Red Skies

by Ronin

Summary

Six months after the end of Bragging Rights, Squall and Rinoa are now living in Deling City, where her pregnancy is progressing normally. All is well...until a catastrophic hurricane traps Squall in Balamb. Then Squall returns home to find Rinoa gone.

Notes

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Chapter 1: Storm Warning

Red sky in morning, Sailors take warning. –Maritime proverb

It started in the middle of the central ocean. A swirl of wind and water, it stalked northward, gathering strength as it cruised through the warm equatorial waters near the northern coast of Esthar. Eventually, it became large enough for the satellites launched and tracked by the Esthar Airstation crew, to detect and watch. When it became large enough to pose a threat, a warning was issued.

"Good morning Deling City, this is Dawn Sweet with Channel Six news Morning Edition. We have weather alert this morning as the International Weather Service has reported tracking a hurricane that is still currently swirling around off the eastern coast of Centra. The estimated wind speed and central pressure, according to satellite readings, put it at about a category one. Currently no populated areas are in its direct path. We'll keep you posted on its estimated direction and landfall…"

Squall sipped his coffee as he watched the news, hoping that the storm being tracked would bear east away from Balamb. It was still too far out to sea to predict its actual course yet, and Balamb had been lucky so far this season, having only a category one storm make landfall on the extreme northeast edge of the island, well away from any populated areas.

It had fared better than Dollet, which had unfortunately been slammed by a category three storm at the beginning of the hurricane season and was still struggling to recover from it. Squall had dispatched several SeeD teams to assist Dollet's army in search and rescue, cleanup, and to maintain order.

Afterward, he had suggested to Cid that they meet with the Balamb's city council and mayor to go over disaster scenarios and see what kind of plan they had for evacuation should it become necessary. That meeting had yet to take place, and Squall for one was getting frustrated with the lackadaisical attitude of the city's government.

Just because Balamb hadn't been hit by a really bad hurricane in a hundred years didn't mean that it wouldn't be in the next month or two. It was currently early November; there was still a month left in the season, and late season storms tended to be the strongest.

"Anything good on the news this morning?" Rinoa padded into the kitchen, wrinkling her nose at the smell of the coffee Squall had brewed and pouring herself a glass of orange juice. She'd already showered and dressed in her work scrubs, her face washed clean of makeup and hair pulled back into a ponytail. Now heavily pregnant, she looked, to Squall anyway, completely adorable.

At six and a half months along and carrying twins, she looked closer to eight months pregnant, and was starting to get a little awkward. Still, she managed to move far more gracefully than Squall had thought possible. How she managed to carry the added burden around while working with
Galbadia Garden's doctor all day Squall didn't understand, and it left him in awe of her strength.

The whole process of watching the changes his wife underwent as their babies developed was completely fascinating to Squall. Her pale skin was luminous, her dark hair thicker and glossier than before she'd gotten pregnant, and her ripening body…. well, he found it just about irresistible.

"Not really," he answered. "They're tracking a hurricane off Centra."

Rinoa left the kitchen of the house they'd rented and approached the table where Squall sat. He reached his hand out and took hers, drawing her close, then releasing her hand and wrapping his arm around her waist, he laid his face against her swollen abdomen.

"They're not awake yet," Rinoa sent, giving in to temptation and running her fingers through his hair. As promised, he'd allowed it to grow out over the last five or so months, and it was nearly as long as it had been before he'd cut it off.

"Are you sure?" He asked, placing his coffee down onto the table so he could caress her gravid belly. He was rewarded with a strong kick and he laughed softly as he felt the tiny foot kick against his cheek. Closing his eyes, he deepened his contact with Rinoa to see which of the babies had kicked him. The tiny, unformed mind he gently brushed was distinctly feminine.

"Good morning Julia," he greeted her softly.

It's daddy sweetheart." He said. She responded by pushing against his cheek this time. A hard kick against his hand where it rested on the other side of Rinoa's belly told him that his son had also awakened and Squall smiled.

"Hello Saber." He said, focusing on the more masculine mind of his son.

This mind, as unformed as his sister's, still held the potential for great strength of will. Squall could sense that strength each time he touched his son's mind. His boy would likely be as strong-willed as he himself was.

Squall, his eyes still closed, sent a flood of love to both of his children and to Rinoa. Opening his eyes, he pulled her onto his lap and hugged her close.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked her, kissing her softly.

"Pretty well, all things considered. This gets in the way sometimes." She replied, rubbing her abdomen. Angelo came up and leaned against Squall's leg, resting his head against Rinoa's thigh. They both reached down and petted him.

Sighing, Rinoa stood up, "Well, I'm going to grab some breakfast. Have you eaten already?"

"Yeah," Squall nodded, then picked up his coffee and finished it. After Rinoa had finished eating and getting ready for work, Squall drove her out to Galbadia Garden.

They had been living in Deling City now for three months, moving out there in September, about a month after Selphie and Irvine had transferred down for his instructor's training. After much discussion they had rented a house on the outskirts, rather than moving in with Rinoa's father. While their relationship was improving, the thought of living with him was still not something
Rinoa was willing to entertain.

They had found a good OB/GYN, recommended by Dr. Kadowaki, and thus far, the pregnancy was progressing normally. In spite of its initial hiccup and much to Squall's relief.

They had settled into a routine, with Squall driving Rinoa to Galbadia Garden, leaving their car there and flying the Ragnarok, currently stationed outside Galbadia Garden, to Balamb. Coming back, they reversed the process, with Squall landing the Ragnarok outside Galbadia Garden and driving them both home.

"You know, I still don't get why you decided to call our son Saber. A sword Squall? Really?" Rinoa asked with a slight laugh.

"Couldn't think of anything that didn't sound stupid. It is unique, you have to admit." Squall said as they drove toward Galbadia Garden.

"What about a middle name? Laguna?" she asked smiling.

"No." He answered.

"Fury?" She suggested.

"Nope." He responded.

"Squall?" she smiled.

"Hell no. No middle name. Just Saber." He said firmly.

Rinoa sighed, and then asked, "Do you have a middle name?"

"You should know by now. As far as I know, I don't." He answered.

"What do you think about our girl's name? Julia Raine?" She asked. Squall fell silent for a moment as he maneuvered their car into the parking area at Galbadia Garden and found a space. After parking, they got out and Squall walked with Rinoa toward the main gate, fingers laced with hers.

"So?" Rinoa prompted as they walked, "Julia Raine?"

Squall looked over at her and smiled gently, "I love it."

Upon reaching the main gate, they stopped and Squall slid his arms around Rinoa's expanding waist. He sensed her disquiet about the fact that her increasing size made it difficult for her to lean into a hug, and he sent her his reassurance that it made no difference to him.

Yes, the pregnancy changed a great many things about their lives together, and yes, lovemaking was getting awkward, and he acknowledged her silent concern about that.

Then he sent her his feelings of complete awe at the miracle in the making that Rinoa carried with her day by day.

"Stop, you're making me cry. You know I get weepy nowadays." Rinoa sent, sniffling and burying her face into his chest.

"Sorry." Squall said softly, brushing tears from her cheeks gently as she looked up at him. Then he leaned down and gave her a soft, lingering kiss.
"Have a good day at work today." He smiled at her, giving her another kiss.

"You too." she responded, and they parted company, with Squall walking toward the Ragnarok while Rinoa entered Galbadia Garden.

"Balamb Garden, this is Ragnarok. I'll be landing soon, anything to report?" Squall hailed, banking the airship and throttling back in preparation for landing.

"Negative Ragnarok. We'll see you when you come in Squall." Nida responded. The dragonship settled on the plain next to Balamb Garden's current location and Squall shut down the engines and left, heading directly for his office.

As he did, he checked his watch. He had a meeting with Cid in about an hour, and then hopefully, they would have that thrice-damned meeting with the community leaders of Balamb. He hoped Cid could convince them to work up an evacuation plan, because hero or not, Squall didn't think he would have the verbal skills to do it.

Entering his office, he immediately took off his uniform tunic and loosened his tie. He could always straighten it out before the meeting, and he wanted to be comfortable for the few minutes he had before it started.

Laying the tunic over the back of his chair, he sat down and logged into his computer, checking his email. One from Zell, using a code they'd both agreed on, alerted Squall that he had something interesting to report from their underground contact in FH. He made a note to contact Zell as soon as possible.

By the time he'd finished with reading and answering his emails, it was time for him to go to his meeting with Cid. Straightening his tie, he put the tunic back on and smoothed it down. He grimaced as he checked the medals on display over his left breast. He felt ridiculous wearing them, but Cid had suggested it, telling him that it would impress the mayor and city council. Picking up the briefcase that he'd stowed beneath his desk, Squall unlocked it and double-checked its contents, finding them as he'd left them the previous day. Leaving his office, he locked it behind him and headed toward Cid's office.

Upon reaching it, Xu ushered him in, and Cid shook his hand in greeting.

"How's everything going Squall? Rinoa doing okay?" he asked. He and Edea had both been astounded when Squall had informed them of Rinoa's pregnancy. Edea's reasoning of how that was even possible had to do with the fact that Rinoa was already physically mature when she'd received her powers. She then had offered Rinoa whatever help and support that the younger woman needed.

"Rinoa's doing fine, getting bigger by the day." Squall answered. Cid laughed softly at that observation.

Cid still persisted as headmaster of Balamb Garden, not having had much luck finding a replacement as yet. He had asked Squall if he wanted the job, but Squall had firmly refused, explaining that he was more comfortable commanding the active SeeDs in Garden than overseeing the education of the cadets. It was a job more suited to a senior instructor, someone used to teaching. While Squall did assist with training senior level gunbladers, he only did so part time, and he already knew teaching wasn't his strength. What was needed was someone with familiarity with both administration and education. Squall's skills lay in a different direction.
Interestingly enough, it was Seifer that was a better gunblade instructor than Squall himself was, and after a good deal of convincing, had applied for his instructor's license. He was scheduled for training in the class after Irvine's.

The point of this meeting with Cid was mainly to map out their strategy to get the civic leaders of Balamb moving on a disaster plan. Essentially, they would tag-team them. Cid, as the headmaster and administrator of Garden carried more weight with the government leaders of Balamb, while Squall would present Balamb Garden's plan. He didn't like to think that his presentation would have more of an impact than Cid's, but he couldn't deny the fact that in many people's eyes, he was a bona fide hero.

He didn't like it, but if it got the results he wanted, he wouldn't complain too much. He'd worked too hard on this disaster plan for it to go ignored.

"Is everything ready?" Cid asked him.

"Yes. I just got the final drafts printed off yesterday. I've got so many damned graphs and schematics and statistics that I would be very surprised if anyone was conscious after I'm done with this presentation." Squall said with a grimace.

"Well, let's see..." Cid said, looking over the plans they'd all worked on. Squall had been given the task of creating the plan, but he hadn't worked on it alone. He'd enlisted help from everyone; from Cid himself to the cafeteria staff, in order to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of what might go into an emergency evacuation of Balamb.

"Good job, Squall," Cid acknowledged finishing his review. "Very thorough. Of course, I expected nothing less from you." He handed the sheaf of papers and other materials back to Squall, who promptly put it back into his briefcase.

Squall nodded. Of course.

Cid glanced at his watch and said, "We'd better get going. Chances are at least half of the council members will be late, but of course, we have to be on time regardless." Squall nodded in agreement and followed Cid out of his office.

They arrived at Balamb's city council chambers exactly on time, with Squall doing the driving duties. This being an official meeting, they had decided to take a Garden car.

Upon entering the chambers, there was the usual round of polite greetings before they were shown to their seats. For a wonder, the mayor and all of the council members had arrived almost on time.

Both Squall and Cid waited patiently while the council discussed various community issues until finally, it was their turn.

"And now, we have the headmaster and administrator of Balamb Garden, Cid Kramer and the SeeD Commander, Squall Leonhart here to speak with us about disaster preparedness and to present their recommendations on that subject. Mr. Kramer?" The mayor said, yielding the floor to Cid.

He approached the podium, put on his reading glasses and organized his notes, then began, "Thank you mayor. You all know what we're here for, so I'll just get to it. As you may recall, Dollet was just recently hit with a category three hurricane that caused a great deal of property damage. They're still calculating the cost but it's already run into millions, and they've only scratched the surface. Fortunately, there was no loss of life and injuries were minimal, mainly due to the fact that
they had enough advance warning to prepare and evacuate areas that were the most vulnerable. Not everyone listened however, and we had to dispatch SeeD teams to assist the army in rescue and recovery efforts."

Cid then activated the slide projector, showing photos of the damage that Dollet's seaport and beachfront area had sustained. Another photo showed EMS and SeeDs working together cleaning up and rescuing trapped people.

"Now, I understand that Balamb has not been hit by a storm of this magnitude for over a hundred years. And I'm sure that there are those of you who think that it won't happen. This year, next year, or ever. To us, at Balamb Garden, that simply means that we're due for one. And to minimize the property damage, avoid injury and loss of life, we need a plan." Cid went on, then indicating Squall, he continued, "To present that plan is Balamb Garden's SeeD commander, Squall Leonhart."

Cid yielded the floor to Squall and he approached the podium, sheaf of papers in hand. Arranging them on the podium in front of him, Squall gazed steadily out at the councilmen, studying them and their expressions. Bracing his hands on either side of the podium, Squall leaned forward and focused upon the mayor.

Then, like a raptor on the attack, he began, "A week after the hurricane struck Dollet, I contacted you all, asking about your emergency plan. I did not receive a response. Subsequent queries from me were put off. By that I construed that you either did not have a disaster plan or did not feel it enough of a priority to devote any time or thought to it." Spearing each council member in turn with his cool gaze, Squall continued, "In helping Dollet to recover from the hurricane it has occurred to me that we here in Balamb have been inordinately lucky in the last hundred years or so. I personally do not want to trust to luck any further. As we speak, a hurricane has formed in the central ocean; it is currently off the eastern coast of Centra and is even now gathering strength. Will it land here? It's too early to tell yet, but if it did, would we be ready for it? I don't think so. Thus far, I have heard nothing from you to assure me that you would be prepared for it if it did."

Straightening, he turned to his papers briefly, and then went on, "Since we needed to have some kind of plan, some kind of framework to work from in the event of an emergency, we at Balamb Garden took it upon ourselves to draw up this plan. I was assigned this task. So, without further introduction, I present to you the Balamb Disaster and Recovery plan."

Cid watched, impressed as Squall outlined the plan to the council. Contrary to the younger man's assertion that the councilmen would fall asleep due to the tediousness of the presentation, upon looking around at the men, Cid saw quite the opposite. Yes, it was thorough; Squall had gone into exacting detail in certain areas. But rather than appearing bored by it, the council instead seemed fascinated. It didn't hurt, Cid reflected, that Squall had effectively ended the siege of Balamb by the Galbadians nearly four years ago.

That alone afforded the young commander far more respect than he was aware of. His track record in the years since had been similarly stellar; proving that despite his youth, Squall Leonhart was someone who if given a mission, accomplished it.

Afterward, the council put it to a vote and they unanimously decided to accept the plan as outlined by Squall. Now all that remained is putting the plan into action, which meant establishing a notification system and coordinating EMS, local police and rescue services.

As Squall was packing up his briefcase, preparing to leave, the mayor commented to Cid, "He doesn't mince words does he?"
Recalling how Squall had essentially called out the council, Cid smiled slightly and answered, "No. He never has. Diplomacy is not his strength."

The mayor snorted, "I suppose not. At least he's not deliberately insulting."

Cid chuckled slightly, "He's done pretty well in overcoming that flaw."

"He has flaws?" the mayor asked with a slight laugh.

Just then Squall joined them then and catching the mayor's remark, said, "Plenty. Fortunately, I'm smart enough not to believe my own press."

He glanced over at Cid inquiringly, but before he could respond, the mayor said, "To hear them tell it, you're greatest hero that ever lived."

"Which is why I fired my press agent. I just did my job and tried not to die in the process. Nothing more, nothing less." Squall said, and then added, "I'll be out in the car whenever you're ready to leave, Headmaster." Nodding to them both, he left.

Shaking his head, the mayor repeated, "He just did his job. And he ended up saving the world...at seventeen. How do you live up to that?"

Cid shrugged, "You don't. You just move on and live your life."

Squall strapped himself into the pilot's chair of the Ragnarok and started powering up the engines. He felt a tired satisfaction at what had been accomplished that day, and he hoped that the council would follow through on their vote and implement the plan as soon as possible.

Squall knew that getting the council to agree to the plan that he'd outlined was only the beginning, and he also knew that governing bodies, be they city, state or national, rarely moved quickly. Indeed, in some cases, he'd seen glaciers move faster.

But while Squall couldn't claim any talent for prescience, he had an uncomfortable feeling that Balamb's luck with regards to dodging the really bad storms that sometimes occurred at this time of year, would not hold for much longer.

As he lifted the Ragnarok up from the Acauld plains where he'd landed, he fired the thrusters and slowly banked to the right. Flying over the small city of Balamb, Squall studied the boats crowding the harbor, the small shops and homes that butted right up against the quay, and shuddered at the amount of damage even a category one storm would do.

Even a relatively minor storm such as that would require the entire city to be evacuated. Too many homes were too close to the harbor itself; the storm surge would flood the entire city. Dollet had escaped loss of life due to its seawall, and the fact that most of it was built on a cliff above the beach. Balamb wasn't that fortunate.

It also, Squall discovered as he directed the Ragnarok toward Galbadia and Deling City, did not have the luxury of time. As the ship climbed higher, Squall saw the building storm, still a gray smudge, far off in the distance. When he checked his radar, he confirmed that it was still swirling off the coast of Centra, but it had moved slightly north. And it was getting bigger.

He frowned at that. He would be paying very close attention to the weather reports over the next few days. If the storm made a clear change in direction that put it anywhere near Balamb, Squall had to be ready to mobilize the SeeDs to help Balamb's citizens prepare their homes and businesses
and be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

In no time at all, he was flying toward Galbadia Garden and banking the airship in preparation for landing. As he did, Squall sent out a questing thought to Rinoa.

"How was your day today?" Squall asked her as the airship landed.

"Exhausting. And yours?" She responded.

"Productive. The council voted to adopt the plan as I outlined it; no modifications." Squall answered, opening the doors and extending the ramp.

"That's great! I know how hard you worked on this. Hopefully, they'll never need it, but if they do, I know it'll save a lot of lives and property." Rinoa sent proudly. Squall smiled slightly at her staunch faith in him. When he'd voiced his concerns about Balamb's vulnerability, he hadn't expected anyone to take them seriously. He also hadn't expected to be assigned the task of making sure that Balamb was prepared to handle a disaster if one should strike.

He unbuckled his restraints and left the airship, palming the doors shut behind him. He walked toward Galbadia Garden and Rinoa, who awaited him at the main gate where he'd left her.

He gave her a gentle hug and sighed in sympathy at the waves of fatigue and pain that he could feel from Rinoa. Strong and resilient she may be but after eight hours on her feet coupled with the added weight of the babies; the only thing she craved was sleep.

She sighed and relaxed in the passenger seat of their car and closed her eyes. Squall reached over and stroked her cheek, then gently squeezed her hand before starting the car.

"Why don't I cook dinner tonight?" He offered, putting the car into gear and backing out of the parking space.

"Throw in a foot rub and you can have anything you want." Rinoa sighed tiredly. Fatigue overlaid her obvious desire, but the fact that she was willing to at least make an effort warmed Squall.

Squall chuckled, and sent, "ANYTHING?"

"Yes, you brat. ANYTHING. Although, I'm so tired that may be all you get tonight." Rinoa replied, sending him a visual of what she meant. Squall's response was a happy acceptance of that compromise.

"Hey, I'm the meanie, remember? YOU'RE the brat!" Squall corrected her.

Rinoa snorted, "Whatever."

"Okay, now that's just scary. If you start taking up the gunblade, we're going to have to seek professional help." Squall smirked.

"No fear of that. I can barely lift the damn thing. I'd only end up shooting myself in the foot or cutting my leg off anyway." Rinoa sent. Squall laughed softly.

"You'd look damn hot in leather though." Squall commented.

Rinoa snorted, "I'd look like I was trying to steal a watermelon." Her dissatisfaction with her currently distorted figure came through plainly in that statement. Squall responded with adamant disagreement to that, showing her what he thought of her current shape and the reason for it.
They arrived home shortly after that, with Rinoa sinking into the couch with a tired sigh. Angelo immediately hopped onto the couch with her and cuddled up close.

Taking off his coat, Squall draped it over the back of a chair and headed into the kitchen, asking Rinoa, "What are you and the kids in the mood for, dinner-wise?" He opened the refrigerator, pondering the contents while waiting for her to reply.

"Pizza. Pepperoni and pineapple." She responded. Okay, so much for cooking dinner then. That faintly disappointed Squall, as he rather liked showing off his culinary skills.

"Okay, I guess I'm ordering out then. Anything else you want?" He asked her.

Rinoa shrugged, "salad?" Squall nodded, feeling better. He could do salad, easily.

"Coming right up then." He said, calling in the pizza order and starting to construct the salad. If asked, he wouldn't actually admit it, but he did enjoy cooking, particularly the part that required the use of a knife; Squall's skill with the blade was not limited to just gunblades.

They had just finished eating the salad when the pizza arrived, and Squall checked the pistol at the small of his back before answering the door. After verifying that it was indeed the pizza delivery person, one he was familiar with, Squall opened the door.

"Hello Joey. What do I owe you?" Squall said, pulling out his wallet.

"Fifteen and a half. How's Rinoa?" the kid asked.

Squall shrugged, handing over the money plus a generous tip, "doing fine. How's school?"

"It's a pain, as always. But I'm graduating in May, so I can hang in there." The boy replied, putting the money away and handing Squall a receipt.

"Good. What's next then, University?" Squall asked, taking the pizza. The boy nodded.

" I kind of wish it wasn't too late for me to enroll in Galbadia Garden. I asked and asked my parents, but they couldn't afford the tuition when I was younger, and now its too late, isn't it, if I want to become a SeeD?" the boy asked wistfully.

"How old are you?" Squall asked him.

"Sixteen. I'm seventeen in March." The boy sighed.

Squall nodded, "yeah, its too late, unfortunately. I was enrolled in Balamb Garden at seven. Usually SeeD candidates aren't even accepted if they're older than ten."

The boy nodded, crestfallen, "oh, well… I guess there's always the army, if I want to go that route."

Squall shrugged, "you could do that. My father was a soldier. There are worse things you could be doing, certainly."

The boy nodded, "Yeah…Well, I gotta go. You guys have a good night."

"You too," Squall said, and then closed the door, carrying the pizza over to the dining room table and getting plates and napkins out.

"Was that Joey again?" Rinoa asked as she came to the table and sat down.
Squall nodded as he sat down and took a piece of pizza, studying it for a moment.

"Pepperoni and pineapple. Well, I guess it's better than ice cream and anchovies." He commented, taking a bite.

"Don't knock it 'til you try it." Rinoa said, taking a bite of her own slice.

Squall, swallowing the bite he'd just taken, said, "Well, this isn't bad anyway. I can't see the appeal of salty fish and ice cream, personally, but then again, I'm not pregnant."

"Seems like every time we order pizza though, its Joey who delivers. Wonder why?" Rinoa asked.

"Because I ask for him." Squall said.

"Why?" Rinoa frowned, puzzled.

"I know him. He's a good kid. And he's... safe. I checked him out." Squall answered.

"Squall, aren't you being just a little paranoid? What are you afraid of? Nobody's threatened us or bothered us the entire time we've lived here." Rinoa reasoned.

"No, Rinoa, I'm not." Squall answered, continuing to eat his pizza. He didn't want to frighten her, but the information he'd gotten from Zell earlier that day had frightened him.

Odine was now aware of Rinoa's pregnancy, had been for some time, and had been ominously silent. Even Laguna couldn't tell Squall what the man was up to, and that worried Squall. To him, that meant that Odine had gone underground with his plans. Whatever they were. Squall wasn't fool enough to think that Odine would leave them in peace. He'd already proved that he wasn't above kidnapping to get what he wanted.

But...money had changed hands in FH. Certain elements had been hired. Odine was cunning, and smart, and nothing could be linked directly to him, but to Squall, it looked as though he was finally making his move. Unfortunately, Squall had been unable to obtain a description of the individuals who had been hired.

It put Squall on his guard though, and made him rethink his entire routine. And that was in itself a problem...it was a routine. They left to go to work the same time every day, took the same route to get there, drove the same car...anyone who paid attention knew exactly when Squall would be home and when he wouldn't be, and where Rinoa would be in the meantime.

Even with Rinoa safely ensconced in Galbadia Garden for the duration of her shift, it would be ridiculously easy to get at her. Explaining that to his wife however, was not something Squall wanted to do.

"Squall? What's wrong?" Rinoa asked, worried. His sudden silence at her mention of his paranoia had given her a chill. Squall wasn't a habitual worrier. He was cautious, always had been, but in general, he wouldn't worry unless he had good reason to. And despite her gentle jab at him, he wasn't actually paranoid.

Something had given him a reason to worry. He was shielding, much to Rinoa's frustration, but she could tell he definitely had something on his mind.

Taking her hand gently, Squall said, "I got some information today that's worried me. We need to be more careful, more alert."
"What is it? Squall, please tell me?" Rinoa asked.

"We think someone, possibly Odine, though we can't confirm it, is making a move. They may be intending to move on us, or it may simply be a coincidence, but I don't want to take any chances with you and the twins. You're well into the third trimester now, Rin. You could potentially deliver at any time. If Odine wants you while you're still pregnant, he has to move now." Squall said.

"What do we do then? I'm not going to live my life in a cage. You know that. My father tried it and you saw how well that worked for him." Rinoa said.

"I know. And that's no way to live anyway." Squall sighed, setting down his half-eaten slice of pizza. Studying her intently, Squall brought her hand to his lips, kissing her fingertips.

"I think our only choice is to stay alert. I want you to keep Angelo with you at all times, and…and I'm going to have Irvine work with you on your shooting skills. I want you to keep a gun on you. It's easier to conceal than your Shooting Star." Squall said.

Rinoa nodded, "Okay."

"And Rin?" Squall added, opening his connection to her to let her know how much this part bothered him, "If…if someone grabs you, please don't fight. Don't give them a reason to hurt you."

"This isn't just about you and me Rin, this is also about our babies. If anything happened to you…" Squall couldn't finish the thought.

Rinoa laid her hand against his cheek, caressing it. He closed his eyes and leaned into it, letting her feel his worry and fear for her. It was very unlike him to be so worried, so fearful. But then, he'd never had so much to lose before.

"You can't let it eat at you honey, it'll destroy you if you do. We'll be careful, vary our routines, and let all of our friends know. If everyone knows what to look out for, we'll have a better chance of catching them if and when they do make a move." Rinoa sent.

Squall nodded. That was their best, and likely only chance. But it didn't do anything to calm his deepest, darkest fear.

As both her Knight and her husband, it was Squall's duty to protect Rinoa. But his job as Commander was now coming into direct conflict with that duty, forcing him to leave her side for hours every day. Leaving her vulnerable, open to attack.

Squall couldn't anticipate everything, every potential threat, it just wasn't possible and it was a good way to go insane from trying.

But…it also left him absolutely terrified that he'd fail her.

After dinner, Squall cleared up and told Rinoa to go back to the couch, put her feet up and wait for him there.

"You know, you don't HAVE to rub my feet, dinner was good enough." Rinoa sent.

"Your feet are killing you. I can feel it. Just relax and I'll be there in a minute." Squall responded.

When he joined her moments later, he turned on the CD player. It already had one of Rinoa's
favorite CDs in it. A soft piano concerto provided a soothing background as Squall sat down on the couch with her.

"Don't you want to watch the news?" she asked as he lifted her feet onto his lap and reached for the bottle of lotion he'd brought.

"No. Not tonight. We've got enough to worry about right now." Squall said, putting a dollop of lotion in the palm of his hand and spreading it onto the bottom of one of her feet.

Rinoa hissed in pain at first as his strong hands ran his thumbs up and down her aching arch, then tugged at her toes and kneaded at the ball of her foot. Then she relaxed and closed her eyes as his warm hands worked the soreness out of her feet.

Squall worked his way up over her ankles, noting how swollen they appeared as he rubbed his hands up her calf.

Frowning in concern as he moved on to her other foot, Squall asked, "Should your ankles be this swollen?"

"I'm on my feet a lot. It kind of comes with the territory. I should be fine as long as my blood pressure doesn't spike." She said, eyes still closed.

"How are you going to know? It's not like we have a way to check it at home..." Squall said.

"I work in the infirmary, remember? The doctor there can check it if necessary. Plus, I have a doctor's appointment in a couple of days." Rinoa replied.

"Do you want me to come with you? I can arrange for the time off." Squall asked.

"I would like you there, yeah. It's just a routine checkup, but if you have any questions or anything, that'd be a good time to talk to the doctor about them." She sighed, yawning.

"What time is the appointment?" he asked her.

"Two-thirty." She answered.

"I'll talk to Cid about taking the day off then." Squall said.

"You don't have to do that…" Rinoa protested.

"I want to." He said.

"Alright. I won't argue with that. It'll be nice to be able to spend the day with you." Rinoa smiled, yawning again.

Squall smiled slightly as he continued working on her other leg, feeling her relaxing to the edge of sleep. Even when he shielded, their bond was so deep it wasn't possible for Squall not to be affected by what Rinoa felt. When she relaxed, he relaxed as well.

It wasn't long before her deep, even breaths told him that she'd fallen asleep.

He studied her for a moment, smiling slightly, running his hand lightly up her smooth leg. She still wore her pale blue workday scrubs, her hair still in a tousled ponytail. Her face was turned slightly toward the back of the couch, one arm draped limply over her stomach. Squall's heart squeezed as he watched her sleep.
There were those who feared that 'Sorceress Rinoa' had enchanted him and made him her slave. But what he felt for her had been inside of him from the very beginning, when the only power she had wielded then had been that of her own heart's ability to draw it out of him.

And later, when he'd learned that she was a sorceress, a sworn enemy to SeeD and all that it stood for? He'd chosen her. Clear-eyed and conscious, he followed his heart for the first time in his life. There had been no sorcery, no enchantments involved in that decision.

But in the years since, as they'd both matured together and their relationship developed, it had blossomed until now, when they were together…it truly was magic.

Moving slowly, Squall lifted Rinoa's feet off of his lap and got up. Heading toward the linen closet, he pulled out a blanket and returned to the living room, draping it over her. The night was cool, but not nearly as cold as it would have been in Balamb's more northern clime.

He supposed he should wake her and tell her to go to bed, but she looked so…cute…he decided to let her sleep for a little while. Pulling the blanket up over her shoulders, Squall let the back of his hand trail up and softly brush her cheek. Then he bent down and lightly kissed her forehead.

The soft notes of the piano music dropped like raindrops as Squall left Rinoa alone to sleep.
Atmospheric Changes

Chapter Notes

Chapter 2: Atmospheric Changes

Later that evening, Squall returned to the living room to wake Rinoa so she could go to bed. Kneeling down next to the couch, he kissed her and mentally urged her to wake. She stirred as he brushed her mind.

"Come to bed. You'll be more comfortable there." He sent to her. She shifted her position on the couch to face him, stretching her arms out to him.

Leaning close enough that her arms could come around him, he embraced her as she embraced him, giving her a gentle, lingering kiss.

Brushing her hand through his hair, Rinoa whispered, "I haven't forgotten I owe you for dinner…"

"Don't worry about it. Let's just go to bed." Squall said quietly, giving her another quick kiss and standing up. Taking her hands, he helped her to her feet, hugging her again.

As they walked toward the bedroom, Rinoa protested, "I know it's been awhile for us honey…" Squall tightened his arm around her briefly and kissed her temple.

When they reached their bedroom, Squall kissed her again and said, "I don't want to pressure you. You've been so tired lately, I feel selfish for even thinking about it."

"You're not selfish. You're normal. And I miss you too." Rinoa said, leaning into his embrace.

"The nap helped. If you're up for it…" She sent. Squall sensed her diminished confidence due to her current shape. She hadn't come right out and said anything, but he knew she worried he wouldn't find her attractive any longer.

"You're worried that I won't be interested in having sex with you because of this, aren't you?" Squall sent, caressing her pregnant belly. Rinoa nodded, feeling ashamed that her apprehension was so easily picked up on.

"How can you still find this attractive? Everything's distorted, out of shape… I don't even recognize my own body." Rinoa whispered, tears starting. Dammit, now she was going to cry and it wasn't Squall's fault. It was her issue, not his.

Squall's response was wordless and ardent. He kissed her deeply, pulling her as close as he could, letting his tongue sweep over hers, tasting, teasing and arousing them both. He reached up while kissing her, pulling the elastic band from her ponytail and freeing her hair, combing his fingers through the silken strands.

"Can I offer my opinion?" Squall asked softly. Rinoa nodded wordlessly. Slowly, gently, he began kissing her. Rinoa sighed and shivered as his lips trailed their way along the sensitive skin at her
neck. Squall smiled privately as he felt her responding to him.

He stepped back and helped her pull her top off. Coming around behind her, he kissed the back of her neck, his warm breath at her nape making her shiver again as he deftly unhooked her bra. As always, their sympathetic connection let him know exactly what he was doing to her, and how she felt about it.

Lightly, he brushed his hands down her arms, pushing the bra straps down them, removing the garment and freeing her breasts.

Wrapping his arms around her from behind, Squall brushed his cheek against hers and whispered into her ear, "Your skin's smoother. Your hair is thicker, and silkier. And these…” he cupped her breasts, brushing the nipples lightly. Heat shot to Rinoa's groin, and Squall marveled at how sensitive she'd become to the lightest touch. He had to be careful, he knew, because too much would actually be painful.

"These flat out rock." He said, trailing light kisses from her ear to her cheek. Moving to face her again, Squall let her know exactly how much he liked the new fullness that pregnancy had given her breasts, kissing and caressing them lightly. Rinoa's head fell back and she closed her eyes with a soft moan, caressing Squall's hair as he kissed and teased her nipples.

Bending down, he untied the drawstring that held up the bottom of her scrubs, pushing them down, along with her underwear. He felt Rinoa shrink mentally from that, just briefly, and he sent calm reassurance to her. That brief apprehension faded on the strength of her rising excitement.

Stepping out of her remaining clothing, Rinoa reached up and began unbuttoning Squall's shirt, suddenly craving the sight, the scent, the feel of his smooth skin and hard muscles against her.

She got to his belt, already knowing how aroused he was, feeling her confidence returning as a result. After she pulled his pants off, taking his shorts with them, he stepped out of them as she had.

Then she let her hands roam, smoothing up his chest, following them with her lips. Squall caressed her hair as she kissed her way lower, but before she got too far he wordlessly stopped her.

"We'll both be more comfortable on the bed sweetheart." He sent, thinking about her added weight and her knees on the hard floor. She sighed, silently agreeing. If they were going to make love, physical discomfort certainly wouldn't help the mood.

They both got onto the bed and Squall took her into his arms, kissing and caressing her. Rinoa was still frustrated and a little embarrassed at her protruding abdomen, pressing herself as close to him as possible. She caught her breath as Squall caressed it gently.

Continuing to kiss her, Squall whispered, "I know you think this bothers me, that I don't find you attractive because you don't look like you did when we got married. But, aside from the fact that it is a little awkward, it doesn't bother me."

Sprinkling warm kisses over her chest, concentrating on her breasts again, Squall continued silently, "It doesn't bother me because I know it's temporary; and because you're more than just your body." Moving downward, he kissed and stroked her abdomen softly, paying particular attention to her there, knowing how sensitive her skin was.

"Besides all of that is the fact that I love you, the fact that this is the result of that love. Then there's my purely selfish male pride at managing to do something nobody had ever thought was
possible." Squall murmured softly, laying his cheek against her belly briefly, smiling as he felt one of the babies shift.

Rinoa felt her eyes stinging, and she stroked Squall's hair, whispering, "I love you."

"I love you too," he said, letting his hand wander lower. Touching her lightly, he felt her response and the warmth of her desire. She shifted, moaning as he stoked that desire, trembling as he teased that most sensitive of spots.

Squall knew Rinoa's original intention had been to pleasure him only, ignoring her own needs, her insecurity making her shy from it. But he refused to allow her to do that, instead gently taking control and concentrating on making her feel loved, making her feel desirable and beautiful. He let her feel from him, how much he loved her, how much she still excited him.

