piece of fanart created by Chorizo_13 (Carys Leon on Instagram) for chapter 5: https://www.instagram.com/p/B3SQkDXA2vq/?utm_source=ig_web_options_share_sheet

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!