Wordlessly, they shifted until they arrived at a position comfortable for them both, and if Rinoa had any lingering doubts of Squall's desire for her, they were dispelled as they made love.

Slow, sweet and gentle, the passion banked and mastered now in deference to Rinoa's condition, it was no less satisfying.

Their hearts beat together, blood surging, breaths coming fast as Squall's long, slow strokes brought them both to the peak. The slow build of tension actually increased the power of their mutual climax, leaving them both limp and spent in its wake.

Caressing a smooth thigh, Squall withdrew from her, lying down against her back and cuddling close, kissing the back of her neck and cheek. There was a mutual shift as they got under the covers, pulling the blankets up against the cool night.

Draping his arm around her, he hugged her close. Rinoa sighed contentedly, lacing the fingers of her hand with his, feeling his wedding ring pressing against her own. Keeping their hands joined together, Squall slowly moved it over her belly, stroking it gently.

"You really are proud of this, aren't you?" Rinoa asked softly.

"Yes, I am. Intended or not, I worked pretty hard to get you to this point. And I take pride in my work." Squall whispered with a grin. Rinoa rolled onto her back, smiling up at him and reached her hand behind his neck. Toying with the hair there briefly, she pulled him to her and kissed him soundly.

"I'm sorry it took so long for us to be together..." Rinoa sent, letting Squall feel her regret at the numerous things that had gotten in the way of their intimacy in recent days.

"It's not your fault Rin, I'm just as culpable. All those late nights working on that damned disaster plan...I've missed this. I've missed you." Squall sent, silently urging her back onto her side, knowing she was more comfortable in that position.

With sleep dragging at them both, Rinoa wondered, "Do the babies feel it, when we make love?"

"Probably, although I'm pretty sure the only thing they sense is the fact that their parents love each other. I seriously doubt that'll hurt them at all." Squall responded.

They lay together in silence, calm, tranquil, both relaxed from the tensions of the day that they hadn't realized they were even feeling until this moment. The spectacular fireworks from early in their marriage may have been set aside temporarily, but their lovemaking was no less hot for its lack. Rinoa's eyes still burned golden for her husband, and his heart still beat for her, even though
his passion was now tightly reined for fear of hurting her.

The light, gentle touch he now adopted however, made things even sweeter for the both of them.

They were both all but asleep when a drowsily contented Squall thought; "Happiness is a warm wife on a cold night..."

Rinoa snorted quietly, responding, "Happiness is a warm, loving husband, on that same cold night..."

"I love you Rin."

"I love you too."

They both succumbed to sleep soon after that, cuddled close together.

Squall got up early, as he usually did, and prepared to go for his morning run. He'd kept up with the same routine he'd followed in preparing for the SeeD games, finding it fairly easy to continue the habit. It simply made sense to be as fit as possible so as to meet and deal with any threat that might present itself. He did back off on the intensity just a little bit, since he wasn't actually training for anything. But he kept it up in part out of habit and because of his work. Of course, the fact that his wife found the results very attractive certainly didn't hurt his motivation.

Stroking Rinoa's smooth skin, Squall regretfully left her warmth and got dressed. The morning was cold, and Squall dressed accordingly in his black sweats with a dark watch cap. After tying his shoes, he added one more item, one that he hadn't taken with him on his morning runs before now. His gunblade.

Shrugging into the harness that he'd had made for the SeeD games; he adjusted the straps snugly, and then slid the heavy weapon into the scabbard on his back, snapping down the strap to keep it in place. A series of loops, running down the length of the scabbard, held the large bullets that his weapon took, and Squall made sure it was completely full.

It wasn't just a run he was going on this morning. It was a patrol.

Whistling softly for Angelo, Squall left the house with the dog at his heels, exiting into the cold morning fog that had rolled in that morning from the nearby ocean.

It was hours yet till sunrise, and the fog lent an eerie feel to the dark morning as Squall loped easily down their street, warming up while keeping alert for anything out of the ordinary.

He didn't know if his neighbors were aware that his morning jogs were actually reconnaissance, familiarizing himself with the layout of the neighborhood and its residents so as to better catch anything out of the ordinary. He rather suspected the neighborhood watch captain had found his activities curious, but not so much so that they invited questions.

Pausing for a moment, breath misting in the cool morning, Squall stretched out his legs, scanning the small park area where he'd decided to stop. Angelo sniffed the area, panting, ears pricked and alert as well. The fog made visibility difficult, so Squall relied heavily upon the dog's keener senses. His own night-vision was pretty good, but nowhere near as good as the dog's.

Moving on to his shoulders, Squall stretched them out while remaining alert. Feeling looser now, he continued his jog, making a complete circuit around the neighborhood. He found some small
amusement in knowing that his neighbors slept on, unaware that their resident SeeD was so
dedicated to keeping the area safe. Not that he'd had to do much; it was a fairly quiet
neighborhood, off the beaten path, populated with mostly retirees and young couples. Solidly
middle-class, certainly not one that invited a great deal of crime. No one was outrageously rich,
and no one had any dark secrets that would invite trouble.

Another thing Squall had checked on…. much to Rinoa's exasperation. In one of their rare
disagreements, she had accused him of being obsessive-compulsive. Using logic to defeat that
notion, he'd simply told her that once he found the information needed, he ceased his activities.

Of course, logic, as Squall quickly discovered, only works when both participants in the argument
are being logical. Pregnant women are rarely logical.

Instead, Squall was learning, they were at once confusing, contradictory, contrary, and emotionally
erratic…. and also sweet, loving, adorable, and sexily irresistible. At least the one pregnant woman
that he had intimate acquaintance with was. He had no idea if that was the case for all of them,
although anecdotal evidence seemed to support that supposition.

Squall had completed his circumnavigation of the neighborhood and had started running down the
main road leading from the subdivision toward the beach, some five or so miles away. An easy run
for him.

Thus far, nothing out of the ordinary had caught his attention as he'd patrolled his neighborhood,
but upon striking out toward the beach, the fog had thickened. He was out well before anyone else
even walked their dogs; everyone's car was safely garaged or parked in their driveways. No one
was about.

So why was there a car parked on the side of the road leading toward the beach?

Squall had almost missed it, the fog making it nearly impossible to see. Indeed, he was nearly on
top of it before he saw it and immediately leaped off of the road and into cover, hoping that the fog
had worked in his favor and whoever was in the car…. and there was someone in there… hadn't
seen him.

He crouched in the brush, commanding Angelo to sit and be quiet, though he had to credit the dog
for alerting him to the car's presence with a soft growl as they'd approached it. It wasn't Angelo's
fault that Squall had been running too fast to stop sooner.

Squall squinted, straining to see any details through the shifting mist and becoming frustrated at his
inability to do so. He couldn't even tell the color or the make of the car. He quickly ruled out a
couple out on a date, as there appeared to be only one person sitting inside of the vehicle. Besides,
the spot where the car was parked was not the most scenic around; there wasn't even much of a
shoulder for it to park on.

Squall waited, tense, watching the silently threatening vehicle and the person inside, waiting to see
what would happen. Had this person been waiting for him to come running past? If so, why?
Squall had made no secret of his habits… to those who knew him. Those who only knew him
casually or who had read up on him in the tabloids would only know that he ran to keep in shape.
Not when, or where. He'd been very careful about keeping that information private.

Obviously, he hadn't kept it private enough.

Squall checked his watch, noting the time. It was several minutes past the time that he normally
came this way. Apparently, the individual waiting in the car had come to that realization as well,
concluding that he wasn't going to show and suddenly starting the engine.

Squall narrowed his eyes as the car started to pull away slowly, lights still off. He continued to watch until the fog swallowed it. A bright smudge of red, diffused by the thick fog, appeared several meters down the road, indicating that the driver had finally turned on the lights.

That alone was an ominous sign. Nobody in their right mind drives down a foggy highway in the wee hours of the morning with their lights off unless they have a good reason to. Like not wanting to be seen.

Squall stood, grimacing as he worked the kinks from his legs from crouching for so long in the cold. Once he'd limbered up again, he took to his heels; a sudden urgency to be home lending wings to his feet. He ran at such a pace, even Angelo was hard-pressed to keep up.

Approaching the street he lived on, he moderated his pace, a quick brush to Rinoa's mind reassuring him that all was well. He loped easily through the awakening neighborhood, pondering the import of what he'd seen.

That driver had appeared to be waiting for someone, and Squall didn't know of anyone else besides him in his neighborhood that jogged that particular route at that specific time. So, that left the most obvious question…. had this person been waiting for him with the intention to attack him? To disable him and make it easier to get to Rinoa? Or, was the watcher simply waiting for him to go past in order to inform someone else that Squall was away from home?

Whichever it was, the fact remained that they were being watched.

Squall suddenly realized that he'd become comfortable with his life and the woman he shared it with. Something he hadn't even thought about before he'd met her. As a young SeeD, he'd accepted the fact that his life would neither be a long one nor a comfortable one. Then Rinoa had shown him the possibility of a future, and he'd decided that he wanted that future.

There was no way in hell that he'd allow anyone to take that away from him.

Approaching his home, Squall sensed that Rinoa had awakened and was showering. The sunrise had lightened the fog to a light gray color; thinning it enough that it was easier to see. He relaxed slightly as nothing appeared amiss with the yard or home itself, unlocking the door and letting himself and the dog in.

As they entered the home, Angelo immediately went to his water dish, lapping up the water noisily. Squall busied himself with making coffee, then scooped up some kibble and fed Angelo.

Going back into the bedroom, he shrugged off the harness and scabbard holding his gunblade, stripped off his clothing and entered the bathroom where Rinoa was still showering.

He hoped there was enough hot water left as he slipped into the shower with her, smiling as he felt her welcome.

Slipping his arms around her from behind, he let the warm spray sluice down on him as he nuzzled at her neck, kissing her cheek and hugging her. She crossed her arms over his and leaned back against his solid warmth.

"How was your run?" Rinoa asked.

"It was okay." Squall said offhandedly, not wanting to broach the subject of the mysterious car he'd seen yet. Smoothing his hands over Rinoa's abdomen, Squall instead thought about how much he'd
enjoyed the previous night and how much he'd like an encore.

Rinoa laughed softly, thinking, "aren't you worried about being late for work?"

"It won't kill us to leave later, just this once." Squall sent, nibbling lightly at her neck, and moving up to her earlobe. Moving his hands up to her breasts, he caressed and teased the nipples, making her sigh and shiver.

He sensed her hesitation beneath her rising excitement, her fear of a slip on the chancy footing in the shower, her worry at her awkwardness. He acknowledged her concern, sighing and sending his regret.

"You're right, its too risky for you and the babies. The last thing I want is for you to get hurt."

Squall thought, unable to hide his disappointment.

Then Rinoa turned around, smiling at the sight of her gorgeous, sexy husband standing wet and aroused in the steamy shower. Okay, making love in the shower in her current condition was a little risky. For Rinoa anyway. But that didn't mean that she couldn't play…

Squall raised his eyebrows as he caught that thought, then groaned softly as she began kissing his chest, trailing her hand down his body to grasp him firmly. His knees went weak as she took him in hand and began stroking.

"Ahh…Rin…" He sent, suddenly unable to form coherent thought.

Rinoa smiled, loving the power she had over him, enjoying what she was feeling through him as well as seeing his response to her.

He kissed her deeply, his body beginning to ache and breath coming short as she continued her ministrations. He wanted more, badly, but as she continued her caresses, her kisses, using their unique connection to gauge just what would bring him the most pleasure, he found that to be equally satisfying in the end.

His release, when it came, left him trembling and gasping, leaning his forehead against Rinoa's while trying to catch his breath.

Kissing her again, he murmured breathlessly, "that was…. different." Different, but good; very good. He stroked her wet hair back from her face gently.

Frowning slightly, he asked her, "What about you? You didn't…"

Rinoa smiled, "I didn't, but that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy myself. I love watching you, knowing I'm making you feel good."

Pulling her against him, he tucked her head under his chin and said, "but that's not fair to you…"

"Sometimes sweetie, I just want to play with you. You can return the favor later if you want to. Right now however, we're running out of hot water and we both really need to get ready for work." Rinoa sent, reaching up to kiss him again before grabbing the sponge and volunteering to help soap Squall's back.

Squall sighed, agreeing with her silently while quickly washing up, trying not to get distracted by the feel of Rinoa's hands on his body as she washed his back. It was difficult to do however, when her touch had already given him such pleasure.
"Tonight is for you then honey. I promise." He assured her.

Aside from the pleasurable interlude that morning, Squall had another reason for wanting to leave later than usual. He needed to vary their routines, leaving at different times, taking different routes to work, so as to confuse their watchers. It was difficult to set up an ambush if you didn't know where your quarry was going to be at a given time.

Rinoa however, gave him a puzzled look as he turned onto a different road than he normally took, one that took a more circuitous route to Galbadia Garden.

"What are you going this way for? It takes forever to get there." She asked, confused.

"Remember what I told you last night?" Squall asked, as he navigated the route, paying particular attention to the cars behind and on either side of him. It was nerve-wracking, this hyperawareness that he had to exercise while driving.

Rinoa nodded, answering, "Yes…"

"I saw a car parked on the beach road this morning while I was running. I watched for a little while, and when it got past the time I normally went by there, they left. In the fog. With their lights off." Squall told her grimly. The more he thought about it, the more suspicious it appeared.

Rinoa swallowed, a chill tracing down her spine. No, Squall wasn't paranoid. His concern was all too real.

"You think they were waiting for you?" She asked, trying to keep a tight grip on her rising fear.

"He. I only saw one person in the car. But I think so, yeah." Squall nodded, attention on the thickening traffic.

"Why?" Rinoa asked unnecessarily. She knew why. She didn't want to think about it however.

"They'd have to go through me to get you. I'm an obstacle that has to be neutralized." Squall said flatly.

Rinoa wrapped her arms around herself, feeling suddenly very vulnerable. She hated it when Squall used that flat, emotionless tone. It meant that he was reverting back to what she called his 'tactical mode'. He was falling back onto his training, setting all emotion aside to deal with the situation.

"They'll kill you…" And me. She whispered, fear threatening to drown her.

"If it's Odine that's behind this, they won't. He has to know about the Sorceress-Knight bond. He may not now how deep it runs, but he's got to know about it. He won't risk hurting you just to get hold of you, he's not that big of a fool." Squall reasoned. He hoped he was right. He'd only told Laguna of his bond with Rinoa, but even he didn't know how profound it was. He truly hoped that Rinoa was in fact a much stronger sorceress than they both thought and that she could survive his death.

But he wasn't willing to risk his life, and by extension, the life of his wife and unborn children, on that hope. He also wasn't going to assume that Odine knew about the bond, though he should, given the fact that the man had obsessively studied anything and everything that had to do with sorceresses for years. He couldn't even rightly assume that it was Odine that was behind the threat, since they had no credible evidence linking him to it. If it wasn't…
Then that meant that both his *and* Rinoa's lives were in danger.
Chapter 3: Rising Tides

At length, they made it to Galbadia Garden, late of course, but Squall was satisfied that nobody at least had followed them.

Walking Rinoa to the main gate, Squall told her, "I'm going to call Galbadia Garden's headmaster as soon as I get to my office and let him know what's going on. If you see Irvine, let him know I'll be calling him too." Rinoa nodded, face pale.

Pausing, Squall pulled her into his arms, holding her tight, partly to comfort her, and partly for his own reassurance.

"I promise you, I'll do everything in my power to keep you and the babies safe." Squall sent.

"Then keep yourself safe as well. We can't survive without you." Rinoa replied.

Gazing down at her, Squall caressed her cheek, then leaned forward and kissed her.

"I love you." He whispered, adding mentally, "I will."

"I love you too Squall." Rinoa sent, reluctantly parting from him and walking through the gate. Squall watched her leave, then turned and walked toward the Ragnarok, heart heavy.

Boarding the airship, he prepared it for flight, noticing the blinking message light and immediately keying the comm. to hear it. It was Nida, wondering what had delayed his arrival. A second message, from Quistis, asked the same question. The third however, froze his guts to ice.

"Commander Leonhart, this is the international weather service in Esthar. We are calling to inform you that the hurricane that we have been tracking off the coast of Centra has moved northward and is gaining strength along the way. If it continues on its current course, it will strike Fisherman's Horizon first, then Balamb right after. Central pressure and estimated wind speed of the hurricane put it at approximately a category three. Estimated landfall in Balamb is forty-eight to seventy-two hours. Disaster protocols should be enacted immediately."

As Squall took off, he called into Balamb, "Ragnarok to Balamb. Nida, this is Squall. Listen, I need you to relay a message to Cid. Tell him that I just got a call from the international weather service. That hurricane they've been tracking has been upgraded to a category three, and it's heading straight for Balamb."

"Copy that Squall. You want me to put the SeeDs on alert?" Nida asked.

"Yes. Estimated landfall is forty-eight to seventy-two hours. That doesn't give us much time to prepare for it. We'll have a briefing as soon as I get there." Squall said, cutting the connection with Nida and calling the international weather service for an update, requesting the information be
faxed directly to his office.

Upon landing the Ragnarok, Squall hurried into Balamb Garden, taking the lift to his office.

Upon exiting, he was met by Cid, who asked, "The hurricane's changed direction?"

Squall nodded, confirming, "Yes. I've requested an update from the weather service. It should be on my office fax right now." Unlocking his office, Squall went directly to the fax machine and took the papers that sat in the receiving tray, scanning them silently.

Cid waited until Squall looked up, expression grim, and said, "according to the weather service, we have a bit more time than originally thought before the hurricane hits us, but not much more. And it will hit us."

"How long?" Cid asked.

"They estimate landfall at four to five days." Squall said.

"Slow moving storm." Cid commented.

Squall nodded, saying, "That's not a good thing. That means it has more time to gather strength as it crosses the equator. It may lose some of that energy if it hits FH, but if it bypasses it and stays out to sea long enough, we could have a real monster storm on our hands."

Cid nodded, then said, "Balamb's only just started implementing your disaster plan Squall. They're not ready for this. Not completely."

"They'll have to get ready, and fast. Call the mayor Cid. Do whatever it takes to get them moving on getting their buildings boarded and people ready to evacuate." Squall said, not realizing that he was essentially ordering his boss to make phone call. In emergency situations however, Squall was in command, and even Cid had to follow his orders.

"All right." Cid said, then asked, "Why were you so late this morning, Squall? That isn't like you."

Squall frowned, "I'll explain later. I need to call a briefing and start getting the SeeDs deployed."

"I'll leave you to it then." Cid said, leaving for his office. Squall, sheaf of faxed papers in his hand, boarded the lift again, taking it up to the top where Nida manned the controls and the PA system.

Stepping off the lift, he nodded to acknowledge Nida's greeting and said, "I need to make an announcement." Nida silently stepped aside to grant him access.

Turning on the mike, Squall said, "This is Squall. I need to see the following SeeDs in my office immediately: Quistis Trepe, Seifer Almasy, Raijin and Fujin, Zell Dincht, Nida, and Xu. Thank you."

Turning the mike off, Squall jerked his head for Nida to follow him. Nida raised his eyebrows curiously and complied.

"What's the plan Squall?" he asked as they boarded the lift together.

"Wait until the others get here." Squall said as they exited the lift and headed to his office.

They didn't have long to wait. Xu and Quistis appeared almost immediately, followed soon after by Zell. Seifer and his posse arrived just ahead of Cid.
Addressing Cid, Squall asked him, "Is the mayor alerting the emergency crews?"

Cid nodded, "Some of the citizens have already seen it on the news and started boarding up their homes and businesses. The mayor tells me that they need a lot of help with sandbags though."

"We'll have to suspend classes and get some of the senior cadets to help with filling sandbags and boarding up windows." Cid nodded and Squall turned to address the rest of the SeeDs assembled.

"The hurricane off Centra's coast has changed direction and is heading straight toward Balamb. Latest reports put it at a category four. That could change for the worst as it's a slow moving storm and it'll have plenty of time to build up strength when it crosses the equator. We have about four days to get ready for it and to try and convince the population of Balamb to evacuate." Squall said.

Turning to Quistis, he said, "Quistis, I want you, Xu and Nida to work on getting the Garden prepared to take on evacuees. Get the junior classmen involved. Set up cots in the gym, the ballroom, and the larger classrooms. We'll take in as many people as we can." They all nodded.

Turning to Zell, Squall ordered, "Zell, you're going to be in charge of the senior cadets and SeeD volunteers to help with sandbags and boarding up buildings in Balamb. I want you to be certain while you're doing that to make sure everyone knows that this is NOT an ordinary storm and that they should evacuate. Soon. Let them know that if they can't get out any other way they can come here."

"You got it man." Zell confirmed.

Directing his attention to Seifer and his posse, Squall asked, "You still have that houseboat, right Seifer?"

Seifer nodded, his mind following Squall's train of thought and immediately leaping to the correct conclusion.

"You want me in charge of the harbor." He stated. Squall nodded.

"You know the harbormaster and the fishermen, they know you. They'll trust you. Get them to move their boats to the north side of the island. The Guarg Mountains will block the worst of the storm, so they should be safe there. Mobilize the ferries as well, get them to transport out as many people as possible to Dollet." Squall said.

Nobody had to ask about utilizing the trains. Once the storm surge hit, the risk of the underwater tunnel flooding was too great. The trains would be shut down as soon as the hurricane made landfall. Once that happened, the only means of escape would either be by boat or in Balamb Garden itself, which would be moved to southern Trabia. Zell would fly the Ragnarok there when he was done with his work in Balamb while Squall would stay on Garden and coordinate the SeeDs and in general keep everything together.

Just like he had when they'd battled Galbadia Garden. Only this time, it wasn't a sentient enemy, but a mindless monster that there was no defense against. Their only option for survival was to get out of its way.

Leaning back against his desk, Squall put the papers down and folded his arms, asking, "Anyone have any questions?"

"Why Dollet?" Seifer asked.

"It's the closest port. Ferries run back and forth daily. Not as often as they did before the
underwater train tunnel was built, but they still do run. Evacuees should be able to catch a train from there to Deling City if they need to. Plus, if the hurricane follows its current course, Dollet won't be affected. At most, it'll get a good, soaking rainstorm. Balamb will bear the brunt of the storm." Squall explained.

Looking at everyone in turn, he asked again, "any other questions?"

Seeing that everyone so far was satisfied with his orders, he dismissed them, saying, "Okay, we've got a lot of work to do. I'm going to go make the announcement now. Dismissed."

Squall quickly went up to the bridge and made the announcement, suspending classes for the duration of the emergency and notifying everyone what their duties would be. Then he went back down to his office and started making phone calls. Starting with the headmaster at Galbadia Garden.

He'd just hung up the phone and was getting ready to call Irvine when Cid came in and asked, "Are you going to explain why you were late this morning?" Squall sighed in irritation.

"Yes." Then he hesitated, wondering if he should tell Cid of his concerns or brush it off as a personal matter. Then he realized, whatever affected him personally affected the SeeDs as a whole, since he was their commander. Besides that, this really wasn't something that he should even attempt to handle on his own. He just wasn't sure how much involvement Garden would or should have in this situation, not with a pending disaster looming over them all.

"Rinoa and I are being watched. One of our contacts in FH provided some information that leads me to believe that someone is preparing to move against us." Squall said grimly.

"Do you have any evidence of this?" Cid asked.

"The only evidence I have right now is the fact that money has changed hands in FH, certain people were hired. Plus, someone was waiting for me on the road I usually run on this morning. They didn't see me in the fog, but I'm pretty sure it was me they were waiting for. No one else takes that particular route at that hour." Squall explained.

"So you were late because…" Cid began, and Squall interjected, "I was late because I needed to vary our routine, leave at a different time than we normally do. Take a different route. If they're trying to set up an ambush, I don't intend to make it easy for them."

Cid nodded, "if there's anything you need…"

"I know." Squall said. He had more than enough on his plate right at the moment. They all did. But Squall was torn. He had all the SeeDs in Balamb Garden at his disposal, as well as its resources. But he had a disaster to prepare an entire city and all of its citizens for. His main focus had to be on that, and not the personal concern of one commander and his pregnant wife.

Quite simply, he couldn't divert Garden's resources and personnel for his own personal issue, not on the scale that he would need in order to resolve the situation, and not with the hurricane bearing down upon them all like a runaway freight train.

He'd have to continue as he was, with his close friends backing him up and with his outside contacts giving him information. He was currently operating outside of Garden's official channels, and he had to keep it that way, for the moment at least. Unless it affected Garden directly, he couldn't do otherwise.

If asked however, there wasn't a SeeD anywhere that wouldn't willingly put his or her life on the
line for their commander. All he had to do was ask them...

After Squall left, Rinoa turned away from the window of the infirmary, trying not to transmit her worry to him. She felt his shield come up however and sighed. He always did that when he went to work, not wanting her to worry over what he was doing, or feed any of his stress to her. Other reasons too, which Squall had explained to her, having to do with security levels and so on. It was dangerous, this link they had, Rinoa realized. Squall was very careful not to let classified information leak into their daily lives, but it scared Rinoa sometimes that she might learn something that she shouldn't.

Not on her behalf, but on Squall's. None of the SeeDs knew of their mental link. Not even Squall's closest friends. Laguna knew, but so far, he was the only person besides them who was privy to it. If the SeeDs knew that their commander was married to a sorceress who had a direct link to his mind...

As much as they admired Squall, Rinoa didn't think they'd appreciate that fact, or trust that he was being as careful about sensitive information as he actually was being. Even Rinoa was surprised at how disciplined his mind could be, and didn't know how he could compartmentalize things like that so that she couldn't see it, but he managed.

And that was just one worry she had. Squall had given her another one to add to it, though Rinoa was sure that was not his intent. She was sure he'd told her about the danger facing them so as to warn her, make her aware of her surroundings, not to frighten her unnecessarily. Squall knew that Rinoa would prefer to know what she was facing rather than exist in blissful ignorance while he did his best to protect her. That had never been her way, and Squall admired her for it.


"Yes. Everything okay with you and your husband?" The doctor asked her.

Rinoa nodded, unable to hide a small smile as she recalled the more pleasant part of why they were both late that day.

"Yes. We're fine." She answered.

"About time, too." The doctor grinned broadly.

Rinoa frowned, "What do you mean?"

The doctor shrugged, "well, you seemed a little tense lately, and a little sad. I thought it might have been because you and your husband may have… fallen out of synch, so to speak."

"I was that obvious?" Rinoa asked, biting her lip.

"Yes, he did." Rinoa answered, smiling proudly. She couldn't help but be impressed with the disaster plan he'd worked up. Squall had told her about it, surprised that she was interested, but happy to run it past her. When she'd added her perspective and made some observations that hadn't occurred to him, he'd looked thoughtful, then smiled and kissed her, turning back to his work. Later on, he'd thanked her and showed her where he'd modified the plans based on her input.
That had warmed her, that she'd been able to assist him in some small way. Maybe she wasn't a warrior, but then, maybe Squall didn't need a warrior wife. There were other ways that she could help him.

Just then, one of the doctor's assistants, Keri, came in, catching the tail end of their conversation.

"Commander Leonhart finally finished his project? Great!" Smiling at Rinoa, the girl added, "and it looks like your husband finally took care of business too! Although, married to such a hottie, I don't see how you can keep your hands off of him!"

Rinoa blushed deeply, admitting, "it's pretty difficult sometimes. Especially with my hormones going completely out of control like they're doing now."

"You are getting plenty of rest, correct Ms. Leonhart?" The doctor asked her.

Rinoa nodded, assuring her, "yes, I am."

"Good. Let's get to work. If you need to put your feet up for a bit Rinoa, let me know." The doctor said, urging both Rinoa and the other assistant, Keri, into the reception area of the infirmary.

Squall hung up the phone from yet another phone call, and rubbed at his temples, trying to ease the tension there. The local lumberyard had quickly run out of the inch-thick sheets of plywood needed to board up the homes and businesses in town, and Squall had started making calls in an attempt to track down another supply that would arrive before the hurricane.

Timber was the best bet, but it would take two days for a new supply to arrive by train, due to the rail schedules. Much too close a time frame. The Ragnarok was the obvious answer, and Squall was on the verge of calling Zell and assigning him and his team of cadets to fly it to Timber and Winhill to purchase as much plywood as they could get their hands on.

But the damned phone wouldn't stop ringing.

Immediately on the heels of his announcement, Balamb Garden was thrown into a flurry of activity. Zell had taken off immediately in a Garden car with a dozen or so senior level cadets, shovels and stacks of bags to the beach to help fill and deploy sandbags. Quistis and Xu had started breaking out all of the camp cots they had in storage, as well as all of the blankets they could find, and together with the younger cadets, set them up in the ballroom and gym.

Nida meanwhile, was preparing the Garden itself, making sure of everything top to bottom, including the supplies of food and water. Depending upon how badly damaged Balamb ended up being, and how long it took before it would be habitable again, Balamb Garden could be playing host to evacuees for some time to come.

Seifer, with Fujin and Raijin, had accompanied Zell in the Garden car to Balamb and headed straight for the harbormaster's office upon arrival there.

The residents of Balamb, seeing the cadets and SeeDs deployed in full force to assist, appeared appreciative of the extra hands but there were some inevitable snags. The lack of lumber being the most pressing one.

Finally finding a spare moment, Squall dialed Zell's cell phone, and quickly brought him up to date on the current situation with the plywood. The entire morning, he and his cadets had been filling sandbags, delivering an impressive number of them to Balamb. It wasn't quite enough, they still needed more, but Squall countermanded that for the moment and directed Zell instead to bring his
Among the many sources of frustration for Squall was the mayor of Balamb's stubbornness over purchasing the materials, fussing about the expense and the city budget and so on. Cid wasn't much help, not wanting to commit too much of Garden's own financial resources to the effort either. While Squall understood both positions, with his sentiments falling firmly on Garden's side in the matter, he felt both men were being unnecessarily obstinate.

With Garden being set up to be used as a shelter for the bulk of Balamb's citizens, not to mention the manpower it was providing, both Squall and Cid felt that the expenses should be shared by the city. But Squall also didn't want monetary concerns to get in the way of their preparation efforts, either.

When they ran out of plywood at the local lumberyard and the mayor had balked at the expense of buying more from Timber and having it shipped in, Squall had finally snapped that he'd buy the damned wood himself and take it out of the mayor's hide if he didn't shut the hell up.

The mayor had finally compromised and would purchase the materials; with Squall getting it transported to Balamb in the Ragnarok.

After disconnecting from Zell, Squall quickly dialed Irvine's number while he had the chance.

"Hello, you've got Irvine." Irvine answered the phone in his trademark drawl, more pronounced now that he had returned to Galbadia, albeit temporarily.

"Irvine, this is Squall."

"Hey buddy, how's it goin'?"

Squall grimaced. He never knew how to answer that offhand question. Answer honestly, and it would invite questions, deflect it with a generic "fine" and he'd sound evasive.

Finally Squall answered, "Busy. Listen, I need you to work with Rinoa on her shooting skills. Marksmanship especially."

"Shooting skills? Why?" Irvine asked sounding puzzled.

Squall lowered his voice; "Someone was waiting for me this morning, on the beach road where I usually run. They didn't see me; the fog was pretty thick this morning. But some other information I got from our contacts in FH lead me to believe that whoever it is, they're planning to make a move on Rinoa and I."

"Odine?" Irvine asked.

"Maybe. We can't confirm it though."

"Well, don't worry about Rinoa man. Selphie and I, we'll keep an eye out for trouble here." Irvine assured him.

"Thanks. I appreciate that." Squall said.

"You know, it could simply be one of those stalkerazzi guys, you know, staking out your jogging route just for pics of your studly self." Irvine observed, tongue firmly in cheek.

"In fog? Before sunrise? If whoever it was wanted pictures they'd need a pretty powerful flash to
get anything worth using. I'm not a photographer but even I know its tough to get a good, useable shot in those conditions." Squall reasoned.

"True. You might want to check with one of your media contacts to rule it out though, just to be safe." Irvine suggested.

Squall nodded in agreement, "That's not a bad idea. I'll give one of them a call."

"So what else is going on? I heard that the hurricane changed course." Irvine asked him.

"Yes it did. They're estimating landfall in about four or five days." Squall answered.

"So I'm guessing you're pretty busy getting ready for that, right?" Irvine asked.

Squall sighed, "That's an understatement."

"Well, don't worry, we'll keep an eye on things here." Irvine said.

"Thanks. I'll talk to you guys later. I've gotta go." Squall said, preparing to disconnect.

"All right. Take it easy." Irvine said.

Hanging up the phone, Squall stared at it pensively for a moment, considering the next phone call he needed to make. Before he could, the phone rang once again. Squall sighed quietly, glancing at his watch. Unsurprisingly, he'd missed lunch.

Resolving to remedy that immediately after the call was concluded, Squall answered the phone, "Leonhart."

The last light of evening was painting the sky vermilion and indigo as Squall finally landed the Ragnarok outside of Galbadia Garden. He never did manage to eat lunch, and only just managed to get out of there before it got too late. As it was, he was an hour past the time he normally picked up Rinoa, but he'd already let her know that he was running late.

She was waiting for him at Irvine and Selphie's place. She could have simply gone home and Squall could have caught up with her there. They had done just that in the past. But that was before this threat against them surfaced. Now, Squall absolutely did not want Rinoa alone. At all.

Squall tiredly shut down the Ragnarok's engines and got up from the pilot's seat, stretching and rotating his neck, trying to loosen the tension that seemed to live there now. Heading toward the door, he palmed it shut, the ramp delaying its retraction until the pressure sensors under the rubber mat covering it no longer felt Squall's weight.

As soon as he stepped onto the ground, the ramp retracted with a hiss.

"I'm back Rin, sorry I'm late." He sent as he walked through Galbadia Garden's main gate. He knew, vaguely, where Selphie and Irvine's rooms were, and he walked through the still unfamiliar garden, following Rinoa's mental trace to help lead him unerringly to her.

"You sound tired. Busy day?" She sent.

"Very. I'll tell you about it when I get there. Right now, I'm so tired I can barely form a coherent thought." Squall responded.

"You haven't eaten, have you?" Rinoa asked, sensing his hunger.
"No." He sent.

"Well, Selphie and Irvine are just about getting ready to eat. They've already invited us." Rinoa told him. Squall sent his relief and gratitude.

He knocked on the door to Irvine's rooms shortly afterward.

Irvine opened the door and greeted Squall, saying, "about damn time you showed up. We were worried one of us would have to go and get you. You hungry? We were just fixin' to sit down to dinner."

Squall nodded as he followed Irvine into the apartment, saying, "I could eat, yeah. Didn't have time for lunch."

"Well, come and have a seat." Irvine invited as he led Squall to the dining room. Rinoa got up from the table and approached him, giving him a hug. Squall sighed, leaning into her, feeling her love warming him as he held her.

Selphie and Irvine exchanged a smiling glance, as Squall and Rinoa appeared to forget them for a moment, kissing each other deeply before simply leaning into each other. Selphie's heart constricted as she saw Squall's hand move down from Rinoa's back to rest on the side of her stomach, caressing it. Reaching out, Selphie took Irvine's hand and he squeezed it gently before clearing his throat.

Grinning at Squall and Rinoa, he reminded them, "Guys? Dinner?"

Chuckling, Squall sat down, saying, "Sorry." Rinoa returned to her seat next to his.

"You guys are so cute." Selphie smiled, passing a dish over to Squall. Squall shrugged, taking a serving of corn and dishing a portion out to Rinoa as well before handing it back to Selphie.

"Depends on your definition of cute." Squall said, taking a dish passed to him by Rinoa and serving himself a little bit of what appeared to be cooked carrots. A very little bit. He loathed cooked carrots. Irvine snorted at his comment and Rinoa laughed softly.

"Well, that would be you two. Rinoa especially. You just look adorable with your pregnant belly stickin' out..." Selphie grinned at them. Squall rolled his eyes.

Rinoa smiled at him, "You must really be hungry to actually consider eating CARROTS."

"PLEASE don't tell me that Selphie and Irvine have gone vegetarian." Squall silently asked her. So far, all he'd seen were vegetables, a fact that had begun to worry him. Rinoa shook her head, eyes dancing, and passed him a bowl with some fried chicken pieces in it. He happily took a nice plump thigh piece and passed the bowl along.

Biting into it, he rolled his eyes, giving Selphie thumbs up. It was tender, juicy, with a nice crispy crunch on the outside, just what fried chicken was supposed to be.

"This is really good Selphie, did you cook this yourself?" Rinoa asked her.

"Yeah, we decided we wanted to do fried chicken tonight since I hadn't done it for awhile. Not hard to do but it is kind of messy to make." Selphie answered.

"Messy to eat too," Squall observed, reaching for a napkin and wiping grease off his hands and chin.
"Worth it." Irvine said, taking a bite out of his piece. Squall shrugged, agreeing with him privately.

After dinner Rinoa helped Selphie clear up the dishes and put them in the sink for washing, putting the few leftovers into containers and storing them in the refrigerator.

As Selphie started running the water to start the dishes, Irvine asked Squall, "So how are you going to handle things with this hurricane on its way Squall? I mean, once it hits, you're stuck. It may be days before you can come home from Balamb."

"That's why I called you Irvine. If I'm stuck there, I'm going to need someone here to make sure Rinoa's safe." Squall answered.

"Well, we'll be happy to help." Selphie chimed in, giving Rinoa a quick hug before adding; "you can stay here with us if you want to Rin. You won't have to be alone."

"Are you guys sure? I don't want to intrude.." Rinoa said, frowning.

"Nonsense. We insist, don't we Irvy?" Selphie asked him.

Irvine nodded, "Yes, we do. It's a good option, and it won't be an intrusion."

Squall approached Rinoa and took her hands, pulling her into a soft kiss. Pulling back, he stroked her cheek lightly, gazing into her eyes.

"Would you be okay with this Rin? It IS a good option. You'd be surrounded by SeeDs, and in the company of good friends. I'd feel much better, knowing you're safe." Squall sent. Rinoa sighed, leaning her forehead into his chest. Squall stroked her hair softly as she tightened her arms around him.

Finally she sent, "Okay, it is the best option out of all of them, and I have to admit, I don't want to be alone either. I wish I could go with you to help."

"Me too sweetheart, but if we got trapped up there and God forbid you were injured or went into labor… I just can't take that risk." Squall told her, continuing to stroke her hair.

"Dude. That is so weird…" Irvine said, shaking his head as he watched them. They'd simply stared at each other for a moment before Squall hugged her and started stroking Rinoa's hair. But their whole attitude made it look as though they'd had a complete, if silent, conversation. And really, now that he thought of it, Irvine didn't actually see them talk to each other very much at all. And yet…they obviously communicated. Somehow.

"What's so weird about it Irvine? When you're that close with someone, you know how he or she thinks. You get really good at reading them, their body language, their expressions, stuff like that." Selphie explained, smiling at their two friends.

Okay, that might explain some of it, Irvine allowed, but when they both turned to look at him and Selphie at the exact same time… well, that was just…. Odd. It was almost as if they shared the same brain…. the same mind.

"Should we tell them?" Squall asked Rinoa silently.

"I don't know. It might help for them to know…" Rinoa thought, but Squall sensed her hesitation. She was unsure of how Irvine and Selphie would react to knowing about their mindlink.

"Irvine at least suspects it. He's not stupid." Squall sent.
They were staring at each other again, and Irvine for one was beginning to get a little creeped out by it.

"Okay, guys, this is seriously beginning to get weird. Could you not do that? Please?" Irvine asked, scratching uncomfortably at the back of his neck. He was starting to get a prickly, shivery sensation down his spine and up to the nape of his neck and it was beginning to bother him.

As one, they both turned to Irvine and said in unison. "Sorry."

It took several minutes to get Irvine calmed down enough to listen. Selphie on the other hand, was surprised but not nearly as freaked out as Irvine was. In retrospect, Squall thought that they could have done a better job at letting their friends know of that particular dimension to their relationship.

"Okay, okay." Irvine took a deep breath, hands in his hair, staring at the two of them wide-eyed.

Swallowing, he dropped his hands, and pointed first to Squall, then Rinoa, saying, "So.. So you actually do… share the same mind?"


"Okay…. so, what is it, exactly?" Irvine asked. The implication of what they were telling him was frightening. They didn't act any differently than they normally did, other than the fact that they just didn't appear to talk very much. But then, Squall didn't talk much normally anyway. But Irvine kept remembering how Ultimecia, through Edea, had apparently controlled Seifer to get him to do what she wanted.

He didn't want to think of Rinoa doing that to Squall, hadn't even thought of the fact that she was a sorceress for ages. She hadn't done anything to cause him or anyone else to worry. Until now.

"It's part of the bond between sorceress and knight. Cid and Edea have this same bond, though not as strong, apparently, as ours." Rinoa said.

"So, can you read anyone else's mind? Or is it just between you and Squall?" Irvine asked, suddenly worrying about how long Rinoa had had this particular ability and what she may have seen in his mind. He couldn't suppress a shudder.

"It's just between the two of us." Squall answered calmly, then added, "and before you ask, NO, she does not control me, nor I her."

Rinoa couldn't hide a small smile at Irvine's relieved sigh.

"Squall can, if he chooses, shield himself from me, and I can do the same. So while we have the link, we are still ourselves, and we can have our own, private thoughts. And if you're worried about me learning things that I should not, well, Squall shields when he goes to work. Even I don't know how he manages this, but he doesn't let anything of a sensitive nature slip out." Rinoa explained.

Intrigued, Irvine asked, "When did you…learn of it? The bond?"

"I'd known of this…possibility… ever since I became a sorceress. I was afraid to tell Squall that I could hear his thoughts, so I had Edea help me to control my abilities so I wouldn't unless I chose to. Squall learned of it just before we got married." Rinoa answered.

Taking Irvine's hand, Selphie leaned into him and asked softly, "What's it like?"
Surprising them all, Squall answered. Slowly, he reached out and threaded his fingers through Rinoa's.

Gazing into her eyes, he said softly, "We share.... everything, when we're linked. Thoughts, emotions, even physical sensations; I can feel her pain, her pleasure, just as she can feel mine. At its deepest level, we truly are of one mind, one heart. It's at once both terrifying and exhilarating. At first, I was afraid I'd lose myself, be consumed by it. But she taught me how to control it, how to shield, if I needed to. If I needed space to be myself, she gave me the skill to achieve that. And it turns out, both of our minds, our personalities, are of equal strength, neither one dominant over the other. Our strengths, our weaknesses, they balance out."

"From what we've learned from researching it, our bond is rare because it's a bond of equals. In antiquity, the sorceress chose her knight, and hers was the dominant personality. He was her servant, her armsman, and her guardian. Nothing more. They did not marry, and they rarely fell in love with each other. The knight might fall in love with his sorceress, but it was the love of servant to master. A function of the bond so that the knight would be more willing to do his job and die for his mistress if it was required of him to do so." Rinoa explained.

"Even so, even those pair bonds, while not as strong as this, had a profound effect upon the sorceress if the knight was killed. Unless she found a new knight to bond with immediately, the sorceress would become...unstable." Squall said.

"Were there any sorceress-knight pairs like you two? Those that enjoyed a true marriage, like you?" Selphie asked, wondering.

"Well, aside from Cid and Edea, we only found a reference to one, over a thousand years ago. We don't have a name. And if the sorceress ruled anything, she did so quietly. The only thing we know for certain was that her knight was killed through treachery." Squall answered.

"What happened to the sorceress?" Selphie asked, biting her lip.

"The moment her knight died, so did she." Rinoa answered softly.

Selphie gasped, eyes filling with tears, and covered her mouth with her hand. Irvine swallowed. What they'd told him explained so much about their relationship that he hadn't understood before.

He wondered what it would be like, to be able to feel Selphie's pleasure as well as his own when they were together. It had to be the most incredible and yes, frightening experience a person could have. But, to feel her pain as well... Suddenly, Irvine remembered Squall dropping to his knees at the SeeD games, looking as though someone had hit him.

"You felt Rinoa's pain, didn't you, at the SeeD games. That's why you collapsed." Irvine stated.

Squall nodded, "I can shield out almost everything. But not that. If she hurts, I feel it."

"And.... if you die...." Irvine swallowed again.

"So do I." Rinoa said.
Irvine stared at them both. How had Squall managed to do his job as a SeeD over the last year with *that* hanging over him? Granted, he hadn't been very active lately, but Irvine recalled at least a couple of missions that he'd gone on since marrying Rinoa.

*How had he done it?*

Selphie broke the silence, clearing her throat and saying, "Well, I need to get the dishes done."

"Let me help you." Rinoa offered, gently pulling free from Squall's hand and turning to join Selphie at the sink.

"Rin, you don't have to do that..." Selphie protested. Irvine watched, fascinated, as Squall frowned. Rinoa simply raised her eyebrows and smiled at him slightly, then turned back to the sink. Squall then sighed in obvious exasperation.

Irvine had to chuckle. It really wasn't much different than how they'd been before they got married, he decided. Even before they'd mindlinked, they seemed to be able to communicate nonverbally. It was just more pronounced now, more apparent.

Approaching him, Irvine clapped him on the shoulder and gestured with his head toward the living room. Squall followed wordlessly.

"How do you do it Squall? How do you do your job knowing that if you're killed it might kill her too?" Irvine asked softly, unable to hide his worry for them both.

Squall sighed, "Until she got pregnant, I always made sure to include her on any assignment I was sent on. We both decided that...if I'm going into a dangerous situation, she had to be with me. It just made more sense that way. She's very good with support and curative magic. Together, working as a team... we're stronger, more effective. And if something really bad happened and I... died... well, we'd be together."

Irvine nodded, then observed quietly, "but its different now, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is. It's not just *us* anymore." Squall said. Turning his attention to the kitchen, he added, "I've put myself on inactive status. Until the babies are born at least; then we'll figure out the rest of it after that."

"Well, it's not like they have much call to bring you out anyway. You're the commander, Squall. You *make* the assignments; you don't *take* them...you shouldn't, anyway." Irvine said.

"You know that isn't always the case Irvine." Squall said.

Irvine nodded, "yeah." Then he studied Squall, whose attention was still on the kitchen and the women who occupied it. *One* of them, anyway.

"Everything okay?" Irvine asked.

Squall frowned, "She's tired. She's been on her feet all day and they're killing her. But she insists on helping Selphie out. She's being stubborn."

Irvine chuckled quietly, "That's Rin." Squall snorted, nodding in agreement.
Then Irvine sobered and he said, "You know we've got your back bro. Anything you need, just ask us. All of us."

Squall nodded, "I know. Thank you."

"I've cleared a spot in the indoor range, tomorrow morning. 7 A.M. What kind of gun did you get for her?" Irvine asked.

"Nine millimeter semi-auto." Squall answered.

"Good choice. Compact but powerful. It'll get the job done, that's for sure." Irvine said.

Squall nodded, "She's familiar with it, anyway. Hasn't used it for awhile though."

"We'll remedy that." Irvine assured him.

When the men left Selphie and Rinoa to themselves, Selphie sighed and plunged her hands into the hot, soapy water.

"Okay Rin, I wash, you rinse. We'll get these done in no time." Selphie directed her.

"You know, you do have an automatic dishwasher. Why don't you use it?" Rinoa asked, rinsing off the plate that Selphie handed her and putting in the dish rack.

Selphie grimaced, "because it's a noisy pain in the ass to use. Plus, it doesn't get the dishes as clean as doing it by hand. Besides," she added, handing Rinoa another plate to rinse, "nothing chases the boys away faster than the prospect of helping out with the dishes. If there's a better way to get some time for private girl-talk, I haven't found it yet."

Rinoa laughed, appreciating Selphie's impeccable logic. She laughed harder at Squall's protest.

"You know that's not true Rin."

"I know dear heart. Not in your case anyway. But please, no more eavesdropping." Rin told him firmly, firming up her shields and smiling at his mental eye-roll. Only Squall could convey the feeling of rolling his eyes in a mental sending, she thought with amusement.

Then Selphie frowned, suddenly remembering that with their mindlink, what Rinoa knew, Squall knew also.

"Um, this is private, right?" She asked, biting her lip.

Rinoa nodded, "It is. I've got my shields up and Squall won't intrude without asking. He's quite the gentleman in that respect."

"Oh," Selphie responded, intrigued.

"Um…" She began, hesitantly, "So, this bond thing…its part of your magic?"

Rinoa nodded, "Yes. I couldn't really hear Squall's thoughts until after he rescued me from the sorceress memorial. Until then, I just got vague impressions, feelings. We were just getting to know each other, you see. I got so many mixed signals from him he drove me crazy. I'd feel one thing from him, but he'd say something totally different…"

Selphie laughed softly, "I remember. I sometimes worried you two would never get together, as
pig-headed as he could be."

Then she sobered and asked, "What was the first thing you heard from him?"

Rinoa lowered her voice and whispered, "He still doesn't know I heard this. He told me of it later… We were standing near the flower field by Edea's old orphanage. I'd told him, since I was a sorceress, I was afraid he'd have to kill me, and I said it was okay if it was him. 'Squall's sword will pierce my heart,' I told him. I swear I saw tears in his eyes, when I said that Selphie. Then, clear as day, I heard his voice whisper in my head, 'even if the whole world is against you, I'll be your knight.'"

Selphie felt Goosebumps rising on her skin from that statement.

Slowly, handing Rinoa a bowl, she said, "So, he chose you.." Rinoa nodded.

"I searched and searched, all of the oldest records here and in Esthar, and never once has a knight freely offered himself to a sorceress. The sorceress always made the choice. Even Edea chose Cid, not the other way around." Rinoa said, taking a handful of utensils and running hot water over them, then putting them in the dish drainer.

"That's when the bond started, wasn't it?" Selphie asked.

"Yes. I couldn't hear him all the time, it was in and out; we had to be physically close for me to hear him at all. It got stronger, after our… first time… together. It scared me. I didn't want to know what he was thinking, it seemed so unfair to him. I told Edea about it, and she showed me how to shield him out. I was so afraid, if he knew…" Rinoa stopped, swallowing.

"You were afraid he'd leave, right?" Selphie asked. Rinoa nodded.

"But it worked out though, obviously." Selphie observed.

Rinoa smiled, "yes, it did."

"How has pregnancy affected your powers, anyway? I haven't seen you use them since you got pregnant." Selphie asked, curiously.

"Well, early on, I couldn't use them because I'd get sick. Now, haven't because I don't know how it'll affect the babies. Squall and I just figured it would be safest if I didn't use them at all for the time being. We haven't seen or heard of any problems with the babies though. Everything's normal so far." Rinoa answered.

Selphie raised her eyebrows and gave Rinoa an impish smile, asking, "Everything?"

Rinoa laughed, "Yes, Selphie, everything. Even that. Especially that."

"Well that's good to know, anyway." Selphie said, searching around in the sink for any stray utensils that she might have missed. Not finding any, she drained it, drying off her hands with a dishtowel, and handing it to Rinoa so she could do the same.

"When that hurricane hits Rin, just bring your stuff and you can crash here, no problem. We'll hang out, drink hot cocoa, and play triple triad, just like old times." Selphie smiled, giving Rinoa a hug.

A brush against her mind caught Rinoa's attention and she turned toward the living room, smiling. Selphie watched as Rinoa stared in that direction for a few moments before turning back to her.
"He's ready to leave. And a little peeved that I was up here helping you instead of resting my aching feet." Rinoa said with a slight laugh.

"Rin! You didn't say anything about your feet hurting! Why didn't you tell me?" Selphie frowned, folding her arms across her chest.

"Sorry, forgot to mention it." She replied with a shrug.

"Well, no more of that!" Selphie admonished, wagging her finger threateningly at her and adding, "You go home now and get some rest."

"We will… eventually." Rinoa said, smiling. Selphie laughed. Squall entered the kitchen then, slipping his arm around Rinoa.

"What kind of secrets are you telling her this time?" He thought, quirking his eyebrows up.

Rinoa snorted, responding, "Nothing she doesn't already know." Selphie stifled a giggle at Squall's sudden, horrified glance at her.

"Rin, please tell me you didn't…" Squall thought.

Rinoa took pity on his extreme discomfort and reassured him, "You know I never kiss and tell, although it's pretty difficult sometimes for me to keep mum and NOT brag on my incredibly sweet, sexy husband..." Squall managed a slight smile at that, appreciating the flattering sentiment.

"It's not flattery when it's true, dear." Rinoa smiled at him. Squall tightened his arm around her in response, kissing her temple.

"Thanks for dinner Selphie. You're a lifesaver." Squall said.


The girls exchanged hugs and Irvine shook Squall's hand as they took their leave for the evening.

"You know, I haven't forgotten the promise I made this morning." Squall said, giving Rinoa a half smile as they walked through Galbadia Garden's parking garage toward their car. Though not as cold as Balamb, it was still approaching winter and the night was correspondingly brisk. Rinoa shivered slightly and drew her coat tighter around her. Squall didn't seem as affected, but his woolen overcoat was buttoned up.

"You haven't, huh?" Rinoa smiled, breath fogging in the cold air.

"Nope." Squall said, attention momentarily on their surroundings as they approached their car. The parking garage was well lighted and secure, being part of Galbadia Garden's property. But it was habit that kept Squall alert and aware.

So when Squall stopped dead in his tracks, barring Rinoa's advance with his left arm, she knew better than to question why. Instead, she quickly moved behind him and stood back to back with him. Then she opened their link completely, giving her husband another pair of eyes to the rear.

"Do you see anything Rin?" He silently asked her, unbuttoning his overcoat, flinging it back and loosening his gunblade its holster. Despite his mostly administrative position at Balamb Garden, when he went to work, his weapon came with him. It would have excited more comment if he had forgotten it. Being SeeD meant that you always kept your primary weapon handy, even in an office
Eyes wide, heart pounding, Rinoa scanned the garage, trying to penetrate the shadowed corners. A scuff of shoe on pavement echoed softly in the garage, and a shadow flitted by, barely seen out of the corner of Rinoa's eye. She turned to try and get a better look, briefly considering casting a stop spell before Squall's silent negative countermanded the idea. He ordered her to get out her gun instead. Gulpimg, Rinoa did as ordered, cocking it and aiming at the area where she'd seen the shadow move.

Squall, with his GF augmented senses, also scanned the garage. He knew someone was out there, hiding. He knew. He could hear their breath, smell their sweat; the faint whiff of cigarette smoke on the stalker's clothing was what had tipped him off. Why they hadn't attacked yet puzzled him however.

They...Squall cocked his head to one side, homing in on the sound and scent of whoever it was. There was only one. He hadn't come here to attack them then. Rinoa agreed silently. There would have been more people if the intent were to attack. Not even Squall could prevail against superior numbers.

Just how many attackers it would take to bring him down however depended upon the ultimate goal. It the goal was to kill him, it would take an army. To disable however, it would only take one...one person with a well-timed spell or well-placed bullet; one person with a well-planned ambush. Only one.

Squall was well aware that he wasn't nearly as invulnerable as people thought.

Where are you, you bastard...There. Sudden movement as the quarry broke cover caused Squall, with preternatural speed, to whirl with a stop spell ready, freezing the person in his tracks.

Cautioning Rinoa to stay alert and keep the gun ready, Squall stalked toward the man, fighting the urge to kill him outright. He needed information first.

First bit of information: The man wasn't a SeeD. If he had been, he wouldn't have been skulking around the parking garage. He was dressed in ordinary street clothing, in colors dark enough to blend into the shadows. No camera, so he wasn't a stalkerazzi.

Other details emerged as Squall drew closer. The clothing: Wool sweater, knit hat, pants in a nondescript style and color, work boots. Along with the scent of cigarette smoke that hung about the man was the sour stench of fear and an underlying reek of rust and oil. The man's eyes rolled in fear as Squall studied him coldly.

"You're from FH." Squall stated. The man swallowed, then nodded hesitantly.

"Who hired you?" Squall asked him. The man shuddered but didn't answer.

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't kill you." Squall said flatly.

The man blanched, but remained silent. Squall waited, hand resting on the butt of his gunblade. When the silence stretched, he dropped his hand to the grip, grasping it, ready to draw and strike.

"You haven't been silenced. Speak now, or die." Squall's hand tightened on the gunblade's grip.

"He'll kill me." The man said.

"So will I. So you have a choice: Certain death now, or possible death later. How long your life
ends up being depends on your choice in the next few seconds. Talk." Squall ordered.

"I don't know his name. It was arranged through a… a go-between." The man answered, licking his lips nervously, trying not to feel like an angry lion had just cornered him. He'd been told how dangerous this young man was, and he'd tried to be careful…but now he greatly feared that regardless of what happened in the next few moments, ultimately, he'd end up dead.

Squall nodded. That wasn't a surprise. Obviously, whomever it was that had hired this man had taken great pains to remain anonymous. Squall didn't think it would be this easy to track down the man behind this. He didn't need to ask how the man had been paid. It would have had to be cash. Which is untraceable.

"Why were you here tonight?" Squall asked him. He silently told Rinoa that there was no one else about. She confirmed that she'd seen nothing and returned to his side.

The man swallowed, and answered, "Tracker. I put a tracker on your car."

"Why were you waiting for me on the road this morning?" Squall asked. He didn't know for sure it was this man, but chances were good that it was. Squall's assumption was confirmed when the man answered him.


Squall stalked forward, his boot heels punctuating every word, demanding, "To what purpose?" He glared icily into the man's eyes, waiting for his answer.

"Not to hurt you. Only to disable you, and bring the sorceress with us; I promise you we would not have harmed her. Our…. patron… was adamant that neither of you should be injured." The man answered, beginning to shake.

Squall nodded slightly. It sounded more and more like Odine was behind this. He had more questions to ask the man, but a tired sigh from Rinoa, accompanied by a wave of crushing fatigue, reminded Squall of what his first priority should be.

So, instead of interrogating the man further, Squall pulled out his cell phone and called the headmaster of Galbadia Garden.

"Sir? This is Commander Leonhart." Squall said in a deceptively mild tone.

"Commander Leonhart? How can I help you?" the headmaster asked curiously.

"Whose job was it to secure the parking garage tonight?" Squall asked, still using that same mild tone.

"Cadets Wilkes and Kenyon, why?" the headmaster answered.

"I don't see them anywhere in evidence. I strongly recommend disciplinary action when they turn up." Squall said, and then added in a cold, hard tone, "Please send a team of SeeDs to pick up and secure a trespasser I caught in your parking garage tampering with my car. Now."

Disconnecting from the headmaster, Squall asked the man, "Where did you put the tracker?"

"Front wheel well. Passenger side." the man answered.
The SeeD's arrived just moments later, crestfallen cadets in tow, and took charge of Squall's prisoner. Before they left, Squall found and removed the tracking device, handing it to one of the SeeD's for analysis.

As the SeeD's left with their charge, Squall pulled Rinoa into his arms and simply held her, feeling her continue to fight the fear that had lurked in the back of her mind all evening. Leaning into him, she began to shake from reaction. Stroking her hair lightly, he leaned his cheek against her head, inhaling the smell of her hair, feeling its warm silk against his face. And he held her gently, and let her shake.

Kissing her temple, he tightened his arms around her for a moment, then released her, saying, "I know you're tired. Let's go home."

Rinoa sighed, "Okay."

Turning toward their car, Squall unlocked it and opened the passenger side door for Rinoa. Then he paused, a sudden thought striking him.

The man he'd caught didn't have to tell Squall where he'd hidden the tracking device. There was no reason for him to answer that particular question, and Squall wasn't fool enough to believe the man had done it out of the goodness of his heart. In short, there was no logical reason for him to have done that…. unless it directed Squall away from where the real tracking device was.

So thinking, he quickly opened the passenger side door again, startling Rinoa, and opened the glove compartment, rummaging around in it until he found what he was looking for.

"Squall? Honey, what's going on?" Rinoa asked, alarmed at his behavior.

He paused, gave her a quick, reassuring kiss and told her, "I think there's another tracking device on the car. The one that guy told me about was a decoy. Had to have been, it was so easy to find. Too easy. This other one will be better hidden. But I'm sure it's here, somewhere." So saying, he turned on the small, powerful flashlight he'd pulled out of the glove compartment and shut the passenger side door.

Then he spent the next few, frustrating minutes searching every possible hiding place he could think of where someone would hide such a device. It had to be somewhere on the exterior, because Squall had locked the doors and there was no evidence that the man had managed to get into the car. It had to be someplace easy to get to, and hard to find.

Unfortunately, that described the entire undercarriage of Squall's car.

So, Squall took a deep breath, and focused on the job at hand, methodically checking every possible location, forcing himself to go slow. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally found it, tucked well out of sight on the vehicle's frame.

Pulling off the device, which was considerably smaller and more sophisticated than the decoy, Squall scooted out from under his car, brushing himself off as he stood. He studied it, using his flashlight to get as much detail from it as he could. While he would have liked to study it more closely at his leisure, he didn't want to bring the thing home with him. He had to destroy it before he left the garage.

But the sleek, elegant design of the tracker told Squall more than its maker realized. Squall squinted, bringing it closer for a better look and was rewarded by finally finding the maker's mark and a miniscule serial number. Odine.
No surprise there, but that in itself was not a positive link since Dr. Odine had merely perfected the instrument's design and sold it on the open market. Just because some random thug had decided to stick it on Squall's car didn't mean *Odine* had anything directly to do with it. At least, that was the argument that Squall knew Odine would present.

*Logically*, it was only proof that the trespasser's "patron" was rich enough to provide the man with top-notch equipment, not that Odine himself was involved. That's what *logic* said.

Squall's gut said that Odine was the puppet master orchestrating this, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that the sharks were closing in faster than he could see them.

Dropping the tracker onto the concrete, Squall decisively crushed it under the heel of his boot and got into his car.

Starting the engine, he looked over at the passenger seat where Rinoa had fallen fast asleep from sheer exhaustion. He sighed, reaching over and squeezing her cold hand gently, warming it with his own, then tucking it under her coat. Reaching up, he stroked her smooth cheek, silently apologizing for taking so long to get them both home, knowing she was sleeping too soundly to feel it.

Then Squall turned on the heater, put the car into gear and drove home.

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Rinoa slept the entire way home, while Squall drove in silence and brooded about the day's events, the last few minutes in particular. All of this while keeping an eye out for a tail. He knew he couldn't keep this increased awareness up for long, eventually it would exhaust him; and despite his efforts to shield, he knew some of it was bleeding over to Rinoa. The last thing his wife needed at this point in her pregnancy was *more* stress.

And then there was that damned hurricane coming. He supposed he should be happy he wasn't responsible for evacuating a metropolitan area the size of Deling City. Balamb was half its size and just getting everyone organized and working together with the preparation efforts was like herding cats. He knew, something had to break soon, and he greatly feared it would be him.

As odd as it sounded, Squall really hoped that Odine's thugs made their move soon so he could just kill them already and get it over with.

At the moment however, Squall felt as though he were stretched between two inexorably diverging and equally powerful responsibilities. Caught in the middle of those two conflicting forces with nowhere to go, he could only wait for the moment that would tear his heart asunder between them. Hard as he tried, Squall just couldn't shake this sense of impending doom.

The sight of the door to his garage, highlighted by his car's headlights, filled Squall with an incredible sense of relief as he pulled into his driveway and waited for the door to open. And while his jangling nerves made Squall check the area thoroughly before exiting the car, when nothing appeared amiss, he sighed deeply, leaning his head back against the seat.

Turning to look at Rinoa, Squall reached his hand out and stroked her cheek. Touching her mind lightly, he silently urged her to wake.

"*Rin? We're home honey, wake up.*"

Rinoa inhaled deeply, yawning, and stretched. Opening her eyes, she smiled slightly.

"What time is it?" She asked, unbuckling her seat belt.
Squall checked his watch and grimaced, "Nine-thirty."

Yawning again, Rinoa commented, "feels later than that."

"It's late enough. Come on, let's get you to bed." Squall said, exiting the car and coming around to the passenger side. Opening the door, he helped Rinoa out and tucked her under his arm. Shutting the car's door and locking it, he escorted her to the door that led into the house itself.

"Did you find that thing you were looking for?" Rinoa asked as he unlocked the door and disarmed the interior alarm.

"Yes." Squall answered her as they entered the house to be greeted enthusiastically by Angelo. He shut the door behind them, locking it securely and arming the alarm again.

The owner of the home had been a little puzzled at Squall's insistence upon adding it, but had allowed him do so when Squall told him he would be more than willing to pay for it himself. It was the best system that he could afford, and the worst-case scenario was that it would at least give him enough warning to deal with any threat that managed to circumvent it. No system was completely foolproof.

"And?" Rinoa asked.

"Odine's. I crushed it." Squall said.

Rinoa shuddered, and Squall could feel the gut-deep fear that seized hold of her in that moment as she remembered the incident in the parking garage, the watcher from that morning and the confirmation that they both received that they were being hunted.

He wanted to comfort her, tell her everything would be okay and that he wouldn't let anything happen to her, but he couldn't. Not when his underlying tension was feeding into her in spite of his best efforts to shield her from it.

They both needed to relax in the worst way or neither one of them would sleep.

Pulling Rinoa to him, Squall hugged her and said, "I don't know about you honey, but I'm wound up fit to break right now. Why don't I get a bubble bath going for you and see if maybe we can't both relax?"

Walking with her into the living room, Squall escorted Rinoa over to the couch where she sank down tiredly. Giving her a quick kiss, he disappeared into their bathroom. Moments later, Rinoa heard water running.

Then he came back into the living room and called Angelo, saying, "I'm going to take him out for a bit, we've been gone all day. He's got to be bursting." Before Rinoa could say anything, Squall went to the back door and disarmed the alarm, taking the dog out with him.

She felt slightly guilty at forgetting about her dog like that, but she was glad Squall had taken care of it, for she was too tired to do so herself.

He returned just a few minutes later, setting the alarm again. Taking off his overcoat, he draped it over the back of one of the dining room chairs and came over to her. Grasping her hands, he urged her to her feet, giving a little tug to help her stand.

"Come on, let's get you into the tub." Squall said, walking with her toward the bedroom and it's in suite bathroom.
"What about you Squall? Aren't you going to join me?" Rinoa asked.

He gave her a thoughtful look and answered, "I suppose so, if you want me to." He had to admit, the notion of soaking up to his neck in hot water actually sounded really good. Doing so with his wife sounded wonderful.

"You know I do." She said.

"Alright." He smiled, "you first." Checking the tub, he saw that it had filled to the level he wanted it, bubbles frothing upon the surface. He reached over and turned off the tap.

When they'd been considering renting this house, one of the things that had swayed Rinoa's opinion in favor of it was the master bathroom. Generously sized, with twin sinks, and a large well-lit mirror over them, it also boasted both a bathtub and a shower. The tub was easily large enough to fit the both of them, and while Squall wasn't much for baths himself, preferring showers instead, he did derive some enjoyment from Rinoa's efforts to convince him otherwise.

The floor was covered in rough, slate-like tiles in a blue-gray color, rather than slick ceramic or marble tiling, reducing the chance of a slip. Fluffy white bath rugs softened the otherwise austere flooring. The remaining décor included gold colored tile partway up the wall and a warm cream paint the rest of the way. A pair of tropical plants, chosen by Rinoa, sat upon the gold-shot marble of the vanity-sink combo. The drawers in the cabinet beneath the sink held various personal care items such as toiletries and towels.

Wordlessly, they undressed each other, touching and kissing as they did. Rinoa caught her breath softly as Squall lightly traced his finger down her bare spine. Squall did the same thing when Rinoa turned and ran her hands down his chest and belly, using just enough of her nails to make him shiver.

Concentrating on the moment, Squall firmly shoved his worries aside as he kissed Rinoa softly. He needed her as badly as she needed him, the comfort they could derive from each other would relax them both and allow them to sleep. So he kissed her, focusing on the softness of her lips, the way they tasted, the way she felt in his arms. With their minds open to each other, he could feel in Rinoa the same edge of worry that he was fighting.

Squall stepped back and released Rinoa briefly so that she could step into the tub and sink into its warmth with a deep sigh. He joined her, sinking down into the water himself with the same deep sigh that Rinoa had expressed just seconds prior, prompting her to laugh softly.

"Feels good, huh?" Rinoa asked, softly.

"Mmm-hmm" Squall replied, leaning against the back of the tub and pulling Rinoa into his arms, offering his chest as a backrest for her. She settled herself against him and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

Pulling one of his hands out of the water, he stroked it back over Rinoa's hair, the water slicking it back over her head. Kissing her temple, he leaned his cheek against her head and closed his eyes, emptying his mind, trying hard not to think at all, just to feel.

Gradually, the warmth of the water and of the woman in his arms began to relax him, easing the tension he'd carried with him all day. Rinoa too was relaxing, the calm tranquility both were feeling echoing back and forth between them.

"This is nice." Rinoa thought, stroking her hand along Squall's thigh underneath the water.
"Very." Squall thought, still holding her and content to continue doing so for the time being. But the feel of Rinoa's hand stroking along his thigh, coupled with the emotions she was sending him, made him open his eyes to meet hers.

"You're not too tired?" He wondered. She shook her head.

"I'm feeling much restored, and I need this. I need you. I know you feel the same." Rinoa sent, beginning to caress him with more purpose. Squall agreed silently. While tired, he wasn't ready to sleep; he hadn't reached that point yet. He was getting there, but there was really only one way they could both relax completely.

But still, he worried, "Are you going to be comfortable here?" He swallowed when Rinoa shifted so that she could reach down to fondle him.

Rinoa nodded, "I'll be fine. This is a big tub, and it's not like we have to worry about a slip."

"I had intended something rather different for you tonight, but I guess we'll have to forego that." Squall thought. "Why?" Rinoa asked, then burst out laughing at Squall's reply.

"Because I can't hold my breath that long, and a snorkel sort of defeats the purpose." He smiled at her response to the image he sent along with that observation.

"Well, you DID say that tonight was for me, right?" She sent, stealing his breath as she continued with her caresses, drinking in his moan with a deep kiss.

"Yes..." he managed.

"Then that means I can do whatever I want with you." She thought, shifting her position to straddle his lap. She continued with her intimate manipulation, until Squall's excitement reached a near painful intensity and forced him to still her hand.

Taking a deep breath, he willed his racing heart and surging blood to calm down, not wanting to end things just yet. Smiling slightly at the wicked amusement he felt from Rinoa at his struggle, he simply studied her for a moment.

Dark hair slicked back by the water, warm brown eyes twinkling at him, soft, pink lips slightly parted as she leaned forward, running her hands up his chest, Squall couldn't take his eyes off of her. Her pale skin was wet and gleaming, a dollop of soap bubbles sliding down from one of her shoulders and over a full breast.

"You are so beautiful." Squall whispered, reaching out to caress her, wiping the suds away from her breasts and filling his hands with them. She sighed, closing her eyes and arching into his caress, and Squall drank in the sensations she sent him, knowing his arousal was echoing within her mind and body as well. Then he met her lips with his own, pulling her close, stealing her breath like she had stolen his.

By mutual accord, Rinoa shifted her position again, Squall's hands at her hips supporting and guiding her as they came together.

The warmth and buoyancy of the water added a new dimension to their lovemaking, one Squall found that he rather liked. Of course, watching his beautiful wife as he made love to her was something that Squall never tired of.
The water sloshed and splashed as their movements increased in tempo and intensity, Rinoa bracing herself with her hands on Squall's chest, while he gripped her buttocks firmly. The beat of his pounding heart, echoed by Rinoa's, set the pace as they moved together.

As always, their hearts and minds joined along with their bodies, their passion threatening to take control and sweep them away. Squall struggled to master it but this time, Rinoa silently urged him to let it go.

"You won't hurt me, sweetheart. Don't hold back."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

At her urging, Squall let his passion off the leash and allowed it to take control. Then they were drowning, gasping for air as they strove together for the peak. Rinoa convulsively clutched at Squall's shoulders with a deep moan, her nails biting into his skin as she climaxed around him. The intense pleasure she felt fed into Squall, bringing him along with her. For a brief, glorious instant, Squall was completely insensible to everything but what both he and Rinoa felt.

Sliding his hands up Rinoa's back, Squall planted a soft kiss at the base of Rinoa's throat, hugging her as close as he could. He closed his eyes for a moment, resting his head against her upper chest, listening to her heart beat, waiting for the heavy thumping of his own heart to calm. As he did, he extended his senses and saw that all was well with his wife and babies, feeling her relaxed, sated contentment, feeling his children sleeping safely within her.

Opening his eyes, he brought his hands up to her face, stroking her cheeks with his thumbs, gazing into her now golden eyes. Then he kissed her, letting her feel everything.

His worry at the multiple challenges they both had to face in the coming days, his secret fear that he'd fail her. Mixed with all of that was how very deeply he loved her, how devastated he'd be if he lost her. Amidst all of those layers of emotion was his steely resolve to protect her with everything he had in him.

In all of their studies of knights and sorceresses, they had found a great many knights who had nobly sacrificed themselves for the sake of their sorceresses. They had even found one pair, like themselves, that had been so tightly bound that the sorceress had died along with her knight. But in all of those studies, one question had never been asked: What happens to the knight, if his sorceress is taken from him?
"Good morning, Rinoa, welcome to your firearms refresher course." Irvine grinned as Rinoa walked into the shooting range, yawning.

"Whose idea was it to have this thing at seven in the morning? If it was Squall's, I'll kill him." She grumbled. While she didn't regret the time she'd spent making love with Squall in the bathtub, she did wish she'd had just a little bit more time to sleep. Having to get up right along with him at the ungodly hour that he normally did was not conducive to a sunny disposition. As a result Rinoa was tired, grumpy, and just a little bit queasy.

The morning sickness associated with pregnancy had mostly subsided by the time she reached her fourth month, but every so often it would strike at unpredictable moments. Odd things like certain smells, or the appearance of a certain food, would send her running for the bathroom to throw up.

Other odd results of pregnancy included increased sensitivity… to everything. Scent, sound, and touch in particular. She also had developed an unfortunate intolerance of coffee. There were mornings when even the smell of coffee brewing would have her heaving over the commode.

Then of course there were the cravings, which weren't too bad, and Squall was actually pretty tolerant of them, by and large. Of course, Rinoa knew better than to ask him to get up and get her pickles and ice cream in the middle of the night. He was tolerant, but there were limits.

"Sorry darlin' but that would be my fault. This was the only time the range was available." Irvine said with a sympathetic smile.

"Just for that, I'm gonna puke in your hat." Rinoa growled, making a halfhearted snatch at it. Irvine avoided it easily by simply clamping his hat firmly onto his head and stretching up to his full height. As he stood nearly a foot taller than her, Rinoa found it difficult to reach, and stretching up onto her tippy toes was just not something she was willing to attempt.

Irvine eyed her with concern. She did look a little green in the gills, though not as bad as she had early in her pregnancy.

"You up for this sweetie? We can try it another time if you aren't feeling right." Irvine said.

Rinoa sighed and said, "I'll be fine. I'm just a little out of sorts because I'm not used to getting up this early and my stomach doesn't care for breakfast at this hour."

"You're sure?" Irvine asked. Rinoa nodded.

"Alright then. Show me what you got kiddo." Irvine said, handing her the ear protectors.

Rinoa put them on, then took her gun and a box of bullets out of her handbag and laid them on the board in front of her, taking care to point the barrel away from her and Irvine. Slapping the clip into the butt, she thumbed the safety off and cocked the gun.

Taking her stance, she took the gun in her right hand, braced it with her left hand, aimed and fired off six rounds in quick succession. Laying the gun back down on the board, she dropped her hands to her sides and waited while Irvine brought the man-shaped paper target up.

Studying it critically, Irvine narrowed his eyes and said, "Well, it's not terrible…"
"But it's not very good, is it?" Rinoa said, biting her lip.

"Well, Squall was right when he said you needed improvement." Indicating the scattered bullet holes, he asked, "What were you aiming for, exactly?"

"Uh, the black part." Rinoa said.

Irvine couldn't help it, he chuckled softly, "Well, you hit that all right." Then he indicated the concentric circles in the chest and head of the silhouette, saying, "That's what you want to aim for. When you pull the trigger, always shoot to kill. You may not have another chance."

Pulling the target down, he hung a fresh one up and ran it back to its original position.

Noticing how close it was, Rinoa asked, "Aren't you going to run it farther back?"

"No. You're not trying to be a sharpshooter. This is for self-defense, so the maximum distance you should be shooting is five meters. That's close enough to determine if the target is a clear threat or not." Irvine explained, putting his ear protectors back on and stepping back to lean against the wall behind Rinoa.

"Go ahead." Irvine said, and Rinoa nodded and picked up her gun.

After several rounds and more spent casings then Rinoa wanted to think about, she finally had a satisfactory grouping around the target zones and Irvine called a halt.

"What time do you need to be to work?" He asked as they both cleaned up the brass and prepared to leave.

"About nine." Rinoa answered, checking her watch and seeing that they'd finished in plenty of time for her to make it.

"Same time tomorrow then?" Irvine suggested, and laughed at Rinoa's grimace.

"If you insist." She said.

"How 'bout you just call me and let me know and I'll meet you here." Irvine suggested.

Rinoa nodded, relieved, saying, "That sounds better. I never know from one day to the next when Squall's going to decide we need to leave. I understand why, but it's a little maddening sometimes."

Irvine grimaced in sympathy, giving her a quick hug and kiss on the cheek, saying, "Yeah, I know. Well, take it easy sweetie, have a good day at work."

Squall meanwhile, after landing in Balamb and getting the latest report on the hurricane faxed to his office, started his day at a frantic pace that showed no signs of easing.

The hurricane was still stalking its way northward, slowly making its way toward Balamb. It had veered slightly east, which meant it would bypass FH, so when it did hit Balamb, it would do so at full strength.

Squall then, mindful of the fact that he'd promised Rinoa that he'd take the next day off to go to her doctor's appointment with her, did his best to take care of everything that he needed to while he was there and make sure that things ran smoothly in his absence. Or as smoothly as possible, given the current situation.
Both Cid and Quistis had questioned the wisdom of his taking a day off with an impending crisis looming ever closer, and Squall couldn't blame them. But there was no way in hell he was going to leave Rinoa to go to her appointment alone. It would offer an opportunity only the truly foolish would fail to take advantage of.

So he worked like an absolute fiend, scarcely taking even a minute for a cup of coffee. And running poor Quistis off her feet as she tried to keep up with him.

"Squall! Squall, would you slow down please? I know you've got stamina to burn, but not all of us run marathons for fun!" Quistis protested breathlessly, half-running to keep pace with his long strides.

"Maybe you should try it." Squall said without easing his pace. He had just taken a quick tour around the Garden, checking in with the cafeteria staff as well as double-checking on the preparations going on in the ballroom. Where Quistis had waylaid him and was trying unsuccessfully to direct his attention to… something.

"Ugh! Not in this lifetime." Quistis grumbled under her breath.

"What do you want Quistis? I'm on my way to go yell at a certain public official who thinks it's his sacred duty to aggravate me at every turn." Squall said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"Mayor Williams? I thought he was being very cooperative," Quistis protested, frowning.

"He's fine. No, I'm talking about that obtuse, egotistical, condescending and absolutely stupid excuse for a sheriff that somehow got elected last year. You know, the logic of electing an individual whose job is to ensure public safety and enforce the law is completely beyond me. If the man has an ounce of credibility to go with his position I have yet to find it." Squall groused as he stomped toward the lift.

Quistis grimaced in sympathy, having had to deal with the man herself recently. The opinion Squall expressed in this rare tirade was shared by many of the other SeeDs and cadets who had met the sheriff. She did however spare a moment of pity for the man who was about to get the sharp edge of Squall's temper.

Suddenly he stopped, turning to quickly catch Quistis before her momentum had her running into him.

"Quistis, what?" Squall asked, exasperated. Letting go of her, he folded his arms across his chest and waited.

"Oh! We need more blankets. You know, for the cots in the ballroom. I thought we had enough in storage but we've come up short." Quistis said in a rush.

Squall sighed, "I'll see if I can convince some of our senior SeeDs and the local citizenry to donate any extras they may have. Thanks for telling me."

"Doctor Kadowaki also wanted me to let you know…" Quistis began, to be interrupted by Squall, "That she needs some more emergency medical supplies. I know. I've already gotten the list and sent Zell off on another supply run."

Quistis let out a breath in relief, "well, that's good at least. Look, while I don't agree with you taking tomorrow off, I know how important it is to you. Don't worry about all of this stuff tomorrow okay? It'll still be here, and worse probably, when you come back."
Squall nodded, "Well, the weather reports show the hurricane just north of the equator. Doesn't seem to be advancing too fast. If anything changes tomorrow, call me."

"Count on it." Quistis said, and smiled as Squall rolled his eyes at that and headed for the lift.

"Check in with Nida, see if there's anything he needs." Squall tossed over his shoulder as he waited for the lift to come down.

"Where is he anyway? I haven't seen him all day." Quistis asked, puzzled.

"MD level. Checking the desalination tanks." Squall answered.

"Oh. Okay, I'll catch up with him in a little bit then." Quistis said, then added with a grin as the lift finally arrived and opened, "Say 'hi' to Sheriff Douglas for me."

Squall snorted as he entered the lift and punched the button. His expression had lightened a little bit, but not by much. Quistis shook her head, wondering if she even wanted to be a fly on that wall. Squall for the most part had worked well with all of the officials involved in the evacuation plans, so long as everyone understood that he had little patience and less tolerance for fools.

He had remained mostly even-tempered throughout, despite the obvious pressure that he was under in coordinating the disaster preparations. But the sheriff had the unique distinction of pissing Squall off on a daily basis virtually since they'd started the entire process.

The elevator ride was much too short for any serious reflection, though Squall did take the opportunity to calm and center himself, reaching out for Rinoa's warmth. Touching her essence, if only briefly, put him in a better frame of mind. He didn't like feeling the negative energies that swirled inside of him every time he had to confront the sheriff, they were difficult to get rid of and he did not want to bring them home with him. They were poison, not just to him but to Rinoa as well.

When the lift opened on the third floor, Squall headed calmly toward the conference room where Cid and the sheriff both awaited him. He would remain calm, so long as the sheriff remained civil. Squall did not have much hope that the man would do so.

Opening the door, he greeted Cid first, saying, "Good morning, Cid. Sheriff." Squall nodded at the other man, acknowledging his presence.

"Good morning Squall." Cid said politely.

"Took you long enough," the sheriff said. Nope, civility was apparently not in sheriff's repertoire.

"How can I help you sheriff?" Squall asked through tight lips. Folding his arms, Squall waited, feeling anger beginning to warm him.

"You can help me by keeping your nose out of my business. You've got your SeeDs running around the whole damn town like you're trying to take over the place and I don't see any need for it, personally." The sheriff said.

_Here we go again_, Squall thought, trying to keep a firm hold on his temper. It was the same damned argument, each and every time. It basically boiled down into a pissing contest over territory, and Squall was sick to death of it. Okay, maybe the sheriff didn't feel like his jurisdiction was being trampled all over by the SeeDs, but he'd been less than cooperative in handling his end of things so Squall had directed the SeeDs to pick up the slack.
"As I have explained to you numerous times sheriff, we are there at the request of the mayor. He asked for our help and we were happy to give it. Now, I apologize if you feel like your toes are being stepped on, but I suggest you take it up with him." Squall said flatly, silently congratulating himself at keeping his anger in check.

"I'm taking it up with you. I don't appreciate having a wet-behind-the-ears punk like you taking over and running things. I'm the sheriff of this town and I'm the one that says if and when we need to evacuate and how to go about it." The sheriff said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms, an obstinate look on his face.

And there it was. It all came down to the fact that Squall was just twenty-one and there were those who could not believe that he'd actually know what he was doing. Of course, that was assuming that he'd had a "normal" upbringing. Nothing about Squall's childhood had been anything close to normal, and he had more experience in handling crisis situations than people twice his age. It was another argument that he was beyond sick of having to rehash again and again.

"And yet," Squall said, glaring at the man and advancing slowly, "when I asked you, you didn't have the time to devote to discussing that with me, did you? You didn't feel it enough of a priority to even listen to what I had to say."

"I just don't feel that we need to worry. The storm'll bypass us. It usually does. I think we're creating a panic for no reason. I say we batten down and ride it out. I don't think it's going to be nearly as bad as you say it is. I think you're overestimating this." The sheriff said.

Squall remained silent, too furious for the moment to speak or think coherently. Was this fool really that stupid? Did he not watch the news reports? See the satellite images? The smug look on the man's face as the silence stretched showed that he thought he'd won the argument. Nothing was further from the truth. Squall's lack of response stemmed from his struggle to contain his anger and not punch the sheriff square in the face.

Cid, seeing the tension between the two men and Squall's white-knuckled grip on his temper, cleared his throat nervously.

"Sheriff Douglas," Cid began, "despite Commander Leonhart's youth, there is a reason he's in command of this Garden and the SeeDs in it. I strongly suggest you pay heed to what he says. It is always better to be prepared for a disaster that doesn't come than be unprepared for one that does, don't you think?"

"Sheriff, I'll make a deal with you," Squall began quietly, eyes icy cold. "If this storm bypasses Balamb entirely, I'll resign my post here and leave Balamb for good."

The sheriff stared at the boy, shocked. He stood rigidly, arms crossed over his chest, piercing blue eyes boring into his. The sheriff suddenly realized that the young commander wasn't a "boy" any longer; was years away from the young cadet he remembered only vaguely. Then, he'd been a single student among dozens he'd seen around Balamb. More aloof, perhaps, than most, but otherwise pretty much the same as the rest. Now, he was lean and scarred, standing straight and tall; taller than the sheriff had thought he was at first sight. The only thing that hadn't changed was the cold, distant look in the young man's eyes.

They were eyes that belonged on an older face, though the scar that bisected them offered proof that despite the youth of that face, they were still the eyes of a veteran.

"Squall..." Cid began, frowning. Squall silenced him with a look.
"Are you serious about this?" The sheriff asked. By all accounts, Commander Leonhart rarely joked, so he had to be. Squall nodded.

"And if the storm does hit us? Then what?" The sheriff asked him.

"I strongly suggest you work with us, rather than against us. We'd all have a better chance of surviving it." Squall answered.

"No, I mean, what do you want from me, if you're proven right?" the sheriff asked.

Squall frowned, "The only thing I want sheriff, is for you to do your job ensuring public safety by pitching in with everyone else that's getting ready for this. And if you aren't willing to do that, then get the hell out of my way so I can do my job."

They locked eyes, each taking the other's measure. The sheriff realized that this young man was not someone who should be underestimated, belatedly remembering everything else that he'd done. Slowly, he nodded, agreeing. If Commander Leonhart was as certain of the storm's path as he appeared to be, then he'd do well to follow his lead.

Seeing that his point had been made, Squall returned the nod and silently left the conference room.

"Squall?" Cid asked, following him out. Squall ignored him and headed directly toward his office.

"Squall, wait. Are you sure that was wise?" Cid asked him again as Squall unlocked his office.

"I don't really give a good Goddam right now Cid. I've had my fill of his bullshit and if the prospect of never having to deal with me butting into his so-called business gets him to cooperate, I'm all for it." Squall said, opening the door and making a beeline for the far corner of his office, where his gunblade rested, leaning against the wall like a silent sentry.

"What if you're wrong? Would you really resign? What would you do if you did?" Cid asked him, worrying that the pressure was finally beginning to become too much for the young man. Cid frowned as Squall picked up the gunblade and buckled it on, face expressionless.

"There's always that possibility," Squall answered him at length. "Although I don't think I'm wrong. If however I am, then yes, I will resign, and what I do with myself after that really doesn't matter."

Squall turned and started toward the door, stopping as he heard Cid say softly, "It matters to me. And I think you'll find that it will matter to a great many more people than you think."

Squall paused, glancing back at Cid, expression unreadable. Then he continued toward the door. He had just touched the doorknob to open it when Cid stopped him again.

"Where are you going?" He asked.

"Cid, I am really not in the mood right now to deal with anyone in any way, shape or form. The only thing I want to do right now is to kill something, as messily as possible and with extreme prejudice. I'm going to the training center." Squall answered, opening the door.

"Take a partner. This is not negotiable." Cid said firmly.

Squall glared, expression stubborn, then snapped, "fine." And left. Cid, left alone in Squall's office, sagged against the desk, letting out a long breath. He didn't blame Squall for wanting an outlet to vent his temper on. That sheriff was enough to try the patience of Hyne herself. At least Squall was
choosing to pummel a monster instead of an unsuspecting cadet… or an extremely annoying public official.

Take a PARTNER? Really? Squall ground his teeth, fuming as he strode through the hallways. He knew he had to bring someone with him when he went to the training center, it was a rule not even he could break, though he had tempted fate more than once in the past. Too many people were paying too close attention to him now for him to get away with doing that anymore however.

So who the hell should he bring with him anyway? None of his friends were available; they were all hard at work following his orders. Not that he'd be very good company anyway in his current mood.

He'd nearly made it to the training center, still pondering his current dilemma, when the solution to it ran into him- literally.

Squall staggered back a couple of steps, breath knocked out of him, annoyed that he'd been caught unawares. Catching his breath, he glared down at the young cadet that had had been sent sprawling from the impact.

"OOF! Ugh, sorry…" the boy said, shaking his head and looking up to see who it was he'd run into…and groaning in dismay as he met Squall's glare.

"…Sir." The cadet finished weakly, gulping. Folding his arms across his chest, Squall waited as the boy picked himself up and brushed off his uniform, cheeks pink from embarrassment. The kid looked vaguely familiar, but Squall couldn't place him at first. Not until the boy told him who he was, at any rate.

"I…I'm terribly sorry sir. I was running late and… uh…. Oh darn! I'm Thad, sir, Thad Millett…" The boy began in a rush, and then trailed off at Squall's continued silence.

As soon as the boy told him his name, Squall remembered. He was a Trabian transfer, there for the next scheduled field exam.

"What is it with you Trabian cadets? If I'm not run down by one of you at least once a year, I somehow feel incomplete." Squall grumbled. It was the literal truth. Since running into Selphie on the day of his field exam some four years earlier, fate had somehow managed to deliver him a new Trabian student to run smack into him each year since. It was well on the way to becoming a tradition now.

"S..sorry…" the boy began again, then stopped as Squall waved his hand impatiently.

"Where were you headed in such a rush?" Squall asked him.

"I was supposed to meet Instructor Trepe out on the Quad, and I was running late and well… I ran into you." The cadet explained. He'd heard of Commander Leonhart of course, who hadn't? But until this moment, he'd never actually met the man face to face. Unfortunately, this was not going the way Thad had envisioned his first meeting with the commander.

"Are you armed?" Squall asked him.

Thad frowned, asking, "What? No, why would I be? I was going to meet Instructor Trepe and help her with whatever it was she needed me to do."

"If you want to be SeeD, you should have your weapon with you at all times." Squall said, patting
"Oh." Thad said, belatedly remembering that Instructor Trepe always had her whip with her, even when she was in class teaching. He'd thought it was there to intimidate unruly students.

"Go get your weapon, junction up and meet me outside the training center. You have five minutes. Go." Squall ordered. Thad stared at him. Was he serious? When Squall pointedly checked his watch, then glanced back at him, Thad got the hint and took off at a dead run.

Squall continued on toward the training center and upon reaching it, checked his watch again. Five minutes later, he heard the panting approach of the young cadet.

"Okay… sir…" the boy said breathlessly, "now what?"

Squall silently gestured with his head toward the entrance of the training center and walked toward it, trusting the cadet to follow.

Seeing that the commander really did intend to go into the training center and invite him along, Thad saw no other choice but to follow.

Entering the tropical warmth of the training center immediately put Squall in a better frame of mind. The fresh scent of the greenery, the anticipation of the hunt, the simple process of stalking his prey… the anger and frustration of the previous few hours fueled his focus upon finding a suitable victim to take it out on.

"So, uh… is there anything specific you want me to learn here? I mean, I just got here; I haven't actually been in the training center yet. Instructor Trepe was going to take me but then you suspended classes because of the hurricane and…" Thad said nervously. He cringed inwardly, knowing that he was babbling and trying to stop, but once he started his mouth just seemed to run away with him.

Squall glanced back at the kid and said shortly, "silence is best."

The cadet nodded, licking his lips. Of course. Silence. He did his best, and tried not to cringe when a twig's snap earned him a glare from Squall, who ghosted through the foliage as silently as a cat.

Coming to the edge of a clearing, Squall paused and crouched down, gesturing for the cadet to do the same. He studied the kid for a moment, assessing his abilities from what he'd heard and seen. He was right about never having been in the training center before, that much was obvious from the way he'd tromped around behind Squall. He seemed fit enough though, recovering quickly from the run to his dorm room and back.

The boy was slight, and not terribly tall, probably about Zell's height, maybe a bit less. Squall knew he had to be at least fifteen, that was the youngest that a cadet would be accepted for a field exam, but the kid looked twelve. He was sandy-haired, green eyed and freckled, and looked like he should have been out playing baseball instead of trailing behind a mercenary commander that was hell-bent on mayhem.

Well, what the hell. No better way to learn a thing than to do it.

At least the kid wasn't scared. Although that might have been due to the fact that he had no idea what he was in for.

"Commander? What are we…" the boy began, much to Squall's annoyance. At least he had the sense to whisper.
Squall shushed him and answered quietly, "Watch. Listen. Pay attention." To emphasize this, he placed a finger to his lips, then directed the boy's attention to the clearing.

The cadet didn't see anything at first, then a rustling, rushing sound caught his attention. He wasn't sure what he was seeing at first, then he remembered Instructor Trepe's unit on common monsters. They were grats; predatory plants. According to the information he'd read about them, they weren't too difficult to kill. There were two of them.

Thad directed his attention to Squall, who gestured to his eyes, then pointed out toward the grats. The boy nodded, confirming that he'd seen them.

Then Squall signed to him, you go left. I'll take right.

The cadet was mortally glad that he'd taken the extra credit class for tactical sign language; otherwise he'd have been lost.

Nodding to confirm he'd understood, he readied his weapon and waited, watching for Squall's command.

Narrowing his eyes, Squall rose up onto the balls of his feet, body tensing as he prepared to spring into action. Thad watched, fascinated. The commander really did look like a hunting lion, ready to pounce in that moment. He'd thought that description was the result of an overly enthusiastic fan's exaggeration. Instead, it was the literal truth.

"Go!" Squall's growled order startled the cadet. The boy leaped to his feet, saber at the ready, while Squall rushed at the grat, gunblade raised high.

Then the boy's entire focus was on the monster he was battling, dodging the tentacles and trying to avoid the sleep-inducing spores the creature released. It was all over in a blur of slashing blades, far faster than Thad had thought possible.

Panting, the cadet wiped sweat from his brow and surveyed his fallen foe in satisfaction. Then he remembered that he was supposed to be backing up his commander and whirled to see Squall watching him patiently, barely winded. Thad found himself vaguely disappointed to have missed Squall's battle.

"Not bad." He said, sheathing his gunblade and continuing farther into the training center.

"Thanks." The boy said, then asked, "So, is there anything more challenging than grats in here?"

"You should already know." Squall answered, attention on their surroundings.

"I haven't had the chance to go over the guidebook yet." Thad said, cringing at Squall's level look. Okay. He'd been there a week…he should have found the time at some point.

Before Squall could say anything further, a distant roar answered the cadet's question. His eyes widened as he felt the tremors left by the approaching monster's heavy tread. T-rexaur. And judging from the vibrations left by its approach, a big one.

Squall jerked his head for Thad to follow him and they hurried along the trail to an open area that would give them more room to maneuver. Slashing his gunblade through the air in anticipation, Squall calmly took his stance and waited.

Thad did the same, though he was feeling a great deal less calm than the commander was. He'd never gone up against a monster of this size before. The closest he'd come to it was a large
snowlion on the Trabian steppes.

Glancing over at the cadet, Squall asked him, "Do you have any blind spells stocked?"

"Yeah." Thad answered.

"Good. Use one as soon as the monster comes into range." Squall ordered.

Thad nodded, taking a deep breath and trying to calm his nervousness. It got more and more difficult to do however as the ground jumped with each heavy step, bushes and trees cracked and snapped from the creature forcing its way through the foliage, and the roaring grew steadily louder.

Thad briefly wondered if it wouldn't be wiser for him to run, particularly when the beast finally broke cover and charged into the clearing where they awaited it with a thunderous roar, and the young cadet saw exactly how big it was.

He thought about it. Then glanced over at Commander Leonhart and realized that even if he ran, the commander wouldn't. He would be the worst kind of coward if he'd left his commander to face that monster alone. So Thad swallowed back his fear and stood his ground, marveling at the predatory expression on Squall's face.

"Come on, Big Daddy," Squall grinned at the huge reptile. "Let's play."

Thad watched wide-eyed, as the T-rexaur, as if it had heard Squall's challenge, altered the direction of its charge toward Squall.

The thing was nearly upon him before Thad remembered the blind spell. He quickly cast it, blinding the monster just before it reached Squall and allowing the latter to avoid the monster's attack easily.

But it was by no means an easy fight. Even blinded, the T-rexaur had scent and sound to guide it, so they still had to be cautious, and in particular, watch for its tail. And the elemental quake and thundara spells it would randomly cast when angered.

In unspoken accord, Squall and Thad took turns, with one of them summoning their GFs, while the other one concentrated on physical attacks.

So the cadet summoned his Guardian, while Squall was literally all over the monster, slashing at its face when it tried to bite him, quickly ducking a tail strike and moving in to attack the creature's legs and belly before diving to the side and avoiding another bite.

The great reptile roared in rage and pain as it continued without success to catch its tormentor, snapping blindly at Squall, and missing him by mere inches as Squall danced aside. Darting under the beast again, Squall slashed at its belly, laying it open, just as yet another summon of Thad's GF finished it off.

With a final cry, the dinosaur finally toppled to the ground with a crash, to lie groaning, mortally wounded.

Squall stopped for a moment, panting heavily, his gunblade resting tip downwards against his leg while he paused to catch his breath. Thad simply stared at him, awed. Not once had Squall used his GF. He had taken the monster on and delivered a significant amount of damage to it with physical attacks alone. It was unreal, how fast he'd moved.

Then the cadet stared, confused, as Squall suddenly cast a sleep spell on the dinosaur, then calmly
walked up to it, climbing up onto its body and walking along its heaving side, surveying the damage. Then he began casting healing spells to close and repair the creature's wounds.

"Commander? What are you doing?" Thad asked. Had the commander gone nuts?

Jumping down off of the monster's body, Squall came around to the head, and patted the nose affectionately.

"We call this guy Big Daddy. Me and Irvine caught him about four years ago, and he's had it in for me ever since." Squall explained. Checking the animal's injuries again, Squall cast one more cure spell, then gestured for the cadet to follow him as he made his way toward the training center's exit.

Thad looked around nervously as they did, not sure what would jump out and attack them next and puzzled at Squall's apparent unconcern. He'd been quiet and cautious going in, but coming out, it was like he didn't know that there were monsters lurking that could attack at any moment…

"Relax. My GF's repelling the monsters. We won't be attacked now." Squall explained as he casually strolled toward the exit, pausing to examine a tropical flower with interest. He wondered idly what kind of flower it was, and if Rinoa would like one to add to the collection in the bathroom. He'd have to look it up. Either that or ask the landscaper that maintained the training center.

"So…you healed the T-rexaur because you caught him?" Thad asked, puzzled.

"Partly, yeah. He's the biggest one we've got, and it's a real pain in the ass to trap and transport more rexaurs in. Plus, I kind of like the big galoot." Squall answered with a half-smile.

The cadet shook his head. Squall liked the monster?

Puzzled, he asked, "Why? It's just a T-rex. There's dozens of them around."

"True. But he's a lot of fun to fight, and it seems kind of wasteful to just kill him." Squall answered with a shrug. The intense fight had left him tired, sweaty, liberally spattered with the T-rexaur's blood, and very mellow. It had definitely worked the edge off of his temper that was for sure.

Thad looked thoughtful as they continued on and exited the training center. Commander Leonhart was definitely not what he'd expected. Quiet, yes. Reserved, definitely, but actually more approachable than he'd thought. Seeing him in action however…. That was awesome. The cadet couldn't help but think that his coolness factor among his year-mates just went up several notches because of his impromptu training center session with the commander himself.

Voicing his thoughts, the cadet said, "You're not what I expected."

Eyebrows raised, Squall glanced over at the boy and asked, "What did you expect?"

Thad shrugged, "I don't know, really. I mean, I've heard of you, and how…I don't know…unfriendly? You can be…I guess I just didn't expect you to heal a monster after nearly killing it."

Squall shrugged, "I'm more complex…" He began, to be interrupted by Quistis' voice completing the sentence, "Than people think." Squall folded his arms over his chest and waited for her, expression unreadable.

She approached from the direction of the lift, smiling, "Cid told me you'd gone off to pummel some unfortunate beast. Have fun?"
Squall frowned, and said in mock severity, "You know, only my wife is allowed to finish my sentences. Anyone else that attempts it is subject to disciplinary action."

Thad stared at the two of them, eyes huge. He wasn't serious, was he? He had to be. Commander Leonhart never joked. At least, not that Thad had ever heard.

Quistis simply laughed, "I'll take that as a 'yes'. I see you found my errant cadet Millett."

"He found me. Cadet Millett is officially this year's Trabian Cannonball." Squall said with a half-smile. Thad ducked his head and laughed, cheeks pink.

Quistis laughed even harder at this, "Really? Wow. You made it all the way to November this year Squall. I think it's a new record."

Smiling down at the cadet, Quistis said, "I take it he dragged you into the training center with him as a reward."

Thad nodded, "Yeah, he did."

"So? What do you think?" Quistis asked him.

"I think it was way cool to have Commander Leonhart as my partner in the training center. And I learned a lot today." Thad said enthusiastically.

"What did you learn?" Quistis asked him, curiously. Squall too was curious about what the cadet may have learned or observed while in the training center. Particularly because he hadn't been trying to teach the boy anything, really.

"Well, I learned that I need to walk softly in the training center so I won't make a lot of noise. I learned how to work with a partner and use my training. I also learned that Commander Leonhart has a soft spot for T-rexaur." Thad said, smiling.

"That's just between us, mind you." Squall said, gesturing from himself to the cadet and back. The cadet nodded his agreement, grinning.

Turning back to Quistis, Squall asked, "So, I assume there was a reason you came looking for me?"

Quistis snorted, "Mainly to make sure you came out of the training center in one piece; but also because I have several urgent messages from Zell, Seifer, Nida and Laguna, in that order. Which ones do you want first?"

Squall sighed, and indicating his disheveled state, asked, "Do I have time to take a quick shower first?"

Wrinkling her nose, Quistis said, "I think you'd better make the time."

Looking over at the cadet, Squall indicated Quistis and said, "You see? This is how I'm respected here."

Cadet Millett laughed in surprise, then stopped, staring. Did the commander just make a joke? When Squall winked at him and strolled off, the cadet's jaw dropped.

"Well, it's nice to see him in a better mood for a change." Quistis commented.

The cadet, still wide-eyed, asked her, "Did he just...make a joke?"
Quistis laughed slightly, and answered, "He did. Twice, actually."

"Really? When was the first time?" Thad asked her as they started walking toward the main hallway.

"That crack about me being subject to disciplinary action for finishing his sentence? He was kidding." Quistis said.

"Really? He looked serious to me," the cadet said.

"Of course he did. That's how he is. But if you pay attention, you'll see his sense of humor sneak out on occasion. And yes, believe it or not, he does have one." Quistis said.

Then she asked Thad, "So, Cadet Millett, what else did you learn?"

"I learned to watch, listen and pay attention." Thad said, recalling Squall's quiet admonition.

Quistis nodded, "If you can learn that, you can learn anything."


Words to live by.
Squall hung up the phone and picked up the next message that Quistis had left for him. Zell seemed to be doing okay with the sandbag and board-up detail. Nida informed Squall that they needed new filters for the desalination tanks, and Seifer told him that the ferries were running steadily, transporting people to Dollet.

The fishermen on the other hand were working overtime, pulling in massive catches, brought on by the impending storm. Seifer assured him however that they would move to the northern coast as soon as the winds reached a dangerous level. Squall hoped so, the last thing he wanted to see was a fishing boat rammed through the front window of the little curio shop across the wharf. Or through Ma Dincht's house.

Picking up the phone again, Squall called Zell back, getting an update on the sandbags (more than enough) and the boarding up of the homes and businesses (all but done), and sent him off to get replacement filters for the desalination tanks in the belly of Garden.

Finishing up that call, Squall finally made it to the final message on his list: Laguna's.

It was always a little frustrating, navigating the phone system of Esthar's Government office. Squall did have a direct number to Laguna's cell phone, but didn't have the number handy right at the moment.

At length, Laguna's voice sounded from the other end of the line.

"Squall? Hey son, how's it goin'?"

"Busy. You called me?" Squall replied.

"Yeah. I checked a few things out like you suggested, and so far, we still have nothing. As far as anyone can tell, Odine's hard at work on his research projects. No unusual expenditures that we've been able to detect, no unexplained activities, nothing, really." Laguna reported.

Squall pursed his lips, thinking, then asked, "How about his private holdings?"

Laguna paused, then said, "We've been mostly concentrating on his research funding…"

"He's not stupid. He knows you keep a tight rein on those purse strings." Squall stated, then asked, "Does he own all the patents to his inventions?"

Slowly, Laguna answered, "Yes. He does."

"And a lot of his inventions are being sold commercially." Squall observed.

"I never even thought of that. That means that Dr. Odine's…." Laguna began, and Squall finished the sentence.

"Potentially worth millions. If he wants to start a private project, he's got more than enough financial resources to do it without subjecting himself to government oversight." Squall said grimly.

"Squall, I'm sorry son. We've been going about this all wrong…" Laguna said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure he's got things set up so that its not immediately obvious that he's
the beneficiary of all of those patents. Do you have a forensic accountant?" Squall asked.

"Actually, yes, we do." Laguna answered.

"Follow the money." Squall said.

Later that evening, Squall landed the Ragnarok outside of Galbadia Garden. Rinoa again was waiting for him with Irvine and Selphie, and Squall was quietly thankful for their support.

After the frenetic pace that Squall had worked at the entire day, including the stress-relieving session in the training center, he found his energy at very low ebb. Rinoa must have relayed his fatigue to Irvine and Selphie, for other than greeting him warmly, they didn't press for anything more as he collected Rinoa and Angelo and they headed home.

He'd worried about Rinoa bringing Angelo to Galbadia Garden, but as it turned out, he needn't have. Selphie was more than willing to install Angelo in her and Irvine's room while Rinoa was working.

So the three of them walked in silence toward Squall's car, Squall noting with some irony the increased security in the parking garage.

"Rough day?" Rinoa finally asked him, gently rubbing her hand up his back.

"Yeah. But I'm off tomorrow, like I promised. So it was worth working my ass off today. Hopefully the weather will cooperate." Squall sent with a sigh.

Rinoa hoped so as well. Despite Squall's promise to her, if the hurricane looked like it would land in Balamb tomorrow, he would have no choice but to get over there as soon as possible. A fact that she could tell he was steadfastly avoiding thinking about.

Despite, or perhaps because of the roundabout route they took home, they arrived without incident, if rather later than either would have liked. By that time, Squall was so tired that even food didn't interest him, a fact that worried Rinoa.

"Did you eat lunch today?" Rinoa asked as they walked into their home, doffed their coats and in Rinoa's case, dropped her handbag on the floor next to the couch.

Plopping down gracelessly onto the couch, Squall leaned his head against the backrest and closed his eyes, answering vaguely, "I think I grabbed a sandwich on the run at some point."

Sitting down next to him, Rinoa snuggled close for a moment, wrapping her arms around him, before saying, "Well, why don't I get us some dinner? I'm sure your appetite will return after you've rested a little bit."

Squall opened his eyes and studied her, torn. He knew she worked hard too, easily as hard as he, and she had the added burden of their babies to carry about. He could feel her fatigue, her aching back and sore feet, and sighed.

"No Rin, I'll do it..." he said, gathering his energy to stand and try and figure out what to fix. Rinoa's small hand firmly pressed into the center of his chest, effectively keeping him pinned to the couch.

Leaning into him, she brushed her lips against his, giving him a soft kiss, before saying, "You're so sweet. I love you. But it's my turn. Why don't you relax for a change?"
"You're sure?" Squall asked. Rinoa nodded, kissing him again and caressing his cheek before getting up.

Squall silently sent his gratitude, layered with an undercurrent of discomfort at being the one to rest while Rinoa worked on dinner. Her response, equally silent, reassured him that she'd sensed how tired he was and wanted him to rest for a change…. For later.

"Well, when you put it that way… Your wish is my command, my Lady Sorceress." Squall sent, smiling slightly, eyes still closed and half asleep.

Rinoa shuddered, "Don't even think that in jest!"

"Why?" Squall frowned, puzzled at her reaction. Opening his eyes, he looked over at her, worried.

Rinoa wrapped her arms around herself, saying softly, "Because I don't want to be like them; those other sorceresses. I don't want to rule the world. I don't want my knight to be my slave. I don't want that. I just want to be me, and I want you to be you."

Rinoa gasped, startled as Squall's arms came around her from behind. He always could move as silently as a cat, even as tired as he currently was. He hugged her close against him, face in her hair.

"I am. You are. I'm no more your slave than you are mine." Squall whispered into her hair, kissing it, then moving it aside to plant a soft kiss on the side of Rinoa's neck.

Then he said softly, "I don't want to rule the world either. Can you imagine the paperwork that would cause?" Rinoa burst out laughing at the image that gave her, with Squall joining her when she sent him her vision of him buried to the ears in stacks of paper.

"So I guess that means world domination is not on the To-Do list any time soon." Rinoa said, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes.

Squall shook his head, still chuckling, "No. It's not."

Turning to face him, she smiled. With his turquoise eyes sparkling and a smile on his face, he looked absolutely beautiful. It was an expression not often seen, even now. Though he was more open than he had been, to all but his closest friends, Squall was still guarded. She felt privileged that he dropped all of his barriers for her, hiding nothing.

"You have such a beautiful smile." She said.

"So do you," he replied, tightening his arms around her briefly before stepping back, and offering, "how about I help with dinner?"

"Okay," Rinoa said, giving him her own smile.

It was oddly relaxing to spend time together doing something as mundane as preparing a meal, Squall reflected later. Recalling Selphie's comments about male avoidance of dishwashing duties, he made it a point to start the dishes himself, giving Rinoa an impish grin as he did. She laughed as she caught his memory of the previous night, and volunteered to rinse and dry.

By the time the dishes were finished though, both of them were yawning.

"Seems awfully early to be thinking about going to bed, but honestly, that's the only thing I really want to do right now." Rinoa said, yawning.
Squall sighed, "You know what? I feel the same." Putting his arm around her, Squall walked with her toward the bedroom, turning out the lights in the kitchen, dining room and living room along the way. Rinoa found that amusing, recalling her father doing exactly the same thing when she was younger. Maybe it was a guy thing.

"No Rinoa, it's a 'good God, look at this electric bill!' thing." Squall sent, prompting Rinoa to giggle.

"Oh, right. Forgot about that part." She responded, smiling.

Squall snorted as they entered the bedroom, starting to unbutton his shirt while Rinoa disappeared into the bathroom. Shrugging it off, he grimaced at the tightness in his shoulders and back, thinking he might have been just a tad overzealous in the training center earlier. He wasn't quite sore, yet, but he knew he would be in the morning.

Yawning, he stretched, trying to loosen up the kinks a little bit, knowing that he'd just get stiffer as he slept.

At length, Rinoa emerged from the bathroom and crossed over to the dresser, opening one of the drawers and poking around in it. Crossing over to her, Squall gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and went into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Once he finished with what he needed to do, Squall turned off the bathroom light and leaned against the doorway, watching as Rinoa turned down the bed, preparing to get in.

She was wearing a white flannel nightgown with little pink and blue flowers on it that buttoned up to the neck at the bodice. It looked like something that someone's grandmother might wear. Rinoa looked adorable in it, and Squall couldn't help smiling at the sight.

Catching his amusement, Rinoa looked up and smiled, "You like my oh-so-sexy granny nightie?"

Only just managing not to laugh, Squall said, "that's the sexiest damn thing I've ever seen."

"Be serious. I wore this because it's going to get cold tonight." Rinoa said, climbing into bed.

Taking off his pants, Squall tossed them into the hamper and turned out the light, crossing over to the bed and joining Rinoa.

"I see I'm not doing my job adequately if you need to resort to a granny gown to keep warm." Squall sighed, prompting Rinoa to laugh softly and snuggle into his arms.

"You do fine." Rinoa said, sighing. Squall responded by tightening his embrace and nuzzling her neck, planting soft kisses under her ear.

He really did intend to just go to sleep, because he was in fact very tired, as was Rinoa. But the feel of her in his arms, the warmth of her body against his, the scent of her hair, the taste of her skin… even the sight of her in that ridiculously cute nightgown…made desire slam into him with the force of a blow. Suddenly, he wanted her with a craving ache.

Now, it was just a matter of convincing Rinoa…

"Do you think I CAN be convinced?" She sent, amusement coloring her response.

"I'll certainly give it my best try..." Squall responded, letting her feel his interest. She was easily as tired as he, if not more so, but Squall's touches and kisses did their work and she began to warm to
his advances.

Turning to face him, her lips found his and they lost themselves, kissing in the dark. Her desire built to meet his as they teased and tasted each other, lips and tongues fueling the fire.

Squall's fingers found their way to the bodice of Rinoa's nightgown, unbuttoning it as far as it would go, then skimming his lips over the bared skin, making Rinoa gasp. It didn't unbutton far enough however to allow Squall access to much more than Rinoa's neck and cleavage, a fact which frustrated him.

Rinoa on the other hand, had the full expanse of Squall's chest bared to her hands, and they roamed it freely. She loved the feel of his warm, smooth skin, and explored every inch that she could reach. It felt more intimate, learning the contours of his body by touch in the absence of light.

She smiled to herself as she sensed his frustration at being unable to do a similar exploration due to the hampering folds of her nightgown, and she obligingly paused to pull it off over her head. Then she drew in a long breath as his warm hands immediately began caressing her as she had done him. Then his lips replaced his hands and she shivered in delight.

The shiver became a soft moan as his lips and tongue kissed and teased at her nipples, skimmed over her pregnant belly and ended up at her navel. Then Squall pushed the bedcovers aside and ventured lower, first stroking intimately with his fingers, then teasing and tormenting her with his tongue. Rinoa's moans became a gasping cry as Squall sucked at her most sensitive of places, prompting her to arch her back and clutch convulsively at the bed sheets.

Feeling her response surging into him through their connection, Squall took a deep breath and let it wash over him, letting the heady draft of pleasure intoxicate him. He drank it in and mingled it with his as yet unreleased passion, and held it prisoner as he waited for Rinoa's tremors to calm.

He shifted briefly to remove his shorts, and then they both came together, finding a position that suited them both. Loving her in the darkness, with the sensations they both felt flowing between them, took on a dreamlike quality. The ebb and surge of their bodies, echoing the give and take of their minds, transported them to a place that only they could reach.

They started slow, but it wasn't long before they both hungered for more. Rinoa's gasps and moans urging Squall to let go, loose the grip he had on his passion. Acceding to her unspoken desire, he did, and it washed over them both. They rode the tide together, Rinoa's cries an increasing crescendo as they reached the peak together, and fell shuddering and gasping in passion's wake.

The intensity of their dual orgasm left Squall fighting for breath, moaning right along with Rinoa in the aftermath as the sensations resonated between them. Kissing the back of her neck softly, he wrapped his arms around her, caressing her soft skin slowly.

Rinoa shifted, prompting Squall to reluctantly withdraw from her warmth. Turning to face him, she caressed his face, running her hands through his hair. He smiled, seeing her eyes glowing golden, and kissed her. As he did, he trailed his hand down her back to rest against the side of her belly, feeling one of the babies shift slightly.

Pulling back, he whispered, "Are you warm enough now?"

Rinoa laughed softly, "Yes. But I think we'd better get the blankets back on the bed or we won't stay that way." Squall's soft laugh echoed hers and he turned away for a moment to rearrange the bedding until they were both snuggled back under their blankets and sheet.
"I love you Squall." Rinoa sent before sleep claimed her.

"I love you too." He responded, despite the fact that she had quickly fallen asleep and likely didn't hear him. He knew she'd feel it however, and held her close as her soft, even breaths began to soothe him into sleep as well.

As he slept, his wife safely held in his arms, he had an odd dream. Rinoa sat upon an ornate throne, gazing regally down upon a throng of people who gazed back in both awe and fear. Squall stood by her side, scanning that same throng for any threat, guarding his sorceress and Queen. But the clothes were wrong. Everyone looked as though they'd come from a historical reenactment, because they were wearing ornate clothing and armor that dated back to a time that had faded into history more than a thousand years ago. And the weapon that hung at Squall's hip was not a gunblade but a broadsword.

And yet…. resting upon his breast, hanging from an ornate chain, was the same pendant that he wore now. He frowned slightly in his sleep, puzzled, and the dream shifted.

He was fighting, against impossible odds. He had been ambushed. While he fought desperately, bravely, killing several of his opponents, he was eventually overwhelmed by the superior numbers and fell. The last thing he felt was his killer's sword, piercing his heart. The last thing he heard was his sorceress wife's scream, as her heart was stilled along with his own.

Squall jerked awake, gasping. He rolled onto his back, hand pressed to his heaving chest above his heart, feeling it thumping heavily. He took several deep breaths, feeling the air filling his lungs and slowly letting it out again, forcing his racing heart to calm. His griever pendant rested in its accustomed place on his chest, its comforting weight anchoring him to reality, pulling him away from the oddness of his dream. Next to him, Rinoa slept peacefully, shifting to cuddle close to him.

He slipped his arm around her, encouraging her to rest her head upon his shoulder, wrap her arm around him and rest her leg over his own. He lay awake; Rinoa wrapped around his body and heart, and pondered the dream and what it may have meant. He stroked his hand over Rinoa's hair, and then kissed it lightly. Unconsciously, his hand strayed back to his chest, where he'd felt the sword stab him… and found the bullet scar where he'd been shot.

It had felt so real, like he'd actually been there. He could still feel the cold steel slicing through his chest. It was almost like what Ellone had done with Laguna; but the difference was, this was far back into the mists of time. Much farther than Ellone could have managed. Besides, he was familiar with her touch now; he'd have known it was she. No, it was just a dream. An unusually vivid, detailed, and disturbing dream.

Squall's eyelids began feeling heavy, the adrenaline that had flooded his system fading and leaving behind it the need for sleep. His tiring mind could no longer analyze his dream, and he decided to take it as a warning, vowing to remain on his guard. He concentrated on Rinoa's regular breaths, and soon his breathing fell into a sympathetic rhythm with hers and sleep claimed him once again. This time, his sleep was deep, and dreamless.

The next morning, Squall got up at his usual time to go out on his run. After he'd dressed in his sweats and strapped on his gunblade, he started for the door, Angelo at his heels.

Before he opened the door however, he stopped, frowning down at the dog. While he enjoyed Angelo's company while he ran, and he knew the dog enjoyed the outings too, he thought that this time, Angelo should remain home to guard his mistress.
"Angelo." Squall said softly. The dog perked up its ears, alert to his command. Squall was honestly impressed with Rinoa's dog-training skills. Not even the Galbadian army had dogs as well trained as Angelo was.

"Guard." Squall ordered, gesturing toward the bedroom. Angelo's ears drooped, and Squall swore he heard the dog sigh in disappointment before he reluctantly started toward the bedroom. Slowly.

Pausing, the dog looked back at Squall, who ordered shortly, "Go. Guard Rinoa." Ears flat, the dog trotted toward the bedroom.

Disarming the alarm system, Squall opened the door and left for his run, arming the system behind him.

Loping along his usual route, pausing to stretch and limber up from the previous day's exertions, Squall found nothing to concern him this time. Apparently, whoever it was that was watching them had either found a vantage that Squall hadn't detected yet, or had decided on a different strategy.

Whichever it was, Squall found he was oddly disappointed that no one had attempted an ambush while he ran. Perhaps they had learned that he'd taken to bringing his gunblade with him. If fate had decided to grant him one day of peace with Rinoa, he wouldn't complain. Instead, he'd enjoy it as much as he could.

Squall was realistic enough to know that fate was fickle, so he'd take what he could while he could, and treasure it up against...he stopped that line of thought. He'd stay cautious, and alert, and hopefully, all would turn out well today.

Returning home, he disarmed the alarm and was greeted by Angelo, who was alertly watching the door. Scratching his ears, Squall fed him and let him out to run a little in the back yard. Sniffing around the yard, Angelo located his favorite squeaky toy and picked it up, bringing it to Squall and dropping it at his feet, watching him expectantly.

Smiling at the dog, Squall picked up the toy and squeaked it, prompting Angelo to wag his stubby tail madly and dance excitedly. At his sharp, demanding bark, Squall tossed the toy to the far end of the yard. Angelo immediately dashed after it, nearly catching it in mid-air. Picking it up, the dog tossed the toy around a bit before bringing it back to Squall and dropping it, waiting for him to throw it again.

They played like that for several minutes, until Angelo was panting happily and ready to go inside. When they did, Angelo went to his water dish, lapping up the water thirstily while Squall made coffee. As it was brewing, he went back to the bedroom to see if Rinoa had gotten up yet.

He smiled at seeing her still sleeping and shrugged out of his harness, laying the gunblade and scabbard aside before sitting upon the bed next to her.

Gently moving her hair away from her face, Squall leaned in and kissed her cheek softly, whispering, "Good morning, sleepyhead. How'd you sleep?"

Rinoa stirred, stretching and yawning before she murmured, "Pretty well, actually." Sneaking a hand out from under the blankets, she took Squall's hand, lacing her fingers through his.

"How was your run?" She asked him.

"Uneventful." Squall answered. Squeezing her hand gently, he stood, saying, "I'm going to take a shower. You're welcome to join me if you want to." Rinoa smiled and yawned, closing her eyes again, snuggling back into the pillow.
"Not just yet." She sighed, already relaxing back into sleep. Squall laughed softly and began undressing; smiling as he saw Rinoa open her eyes briefly and send him her appreciation of the view.

Once the shower was going and at the desired temperature, Squall ducked under the spray and sighed; the morning was cold, and even in his sweats, he'd felt chilled. It took a few minutes however before the hot water and steam finally drove off the chill. Of course, remembering the dream he'd had, Squall couldn't be certain that the chill he felt had come from the weather outside.

He'd finished his shower and was shaving, towel around his hips, when Rinoa finally entered the bathroom, yawning. She watched him shave for a moment, fascinated.

"Finally decide to get up?" He sent, amused at her interest. He supposed the opposite could be true for him, if he'd wandered into the bathroom to see Rinoa shaving her legs.

A mental snort from her showed Rinoa's opinion of Squall's blatantly sensual mental image, and she sent, "I hate to disappoint you, but I don't look nearly as sexy shaving as you do. Especially now. It's getting harder and harder to do that these days. I'm having a hard time even SEEING my legs, much less SHAVING them." Rinoa's frustration at how difficult and uncomfortable it was becoming came through plainly. Squall sighed and sent his sympathy in response.

He finished shaving and splashed water on his face, rinsing off, then dried his face before turning to Rinoa and kissing her. She closed her eyes and stroked his now smooth cheeks, giving herself up to the kiss.

Pulling back, she sighed, "I love being married to you…"

"You do? Why?" Squall asked curiously.

Grinning impishly at him, she seized his towel and jerked it off, saying, "Because I get to do this!"

"Oh yeah?" Squall said, stalking slowly toward her as she backed away playfully, unconcerned with his nakedness. Rinoa smiled, sending her appreciation of the sight as he caught her, took her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

"I love being married to you too." Squall said, between kisses, "Because I get to do this, and this, and this…" Each kiss was progressively hotter and more ardent, and while Rinoa was feeling his arousal, and responding with her own, she couldn't let things go any further.

Squall felt her regret and pulled back, gazing inquiringly into her eyes, trying to ignore the heaviness in his groin.

"I'm sorry," Rinoa whispered, stroking his cheek again, "But I can't right now…" She didn't elaborate, but then, she didn't have to. Squall understood her concern. With a doctor's appointment and its attendant indignities looming, her apprehension had diminished her interest in any intimacy. For the moment at least.

Resting his forehead against Rinoa's, Squall cradled her face between his hands and caressed her cheeks, sighing.

Glancing down at his semi-tumescent state, Rinoa winced, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to…"

"Sweetheart, all you have to do is look at me and I end up like this. I'll be fine, just give me a few minutes." Kissing her forehead gently, he retrieved his towel and wrapped it back around his hips.
"Why don't you go ahead and take your shower and I'll get breakfast?" He offered, heading toward the door.

"Alright." She smiled as he left.

Squall gazed around the small boutique just off the main drag in Deling City and felt completely out of place. Rinoa was happily wandering through the store examining the various items on display and asking his opinion on some of them. For most of them, he simply didn't know how to respond, feeling totally out of his depth. Rinoa fortunately seemed mostly satisfied with his noncommittal responses.

He was sure he looked as out of place as he felt. Most of the other shoppers were women, many displaying various stages of pregnancy. Squall was the lone male among them, tall and dark in his black overcoat, worn due to the decidedly icy conditions outside. Beneath the coat, concealed by its folds, was his gunblade. The sight of a lean, scarred and forbidding (but still very handsome) looking man shadowing the petite brunette who was engrossed in her shopping garnered more than a few double takes.

"Squall? Come look at this dress! Isn't it just precious?" Rinoa's voice directed his attention to what she held in her hands. It was a frilly, lacy little dress that looked like it belonged on a doll. It was absolutely beautiful, and completely impractical.

"It's... tiny." Squall said, taking it from Rinoa for a moment and laying it flat on his hands. It was only a little larger than one of his hands. He frowned. Were babies really that little?

"It's preemie sized. Newborn size is a little bigger. See?" Rinoa held another dress up. It was a little larger, but not by much.

"It's beautiful. But wouldn't it be ruined the first time the baby wore it? I understand they throw up a lot." Squall said, remembering what he'd learned about babies up to that point. Everything he'd read and heard about them gave him the idea that they'd be messy. Very, very messy.

"Hmmm..." Rinoa said, frowning as she examined the garment's tag. "It says its machine washable."

"I'm assuming you want this for Julia?" Squall asked, checking the price tag. Not terribly expensive, but more than one would expect to pay for an article of clothing that would likely only be worn for a short time.

"No Squall," Rinoa snorted, rolling her eyes, "I want to start our son out as a cross-dresser. Of course I want it for Julia."

"Okay." Squall said. It was cute. He wondered how his daughter would look in it. When she was finally born, that was. Rinoa continued her shopping, with Squall starting to take an interest in the process. When she picked up another dress, this one a lovely yellow color, Squall pointed out that they'd need something for Saber as well. Unfortunately, Squall didn't much care for what they had available for boys.

"Well, you can't dress him in leather Squall, that certainly is not machine washable." Rinoa said on a laugh.

"Of course not." Squall said, holding up one of the outfits and adding, "But I don't want him to look like a miniature accountant either. Don't you think this is kind of silly looking?"
Rinoa wrinkled her nose and nodded, "Yeah, it is, actually. Well, we'll just have to keep looking. Maybe we'll find something a little better."

"I doubt we'll find it here," Squall said, scanning the store again. Most of that they had on offer was of the overly precious, fussy variety; okay for girls, not so much for boys. Not Squall’s boy, at any rate.

They had an hour or so to kill before Rinoa's appointment and she had decided that she wanted to look around for "baby stuff" as she put it. After reading through an utterly mind-boggling array of books geared toward expectant parents, Squall knew that babies required an incredible amount of preparation.

And absolutely tons of "baby stuff"; multiply that by two, and it was easy to become overwhelmed by it all. Rinoa had already begun stockpiling diapers, wipes and various necessary supplies, though she was still weeks away from giving birth. They already had two carriers and a double stroller, but they had yet to set up a nursery.

That was a major source of concern for Rinoa, and confusion for Squall. Set one up in their rented house in Deling City and get one ready at Balamb Garden for when they moved back? Should they go with a pair of bassinets? Or should they just get one crib for both twins until they were big enough to require more space? Twin cradles? Dual changing tables?

Squall didn't even want to think about how much it all cost. Yes, he made good money, but some of the prices they charged for the furniture in particular bordered on ridiculous.

In the end, with the aid of a helpful salesgirl (there always seemed to be one of those about, Squall had noticed) they decided on two bassinets to start with. Squall was just about ready to pay for their purchases and arrange to pick up the bassinets when something caught his eye.

Picking it up and studying it, he couldn't hide a grin as he held it up and said, "Hey Rin, check this out."

Catching sight of it, Rinoa clapped her hand over her mouth and stifled a laugh. The item in question was a one-piece outfit meant for outdoor wear. In a sea of pastel pinks and blues, it stood out in stark black. Made of soft, plush material, it zipped up the middle and it included a hood that was trimmed in white faux fur, more than a little reminiscent of a certain jacket worn by a certain famous SeeD.

"Okay, we have to get that!" Rinoa laughed, taking it. Squall smiled, wondering how difficult it would be to add a SeeD emblem patch to the outfit. Then it would be perfect.

"It wouldn't be difficult at all. Bring the patch home and I'll stitch it on." Rinoa sent as they paid for their items. After asking the cashier if they'd hold their items until they returned from Rinoa's appointment, he escorted her from the store.

"Okay." Squall responded, thinking that he'd officially gone completely nuts to even consider it. Then again, if Rinoa wanted to dress Julia up in little frilly dresses, he could concoct a miniature SeeD uniform for Saber. Or SeeD-like, at any rate; why not?

But that suddenly reminded him that this was really going to happen, he really was going to have two babies to take care of, and far sooner then he felt at all ready for. He currently had the lives of several hundred cadets, SeeDs and citizens of Balamb in his hands, but what frightened him the most was being responsible for the two tiny lives that Rinoa was sheltering in her womb.
The results of Rinoa's check-up certainly didn't do much to calm his apprehension, though actually *seeing* both babies via ultrasound for the first time momentarily diverted him.

He watched in fascination as the image on the monitor screen suddenly changed from incomprehensible blobs of light and dark to a recognizable face.

"There's your son, Mr. Leonhart." The technician said, pointing to the screen.

"I see that." Squall said, attention riveted to the screen. Rinoa took his hand and he squeezed it gently, glancing down at her before returning his attention to the screen.

Then he frowned, asking, "Is it just me, or does his face look a little…squished?"

The technician laughed slightly, answering, "It is a little squished. Things are pretty crowded in there for the two of them. They're getting pretty big."

"Where's our daughter?" Rinoa frowned, trying to make sense out of what she was seeing. Squall too, squinted at the screen, looking for her.

The technician moved the wand over Rinoa's abdomen, searching, then manipulated the pointer on the screen, "there she is." Frowning slightly, the technician moved the wand a little more, causing the image to dissolve into random light and dark spots momentarily, before she moved it back to its original position.

Catching the technician's frown, Squall asked, "is there something wrong?"

The woman shook her head, answering, "with the babies? No. Everything looks like it's developing just like it should."

"But?" Squall prompted, sensing that she was leaving something out. Rinoa squeezed his hand, beginning to worry.

The technician hesitated, then answered, "I'd rather the doctor have a look first, see what he thinks. It may be nothing to worry about." Freezing the screen for a moment, the technician left briefly, returning with the doctor.

Frowning in concentration, the doctor moved the wand over Rinoa's stomach, directing the technician to freeze and print various, apparently random images. Moving the wand some more, he studied the screen intently before taking the printouts.

"Well," the doctor said, indicating the screen. "There's your boy. And he looks pretty good. Nothing wrong there." He moved aside and allowed the technician to reclaim the wand. Rinoa and Squall exchanged a look.

The screen shifted and the doctor said, "And, that looks like your daughter."

Squall nodded, feeling slightly frustrated and asked, "Okay. Now what are you *not* telling us?"

The doctor looked up and studied the sharp-eyed young man, and answered, "both babies are healthy and of good size. Your wife is likewise in pretty good shape for carrying double the burden of a normal pregnancy. If both babies were born anytime during the next few weeks, they'd have a very good chance of survival. All of their organs are fully developed, so from this point on they're just putting on weight, storing up body fat. Now, *here*…"

The doctor had the technician move the wand up Rinoa's midsection, and pointed at the screen.
"Here are your son's feet, right up under the ribcage."

The technician moved the wand over slightly and the doctor pointed out, "And here is your daughter's face, right next to your son's feet." Squall frowned; the blobs on the monitor beginning to make sense. Remembering one of the numerous books he'd read on the subject, he finally understood what he was seeing.

Slowly, he asked, "They should both have shifted their positions, right?"

The doctor nodded. The young man was quick. Then again, given his profession, being slow to think could be as deadly as being slow to act.

"By this point in the pregnancy, both babies should have turned to face the proper position in preparation for delivery. Now, your daughter may still move, there's still time. But she's running out of room. If she doesn't shift soon, she may not be able to." The doctor told them.

Rinoa swallowed, then asked, "So, what do we do then?"

Scratching at his silver-threaded hair, the doctor answered, "Well, for right now, since I think we're done here, we'll get that goop wiped off of your stomach. Then if you and your husband would mind consulting with me in my office, we can go over your options based on where you are right now and how we want to proceed." Picking up the printouts and a manila folder that contained all of Rinoa's information, the doctor left them. The technician helpfully wiped away the gel, then showed Rinoa where the bathroom was when she expressed an urgent need to use it.

Pointing toward the doctor's office, the technician told Squall, "Dr. Teyvan's office is the second door on the left." Squall nodded and started down the hallway.

Rinoa caught up with him as he reached the office and walked blithely through the open doorway. Squall followed after her, to discover the office was empty. Rinoa sat down in one of the chairs in front of a large wooden desk and after gazing around the room for a moment; Squall took the seat next to her and took her hand. He'd met the doctor a couple of times, though he hadn't been able to make it to all of Rinoa's appointments, and felt comfortable that the man knew what he was doing. More importantly, Rinoa liked him and had no complaints about the doctor or his practice.

The doctor joined them after just a few minutes, seating himself behind the desk and laying Rinoa's folder aside. He smiled reassuringly at the two of them, brown eyes twinkling.

"Okay. So, here's the rundown." The doctor began, looking though Rinoa's paperwork. "You are currently at about thirty-two weeks, give or take. Maybe a little more, the babies are certainly well developed. Labwork comes back pretty good, glucose tolerance is fine; no protein in the urine, and blood pressure is okay. A little bit higher than your baseline but nothing to be overly concerned about, though we'll certainly keep an eye on it."

Picking up the ultrasound printouts, he continued, "As far as the positioning of your babies goes, we have several choices: we can wait week and check to see if your daughter has moved into the correct position for delivery. We can try and engage a nurse-midwife to attempt to turn the baby, though as tight as things are getting in there, that might be kind of tough to do, and it can be tricky… it could potentially make things worse. I know you expressed a desire early on Mrs. Leonhart for a conventional delivery if at all possible, but in light of this current situation, that may no longer be an option for you."

Putting the films down he gazed at them earnestly and said, "If your daughter's position has not changed by your next appointment, then I'm afraid we won't have any other choice but to go with a..."
cesarean delivery. That is the safest course for everyone involved at this point."

Rinoa sighed, disappointed. She hadn't wanted a surgical delivery, in spite of the fact that she could essentially schedule when she wanted to have the babies instead of letting them decide.

"So, how do we do this? Do we just pick a day to have them and you schedule the surgery, or what?" Rinoa asked, feeling somehow like she was either cheating or being cheated of some kind of rite of passage.

"Well, essentially, yes. Obviously, we'll want to pick a date as close to your projected due date as possible so as to give the babies as much time to grow and get strong as we can. But with twins, the bigger they get, the tougher it'll get for you, and the risks will increase correspondingly. I would suggest from this point on Rinoa, that you try and cut down your hours at work a little and get a bit more rest. And we'll be starting weekly visits to keep a close eye on things. If it looks like either you or the babies are showing any signs of distress, we'll do the surgery immediately." The doctor answered her.

Squall sat silently, listening to the doctor, feeling Rinoa's disappointment and fear mount right along with his own worry. He was almost relieved however that a cesarean would be necessary, for that meant that there would be more control over the risk associated with childbirth. He hoped anyway.

Still, it wouldn't eliminate all of the risks…

"Doctor," Squall asked, "what do we need to watch for?"

"Well, the biggest thing to watch out for, particularly with twins, is preeclampsia. So if Rinoa experiences any dizziness or blurred vision, or if her blood pressure spikes significantly, call me immediately. Preterm labor is also a risk, so if you feel any contractions at all Rinoa, let me know. I don't care if they're sporadic or regular. While the babies can be born now, and they'll survive, its far better for them if they can stay in the womb as long as possible." The doctor answered. Squall nodded, and Rinoa squeezed his hand.

"Do you have any other questions or concerns to bring up?" The doctor asked.

When both Squall and Rinoa responded negatively, he said, "Well then, I'll see you next week Rinoa. Go ahead and set up the appointment with my office manager."

Rinoa and Squall both got up, with Rinoa leaving to make her appointment. Squall started to follow her when the doctor stopped him.

"Commander. A moment, please." The doctor requested, studying Squall closely.

"Yes?" Squall paused, wondering what he wanted.

"I understand you're SeeD, and what that entails as far as your training goes, but I and my other patients would appreciate it if you would leave your weapon at home, should you choose to accompany your wife to any future appointments." The doctor stated, wondering why the young man felt it necessary to bring his gunblade with him. It hadn't been obvious; indeed, the only way the doctor had been aware of it at all was because he'd seen Squall without it once before, and had noticed the difference in the way he moved. That, and the fact that despite being indoors, the young commander had neither removed nor even unbuttoned his long, heavy overcoat.

The doctor frowned when Squall responded, "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't do that."
"Why?" The doctor asked, wondering at Squall's guarded expression. His entire attitude had been watchful and alert, more bodyguard than loving husband. Something had given the young man a reason to behave in such a way.

Squall folded his arms across his chest, wondering how much he should tell the doctor. In the context that Rinoa's safety and well-being was at stake, as well as her health, it could be argued that her doctor should be notified of any physical risks to her. If nothing else, it would make him aware of a potential source of stress for her. But he was a doctor, and his concern would be with her health. Squall's job was to guard and protect her, so that nothing happened to her to make her doctor's job more difficult.

Finally, Squall answered, "I have reason to believe Rinoa's in danger. So, yes, I'm armed. And I will remain so until I can find and neutralize the threat to her."

"I…see. Your wife is aware of this?" The doctor asked.

Squall nodded, answering, "She's aware, and we're taking as many precautions as possible. I have instructed her not to fight if someone should attempt to abduct her so as not to give them a reason or excuse to hurt her."

The doctor nodded back, saying, "Good. Well, it looks like you have things well in hand, Commander. Thank you for telling me, I'll advise my staff as well. A threat to Rinoa can be an indirect threat to my patients and employees by extension. We will review our security procedures here. It won't hurt and may even help."

"It might at that." Squall acknowledged, and then glanced toward the receptionist's desk. Rinoa had set her next appointment and was chatting with the girl at the desk, waiting for him.

"Well then, see you next week Commander?" The doctor asked. Squall nodded.

"Enjoy the rest of the day then. Relax as much as you can. Rinoa too." the doctor advised.

"Thank you." Squall replied, then left.

They returned home shortly afterward, having stopped briefly at the store they'd been in earlier to pick up their purchases. Rinoa was feeling decidedly tired, and the only thing currently on her mind was a nap. Having been told by the doctor that this excessive fatigue that she was feeling was actually normal, Squall had no problem with Rinoa going directly to bed, leaving him to deal with the results of their shopping trip.

She was sound asleep in moments, and did not stir even when Squall brought both bassinets into the bedroom and set them up. He studied them both, frowning, wondering if he should put them aside until the babies were born or leave them where they were.

The clothing and other items that they'd purchased he left in the bags and put in the closet along with the boxes of diapers that Rinoa had been stocking up on. Before he closed the door however, he reached into one of the bags and pulled out the outfit they'd gotten for Saber.

It was newborn sized, but still very tiny. From what the doctor had told him, Squall thought that both babies, depending upon when they were born, would be even smaller than that. Twins tended to be born early, and were thus smaller than normal as a result.

Taking the item with him, he sat down on the bed next to Rinoa and crooked his arm experimentally, laying the garment along his forearm. The fur-trimmed hood touched the crook of
his elbow, while the footed end didn't even reach his wrist. So tiny, he thought, stroking his hand gently along its length, feeling the softness of the fabric. It was thick and plush, designed to keep its wearer warm.

He tried to picture his son wearing it, with the patch affixed to the breast, and couldn't stop a smile. Yes, newborn babies were tiny and fragile. And yes, the prospect of having their lives entirely in his hands was terrifying. He knew already that Rinoa would need him as never before; it would be incredibly unfair to expect her to take care of both of their babies by herself. Of course, that wasn't something that Squall would even consider anyway.

So, yes, he would learn to warm bottles and change diapers. He would deal with the mess, the chaos, the lack of sleep. He knew that was coming, and he knew that despite studying up on the subject extensively, he'd feel frightened and out of his depth. Hell, he already did and the babies hadn't even been born yet. But he wasn't in it alone, and neither was Rinoa.

He couldn't wait to see his children.
Dawn broke over Balamb harbor in an angry red stain upon the sky, the sun dueling with the threatening purple clouds that partially obscured it. They rode upon the back of the wind that had risen with the sun, whipping up spray into the face of the man who stood upon the heaving deck his houseboat.

Seifer frowned at the blood-red dawn, watching as the clouds built and the seas grew heavier by the minute. The storm was coming, and coming fast. He hoped everyone in Balamb was ready because by evening, they’d be in the grip of a category five hurricane. The report he’d gotten over the radio had turned his blood to ice. Even sheltered by the Guarg Mountains, he and everyone else there were in for a rough night.

Raijin came out to the deck from the cabin of the boat, joining Seifer.

"Storm's comin', ya know?" He commented.

Seifer snorted, "I know. Run 'em up, Raijin." Raijin nodded silently and disappeared into the cabin briefly, then returned with a pair of flags that he ran up the pole atop the cabin. The wind caught the flags and spread them out, displaying the black square in the center of a red field on each flag. Hurricane warning.

"Okay, let's round 'em up and move 'em out." Seifer said. Raijin nodded and they headed back into the cabin where Fujin currently had charge of the wheel.

Fujin steered them around the harbor while Seifer radioed all of the fishermen still at anchor, advising them to move out of the path of the coming storm. Some of them had already begun to do so, their captains knowing when a bad blow was coming better than the satellite scans did. The ferries would not be running this day; the seas were already too rough. Anyone that still wanted out of Balamb would either have to take the train before it was halted, or head to Garden.

Anyone who failed to do either had no other choice but to pray.

Before he and his crew steered their own boat toward what they hoped was a sheltered anchorage, Seifer pulled his cell phone out of a pocket of his rain slicker and called Balamb Garden.

"Hey Quistis, it's me. Is he in yet?" Seifer asked when she answered the phone.
"No, not yet, but he just checked in, so he'll be here shortly." Quistis said.

"Okay. Tell him that I've notified the fishermen and we're heading out. The ferries are officially shut. It's getting too rough out here for them already, so if anyone still needs to get out of Balamb, they either have to take the train before the service is suspended or head to Garden." Seifer reported.

"Thanks Seifer, I'll let him know. Call in when you're on the north side and give us an update." Quistis instructed.

"Will do." Seifer replied and cut the connection.

Pocketing his phone, Seifer gave Fujin a brief kiss on the cheek and told her, "Okay honey, get us outta here." Fujin nodded and turned the wheel. The boat slowly changed direction, bucking harder atop the heavy seas as they exited the harbor.

They'd battened down as well as they could, but while the houseboat was a sturdy one, Seifer worried that it wasn't up to the rigors of a storm-tossed sea. It wasn't precisely an ocean-going vessel. And even sheltered on the lee side of the northern mountains, the sheer power of the approaching storm might still make the coming hours very, very challenging.

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"Rin? Honey, are you packed? We gotta go, and we gotta go now." Squall said, throwing his clothes on after a quick shower. He'd passed on his run that morning after checking the news and seeing the weather report. The storm had suddenly picked up speed and was now right on Balamb's doorstep. It would make landfall that evening as a full-blown, category five hurricane. The winds were already gusting to an alarming degree, and if Squall wanted to land the Ragnarok safely, he had to get there as soon as possible.

"Almost done." Rinoa said, quickly checking over the contents of her overnight bag and adding a few more items.

"How long do you think you'll be stuck there?" She asked.

"I don't know. It could be several days before I can get home." Squall answered, buckling on his gunblade.

"I wish I had time for a shower," Rinoa frowned, sighing. Squall had rousted her out of bed after he'd seen the news and then ducked into the shower, leaving her to pack and get dressed. He'd finished and was dressed in less time than Rinoa had thought was even possible. She wished she could move that fast, but her current condition made that rather difficult for her.

"I know sweetie, and I'm sorry. I'm sure Selphie and Irvine would be willing to let you use theirs. I'll give 'em a call before we leave so they know you're coming." Squall said, grabbing his overcoat.

He made the call while Rinoa ran a brush through her hair and wondered what they'd do about breakfast. As urgently as Squall needed to leave, she thought that he might simply forget about it. All right for him perhaps, but not for her. She had to eat.

As it turned out, Squall had been thinking about that and had put together a quick breakfast for the both of them. Mostly just fruit and toast, but it was good enough for Rinoa.

After they'd finished eating, Squall called Angelo, picked up Rinoa's overnight bag and escorted
Rinoa out, arming the alarm system behind him.

As they got into the car, Rinoa commented, "I have to confess I was worried you'd hustle me out the door without breakfast."

"Well, I know we had to leave as soon as possible but I also know that you need to eat. And to be honest, I had to have something too, no telling if I'll get a chance later." Squall said as he started the car and they left.


"Yeah, I do have occasional flashes of brilliance now and then." Squall commented. Rinoa snorted. Squall chuckled softly in response.

They arrived at Galbadia Garden quickly, Squall having taken the direct route this time. Irvine and Selphie both waited for them at the front gate.

Pulling Rinoa into his arms, Squall held her close, whispering, "I love you Rinoa. Stay here; stay safe. Don't go anywhere without either Selphie or Irvine. I need to know you and the babies are okay. I'll come back as soon as I can."

"I love you too." Rinoa said, pulling him into a deep kiss. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't. But as her lips touched his and she lost herself to his taste and touch, she felt the sting of the tears that she wouldn't let fall.

As he pulled back Irvine and Selphie both approached, Selphie putting an arm around Rinoa. She appreciated the support and leaned into her as Squall squeezed both of her hands.

Looking at Irvine first, then Selphie, Squall said, "I really appreciate your help, guys. Take care of them."

They both nodded, and Irvine said, "We'll see you back soon."

Squall nodded and stepped away, saying softly, "I've got to go." He hesitated for a moment sending everything he couldn't say to Rinoa, then turned and ran toward the Ragnarok, pounding up the ramp when it lowered for him.

He lifted off and roared away in moments.

As he was coming in over Balamb, he saw the storm. A swirling maelstrom of white clouds, reaching out toward the coastline, hungry fingers stretching out as though to grab at the city directly in its path. It was massive, easily the size of the small continent that it threatened. Even as high as Squall flew over it, the winds reached up and buffeted the airship, forcing Squall to fight to keep it on course.

It was going to be a real bitch to land the Ragnarok in those conditions. In light of that, Squall intended to have Zell fly it out to Trabia as soon as he landed. Better that than risk a crash on takeoff due to the winds. As fast as the storm was approaching, Squall didn't think it would be very long before the wind would be too strong for even the sturdy airship to withstand.

He called in as he made his approach, advising them of his plans, then concentrated on landing. The Ragnarok shook and fought him like a live thing, the gusts battering the ship, forcing Squall to make an inelegant and rough landing on the plain next to Balamb Garden.

Zell was pounding up the ramp as soon as it deployed, nearly running into Squall, who was on the
"Man, it's getting bad out there already!" Zell said, windblown hair looking even wilder than it normally did.

"That's why you need to get the Ragnarok to Trabia as soon as I'm clear of the ramp. You wait even a minute longer and you may not be able to fly it out of here at all." Squall said.

"Yeah," Zell said, frowning. Then he added, "I was hoping to do a final sweep through Balamb before Garden took off, you know, make sure to pick up any stragglers, get my mom…"

"Your mother hasn't evacuated yet?" Squall asked sharply.

Zell shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck uncomfortably, "N-no. She…well she's insisting on packing half the damn house. I told her we didn't have a lot of time to waste..."

Squall cursed under his breath.

"Alright, listen. You take off and get to Trabia. Radio in when you land. I'll do the sweep." Squall ordered.

"Are you sure? Maybe there's someone else, you know, like Quistis…" Zell began, but Squall shook his head.

"Quistis is going to have her hands full along with the other instructors dealing with the junior cadets and the evacuees in Garden. You're the only person I'd trust to fly the Ragnarok, nobody else is available that could do it." Squall said. A sudden gust rocked the airship, causing both young men to stare at each other.

"You've got to get out of here Zell. Fly carefully, she'll fight you like a dragon in these winds. Go to manual only if you have no other choice. The computer's pretty good at compensating, but it's going to be a rough flight until you get over the top of the storm." Squall instructed, then turned and ran down the ramp. It retracted and as soon as Squall was well clear of it, the engines fired and the ship lifted off.

Squall watched as the thrusters engaged and powered the ship through the turbulent atmosphere. As if in defiance of the buffeting winds, it flew straight and true, due northwest toward Trabia. Turning his face into the wind, Squall watched the clouds building in the still red dawn.

Red skies at dawning...

Squall turned and ran toward Balamb Garden.

As he entered Garden, the sheer number of people that thronged its hallways struck him. It seemed as though half the population of Balamb had decided to shelter in the Garden. He was forced to slow to a fast walk as he navigated through the milling cadets, SeeDs and citizens. Several people hailed him and he acknowledged their greetings but kept on his course, hurrying toward his office.

Quistis met him at the door, commenting, "Wow, you got here a lot faster than I thought you would."

Squall shrugged, and then asked, "I'm assuming you have an update?"
"I do. Seifer called just after you did. He's already bugging out, and the ferries are officially shut down. Anyone wants out now, it's either the trains or us." Quistis reported.

"What's the status here?" Squall asked, unlocking the door and crossing the office to check his fax machine.

"So far so good. Most of Balamb's population got out by train or ferry it looks like. Right now, we've got an extra hundred and eighty or so people on board. We've got plenty of room for more if needed." She answered, and then paused as Squall glanced down at the faxes and frowned.

"The weather service has just updated the latest report on the hurricane." Squall said grimly.

"And?" Quistis asked, not liking Squall's tone.

"Still holding steady at a category five; a strong category five. They're estimating wind speeds gusting up to close to two hundred miles per hour, and the tidal surge could potentially reach thirty feet." He said.

"But… Balamb's a deepwater harbor…" Quistis began, but Squall cut her off.

"Doesn't matter. Even a deep harbor is going to have a hell of a surge with a storm this size. You forget, its high tide. Water was already coming over the wharf when I flew in." Squall said. Turning toward his desk, he unbuckled his gunblade and laid it aside, then went around to his seat to log in and check his e-mail.

Looking up, he asked, "Was there anything else I needed to know Quistis?" She shook her head.

"Did Zell get away okay?" She asked.

Squall nodded, "He told me about the sweep he was planning to do. I told him I'd do it."

Quistis sighed in relief, "Okay, good. I was a little worried; he told me about his mom. When are you planning to go?"

"In about an hour or so. I need to call the sheriff and let him know. Maybe he can actually help for a change." He answered.

Quistis sighed, "good luck with that."

Squall nodded, making a face, before turning to his computer, silently dismissing her. She left, knowing that he wouldn't be stuck in his office long; not today, at any rate.

After reading and answering his emails, Squall sighed and reached for his phone. Before he could pick it up, it rang.

"Leonhart." He answered.

"Yo man, its me." Zell said. Rather than calling in on the Ragnarok's radio, he'd called Squall's direct line from his cell phone.

"I assume you landed safely," Squall stated.

"I did. Barely. You weren't kidding about fighting the wind. The takeoff at least was pretty rough. Once I got to Trabia though it was fine." Zell answered.

"Good. Just hang tight there. I'll let you know when we're due to arrive." Squall said.
"All right. I'll see you later then." Zell said, disconnecting the line.

Squall stared pensively at the phone for a moment before picking it up again.

"Sheriff Douglass? This is Commander Leonhart."

It was early afternoon before Squall could get the sweep coordinated. The sheriff, surprisingly enough, had actually been a lot of help in identifying possible holdouts that either had been unable or unwilling to evacuate to Balamb Garden or Galbadia. The last train to Deling City was due to leave in less than an hour, so Squall's sweep of the city was literally the last chance for many of its remaining citizens to get out.

Thunder rumbled in the darkening sky as Squall rolled out in a large transport with two SeeDs and the sheriff. By the time they reached Balamb, the rain had started. Freezing cold, driven by the wind, it lashed them with needles of ice as they stopped at one home after another, picking up those residents who hadn't left yet.

Ma Dincht's home was the last stop before they left Balamb, and Squall jumped out of the transport, heading for the door.

When she answered at his knock, she blinked at seeing him soaking wet, wearing a SeeD-issued black rain-slicker. Lightening snaked through the sky, sending a rumbling counterpoint of thunder to Squall's knock.

"Squall? Where's Zell? Is he okay?" She asked, looking alarmed.

"He's fine Mrs. Dincht. He couldn't make it so I'm taking over for him. Are you ready to go?" He asked. The wind-driven rain had rendered the slicker all but useless, and Squall was wet to the skin and half-frozen. He really, really wanted to get back to Garden and into a hot shower as soon as possible.

Zell's mother hesitated, casting one last glance around her small home before picking up her bags and sighing, "Yes, I'm ready. Let's go." Squall nodded and grabbed one of her larger pieces of luggage, setting it in the transport alongside her.

Getting back into the cab of the vehicle, Squall asked the sheriff, "Is there anyone else?"

"No. We've got 'em all." He answered, eyeing the young commander with the beginnings of respect.

"All right, let's go then." Squall said, starting the engine.

As they left, Squall and the sheriff, along with all of their passengers, took a long look out the windows at the harbor. The hurricane hadn't even made landfall yet, but waves, driven by the wind and the high tide, were already crashing over the docks. The entire quay would be awash before the storm surge even started.

They drove out of Balamb in silence.

Upon arriving in Garden, Squall left the SeeDs he'd brought with him to direct the evacuees to the facilities that had been set up for them, and headed toward his old quarters. As he left however, the sheriff stopped him.

"Commander." He said.
Squall stopped, wondering what the man wanted, and asked him, "Yes, sheriff?"

"Good work." He put his hand out, offering a handshake to Squall.

After a moment's hesitation, Squall took it, saying, "Thanks. Likewise." Then he continued toward his quarters and a hot shower.

Once he'd reached his old quarters, he paused, feeling a gut-deep chill at its emptiness. He'd never noticed before how cold and...dead...it seemed without Rinoa's presence bringing life to it. Bringing life to him. He hoped, with all his heart, that she was still safe with Selphie and Irvine, and once the storm ran its course, he could return home to her and see his babies born.

But he had to get through it first, and he knew the storm would only get worse before it got better.

Follow the money, Squall had said. Following his advice, Laguna had started investigating Dr. Odine's personal accounts and business interests, and what he found disturbed him. He knew he'd only scratched the surface; the network of businesses, bank accounts and things that Odine had a hand in either directly or indirectly was absolutely labyrinthine.

It was no surprise then, despite how carefully Squall had researched the security system that he'd purchased for his home in Deling City, that he'd missed the fact that Dr. Odine had in fact, designed it.

Laguna reached for the phone to call Squall and tell him about this development when Kiros interrupted him with an urgent summons to the finance minister's office. As he left, Laguna cast a look back at his phone, vowing to call his son as soon as he could to update him.

His shower was of necessity a brief one, mainly just to warm up from the icy drenching he'd gotten, so Squall was dressed in one of his spare uniforms and on the bridge of Garden before he was even missed.

Standing with Nida, he went over the checklist in preparation for mobilizing the garden, clipboard in hand. Looking out at the sky, which was now nearly pitch black, and hearing the howling wind and the crackling thunder and lightning, made him suddenly worry that they'd left it too late. Though the hurricane had yet to officially make landfall, the strength of what they were already experiencing led Squall to believe that the leading edge of it was already there.

"Can we move in this Nida?" he asked, voice raised over the sound of the storm.

"We can try. If we do, we need to do it now though." Nida answered. Squall nodded and braced himself as the mobile base began to move. As it did, it shuddered when a strong gust of wind slammed into it. A sudden thought struck Squall.

Shit! The windows...

Activating the PA, Squall announced, "I need everyone to move away from any windows toward the interior of the Garden. Stay low and cover up with either blankets or mattresses. We're moving out of the path of the storm but it's going to be a little rough."

The Garden picked up speed and began to sail smoothly away. For a moment, it seemed as though they would manage to get away from the storm after all. Then disaster struck.
Rinoa yawned, stretching out on Selphie's couch. Angelo, disturbed by her movement, jumped off of the couch where he'd been curled up by her feet, walking forward to sniff at Rinoa's face, then lick her once in greeting. He panted happily as she scratched behind his ears.

"Have a nice nap?" Selphie asked her.

Yawning again, Rinoa sat up and answered, "Yeah. Where's Irvine?"

"He had a class to teach. He's almost done with his instructor training, he's just got to pass the classroom evaluations to get his license." Selphie answered, sitting down next to her with a cup of hot cocoa in each hand. She silently offered one to Rinoa who took it and inhaled the rich, chocolaty aroma with a smile.

"Mmmm.. Thanks." She said, taking a sip.

"This pregnancy thing, it really takes it out of you, doesn't it?" Selphie asked.

Rinoa sighed, nodding, "You have no idea. It seems like no matter how much sleep I get, I'm just constantly tired. And nauseated, and hungry, and horny and irritable… sometimes all at once."

Selphie laughed softly, "I wonder how Squall's handling that."

"Mostly, it confuses him." Rinoa answered. Selphie laughed.

"So how'd the doctor's appointment go yesterday?" She asked.

Rinoa sighed, "Well, the babies are healthy, but Julia hasn't turned. If she's not facing the right direction for delivery by next week, we'll have to do a cesarean."


"Yeah. No more bikinis for me after this." Rinoa said sadly.

"Oh, come on Rinoa! You're married to a SeeD! You should know that a little thing like a scar wouldn't bother him!" Selphie said staunchly.

"He said pretty much the same thing to me when I mentioned it. Besides, they can do the incision low enough where you'd hardly even see it, even wearing a bikini. " Rinoa shrugged.

"So what did Squall think about that?" Selphie asked curiously.

"Honestly? He didn't really say much about it, but… he's actually relieved." Rinoa answered.

"You… read that from him?" Selphie asked hesitantly.

"Sort of. I felt it from him when the doctor told us. He was worried about complications." Rinoa answered. She took another sip of the cocoa, savoring the rich flavor.

Selphie nodded, saying, "Yeah, I guess he would be. So what else did you two do yesterday? You both had the whole day off, I hope you two made the most of it."

"Well, we kind of did. We went shopping for things for the nursery, found some cute baby clothes that we just had to get..." Rinoa began, and Selphie laughed.
"We? Seriously? Squall was a willing participant in this shopping trip?" Selphie asked with a smile.

Rinoa laughed, "Yeah, although it took him a while to get into it. He finally did though. He even found a cute little outfit for Saber."

"Really? Wow. Will wonders never cease?" Selphie asked.

"You should see it Selphie, its adorable. It's just this little black, fuzzy one-piece thing with white fur around the hood. Looks a little bit like Squall's jacket. Squall's going to bring back a SeeD emblem patch for me to sew onto it." Rinoa smiled, thinking about it. She couldn't wait to see what it looked like on the baby.

"I can't wait to see it, I'll bet it's so cute!" Selphie said, smiling.

"It is. I wish I'd thought to bring it with me; that and this absolutely adorable dress we got for Julia. I'd love to show them to you..." Rinoa said, sighing. Then she turned and studied Selphie, a speculative look in her eyes.

"Maybe we could go and get them in a little bit? I'd love you to see them, and the bassinets we got." Rinoa suggested.

"Don't you need to go back to work? I know you needed a break earlier but what about your shift?" Selphie asked.

Rinoa grimaced, "Dr. Curran cut my shift down to four hours when I told her my OB wanted me to ease up on my work schedule. So I'm done for the day."

"You certainly were earlier. You crashed without even bothering to eat lunch. Speaking of which, you have to be hungry by now." Selphie observed, getting up and taking Rinoa's now empty mug.

Rinoa made a face and rolled her eyes, saying, "Yeah, that's me, just one big hormonal, walking appetite. Ugh. It's getting really old, you know? Being such a slave to my body. I can't wait until it's over. Right now it's like I have no control over myself. I have to eat, I have to sleep...."

"You have to do that anyway." Selphie laughed from the kitchen as she put the mugs in the sink.

"And I have to pee all the time!" Rinoa groused, getting up and disappearing into the bathroom.

When she returned, Selphie asked her, "What do you want to eat for lunch?"

"Anything. Seriously, suddenly, I'm starving." Rinoa said.

"Well, care to start out with some grapes and an orange while I make you a sandwich?" Selphie suggested.

"Sure. Make it peanut butter and mayonnaise." Rinoa said.

"Really? Ugh," Selphie said, shuddering as she handed Rinoa a bowl of grapes and the orange, sliced into wedges. Rinoa took it to the dining table and sat down.

"Don't knock it 'til you try it." Rinoa said, happily digging into the grapes.

"Maybe when I get pregnant. Meanwhile, I'll just sit over here and be grossed out while you eat that." Selphie said, setting a plate with Rinoa's sandwich on it in front of her and taking a seat across from her.
Rinoa playfully stuck out her tongue, and then continued eating. It wasn't long before she was finished and taking the dishes to the sink.

"So? You want to come to my place and check out the stuff we got?" Rinoa invited.

Selphie nodded, then said, "We should let Irvine know, just in case. And neither one of us is leaving without a weapon. I know you feel safe at home Rinoa, but I'm not taking any chances with you and the babies. I want to see them too much for anything to happen to you."

Rinoa frowned, not liking the reminder of why she was staying with Selphie and Irvine in the first place, and suggested, "Could we leave him a note?"

Selphie nodded, "Yeah." Rinoa checked the gun she had in her handbag, making sure the clip was full and a spare was in the purse as well. She added a couple of high-powered healing potions for good measure, hoping they wouldn't need them.

Selphie meanwhile was doing much the same, getting her nunchakus ready, junctioning her GF's, and stocking magic and potions. Finally, she quickly wrote a note and stuck it to the refrigerator.

_Went to Rin's. Be back soon._

It was a fateful decision that would lead them right into the hands of the enemy.

The Garden lurched as if struck, the wind increasing in pitch and volume. Squall, Quistis and Nida staggered, trying to keep their balance on the bridge as Nida fought for control against the raging elements.

"Squall! I need some help here, this thing's getting impossible!" Nida grunted as yet another gust rocked them and sent Nida, attached to the steering lever, sliding to the side, struggling to keep to his feet.

Squall immediately thrust the clipboard he was holding at Quistis and leaped to Nida's aid, lending his strength to help bring the Garden under control.

As it steadied, Squall looked out at the now pitch black, boiling clouds and said urgently, "Can we make any more speed?"

Nida shook his head, "Its going full out Squall. This thing was never built for speed."

"Well, then things are going to get really rough. We may have to set down and ride out the storm where we are. Because that thing's right on our heels and it looks like it's going to catch us soon." He said grimly.

The Garden continued to shudder and shear as the elements battered it, and Nida hung on to the control stick like grim death. Squall never did understand the odd design that the FH techs had cobbled up when they had crashed there; it hadn't made much sense to him then and made even less sense now.

_If we make it through this, I'm going to have to have a talk with them about using a bit more LOGIC in their design concepts... _he thought privately.

The mobile base suddenly lurched, knocking Quistis off her feet and causing both Squall and Nida to scramble for balance. Squall went over to Quistis and helped her to her feet. As she got up, she
handed his clipboard back to him.

"I think we're going to have to set down Squall, I don't want to be in the air when that monster behind us catches up and unleashes hell!" Nida said.

Squall nodded; about to answer him, and hoping to hell that Rinoa was safe where she was when suddenly, as if his thoughts had summoned her, he felt her presence.

"Rin?" he thought. Then he froze as a wave of fear slammed into him, forcibly yanking him into their link. He saw Rinoa and Selphie in the bedroom of their home in Galbadia. He saw Angelo prick up his ears alertly and growl a warning. He saw them get up, check their weapons and head toward the kitchen…

"No…" He whispered, face draining of all color as his wide eyes stared unseeing. Through Rinoa's eyes, he saw events unfold that he was powerless to prevent.

"Squall?" Quistis' voice, dimly heard from a thousand miles away, sounding concerned as the clipboard slipped from his grasp to clatter onto the deck.

His mind and heart were in Galbadia, watching as several men assaulted his home, crashing through the windows and the glass patio doors. Hearing Rinoa's scream, the sharp report of her gun as she shot one, two, of their attackers. He saw Angelo, snarling, leap onto one of the men and savagely tear out his throat before a gunshot silenced him. He watched Selphie, a whirling dervish with deadly purpose, take out several of the men, validating the faith he'd placed in her…. until she too caught one bullet, then two, and went down.

He shuddered as he heard his wife sobbing while she dropped her weapon, prompted to do so by the cold steel barrel one of the attackers had pressed against her belly. Another man approached her, a shiny metal cuff held in one hand. He felt her shaking her head in denial knowing what it was, and what it would do to her.

As the cold metal settled around her wrist, Rinoa reached out to him desperately, "Squall! I love you! I'm sor…" Then everything went dark. And Squall went mad.

"NO!" He screamed in anguish, bolting for the lift. There was no rhyme, no reason to his action. No logic, no rationality. Nothing but raw pain and a driving need to be elsewhere. There, where she was. He needed to be there, even though he knew it was already too late to save her.

He entered the lift as it opened, blindly punching a button with shaking fingers, not caring where it took him.

As the doors closed behind him, shutting out the silent tableau of Quistis and Nida's identical expressions of shock, the monster caught them all.

Like a hammer of doom, the full force of the hurricane struck Balamb Garden broadside and flung it into the ground. It landed partly onto its side, and the force of the crash knocked out the power.

Quistis and Nida were both thrown to the ground and they were plunged into darkness as the power outage took the lights with it. In the lift, the force of the crash flung Squall against one of the walls, knocking him unconscious as the lift lurched to a halt.

Selphie and Rinoa arrived at the home Squall had rented, unaware that they were being watched. As Rinoa unlocked the door and entered the alarm code, the watchers were readying their assault,
seizing the opportunity presented to them.

They had been charged to harm neither the sorceress nor her knight husband, which had made extraction plans difficult. They couldn't kill the knight but he would have had no such restrictions, and no one had wanted to go up against him under those conditions. Then they learned that he was spearheading the evacuation of Balamb from the path of the coming storm, and saw a solution to their dilemma. They had only to wait for the storm to start, and the knight would be safely out of contact.

It had been ridiculously easy to circumvent the security system of the home and install surveillance cameras, so that when and if the sorceress arrived there, alone, they would know, and be ready.

She wasn't alone, however, but with another young woman, a SeeD. She was a complication, but not an insurmountable one. Unlike the knight, they could eliminate any other obstacles to their goal with deadly force.

So, as Rinoa walked back toward the bedroom she shared with Squall to show Selphie the bassinets and the baby clothes that they'd bought, a veritable army stealthily surrounded the home and took their positions.

"So, what do you think Selphie?" Rinoa asked, holding up the outfits.

"I think I'm going to die from the terminal cuteness." Selphie smiled. Taking the outfit Squall had chosen for Saber, she stroked it, marveling at how soft it was.

"I can't believe Squall chose this. That's just so amazing. I never would have thought it of him. It's going to look really adorable with the SeeD patch on it." She said.

"A lot of people are having a hard time picturing him as a father, himself included. But, I've always maintained that given a chance, he'll surprise you. And he has. He may not show it much, but I can tell he's actually excited about the babies. He can't wait to see them." Rinoa said, smiling.

"You know what? Me neither." Selphie smiled back. Suddenly, Angelo perked up his ears, growling. Rinoa frowned and exchanged a glance with Selphie. Angelo wasn't the sort of dog that barked or growled at the mailman or pizza delivery guy. If someone came to the door, he knew they were safe.

That meant that someone was not coming to the door.

"Rin," Selphie said in a low voice, "we need to leave. The car's in the garage and the kitchen door opens right into it, so if anyone's outside, that's our best chance."

Rinoa swallowed and slung her purse over her shoulder, digging out her gun and checking the safety. Then she cocked it, chambering a round.

"Okay," she whispered, "let's go."

As they made their way toward the kitchen, Selphie cast protection spells on Rinoa, so that whatever happened, she wouldn't get hurt. They had almost made it to the door when the attack started.

Rinoa screamed and immediately started shooting as men crashed into her home through the windows and the glass patio doors. Her first few shots went wild, missing everyone. Then she took a deep breath and calmed herself a little, and concentrated on her aim. She did better after that, dropping two of the intruders. Selphie meanwhile was a blur of whirling nunchakus and battle
magic, casting meltdown and summoning her GF, causing an impressive amount of damage to their opponents.

One of the attackers however managed to evade Selphie's attack and Rinoa's bullets, and lunged toward her. Angelo leaped in to defend his mistress, knocking the man to the ground and ripping into his throat, cutting him off mid-scream. Seeing another threat to Rinoa, he left his first victim and moved to attack the next one.

As he leaped at the man, a gunshot rang out and he fell to the ground with a yelp, to lie still.

"Angelo! No!" Rinoa sobbed, seeing her companion lying dead. Eyes blurring with tears, she drew a bead on the shooter and dropped him.

"Rinoa! Run! Get to the car!" Selphie yelled.

"I can't Selphie! I can't run!" Rinoa sobbed, still shooting. She was too heavy and awkward. They'd have her in moments. Selphie had to know that.

"You have to! Go! Get out of here, I'll hold them off!" Selphie urged her. Then she screamed in pain as first one then another bullet struck her. She fell limply to the floor to lie bleeding and still.

"SELPHIE!" Rinoa screamed. She couldn't be dead. She just couldn't. She felt Squall's shock and grief in the back of her mind, her fear having called to him. He'd seen everything that she'd seen, felt what she'd felt.

When she felt the barrel of a gun pressing against her abdomen, she collapsed into tears and dropped her weapon.

As one of the men approached her with an Odine bangle ready, she sent a last, desperate message to her husband, apologizing for her foolishness, telling him how much she loved him.

"Squall! I love you! I'm sorry..." the contact was severed as the bangle settled onto her wrist. Rinoa cried harder as she realized that this was a different type of bangle. The one that had been placed on her once before simply nullified her magic. This was apparently a newer design, one that incorporated a psychic damper as well. Just like the seals in Adel's prison, only smaller and built into the bracelet.

Her mind fluttered desperately against the artificial barrier the bangle had erected to no avail. She couldn't hear or feel Squall at all. She was completely cut off from him.

"Sorceress Rinoa," one of her captors addressed her. "Please come with us. The doctor would like to see you now."

They led her, unresisting, toward the front door. As she passed Selphie, she wept anew at seeing her friend lying so still. Then her breath caught as she saw Selphie's eyes open briefly before fluttering shut again. Relief that her friend wasn't dead left Rinoa feeling limp and drained. Then she realized that while Selphie wasn't dead, she was hurt, and badly.

Thinking about the healing potions and her cell phone, both of which were in her purse, Rinoa let it slide down her arm and dropped it as they passed by Selphie. Her captors never even noticed. If they did, they'd simply take it as a reaction to shock.

As they loaded her into a car and drove away, she hoped that Selphie wasn't so far gone that she would be unable to use the potions to heal herself.
Squall awoke in darkness, pain pounding in his head. Groaning, he put his hand up and felt the growing knot on the side of it. He'd obviously hit it when the garden had crashed. He knew it had, he'd heard it. He whispered a cure spell and the pain faded away. The physical pain did, anyway.

Rinoa...

She was gone. They'd taken her. Despite his best efforts, his plans, his preparations... He'd failed her. He had failed her. He wanted to scream, cry, and rail at uncaring fate. He wanted to smash things, rend and destroy. He wanted to kill.

Instead, he did nothing. He lay, staring at the darkness, feeling completely empty. He reached for Rinoa and found a blank spot where her presence had once been. A barrier. She wasn't dead, he knew that; they'd been true to their word that they would not harm her. It was small comfort however.

And there was nothing he could do. Even if he got out of the elevator, and he knew that he could, he had only to find the trapdoor and climb out as he had done once before; even if he got out, he was trapped by the storm. While the hurricane raged outside, Squall could go nowhere. Do nothing.

And then there was Selphie. He closed his eyes as a fresh wave of pain washed over him. He had to call Irvine and let him know that his wife was dead.

He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and turned it on. No signal. He cursed in impotent rage and flung it against the wall of the lift, shattering it. Then he finally collapsed and let the tears come.

Selphie heard the door close and a car start up, and felt safe enough to take a deep breath. But she couldn't. The pain burning in her chest was too great. She had heard Rinoa's sobs as they took her away, had heard her purse drop. She knew then that Rinoa had seen her open her eyes briefly and knew that she was still alive. For the moment anyway.

When she'd been shot Selphie's instinct was to get up and keep fighting, but realized very quickly that nothing would be gained by her throwing away her life. So she played dead instead, lying as still as possible to give their attackers the impression that they had killed her. Unfortunately, she was bleeding badly enough that it would soon be a correct assumption on their part unless Selphie did something about it.

Groaning, grunting from effort, Selphie rolled over and reached a trembling, blood-smeared hand toward Rinoa's purse. Dragging it toward her, she opened it and fished out the two bottles of potion that Rinoa had put in there.

Opening one of the bottles, she drank down the contents and sighed, closing her eyes and lying back for a moment, letting the potion do its work. A cool tingle spread from her stomach outwards, salving her pain, healing her wounds. Only one of the bottles was needed to heal Selphie. Apparently, the potions that Rinoa stocked were very powerful.

Taking a deep breath, and reveling in her ability to do so once again, Selphie sat up and placed
Rinoa's purse on her lap, searching the contents. After digging around a bit, she found what she was looking for and pulled out the keys to Rinoa's car.

Pulling the purse straps over her shoulder, Selphie carefully got up. The silence in the house was eerie, made even more so by the fact that she was the only living occupant. Locating her nunchakus, Selphie picked them up, placing them carefully back into the special sleeve she had in her boot.

Then she scanned the room. Bullet holes marred the tiled backsplash in the kitchen; both the patio doors and the windows in the living and dining rooms were shattered. Glass shards were everywhere…. and so was blood. It was spattered on the walls, pooling in huge crimson stains on the carpeting in the living room, congealing in scummy ponds on the wood-floored dining room. It took Selphie several minutes to realize that despite all of the blood, there was only one body left lying in the house. Apparently, whoever it was that had taken Rinoa, had also taken the time to bring their dead and wounded with them as well. Leaving nothing behind that could be used to track them down.

The body that had been left behind was Angelo. Tears flooded her eyes as Selphie walked over to where he lay, sniffling as she knelt down next to him and stroked her hand over the soft fur of his ears one last time before she broke down into heartbroken sobs.

She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth, shuddering and gasping as the sobs wracked her. She didn't try fighting the tears; there was no one there to be strong for, and no reason to hide them. She had done her best. She had tried to protect Rinoa, and had nearly died doing so.

It didn't make her feel any better to know that despite her efforts, she failed in the one personal favor that Squall had ever asked of her.

She wanted to go home. She wanted to wrap her arms around Irvine and cry like there was no tomorrow.

But she also knew that she was sitting in the middle of a crime scene. Whatever evidence was there needed to be obtained and processed as soon as possible or it would make finding Rinoa and bringing her home that much more difficult.

Sniffling, she wiped at her eyes and took a deep, shaking breath, trying to calm herself as much as possible. She needed to make a phone call.

But she didn't call the police. This was a SeeD matter. Pulling Rinoa's phone from her purse, Selphie called her husband.

When he picked up, a fresh round of tears flooded her eyes and caused her voice to shake as she said, "Irvine? Honey, it's me. I…" her voice broke on a sob. "I need you…"

Squall sat up and leaned his head back against the wall of the elevator, wiping his eyes. He felt like a fool, despite the fact that he was completely alone. But he wasn't given to emotional outbursts, and tears…well, he never cried. Or, almost never. The last time had been on Rinoa's behalf as well, when she'd still been in a coma after they'd fought against Edea and won.

Funny how she could draw emotions from him that no one else could. But that was why he loved
her so much. She was proof that he wasn't so damaged emotionally that he couldn't care for someone else. She was his evidence that he did in fact have a heart and could learn how to love. And within her, slept evidence of his very existence.

To have that taken away… What man wouldn't collapse, at least momentarily, into tears?

But tears served no practical purpose. They didn't make him feel better. His head ached, his eyes burned and his nose ran. They couldn't bring her back. That was supposed to be his job. The real hell of it was, he couldn't bring her back either. He was trapped inside a box in a crashed garden that was currently being savaged by the most powerful hurricane that the world had ever seen. Even deep within the elevator shaft, he could hear the wind shrieking, feel the garden shuddering at its power. He couldn't do anything until the storm had passed.

His heart sank as he realized it could be days, weeks even, before he could even leave Balamb to go look for her. The trail would be long cold by then, virtually impossible to follow. It didn't matter to him; he'd spend the rest of his life looking for her if he had to.

Meanwhile, sitting alone in the dark was accomplishing nothing. And he still had a job to do here. He couldn't help his wife, a fact that ate at his very soul. But there were several hundred SeeDs, cadets, and citizens that were counting on his leadership. He could help them.

He'd never wanted that responsibility; it had been thrust upon him long before it should have, despite Cid's pronouncement that he'd been groomed for it from his first induction into Balamb Garden. But as time had passed, he'd discovered that what he did instinctively, took others years to learn. He'd been born to do this job. Did he love it?

Sometimes. Would he give it up if his wife asked him to? In a heartbeat.

But since the responsibility still rested firmly in his hands, he'd do his best with it. It was the only thing he knew how to do, the only way he knew how to be.

All of this brought him back to one very practical concern. He was trapped, and couldn't count on rescue. He had to get out himself. And while he'd managed to escape once before without too much difficulty, there was one very telling difference in his current situation. He couldn't see.

There was no light whatsoever; that meant that there was no emergency power either. Squall had good night vision, but not this good. And climbing down the elevator shaft by feel alone bordered on insane impossibility. So, he had to find a light source.

Then he needed to find a way to restore power to the Garden. They couldn't move, not while the storm still raged, and maybe not for a long while after, depending upon the damage it sustained. But he knew that if nothing else, everyone else in the Garden would feel better if the lights were on. And if there were any injuries sustained during the crash, they would be easier to deal with if one could see them.

Faced with a situation outside of his control, Squall fell back onto what he could control; what he could deal with. The pain, the grief at losing Rinoa, Selphie, even Angelo (those fuckers KILLED MY DOG!), his resulting rage and frustration at being unable to do anything about it; he shoved it all into a corner of his mind and locked it away. It was the only way he could function at least semi-normally.

With the emotional pain set aside for the nonce, cool rationality took control, and Squall stood up, trailing his fingertips along the wall until he found the doors to the lift. Continuing across the doors to the other side, he found the control panel. Moving his fingers lightly over the buttons, he
continued downward until he found what he was looking for.

A handle. Grasping it, Squall pushed inward and pulled up, gaining access to the emergency kit. It was difficult finding what he needed by touch alone, but eventually, he located the light sticks.

Snapping the small capsule in the stick he held, Squall shook it, mixing the chemicals within it and activating it. Cool, yellow-green light radiated from the stick, chasing away the darkness.

Slinging it over his head by the cord threaded through the end, he allowed it to fall, resting against his chest, leaving his hands free. Searching through the kit again, he found and appropriated several others, sticking them in his pockets. Then he pulled out the rope and rappelling gear that was stashed in the bottom of the kit.

Now that he could see, Squall located the emergency hatch in the floor and opened it. The inky darkness of the shaft greeted him, but the light from the stick dangling from the cord around his neck chased it back a little. Enough for Squall to see the rungs of the ladder running down the side of the shaft.

Squall looped the rope around the railing that ran along the interior of the elevator cab, making the knot tight and leaning his full weight on it, bouncing and tugging until he was satisfied. He put on the harness and looped the rope through it, securing the end. If he should slip, it should reduce the chance of the sudden stop at the end of the fall ending up a fatal one. Carefully, he climbed through the hatch, holding on until his feet found the rungs of the ladder. Working his way down, he finally was able to reach the topmost rung with one hand, supporting himself with the other until he was fully secure on the ladder.

Then he began climbing down into the yawning blackness below.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Rinoa was silent during the journey she was being forced to undertake. It hadn't been hard to do; none of the men "escorting" her had tried to initiate any conversation.

She could have just as easily been a lamb being led to slaughter, for all the care they gave her.

Oh, they hadn't been rude, or rough. They seemed mindful of the fact that she was in a rather delicate state, and that their orders had been to deliver her unharmed to wherever they were taking her.

Since she seemed to be marginally more valuable to them than lamb chops on the hoof, maybe a better analogy would be delivering a dairy cow to the calving shed. She snorted inwardly. The "cow" part was certainly more accurate, given her current shape.

Then chills traced up her spine as she realized that that was exactly what she was to them. Their entire attitude toward her had been coldly efficient and businesslike. No compassion at her fear and pain, no anger at her for the men she'd killed while fighting them. No unnecessary emotions of any sort, either towards her or about her.

They had rendered her helpless by using the Odine bangle, and once safe, had given her a quick once-over, checking her for any injuries... and hidden weapons. But aside from the occasional order, phrased as a polite request, no one had spoken to her or attempted to interact with her. And the more attention she paid to their behavior and treatment toward her, the more it resembled the way one would behave when handling a high-strung, very valuable brood animal.

You don't initiate conversations about the weather in Balamb to a dairy cow.
They were currently on a train somewhere between Timber and Fisherman's Horizon. The trans-oceanic railway had been reconstructed, and train service between the two continents restored. And despite the vagaries of marine weather patterns, even ran more often than not. A testament, no doubt, to the sheer hubris involved with constructing a railway bridge that spanned an entire ocean to bridge two vastly different continents.

There had been some concern amongst her captors that the hurricane currently savaging Balamb had caused some damage to the line, but it had passed by FH, leaving little more than a drenching in its wake.

Rinoa stared out the window at the monotonous expanse of water that they were currently traversing, and tried not to think about what was happening in Balamb and how Squall was doing. Unfortunately, she had little to do but think, and her mind automatically reached toward her husband…to meet the barrier raised by the bangle.

She crossed her arms over her stomach and blinked away tears. She'd already cried far too much today. Her eyes were still burning, and her nose was still clogged. The thought of wiping her nose on her sleeve made her recoil, and she was damned if she would ask her captors for anything, though she would eventually have to use the restroom and would likely need to ask permission to go.

Wiping at her eyes, she sniffled a bit to clear her sinuses, and was surprised when a tissue appeared.

Slowly, she took it from the young man who offered it, watching him warily as she did. His expression didn't give much away, but it seemed to her at least that this man saw her as something more than mere baggage. She didn't want to trust it however, not sure of what to make of this seemingly kind gesture. It could simply have been an attempt to be nice, or more likely; he'd done it to keep her quiet.

Whichever it was, Rinoa was grateful for at least that much consideration. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose, taking a second tissue when it was offered.

"Better?" He asked her.

Rinoa nodded silently, returning her gaze briefly to the view outside of the window. The sense of movement from the train and the featureless, undulating sea beyond the causeway began to have an unsettling effect upon Rinoa's stomach. She took a deep breath, looking away from the window and rubbing her hand over her abdomen in an attempt to soothe the sudden attack of nausea.

"Is everything okay?" Rinoa met the young man's eyes again, wondering if he was actually concerned about her, or simply worried that she'd throw up and make a mess of things.

"Is everything okay?" Of course it wasn't. She was nearly seven months pregnant with twins, being forced to travel by train across the ocean by men who'd kidnapped her, killed her dog and possibly even her best friend. She had been ripped away from her home and blocked from even sensing her husband's mind and heart. She was emotionally devastated and afraid. She hadn't had anything to eat or drink in hours, and the motion of the train and the view outside the window was making her feel sick. To top it off, she had to go to the bathroom. Badly. No, she wasn't okay. Not by a long shot.

She was tempted to answer the young man's question honestly, at the top of her lungs. But then she decided an outburst of that sort would ultimately serve no purpose but to make things more uncomfortable for her.
Instead, she answered, "I need to go to the bathroom."

The young man nodded and said, "This way please." Rinoa stood carefully, grimacing at the stiffness in her back and knees from sitting for so long. Stretching a little to loosen up some, Rinoa sighed, then followed as she was led toward the lavatory.

As she did, she gazed around, studying the car and its occupants. Rinoa and her kidnappers were the only people there. It was obviously a private car. The décor it sported spoke more of its owner's personality than perhaps he had intended.

While it had plush carpeting and comfortable upholstery, there was little in the way of opulence in its design, and none in the way of personal touches. The colors were an almost sterile scheme of pale icy blue and white, while the seats and other furnishings displayed clean, uncomplicated lines. The overall effect was of cool, impersonal, almost clinical comfort. Understated, unobtrusive luxury. It had to belong to Dr. Odine.

Upon reaching the restroom, Rinoa entered and did what she needed to do, which fortunately did not include throwing up, though she felt perilously close to it.

She splashed cool water onto her face, taking some in her cupped hands and sipping at it. It slaked her thirst at least, though she didn't like the slightly alkaline taste. After washing her hands and patting her face dry, she exited the bathroom to find the same young man who'd shown her where it was still waiting for her.

She sighed inwardly, thinking that at least he didn't feel it necessary to actually accompany her into the restroom and wait outside the goddamned stall.

Of her captors, the only conclusion that Rinoa could draw was that they were mostly Estharian, having recognized the accents, and were either military or military trained. They didn't wear anything that resembled Esthar's military uniforms however, though it was a uniform of some kind. It didn't bear any sigils or anything that would identify its origin, and was a rather drab, dark brown. Private security force perhaps?

Rinoa's speculation was interrupted by an insistent gurgling in her stomach; her hunger was making itself known noisily, much to her embarrassment. Her escort raised his eyebrows in surprise and smiled slightly in amusement.

"Hungry?" He asked.

Rinoa made a face, her cheeks warm, answering, "yes." Upon reaching her seat, she sat down with a sigh.

"I'll be right back." The young man said, and disappeared. He returned with a small bottle of orange juice and some crackers. It wasn't nearly enough, though likely all that the fellow could find. It would however help quell the sickness that her rising hunger, dropping blood sugar and the repetitive motion of the train was causing.

Taking it, she thanked the man politely and started nibbling on the crackers, while sipping at the orange juice, and feeling much better as a result. Physically at least.
door behind him as he raced toward the front door. Upon reaching it however, he froze, seeing the shattered windows; hinting at the similarly shattered life of the current occupants.

Approaching slowly, he ducked his head through the broken window, peering into the shadowy interior of the house.

"Selphie?" he called softly, stepping over the pane and staring around at the chaos.

"Irvy!" Selphie sobbed, flinging herself into his arms. He held her close and rubbed her back as she cried into his chest.

"Shh…I'm here sweetie." Irvine soothed, caressing her hair. He'd gotten a disjointed, sobbing account of what had happened from Selphie when she'd called him. But seeing the actual aftermath of the attack left a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. Running his hand down Selphie's back again he frowned as he felt something cold, wet and kind of sticky. Raising his hand, his frown changed to a gasp of alarm as he saw what it was. Blood.

Pulling back, he looked her up and down, eyes wide, exclaiming, "Selphie! Are you hurt? Baby, why didn't you say anything?" She'd seemed okay but now that he'd gotten a good look at her blood-soaked clothing, he began to truly fear for her.

Snuffling back her tears, Selphie wiped at her eyes and assured him, "I'm fine. Rinoa had stashed a couple of really powerful healing potions in her purse and she dropped it next to me as they led her out."

Irvine sighed in relief and pulled her back into his arms, holding her tightly.

"God babe, you gave me the scare of my life. You're sure you're okay?" he studied her, eyes dark with concern.

"Yeah," she sniffed, then her eyes filled again. "I tried Irvine. I really did. And I failed. I failed Squall, I failed Rinoa, and Angelo…" she took a deep breath, tears sliding down her cheeks again. She wiped them away with a trembling hand.

Irvine tightened his arms around her, feeling his own eyes stinging.

"You did everything you could, Selphie, and you nearly died. You've got nothing to be ashamed of in that." He told her softly.

"What do we do now?" Selphie asked him.

"Whatever we can to help Squall find her." stepping away from Selphie for a moment, Irvine studied the room.

"Didn't Squall have an alarm system installed on the house?" he asked, frowning. The assault, coming violently through the windows, should have set the alarm off and police should have been dispatched automatically.

"Yeah…" Selphie answered, frowning. Then her eyes opened wide.

"They must have disabled it somehow." She gasped.

Then she bit her lip, saying, "It never even occurred to me that the police should have come. I didn't even think to call them. I figured, since it was a SeeD matter, it would be better if I called you. Maybe we could get a team in, collect whatever evidence we can find…"
"I'll give 'em a call. Probably best that the PD didn't show up after all. They'll have taken Rinoa out of the city and likely even the country by now. DCPD wouldn't be able to do much about it then anyhow." Irvine said, pulling out his cell phone.

In no time, Squall's house was swarming with SeeDs, photographing, collecting and cataloguing evidence. Irvine and Selphie both told their stories, Selphie especially wanted to make sure that everything that she'd seen and remembered about the attackers was recorded while it was fresh in her mind.

"Have you managed to reach Commander Leonhart yet?" the SeeD interviewing Selphie asked Irvine.

Irvine shook his head, "No. I tried calling him on the way over, and I tried again about a minute ago, and still can't get through. The hurricane's got them completely cut off up there."

The SeeD grimaced, saying, "I don't envy you, having that conversation with him. I can't even imagine how he'd take it. I know how I'd feel, if it were me…"

"I know. Me too." Irvine said, exchanging a look with Selphie. It was very likely that Squall already knew, but they couldn't operate on the assumption that he actually did.

Several hours later, the SeeDs had gathered everything that they needed for analysis, with Irvine charging them to let him know the results as soon as possible so he could get started on the hunt for Rinoa. He knew Squall would want to be involved, hell, he'd insist on it. But he also knew that personal pride aside; he'd want Rinoa found and brought home as soon as possible, by whatever means it took. Since Squall was trapped and unable to look for Rinoa himself, it was left to Irvine and Selphie to do it for him.

Irvine approached Selphie, his boots crunching through the shards of glass as he crossed the room to where she stood, staring helplessly down at Angelo's body.

Wiping her eyes, she said, "I don't know what to do with him, Irvine. I don't want to just bury him; it wouldn't be fair to Squall or Rinoa. Besides, they're renting this place. When they move back to Balamb he'll be left behind…" she sniffled again.

"I'll take care of it." Irvine said, pulling her into his arms and hugging her.

"How?" Selphie asked.

"I'll take him to his vet and have him cremated." Irvine said. Selphie nodded.

Irvine looked around at the mess left behind, the broken windows, the blood and glass embedded carpeting, saying, "I don't know what to do about the rest of this; it seems wrong to just leave it. But at the same time, I don't want to mess with it in case there's something we missed on the first go-round."

"I know. I don't want any of their things to get stolen either…" Selphie said, frowning.

Looking thoughtful, Irvine made a quick phone call and reported back to Selphie, "The team leader said he'd secure the scene here. Which I'm guessing either means they'll station someone here to guard it, or board up the windows or something. Maybe both."

Nodding, Selphie sighed, "Alright."

Caressing one of her cheeks, Irvine suggested softly, "Why don't you head back home and have Dr.
"Curran check you out?"

"I'm fine..." Selphie protested.

"Humor me. I just want to make sure you don't have any bullets still stuck in you, okay? I know the potion healed you, but I just want to make sure you're okay. Take Squall's car, I'll catch up with you later." Irvine said.

"Okay. I'll see you later. I love you." Selphie said, kissing him.

Irvine kissed her back, crushing her body against his, knowing how close he'd come to losing her and deeply grateful to Rinoa for thinking of dropping those potions within Selphie's reach. He didn't have the same, soul-deep connection to Selphie that Squall had with Rinoa, and Irvine couldn't imagine what his friend was feeling right now, assuming he was aware of the events that had transpired. But he knew how he'd feel if he lost Selphie, and so could sympathize with Squall's feelings, if not completely identify with them.

"I love you too baby." He said softly.

After she left, Irvine searched around until he found an old towel to wrap around Angelo's blood-soaked body. Giving the dog's head a final pat, he carefully lifted him up and carried him out to his truck. He hoped Squall would be okay with cremating Angelo. He could decide when he came back what he wanted to do with the ashes, or wait until he got Rinoa back and they could both decide.

It was kind of funny in a cute way, the way Squall had bonded with the dog. Neither he nor Rinoa had thought that he and Angelo would become such good friends. Squall had never had a dog before, so nobody knew that he even liked dogs. Now, he had lost both his wife and his dog.

The whole situation sounded like a bad country song, but Irvine couldn't see the humor in it. Instead, he felt sad at Angelo's loss, both relieved and slightly guilty that Selphie had survived the attack, and worried about Rinoa and the babies. He hoped that Squall was doing okay in Balamb and could find his way back soon. He wanted to start looking for Rinoa as soon as possible... but it didn't seem right to do it without Squall.

*Hang in there, buddy.* Irvine thought as he brought the dog into the vet's office. *We all need you back, Rinoa especially. Come back soon so we can get these bastards...*

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As Squall was climbing down the elevator shaft, it suddenly occurred to him that he had no clue where, exactly, he needed to go first. Go back up to the flying bridge where Nida and Quistis were? Nida knew the technical specs of Balamb Garden better than anyone outside of the FH mechanics that had repaired it. How would he get past the elevator to get to them though? The elevator car blocked the shaft completely, and Squall couldn't get around it. Not from inside the *shaft*, anyway.

Another option was to head to his office and get the technical schematics that he had on file there. He needed to get his gunblade too. If he had to go back down to the MD level, he wanted to be prepared for the creatures that lurked down in the belly of Garden.

When Squall judged he'd climbed down far enough to reach the floor below where the elevator had stopped, he began looking for the access door. It wasn't long before he found it. Hooking an arm through one of the rungs of the ladder for support, he opened the door and pulled himself through the portal.
He untied the rope, letting it fall, and thought about taking off the rappelling harness as well. Then he reconsidered, thinking that he'd be doing a lot of climbing up and down narrow, dimly lit shafts and the like. He was going to need a lot more rope, and knew he wouldn't find it in his office.

Holding his light stick up to illuminate the hallway he was in, Squall nodded in satisfaction at finding himself on the level he needed to reach his office. He padded silently down the hallway toward it, wondering where everyone else was. He thought Cid at least might have been in his office. But there didn't seem to be anyone about at all.

Unlocking the door, Squall paused, feeling the Garden shudder at another powerful blow from the hurricane shrieking outside. Studying the tumbled disorder in his office, he crossed over to where he'd set his gunblade, buckling it on. As he glanced about, his gaze fell upon his telephone. It, like many of the other items on his desk, had been tossed to the floor when the garden had crashed.

Kneeling down, he picked it up, pressed the disconnect button and listened to see if it worked. He was disappointed but not surprised to find it dead.

Sighing, he headed toward his file cabinet and began looking for the technical schematics and the design blueprints of the garden. Holding the light stick in his teeth to leave his hands free, he pawed through the files until he found what he was looking for.

Laying them out on his desk, he squinted in the dim light cast by the stick he still held in his mouth, looking first of all for a route to the flying bridge, then from there, a means to restore power to the garden.

Folding them up, he stashed them in the inner pocket of his uniform tunic and left his office. He was halfway down the hallway toward the access panel he was looking for when he suddenly paused, snorting quietly as he realized that he'd locked his office door when he'd left out of habit.

Holding the light stick high, he slowed down, studying the wall carefully until he found the access panel, really a nondescript door, located to the right of the elevator doors. He frowned, hoping the door didn't have an electronic lock, and then let out a relieved breath when he saw it was a conventional deadbolt-and-knob arrangement. As Commander, Squall had a master key along with the master codes.

Opening the door, Squall peered into one of a network of dozens of tunnels, shafts, and hallways used for maintenance. Dropping the light stick and leaving it to dangle from his neck once again, Squall grasped one of the rungs of the ladder affixed to the side of the shaft, and began climbing upward.

After an eternity in the dark with only the dimming greenish yellow light of his stick to combat it, Squall finally reached the floor above and unlocked the access door and pulled himself through.

Approaching the lift that would take him to the main bridge, Squall simply climbed up the shaft, pulling himself up and onto the main bridge itself.

"Nida? Quistis? You guys okay?" Squall asked, holding the light stick aloft again, looking around the flying bridge for them. The howling of the hurricane was more pronounced here. Nearly deafening in fact.

But whatever protections the shumis had incorporated into the design of the Garden, apparently still held, for the bridge was still intact, despite the raging storm that Squall could plainly see outside. It was nice to know that the shield, if that was what it was that had deflected the incoming missiles when Garden had been attacked four years ago, was still working and was not tied to
Garden's main power source. Perhaps it was a permanent, passive spell that only activated when the Garden itself came under physical attack.

Whatever it was, it saved the lives of Quistis and Nida, as well as preventing the Garden from taking too much damage in the crash and from the storm.

Squall frowned, beginning to worry when he did not hear any response or see any movement. Although as loud as the storm was, they'd have to shout to be heard, so if either were injured, they simply may not be able to call out loud enough for him to hear.

He continued looking, the dimming light stick making it harder to penetrate the gloom. Finally however he found them both, crumpled together against the side of the bridge. At first, he thought they were dead. They both were so still they certainly looked it.

Upon closer investigation, Squall was relieved to learn that they were both alive, but badly injured. Fortunately, he was fully stocked with cure spells, one of the preparations he'd made prior to coming in to Balamb. He knew, with a storm the size of the one currently battering them, that he would need them.

Crouching back on his heels, he began casting the spells. Then he waited. Nida woke first, groaning.

Sitting up, he blinked at the light emanating from the stick hanging around Squall's neck, saying, "Squall? I thought you were dead. You ran for the lift, and we crashed…"

"You and Quistis were a lot closer to dead than I was." Squall said.

Nida's eyes widened and he gasped, "Quis…?" He whipped around, to find her stirring. Taking her hand, he helped her up and then pulled her into his arms.

"God, Quis… I thought we were both…" He whispered into her hair. Squall looked away, feeling suddenly uncomfortable at the display.

"Squall?" Squall turned his attention back to them at Quistis' question.

"Squall, what happened?" She asked him softly. Nida tightened his arm around her and watched Squall.

"The hurricane caught us and we crashed." He answered simply, not wanting to get into any detail.

"No, before that." She asked. He knew what she was referring to, and he did not want to discus it with her. Now was not the time for it, for one thing… and for another, it was too damn painful.

"Just before the crash, you froze. Your face went dead white and you just stared into space for a couple of heartbeats, then you freaked out and bolted for the lift. What happened?" Quistis asked him.

Squall let out a breath and looked away, covering his mouth with his hand for a moment, before finally answering, "I can't… talk about it. Not right now. We have some more immediate concerns to deal with."

Focusing his attention back to Nida and Quistis, he said, " Nida, I need you to help me figure out how to get the power back on. Quistis, you're going to help keep the oilboyles off of us, because
I'm pretty sure we're going to have to go down into the MD level. Aren't we, Nida?"

"Yeah. It looks like we don't even have emergency power right now; the main cutoff switch was probably triggered on impact when we crashed." Nida said.

Squall nodded. He'd figured as much. He doubted that the main generator was damaged at all, as deep as it was in the belly of Garden and as protected as the base had been by its shield.

"So, we go down to the main generator, turn the main switch back on, and reset the breakers, right?" Squall asked him.

"Yeah, but we need to make sure the core isn't damaged." Nida said.

"It shouldn't be. Whatever magical protections the shumis built into this place are still holding, otherwise the hurricane would have sheared the flying bridge right off, taking you two with it." Squall said.

Nida's eyes widened, "I never thought of that. You're right, as powerful as that storm is, the glass should have shattered, and the entire bridge should have been destroyed."

"I'm assuming you have a plan on how to do this," Quistis began.

Squall nodded, and pulled out the schematics that he'd brought with him. Taking out three of his extra light sticks, he activated them. Handing one each to Quistis and Nida, he laid the schematics out in front of them.

"Obviously, with no power the lift is out. So we'll have to climb down. You remember when we had to do that to get the garden moving, right Quistis?" Squall asked her.

She nodded, "I remember wishing we had some rope, those ladders are really treacherous. And we had power then. With just these little light sticks…"

"Right. So, you need to find us all the rope you can, and a couple of rappelling harnesses; the one I've got I pulled out of the emergency kit in the lift." Squall directed her. Quistis immediately left, knowing exactly where to find what she was looking for.

While she was gone, Squall and Nida worked out the route to get to where they needed to go. By the time she had returned, and Squall made sure everyone had junctioned their GF's and stocked the magic they needed, they were ready to go.

They assembled near the access door to the maintenance tunnel Squall had used to reach them, ropes and rappelling gear at the ready. After some discussion, it was decided that Squall would go first, then Nida, and finally Quistis.

Climbing down into the dark again, Squall found he was grateful for the activity. Focusing on survival was a good way to avoid thinking about other troublesome matters… such as how Rinoa was faring at the hands of those who now held her captive. Of course, the ultimate goal was to have the garden and everyone in it in good enough shape that once the storm was over, Squall could leave.

He knew what that would look like, how others would see it. It would look as though he was abandoning his post in the middle of a crisis, an action punishable by court-martial, dismissal, possibly even time in the brig, depending upon the circumstances. Squall didn't care. SeeD was his job. Rinoa was his life. When it came right down to it, she was more important to him.
She would *always* be more important to him.

In the meantime however, he would do his damndest to restore power to the garden, work with Quistis, Nida, and Dr. Kadowaki to find and care for any casualties, and in general, do what he had to in order to ride out the storm. But the minute it was over and communication with the Ragnarok was restored, Squall was out of there.
"Miss? Sorceress Rinoa?" Rinoa heard her name being called, and frowned slightly, thinking, *my NAME is Rinoa... Rinoa Leonhart. NOT 'Sorceress Rinoa'...* a hand touched her shoulder gently and she opened her eyes. She had fallen asleep, giving in to sheer physical and emotional fatigue. The young man who had assisted her earlier gazed down at her, waiting patiently for her to respond. Yawning, she stretched, irritated at having been awakened.

Unable to hide that irritation, she said shortly, "My *name* is Rinoa; or Mrs. Leonhart, if you want to be formal. Not 'Sorceress Rinoa'."

The young man frowned, "But you *are* a sorceress."

"I didn't want to be." She answered softly, meeting his eyes. "I didn't ask for this. *Any* of this. *I didn't ASK* to be given this power. *I didn't want* it. *I don't want* to be the world's enemy. *I don't want* to be hated and feared for something that wasn't even my FAULT. *It was just a horrible, ironic accident* that made me into what I am. *I'm not the enemy. I'm not a pawn. I'm not a tool. I'm not a TEST subject. I'm just a scared, pregnant woman who misses her husband and wants to go home.*"

The girl she had been back when she'd first received her powers wouldn't have hesitated to let her feelings be known. The young woman she had grown into had learned that sometimes, it was safer to remain silent.

The young man cleared his throat and replied, "No I… don't suppose you did." His gaze softened for just a moment, and Rinoa caught a glimpse of… compassion…in his eyes.

Then he was back to business as he told her, "We've arrived in FH. We'll have a layover here before we continue on. Dinner will be brought to your room, and while it goes without saying, your continued cooperation *will* go a long way toward making this journey easier on you."

"Of course." Rinoa said. It was to be expected. And really, what else could she do? She started to get up and was startled slightly when the young man extended his hand, offering to help her to her feet. Taking it gratefully, she stood and followed him out, the other men flanking her.

She wondered briefly what they had done with the men who'd been killed during the attack, for she'd seen some of the men pick up the dead and take them along. Perhaps intending to return them to their families.

Perhaps. But as she followed her captors to the hotel where they would be staying that night, Rinoa found that the only thing she was sorry about with regards to those dead men was the fact that she hadn't managed to kill *all* of her captors.

Even the fellow who thus far had been so nice to her; if an opportunity to escape made killing him necessary, Rinoa would do it without hesitation. She had learned far more from her mercenary husband than he'd intended for her to learn.

Since there were no opportunities of that sort that Rinoa could take advantage of, and since she had not only herself but also her babies as well to be concerned with, Rinoa remained quiet and cooperative. She coolly acknowledged the fiction that her abductors didn't hate and fear *her* as much as she hated and feared *them.*

Rubbing her hand over her abdomen and feeling the babies moving, sensing their little minds awakening to her touch, Rinoa calmed and turned her mind away from the trend it had been
following. That was not a pathway she wanted to be on; allowing herself to be consumed by hatred and fear would turn her into the very monster that everyone thought she might be.

At least the bangle couldn't block her from sensing her children, a fact that Rinoa found comforting.

By the time they got her installed into a secure room and provided her with dinner, she was too hungry and too tired to be anything but grateful. She couldn't go anywhere anyway, even if she was inclined to attempt escape; she was situated in an inner room with no windows, and her escorts occupied the outer sitting room and the two additional rooms flanking hers.

After she finished eating, she was left to herself in the room she had been assigned. Sighing, Rinoa looked around, studying the décor and wishing she had a change of clothes so she could take a shower.

The room was furnished in a fashion typical for FH; using found items put to new use, such as a lamp made from an old milk can, a bed frame somehow attractively constructed from scrap pipes painted black, a circular bed table that turned out to be an upended fuel canister with a pretty cloth over it. Despite the unorthodox furnishings, a hand-braided rug and knitted afghan added a homey touch and saved the room from looking like a junkyard.

Sitting upon the bed, Rinoa sighed in relief. The mattress seemed to be in good shape at least and wasn't too mushy or hard. Caressing the soft bedspread, she wished once again she could take a shower. Pulling back the covers, she debated getting undressed or simply going to sleep with her clothes on. She'd be more comfortable with them off, but then reconsidered, thinking about the men that surrounded her.

Not that she'd be much of a temptation to them, however, as hugely pregnant as she was.

Grunting in discomfort, Rinoa struggled with untying and removing her shoes, then sitting back up and taking a deep breath. It was getting to the point that she had to hold her breath when she was putting on or taking off her shoes.

Yawning, she turned out the light and crawled into bed. She had no idea what time it was, early evening she'd guess. It was still light out when they'd arrived, though the sun was midway through setting. Rinoa was so tired it didn't matter to her if the sun was up or not.

But once she lay down, sleep eluded her despite the crushing fatigue that seemed to press her into the mattress. When she closed her eyes, she saw Selphie jerking as bullets struck her. She saw Angelo; brave, devoted, loyal Angelo, leaping for one of the men threatening her and falling back with a yelp as he too was shot.

Tears leaked from her eyes as she rolled onto her side, missing the feel of Squall's arms around her. Missing the feel of his mind touching hers. Missing the comfort his solid strength gave her. Missing him.

She felt as though a piece of her was missing, walled away behind a barrier that she couldn't pass because of the hated bangle that had been forced onto her.

He would come for her. She knew he would; he always did. Then her confidence faltered as she realized that her captors had been very careful about what they left behind. She realized it was as much to cover their tracks that they brought their dead with them, as it was to provide their families with closure.
And it would be days before Squall could come after her, maybe even weeks. The trail would be long cold by then, and infinitely more difficult to track. Without thinking, her hand came up and grasped her mother's ring. Drawing comfort from her personal talisman, an idea came to her.

She couldn't escape. Running in her current condition was next to impossible. But that didn't mean she couldn't leave a clue behind to let Squall know he was on the right trail…

Squall, Nida and Quistis were currently making their way through the echoing darkness in the MD level toward the main power core of Garden. Quistis at least was very nervous, knowing what they could potentially encounter down there and not liking the fact that they had to do it in the dark at all. Squall by contrast, was intensely focused on his surroundings and completely calm. Cold, in fact.

"Okay, here's the power core." Nida said, his voice echoing.

Squall nodded and moved off a few feet, attention directed outward toward the impenetrable blackness. Quistis did as well, focusing on a different direction, flanking Nida as he approached the core and began working on it.

Suddenly blue-white light bloomed, startling Nida into whipping around to look for its source. Lionheart. Squall had drawn his weapon and the glowing blade lit their surroundings like a torch.

Blinking, Nida stared and asked incredulously, "It glows? Why didn't you draw it earlier?"

"Because it's heavy and I needed both of my hands." Squall answered coolly.

"Oh." Nida said, conceding that climbing down to the MD level one-handed while holding the gunblade up like a beacon would be rather difficult. The pure light emanating from the gunblade did make it easier for Nida to see what he was doing, so he turned his attention back to the power core. Opening an access panel on the side of the core, Nida punched in a command query to have a response come up on the small LED screen that satisfied him.

"Okay. Core's solid. No breaches or anything, so I guess I can turn on the main switch." Nida said, shutting the panel. As he headed toward the switch, Squall shifted his position slightly, still appearing to focus upon the outer darkness. But that slight shift illuminated the main switch on the far side of the platform they stood upon.

As he headed toward the switch, Nida reflected that aside from the Dollet mission where they'd both earned their SeeD ranking, he'd never served in the field with Squall. He'd heard about Squall's Lionheart blade; by the time he'd defeated Ultimecia, there were few who hadn't. But it was interesting to Nida to note that in all the time that they'd worked and yes, even played, together, he'd never known of that one unique feature of Squall's signature weapon.

Even now, four years on, Squall still wasn't one to let go of too many personal details. Still, Nida was counted among Squall's friends, so while personal revelations might be few and far between, they did happen.

As Nida drew closer to the switch, the light thrown by Lionheart's blade brightened as Squall paced him, still peering intently into the shadows. He tried to ignore the prickling at the back of his neck at the quiet, echoing, slithering noises that came to him as he approached the switch. He'd never liked going down into the MD level. Despite periodic extermination sweeps, it still teemed with
dangerous vermin.

A barely audible screech made Nida duck instinctively as a large red bat just missed him. Lionheart flashed as it attacked Squall and met its end as the blade cleaved it in two. Another screech was silenced as Nida heard the crack of Quistis’ whip. Letting out a breath and drawing in another, trying to calm his racing heart, Nida flung the switch upward, restarting the power core.

"Okay. We need to give it a few minutes to power up, then we can start resetting the main breakers." Nida said, getting his weapon ready.

"Where are they?" Squall asked.

"We need to go down a level." Nida answered, leading the way toward the ladder on the side of the core to the lowest platform. Squall nodded and sheathed his gunblade. The light immediately went out, smothered by the sheath, leaving them with just their glowing light sticks. Nida swallowed, trying not to think about what lurked in the darkness surrounding them.

Squall, for his part, was tense and alert, well aware of the dangers inherent in what they were doing. After the bats had attacked them, he mentally kicked himself and contacted one of his GFs, Diablos, ordering it to repel any future attacks. Unless the monster was a very large one, they shouldn't see any additional encounters.

"I've junctioned Diablos. I told it to deter any further attacks, so unless it's a really big monster, we shouldn't have any other problems." Squall told both Quistis and Nida, grasping the rungs of the ladder and leading the way downward.

"Somehow, that doesn't actually make me feel any better." Nida commented as he followed. He half expected a snort of derision from Squall in response, and was mildly surprised when the comment was met by silence.

As Squall climbed down, he reached for another of his Guardians, one that wasn't actually junctioned to him.

Griever, he sent, calling for it. And just like that, it was there, in his mind.

Master, it replied. Where is thy mate? We are incomplete.

I know. She has been taken from us, Squall replied.

She must be returned. Griever responded.

I will search for her as soon as I can. I need your help here, however. Squall said.

I am yours to command, master. It said.

Good. Be ready. Squall told it.

Squall reached the lower platform first, drawing his gunblade and moving off a few paces to light the way for Quistis and Nida and give them room to move. He fancied he could actually see Griever standing next to him like a translucent afterimage from a flash of lightning.

The echoing slithers grew louder, and Squall raised his blade high, anticipating an attack from whatever lurked just beyond the reach of Lionheart's light.

"Nida," he said without turning around as he heard them reach the platform. "You may want to
make this as quick as possible. Quistis, do you hear them?"

"Yes." She answered.

"This won't take long," Nida assured them as he hurried over to the large box that contained the main breakers. He opened the box and began working on the breaker switches, trying to ignore the nervous sweat that began dampening his armpits. Trying to ignore the feeling that something was poised to attack him from the rear.

Nida was nearly finished when he heard a hissing shriek and a shout from Squall. He shut his ears to the sounds of battle going on behind him and concentrated on his task, hoping to hell that both Squall and Quistis could hold whatever it was that was attacking them at bay.

Griever, the moment Nida had turned away to work on the breakers, had alerted Squall to the impending attack. Upon receiving the alert, Squall had readied some protection and cure spells, flinging a protect spell quickly at Quistis before the monsters he'd heard stalking them attacked.

Then he got a confused impression of slick, blotchy, gray-white tentacles before he was knocked off his feet. It was a large oilboyle that had attacked him with a high-pitched hiss, sending him sprawling. Not far away, he heard Quistis' whip crack twice in quick succession as she responded to a second oilboyle's attack.

Squall rolled to avoid the monster's next attack, leaping to his feet and shouting, "Griever! Shockwave pulsar! Now!"

Immediately, blinding light flooded the entire area, causing Squall to close his eyes and shield his face. The oilboyle was nothing but ash in seconds.

Blinking spots from his eyes, Squall raced over to where Quistis was still battling the second oilboyle, casting Aura on himself as he did. She fell back with a cry, slipping on the oil that the creature had shot at her, managing to beat it back with a snap of her whip as she did.

The Aura spell took effect with a warm rush of power, and Squall leaped high, gunblade raised. He used his weight and the momentum behind it to deliver blow after crushing blow to the oilboyle, leaving great gaping rents in the creature's hide. Then he did a back-flip off of the oilboyle to land securely onto his feet facing it, and gathered his energy for his final attack: The Lion Heart.

Golden power swirled around him, coalescing along the blade of Lionheart, causing its glow to brighten from blue-white to a pure, blinding white light. When he was ready, Squall charged with unearthly speed, knocking the monster into the air with a single, powerful blow and leaping up after it, delivering slash after slash with incredible, devastating power.

Squall landed and immediately dropped to his knees, panting heavily, while the remains of the oilboyle fell in oil-smeared, bloody pieces around him.

"Holy shit! Remind me never to piss you off, Squall." Nida said, staring. He'd whirled around with his sword ready only to find that the fight was over. It left him both relieved and slightly disappointed.

"If you pissed me off…" Squall panted, "I'd just kick your ass… I only use this… on people I really… really… hate."

"Or extremely large and aggressive monsters he doesn't feel like taking forever to kill." Quistis said, getting carefully to her feet and grimacing at the smears of oil on her clothing.
"Good to know." Nida said, adding, "Well, I've gotten all of the breakers reset. So now we have lights. You looked a little preoccupied or you would have noticed."

"Good," Squall said, finally catching his breath. The spell had worn off, as had his adrenaline rush, leaving him tired and drained. Levering himself to his feet, he winced and clapped his hand over his right arm, where burning pain and warm wetness told him he'd been injured.

"You okay?" Quistis asked him, catching sight of the injury.

"Yeah," he grunted as he readied a cure spell. "I will be." Within moments, the pain was gone. Looking up at her while flexing his arm to test out the healing, he surreptitiously checked for any signs of injury. Not seeing anything obvious, he looked over at Nida who was likewise checking Quistis for injury. Nida met his eyes and shook his head. Nothing. Squall nodded, relieved.

Walking over to the ladder leading upward, Squall said, "Now that we've got the power back on, the real work begins. Hope you two are ready for a real long night." Sheathing his gunblade, he grasped one of the rungs.

As Squall started climbing upward, Nida said, "Bring it on." He hung back and waited for Quistis to follow Squall up, giving her a wink and waggling his eyebrows at her as she started climbing. She snorted softly and he chuckled in response.

Squall glanced down at them, expression unreadable, then continued climbing, missing Quistis' concerned frown.

*Renn studied the closed door behind which the young sorceress rested, thinking. He knew what his commander would say, if he knew. He'd say, "You're not paid to think. Just do your job. Leave the thinking to those who get paid enough for it to matter."

He hadn't worked for this particular outfit for very long, and at first, he'd just figured a paycheck was a paycheck, and didn't worry too much about the finer points of his job. But that was when the job was simply to guard the lab where their employer worked.

He should have backed out of this assignment when he'd learned the details. *Acquire* Sorceress Rinoa by any means necessary short of killing her knight? *Kidnap* President Loire's daughter in law? His pregnant daughter in law. The implications of that alone made him worry that they were treading dangerously close to treason.*
He'd heard rumors about the doctor's secret experiments, some of which were just too horrible to be true. They had to have been made up; stories told to give a young security specialist the willies as he stalked the darkened corridors of the facility he'd been assigned to. Had to have been… right?

But now, he began to wonder. What possible reason would that dried-up old prune of a doctor have to bring a lovely young pregnant woman to his lab by force? A pregnant sorceress… in that statement, Renn found his answer.

Conventional wisdom, and thousands of years of recorded history said that sorceresses could not bear children. The magic interfered with it in some manner, which was why a successor was always chosen, never born.

And yet, just a few feet away, impossibility slept soundly in the hotel's bed. No wonder Dr. Odine was practically insane with his desire to study her. Or perhaps, it was just plain desire. Or, even more likely, just plain insanity.

Renn snorted inwardly at that thought. If it were anyone else, he might have credited the man with having a man's desires, but not Odine. It just didn't seem to fit him. Oh, the sorceress was undeniably beautiful. Even pregnant, she was lovely enough to tempt. Night-dark hair, pale, luminous skin with that glow that only gravid women possessed, and soft, doe-brown eyes… But beauty didn't move Odine. Intellect did. Puzzles did.

Despite only having met the man a handful of times, Renn had learned that right off. Nothing drove the man like having a question that needed answered.

Sighing again, Renn leaned back into the couch that occupied the suite's sitting room, trying not to think too much about the beautiful, frightened and vulnerable young woman just a few feet away. And wondering when he'd be relieved so he could get dinner.

"She asleep?" His relief came at long last.

"Yeah. She was exhausted. Rough day for her, I guess." Renn commented, wincing inwardly at how callous he sounded.

"She's been pretty docile the whole trip. I half expected hysterics the entire way." The other man replied.

"She's obviously smart enough not to waste her energy on that. And she's docile because of the bangle. Plus, she's pregnant. It's not like she can run very far or very fast. She can't do anything even if she wanted to." Renn said, standing up.

"You going to get some dinner?" his relief asked.

"Yeah, you want anything?" Renn asked him. The other man nodded.

"I'll bring something up for you then." Renn said, leaving the room and going down to the Hotel's small café. While not as fancy as the Galbadian Hotel or anything he'd seen in Esthar, the food was at least fresh and tasty, if a little heavy on the fried fish. He supposed it was good if you liked fish and chips. If you wanted anything else…well, you might as well go on to Esthar.

Fortunately, the Sorceress… Rinoa, her name is Rinoa…had been too hungry to complain. He supposed it had been a long, trying day for her, all things considered. Renn couldn't help feeling sympathetic toward her; she'd had her best friend and her pet killed and had been taken forcibly from her home and forced to travel for hours by train. At a time when hunger and fatigue were pretty much the norm.
He too was surprised that she wasn't more hysterical and difficult to handle. Another surprise to him was the fact that despite being a sorceress, she had not used magic while fighting them. Not once.

He wondered why. Thinking back to the desperate courage she displayed, despite her obvious fear and the overwhelming odds she faced, Renn couldn't help but admire her. But if she were so desperate to avoid capture then why not use her magic?

Renn puzzled over that the entire way back to the room, both his and his co-worker's dinners in hand. Upon arriving, he gave his co-worker his food and set his down on the coffee table, picking up the news magazine that had been left there.

Chills traced down his spine as he saw the face that was featured on the magazine. Squall Leonhart's ice-blue eyes glared back from the cover, a featured story due to the hurricane and the extraordinary measures he was involved with in evacuating the entire town of Balamb. SeeD Commander. Sorceress's knight. Husband to the woman Renn had helped to abduct.

He would come for her. No one doubted that. The only question was when, and what kind of weapons he would bring to bear. And what kind of preparations they would make in response. Renn swallowed, trying not to think of facing such a formidable foe with the continued injunction against killing him.

Renn's privately held opinion of his employer in that moment was that the man was extraordinarily foolish. He'd just stepped on a lion's tail…and it wouldn't be long before the lion turned around and bit him in half.

Squall sat on the floor in the main ballroom, back braced against the wall, eyes closed. He had essentially collapsed there from exhaustion after working nonstop for nearly six hours while the storm raged, helping Quistis, Nida, Xu and Kadowaki, along with the other senior SeeDs, with the inevitable casualties that had occurred from the crash. Fortunately, the casualties were light, only two actually critical injuries, and thus far, no deaths. Squall's stock of curaga spells was depleting rapidly however, so he hoped there wouldn't be any more need for them.

He sat there, half-asleep, listening as the hurricane continued to shriek and hammer at the Garden like a live entity trying to claw its way in. As large as the storm was, it had gone on long enough that the eye should be passing over them soon. Once it did, they would get a short respite.

Maybe he'd actually manage to get some sleep. Never mind about dinner. He was so tired he likely wouldn't be able to eat it anyway. He wondered vaguely if Xu had managed to get the cafeteria put back together enough so that they could start feeding everyone else, though.

"Where my mama?" Squall opened his eyes to meet those of a toddler, staring earnestly at him. The towheaded little boy couldn't have been more than three, if that.

"I don't know." Squall answered him. He supposed he could go look for the kid's mom, or get Quistis to search for her…but he was too damn tired to move. The boy started to sniffle.

Squall sighed; closing his eyes again, he said, "I'll bet if you stay here with me, your mom will find you."

"Okay." The child said, and then startled Squall by climbing trustingly into his lap and curling up
against his chest.

Squall froze, looking down at the child with a slight frown, wondering what to do next. Meanwhile, the toddler squirmed around until he found a comfortable position on Squall's lap and stuck his thumb in his mouth. Without thinking, Squall wrapped his arms around the little boy, holding him securely in place, and leaned his head back against the wall, closing his eyes again. They were both sound asleep in moments.

"Quistis?" Xu said quietly, eyes twinkling. "Come here. You have to see this."

"See what?" Quistis asked, curiously.

"Remember that little boy that went missing a little while ago? His mother was frantic, looking for him." Xu said, smiling.

"Yeah, Jessie was it?" Quistis asked.

"Yes, well I found him…. And you won't believe where he is." Xu said, leading Quistis over to a quiet, shadowy section of the ballroom.

Gesturing for Quistis to be quiet, Xu directed her attention to the two forms that were huddled together against the wall.

Quistis put her hand over her mouth, smothering a laugh, and whispered, "This is just priceless. I really wish I had a camera with me now; Rinoa would just die to get a look at this!"

"Isn't that just adorable? I'll go get Jessie's mother." Xu said quietly, hurrying off.

Quistis approached the pair quietly, smiling at the scene. She didn't want to wake either of them, Squall especially. He'd worked like an absolute fiend after they'd come up from the MD level. He hadn't even bothered to stop to eat. It was not a surprise to find him literally passed out from exhaustion.

Quistis knelt down next to him, reaching for his shoulder to wake him. As she did, a quiet gasp behind her made her look back to see the Xu with the child's mother. Tears swam in her eyes as she smiled, putting her hands over her mouth.

Turning back to Squall, Quistis reached for him again, touching his shoulder gently. He slowly opened his eyes and focused on her, shifting and grimacing, obviously stiff.

"Squall, we found the little boy's mother, she's right over there." Quistis indicated the woman standing not to far behind her.

"Oh, okay." Squall said, blinking. Then he frowned down at the child in his lap for a moment. Shifting the little boy's limp body in his arms slightly, he thought about how he could stand up with the child still in his arms.

"I'll take him," Quistis offered.

"I've got it." Squall said, carefully shifting the boy again and struggling to his feet. It was awkward, and he was nowhere near as graceful as he would ordinarily have been, but the fact that he managed it at all without even waking the child was pretty impressive.

Once he gained his feet he carried the boy to his mother, placing him carefully into her waiting arms.
"Thank you for finding him, Commander." She said, eyes shining with tears.

"He found me." Squall smiled slightly and added, "we were both so damn tired I figured it would be best if we stayed put."

"Well, thank you anyway for looking after him." She said smiling at him.

After she'd left Quistis suggested, "why don't you go ahead and go to bed? It'll be more comfortable than leaning against the wall."

Yawning Squall rubbed at his eyes, and nodded, "Alright. I think we've got everything pretty much handled now, right?" then he paused, frowning slightly and cocking his head, listening.

"Sounds like we're in the eye of the storm." He observed.

"Good. We all need a break." Quistis replied.

Squall nodded in agreement, and started walking away, saying, "If anything happens or you need me for anything, wake me."

"You know I will." Quistis said. Squall raised his hand in acknowledgment but otherwise kept walking toward his former quarters.

The one good thing about all the hard work he'd put in that day was this: he was so damn tired he was guaranteed to sleep.
Zell stared at the comm. light on the instrument panel, worried. It had been hours since he'd left Balamb in the Ragnarok, with the thought that Squall and the Garden, with everyone in it, would be arriving just a few hours later. But it had been ten hours. Squall should have arrived long before now. He was almost never late, and when he said he'd be somewhere, then he'd be there. Unless something had happened.

He tried calling Squall's cell phone and frowned at the lack of reception he was getting. The storm was obviously fully involved now, and had disrupted communications. Cellular and conventional communications apparently were down; and Zell wondered about radio communications.

Opening the commlink, Zell tried Balamb Garden's channel and got nothing but static. Trying another channel, he got the same thing. Static. Flipping through the channels, he encountered the same thing on each of them…but one. A snatch of a voice obliterated by static made him switch back to the channel he'd just passed.

"Hello? Hello?" he said, adjusting the signal for more clarity and listening hard.

"….thar Airstation….calling?" came the response, all but obliterated with static.

**Esthar Airstation? How the hell…** Zell thought, then shrugged. Maybe he could get them to call Irvine at Galbadia Garden or something.

Keying the comm. again, Zell answered, "This is the Ragnarok, Zell Dincht piloting."

"…arok…channel 1165…" Zell could barely make out the response, but decided to try the channel code they gave him. Zell typed in the code and listened, as the comm. hissed and sputtered, then seemed to clear up a little.

Then a voice said, "Squall? Is that you? I've been trying to call you for hours, is everything okay?" The atmospheric interference had distorted the voice and it still faded in and out, but Zell recognized who it was.

"No, Mr. President, this is Zell Dincht. Squall put me in charge of the Ragnarok while he was Commanding Garden." Zell answered.

"Zell? Is Squall there? He's supposed to move the Garden to Trabia, right?" Laguna asked, concerned.

"No, sir, he's not here. And yeah, he was supposed to bring the Garden to Trabia to escape the storm. He should be here by now..." Zell said.

"The storm is fully involved now, so wherever they are, if they're still in Balamb, they just have to ride it out." Laguna said grimly.

"Yeah. You're right. I was thinking about doing a flyover once the storm's cleared up, see if I can locate them." Zell said.

"Let me know what you find when you do." Laguna requested.

"Will do." Zell answered, preparing to sign off. Laguna's next question however made him pause.
"How's Rinoa doing? Do you know?" Laguna asked.

"No, I'm assuming she's fine. Squall left her with Irvine and Selphie so she wouldn't be alone." Zell answered, puzzled.

Laguna's sigh of relief was audible, "Good. I was worried that she'd be left alone at their house. I know Squall was being careful with her and the security system he installed was a good one, but the pressure of dealing with the evacuation and trying to counter that threat to Rinoa…"

"I'm sure she's fine Laguna. If you want, I can give you Irvine's number so you can call and check on her." Zell offered.

"Yes, I want that very much Zell, thank you." Laguna said gratefully.

"Don't mention it. Hey, when you get Irvine on the line, give him an update on our status here, but don't tell Rinoa. I don't want her to worry. I'm sure Squall's fine wherever he is, he's tough as they come and Garden's pretty solid." Zell said.

"She's probably already worried Zell, it comes with the territory. But I'll do my best not to add to it." Laguna replied.

"Thanks man. Once I get in contact with Squall, I'll let you know." Zell said.

"Good. Thank you, Zell." Laguna said.

"No problem." Zell responded. The channel went dead and Zell got up and stretched, wondering what to do next. Pacing the empty corridors of the airship, he reflected that he should have brought his girlfriend with him. It would make the empty hours pass much more quickly and pleasantly than they were now.

Unfortunately, he'd had to leave in such a rush it didn't occur to him to do that until he'd already landed in Trabia. Go figure.

Well, maybe when things settled down he could talk Squall into letting him jet off somewhere with his girl for a little R&R.

The insistent ringing of his phone woke Irvine out of a sound sleep and he rolled over, groaning quietly, reaching blindly for the phone.

"'Io?" he answered, voice husky from sleep. Next to him on the bed, Selphie shifted closer to him, her arm sliding across his belly. He pulled her closer and caressed her hair.

"Hi Irvine? Oh, gosh, I forgot it's the middle of the night over there isn't it? I'm sorry…" it was Laguna's voice.

Irvine sat up, wide awake and said, "No, it's okay. I was actually planning on calling you earlier today but I got confused on the time zone thing." He leaned back against the headboard and Selphie shifted her position again, sighing.

"You…were going to call me? Why? Is Rinoa okay?" Laguna asked, dread creeping up his spine.

"I don't know. She… they attacked Squall's house, Laguna. Selphie did her best, she fought them as
long as she could…" Irvine said, still feeling a little shaky at his wife's close call and Rinoa's loss.


Irvine took a deep breath. He'd been dreading telling Laguna about Rinoa's abduction. About as much or even more than he'd dreaded telling General Caraway about it earlier, for different reasons. Caraway was a respected general, and Irvine had grown up in Galbadia with the idea that if he couldn't make it as a SeeD, there was always the G-army. No one could argue that the Galbadian army at one time had been the most feared and skilled army in the world, an army that only Esthar could challenge. He had a great deal of respect for General Caraway as commander of that army, more so once he'd learned from Rinoa what the man had endured under Deling.

Laguna however was just an all around nice guy, one that you felt horrible telling bad news to. It would be easier to kick a puppy. Intellectually, he knew Laguna wasn't just a happy-go-lucky, slightly air-headed, big-hearted leader. He'd seen hints of steel in the man's spine; you couldn't lead a country as large as Esthar for two decades without it. Laguna wasn't a weakling, despite the image that played up his softer qualities.

But Irvine still felt like he was about to kick a puppy when he raked his hand through his hair and told Laguna, "Selphie and Rinoa went back to Squall's house earlier today to look at some baby things that Squall and Rinoa had bought yesterday and…. the house was attacked. Squall's trapped by the hurricane and out of touch, and I guess they saw that as an opportunity. Selphie fought them off the best she could but there were too many of them. They shot her and Angelo, and took Rinoa with them." There was dead silence on the other end of the line, and Irvine rubbed at his eyes, wondering how Laguna was handling the news.

"Oh, my God..." Laguna whispered, shaken. Up until this moment, there had been a small, sneaky part of him that had thought Squall was being a little overly protective of Rinoa. Until he'd gotten proof positive that she was in danger. The fact that despite everything Squall had tried to do, all of his preparations, she had been kidnapped anyway, hit him like a sucker punch in the gut. And Selphie…

"They shot Selphie? Is she okay? God, please be okay… Laguna asked, closing his eyes and aching for the young man on the other end of the line. Hoping to hell he wasn't talking to a widower, like himself.

"She's… she's fine Laguna. Rinoa dropped some healing potions near her as they led her out. She saved Selphie's life; she wouldn't have made it otherwise. She'd been shot three times..." Irvine replied. He'd be forever grateful to Rinoa for that. He hoped he'd be able to tell her that face to face. He glanced down at Selphie's still sleeping form and stroked her hair again.

"Well, that's good, I'm glad to hear that. What about Angelo?" Laguna asked.

"Angelo's dead. Selphie told me he'd attacked and killed one of the men that threatened Rinoa, and when he went for another one, he was shot and killed." Irvine told him.

"Aw, damn." Laguna sighed, "This is my fault. If I'd warned Squall earlier...."

"What are you talking about? Squall already knew about this, that's why he asked Selphie and me to back him up. He couldn't be in two places at once. If anything, I'm the one that should be at fault here. I should have insisted that Selphie take me along with her if she and Rinoa had to go somewhere, or made sure that they stayed put, or something...I'm the one that failed him Laguna, not you. It hurt, admitting that. Try as he might however, Irvine couldn't figure out where they'd
gone wrong. And he had to, because if a similar situation arose again, he needed to know how to answer it.

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. Squall had asked me to look into some things for him, and I found something out that he'd overlooked. I tried to call him but I was pulled away at the last moment and by the time I was able to try again, he was out of reach." Laguna explained.

Irvine frowned, asking, "What did he overlook?"

"The alarm system that Squall installed on his house? Dr. Odine designed it. He sold the designs to the company that installed and monitored it." Laguna said.

"Oh, wow…" Irvine whispered. That was why the police didn't come when Squall's home had been attacked. The alarm had been disabled. Not that it would have made a difference anyway. By the time the police would have shown up, Rinoa would have been gone and Selphie dead or injured.

"That was my reaction too. It was tough to dig that information up. When a design concept is sold, the only information you normally see when it's put into production is who manufactured it. The only way I found that out is I started checking into Dr. Odine's personal finances, at Squall's suggestion, and I found the proceeds from the sale and was able to backtrack it. Or rather, a forensic accountant I have on staff was able to do it." Laguna said.

"Well, while that information is significant, I don't think it would have made any difference. These guys were pros… in and out fast enough that even if the alarm had gone off, Rinoa would still have been kidnapped." Irvine said.

Laguna was silent for a moment, letting that statement seep in.

Then he asked, "What other information do you have about them?"

"Well, we're still analyzing the evidence, not that there was much; Selphie told me she was sure that between her, Rinoa and Angelo, they had to have killed at least five of their men, if not more. But all that was left behind was a big mess and a lot of blood. They took their dead with them, to make it harder to figure out who they are and who hired them." Irvine said, and then added, "From what Selphie told me, they sound like either a mercenary unit kind of like SeeD or a private security group. Maybe former army, some of them; they certainly were very quick, efficient, and coordinated. They worked as a unit. They even wore uniforms of a sort, but not anything that Selphie recognized. Not military, that's for sure… just a kind of drab, nondescript brown. No insignias of any sort."

"Nothing that would identify them or their employer." Laguna said.

"Right." Irvine said. "But we did figure a few things out."

"What?" Laguna asked.

"Well, they were definitely from Esthar. Selphie recognized the accents from some of the men that attacked, plus the bullets we dug out of the walls, and…Angelo… well, they're unique to Esthar." Irvine said.

"Unique to Esthar…Oh! Right! The alloy!" Laguna exclaimed.

"Right. You guys don't make bullets out of lead there. Esthar's lead-poor, so you use a steel alloy. That's why bullets there are so damned expensive. Which means whoever hired these guys has a
fat bankroll." Irvine said.

"Well, it's still not concrete enough to link to Dr. Odine, but I'll check into the high level security angle, see if I can't trace anything back to Odine and maybe even get a possible location where they may be taking Rinoa." Laguna said, already thinking hard about the different agencies that existed in Esthar and what they specialized in. And how he could legally obtain confidential client information from said companies, who were notorious for being discreet about who hired them.

Of course, there were advantages to being the head of the country's government… then Laguna sobered. He had to tread very carefully. Squall was his son, but Laguna was the President of Esthar. There were ethical issues that he had to consider very carefully. If it looked like he was abusing his power even a little… it could jeopardize everything he'd worked for over two decades to build.

"Call me if you find anything. I'll do the same, I'm going to be checking into things here, see if I can't get at least a lead for when Squall gets back." Irvine said.

"You're not going to wait for him to get back to go after her, are you?" Laguna asked, worried. Rinoa might not have that much time…if it was Odine that had engineered the kidnapping, Laguna wasn't completely certain that he'd let her go once he'd gotten what he wanted…. not alive, anyway. The only thing Laguna knew for certain about Odine was the fact that he was never sentimental about any of his test subjects. No matter who or what they were.

"No. He wouldn't want me to wait. He'd want me to go as soon as I have a lead. And I will. If he gets back soon enough, then I'll point him in the right direction and get out of his way. Until then, I'm taking the lead on this." Irvine said firmly.

"Good." Laguna said, relieved. Then he smiled slightly as he heard Irvine yawn on the other end of the line.

"I'd better let you get back to sleep. Give Selphie a hug for me. I'm glad to hear she made it through all right." Laguna said.

"I'll right. I'll keep in touch." Irvine promised.

"Here, let me give you my direct number, the switchboard system in the Presidential Palace is a nightmare, according to Squall. Beats me why he won't at least program my direct number into his phone if he can't memorize it." Laguna said, giving Irvine the number.

After writing it down, Irvine commented, "Squall's got a lot of things in his mind. Remembering a phone number with all of that going on might be a little difficult for him."

Laguna frowned at the odd phrasing before he remembered: Squall used GF's. A lot. There was still a bit of controversy about that, there were some that maintained that they caused memory loss. Empirical studies of that however were inconclusive. No one could say with any certainty that it actually did or would occur and to what extent, and if the person junctioned to the Guardian did experience memory loss, if it would be permanent.

"I wish he'd stop using the GF's. He's not active now, he shouldn't need them..." Laguna said, frowning.

Irvine sighed, silently agreeing with his friend's father, saying, "Well, he'd stopped for about six months give or take while training for the SeeD games, and only just recently started using them again when this threat to Rinoa surfaced." Having come from a philosophy that didn't rely as
heavily upon the Guardians as the Balamb-trained SeeDs did, Irvine tended not to use them as often, fearing the side effects that he'd seen firsthand.

However, Irvine also had firsthand experience with the fact that the memory loss that tended to occur was not in fact, permanent. The memories, it turned out, weren't erased but set aside, access to them blocked by the Guardians. When the junction was dropped, the mind slowly began to re-establish that access.

Slowly, Irvine said, "I don't know if this will make you feel better about Squall using the Guardians or not, but the memory loss isn't permanent. He told me that after he'd been un-junctioned for a while, a lot of old memories that he'd thought completely gone surfaced. Apparently, memories can't be permanently eradicated. The mind doesn't work that way."

"And I know to Squall, the tradeoff is worth it. Face it, he doesn't have enough happy memories to care about possibly losing them." Laguna said, sadly.

"Maybe that was true in the past. Not so much now. He has a lot more to lose now." Irvine said.

"Yeah, that's true," Laguna said. Irvine was right. Squall did have a lot more to lose at this point in his life, and he knew that it wasn't just memories that Irvine was referring to.

"Well, we'll do all we can to help him bring Rinoa home." Irvine said.

"I know you will. So will I. In fact, I think I know of something that might help." Laguna said.

"What?" Irvine asked.

"I think we need to go public with this. Someone had to have seen something. If she left the country, it could only have been either by train or boat. If it was by train, someone had to have seen her getting on or off. We can set up a hotline. Maybe we can track where she was taken if enough people call in..." Laguna said, warming to the idea.

"That's a good idea, but who's going to man the hotline? I'm gonna have all the SeeDs I can talk into helping me working on following her trail. We're going to start with interviewing the neighbors to see if anyone saw anything," Laguna said, warming to the idea.

"Don't worry about that. I'll call Caraway..." Laguna frowned, asking, "Did you tell him?"

"Yeah, I did." Irvine answered. Caraway's reaction to the news had been unexpected, at least to Irvine. He knew that Rinoa and her father had managed a reconciliation of sorts over the last year or so, but seeing Caraway's face turn ashen and aged right before Irvine's eyes at the news had been startling.

"How'd he take it?" Laguna asked quietly.

"Not well. Worse than I thought he would." Irvine said.

Laguna sighed, and suggested "Well, why don't you go ahead and go back to sleep, and I'll give you an update later on all of that."

"All right. Good night.... or day... or whatever it is there." Irvine yawned.

Laguna chuckled, "Good night Irvine." Then he disconnected the line.

Irvine laid the phone back onto the nightstand, settling back into bed, curling himself around
Selphie's still sleeping form. Throughout the protracted conversation he'd had with Laguna, she hadn't awakened once, despite the fact that Laguna was one of her favorite people.

Kissing the back of her neck gently, Irvine wrapped his arms around her and thanked all of the powers that existed that she'd not only survived the attack, but that she'd come out of the emergency surgery following it as well as she had.

When Irvine had sent her to Dr. Curran to be checked out, neither he nor Selphie had had any idea that she still had three bullets inside of her, one of which threatened Selphie's heart if it shifted even a little. The healing potions had taken care of the damage caused by the bullets, but not the bullets themselves. They still had to come out.

So she'd undergone emergency surgery, and endured another dose of the healing elixir Rinoa had left for her to recover from it. The end result had left her pale and exhausted.

Irvine knew that she only needed a good night's rest and she'd be back to her normal, spunky self. Tears stung his eyes at the thought of losing her; the relief that he'd felt at learning that she would be fine and with him that same night made him feel weak. He couldn't imagine what Squall was going through; assuming he knew that Rinoa had been kidnapped, he had to be going out of his mind at his inability to search for her and bring her home. It was up to Irvine then, to find Rinoa and bring her back to Squall so they could be together when their babies were born.

He'd do everything he could to make that happen. He wouldn't fail Squall again.

Gray dawn broke over an uneasy sea, the heaving deck of the houseboat making even Seifer begin to feel queasy. The night had been hellish, no sleep for anyone. He, Fujin and Raijin had battled the sea the entire night, riding the pounding waves, hoping against hope that their boat was sturdy enough not to founder as the storm worsened.

Yes, they were on the lee side of the continent, shielded in part by the Guarg Mountains; but the hurricane was so massive that even partially blocked by the mountain range, enough of the wind and rain overtopped them that everyone on the seas that night were in for the fight of their lives.

The storm they endured wasn't quite hurricane strength, but it was damn close.

Not everyone made it. Two of the trawlers had either strayed too close to the treacherous rocks in the shallows or had taken on too much water and were lost. Seifer had coordinated the remaining fishing vessels to rescue the survivors; he himself had taken on four. But two sailors were unaccounted for and presumed dead.

As the dawn progressed however, Seifer saw hope. The swells were calming, and the wind had blown itself out hours ago. All that remained was a fitful breeze that was helping to gently shred the clouds to tatters.

"STORM'S OVER." Fujin said. She still held the wheel to the Fire Cross in a death grip, smiling tiredly up at Seifer as he gently kissed her cheek on her blind side.

"Looks that way." Seifer replied, sighing. They'd survived the storm, but now the real work would begin; clean up, recovery, restoring power to Balamb and the outlying areas…
Raijin came in then, interrupting Seifer's thoughts by saying, "So, whatta we do now, ya know? I mean, Fire Cross came outta the storm okay but the decks are awash and we lost half of our lines, ya know? And all of our fishing tackle." That last bit of information was delivered with a sigh and a frown. Raijin's passion for fishing led Seifer to believe that the man should have chosen a job as a fisherman rather than as a SeeD. Fortunately, despite his somewhat simple image, Raijin was actually quite adept at both jobs. Of course, to Raijin, fishing wasn't so much a job or hobby as it was an obsession.

"How are the bilges?" Seifer asked him.

"Need pumpin'." Raijin reported.

"Get on it then." Seifer ordered him.

"Aye, aye captain!" Raijin said with a mock salute. Seifer flung a halfhearted backhand slap at him that he easily avoided, laughing. Fujin smiled at the interplay.

Sighing, he wrapped his arms around Fujin and leaned his head against hers, saying, "God, I'm so tired I can barely think. I'd go to bed but the boat's still tossing too much for me to sleep."

Fujin snorted quietly and offered, "TIE YOU DOWN?"

"Don't tempt me." Seifer said, yawning. While Fujin's offer conjured some rather risqué imagery in his mind, Seifer knew he was much too tired to do anything but sleep. Of course, the day he slept through being tied down and left to Fujin's whims was the day she'd have to start planning his funeral.

Scratching at his hair he said, "I guess I could check in with Garden, let 'em know we survived."

Fujin nodded agreement.

Sighing, he tried Squall's cell phone and got dead air; the same with Quistis' phone. The main number at Garden was no different. Frowning in frustration, he tried Zell. Nothing.

"Well, no cell reception. Towers must be down or damaged." Seifer said.

"RADIO?" Fujin asked.

"Could try it I guess..." Seifer said, reaching for the radio mike and turning it on. Radio reception was pretty iffy in general, although since the big tower in Dollet had been repaired and later improved upon, it had gotten better. Other large towers like it had started to appear on mountaintops, improving cellular and satellite reception. Progress since the last Sorceress War had apparently marched on.

Adjusting the frequency until he found a clear channel, Seifer keyed the mike and said, "This is Fire Cross, Seifer Almasy commanding. Anyone out there?" Seifer waited for a response, and heard nothing but static. Switching to another channel, he tried again. When no response came from that channel, he tried another, and another, until he heard a response. It was so garbled as to be unintelligible, so he adjusted the signal again until it was a little clearer.

"This is Seifer Almasy. Please repeat your response." The crackling static on the radio had faded a bit, and the voice coming through was clearer, but still unintelligible. After fiddling with the dial for several minutes, he gave up in frustration.

"I'm not getting anything." Seifer growled.
Raijin popped his head into the cabin of the boat at that moment and asked, "Not getting what?"

"Signal. I'm trying to raise Squall or Zell or anybody on the radio. We can communicate okay between ships, but I'm not getting anybody else." Seifer stood, rubbing at his burning eyes and trying without much success to fight the fatigue that dragged at him.

"Maybe ya need to get closer to 'em, ya know?" Raijin suggested.

Seifer stared at him, suddenly feeling about three feet thick. Why hadn't he thought of that? Because you haven't slept for twenty-eight hours, that's why, he thought. Raking his hands through his hair he stood, trying to scrub the exhaustion off his face and rub it from his eyes with no success.

Stepping out onto the still lurching deck of his boat, he closed his eyes and let the freshening breeze wash over him. While the seas were still tossing and turning, they were gradually flattening out, the boat tossing much less now than it had just moments ago. She seemed sound enough, despite the storm, and really, they had no other choice. Their refugees were going to need to go someplace; there was no room for them on Seifer's boat, and only enough food for the three of them.

Going back to Balamb was out of the question. At least, not at the present time; nobody would be there. If everything had gone according to plan, the entire community would have been evacuated and Garden moved from the path of the storm. They had to go where Garden was.

Turning back to the cabin, he re-entered and told Fujin, "Fujin, steer us toward southern Trabia. Maybe if we're closer to them we'll be able to raise them on the radio."

Fujin nodded and spun the wheel, turning the boat.

As the vessel bobbed and tossed its way toward the new heading that Seifer had directed, Fujin speared him with a glare from her red-rimmed eye and said harshly, "YOU SLEEP NOW."

Seifer gave her a tired smile and kissed her cheek gently, saying, "Yes dear. You coming to join me?"

Fujin smiled slightly and replied, "LATER." She sighed as Seifer wrapped his arms around her from behind, hugging her close.

"Have I told you lately how absolutely amazing I think you are?" Seifer whispered into her hair.

"NO." She said, her smile broadening.

"Then I am remiss, and I apologize. I love you Fu. Come join me soon, okay? You need rest too." Seifer said softly, turning her to face him and kissing her deeply.

"OKAY." She said, turning her attention back to the wheel and the boat she was currently operating. Seifer knew Raijin was more than competent at the wheel; they'd all taken turns spelling each other during the night. Once the bilges were pumped out, Seifer hoped that Fujin had Raijin take over for a while so they could both sleep.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

A knock at the door woke Rinoa from a sound sleep, leaving her disoriented and wondering why
she was sleeping alone in an FH hotel room. Then tears stung her eyes as she remembered. The kidnapping. Selphie. Angelo. Squall, I miss you so much…

The knock sounded again, louder.

"Sorceress? Er, Rinoa? Are you awake?" the voice of one of her captors sounded from the other side of the door. Rinoa thought she recognized the voice of the young man on the train that'd been… well; he'd been nice to her. Or at least treated her like a human being and not baggage.

Yawning and groaning, Rinoa considered not answering. Mornings weren't usually her thing anyway, and she was definitely not in the mood to be cooperative with her captors. Then it occurred to her that they might simply come into the room and haul her bodily out of bed.

She considered putting up a fight simply out of pique, but then remembered Squall's directive: Don't fight. Don't give them a reason to hurt you.

Yesterday, she had been in shock. Tired, afraid, grieving; her behavior had reflected that. She'd been quiet and docile, and had given her captors no trouble whatsoever. Today however, she had slept and was rested; she had also come out of her shock and what was left was anger.

No, she wouldn't physically challenge her captors. She wasn't stupid. But she also was not going to be cooperative any longer. The trick would be making it appear that she was cooperating, when in fact she was doing everything in her power to slow her captors down. If it also afforded her the opportunity to leave a clue for Squall, so much the better.

Besides, she really, really wanted a shower and clean clothes.

Getting out of bed, she padded over to the door and opened it, startling the young man on the other side. He blinked at her, and then frowned slightly. Rinoa gave him an ironic half-smile. She knew what she must look like. Hair uncombed and sticking in all directions, skin oily, clothes wrinkled from having been slept in.

"Ah…Sor...Rinoa, um, we need to get ready to go." He said, hesitantly.

Rinoa gave him a falsely sweet smile and asked, "What's your name?"

He frowned, confused, "My…name? Renn. It's Renn."

"Renn?" She asked, using a saccharine tone, "Did you manage to take a shower this morning? You look very put together and tidy."

"Uh, yes, ma'am, I did…" he answered, still confused. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something in her tone made him a little uneasy. Maybe it was just discomfort at seeing the young sorceress in such a disheveled state, when it was obviously not her preference.

"Clean uniform too, if I'm not mistaken." Rinoa commented. Renn nodded.

"Well, Renn," Rinoa said, still smiling sweetly. "I would dearly love to also have a shower and clean clothes to wear. If you could help me with that, I would be very grateful to you."

"Bu…But our train's leaving in a half-hour. I was sent to get you so you could eat breakfast…" Renn said, feeling helpless. Now what was he supposed to do?

"Renn, if you could just get me some clean clothes, I would feel sooo much better and less inclined to force you to carry me out of the hotel, kicking and screaming, attracting all kinds of attention,
putting undue stress on me and the babies…” Rinoa said, still using that same sweet tone. She met the young man's eyes, letting him know in no uncertain terms that she was not kidding.

Renn swallowed, realizing he'd been outmaneuvered and unsure of just exactly how that had happened, and said, "I'll…. see what I can do."

He left, to return a few moments later, instructing her, "Leave your clothes outside the door here and we'll have them laundered by the hotel. Go ahead and take your shower in the meantime."

Rinoa gave him a genuine smile of relief and Renn blinked, surprised at its brilliance. The door closed as Rinoa ducked back into the room, and Renn stared at it for a moment, cheeks warm. Trying hard not to think of the young sorceress undressing on the other side.

Rinoa meanwhile had found a soft terrycloth robe, apparently supplied along with the assorted toiletries that this suite boasted. After stripping, she put on the robe, bundled her clothes together and deposited them onto the floor outside her door.

Then she went into the small in-suite bathroom and started the water, adjusting the temperature to her liking before doffing the robe and stepping under the spray. While she would have loved a bath… her cheeks grew warm at the memory of the last time she'd had a bath…it felt so good to finally have a shower and to be clean.

But she couldn't stop her mind from replaying that night, was it just days ago? It seemed as if a year had passed since she last felt Squall's hands caressing her body, tasted his lips upon hers, drowned in his scent and lost herself in passion with him.

Tears leaked from her eyes again as she tilted her face into the spray, missing her husband with a desperate ache.

She raked her hands through her hair as she took advantage of the provided toiletries and washed it. It was while she was rinsing the conditioner out that she noticed a good bit of her hair coming out and catching in her fingers. It wasn't anything unusual; she always lost a bit of hair while showering. But it seemed she was losing more than usual, possibly due to stress. But it gave her an idea.

She kept raking her hands through her hair, pulling more and more of the strands free, and carefully laying them aside to dry. She did likewise with the comb after she'd finished her shower and dried off.

Rinoa studied the results critically. She'd managed to gather up a respectable amount of hair, though it was actually less than she'd feared it would be, and definitely less than she wanted. Still, it was enough for what she intended.

Wrapping herself up in the robe, she took the hank of hair, and deftly worked it into a thin braid, and then into a knot. A specific knot.

"What are you doing?" Rinoa asked the silent young SeeD that had been assigned to her.

"Tying a knot." He'd answered tersely.

"I can see that," Rinoa said patiently, then asked, "why?" Squall didn't answer her. Instead, he showed her the knot, an intricate loop at one end of the rope he was holding. Then he slipped it over the top of the support pole that projected through the grommet at the front of the tent she was using. Pulling it tight, he tied another of the intricate loops at the other end of the rope and slipped it over the tent peg that was partially buried in the loamy soil, pounding it the rest of the way into
the dirt to secure the rope.

Finally, he answered, "So I can pitch your tent."

Placing a hand at his hip, he asked her, "Any other questions?"

"What kind of knot is it? Can you teach me how to tie it?" she'd asked him. She'd smiled inwardly at his wary look, hoping her ploy would work. As the silence stretched, she began to worry that he'd simply glare at her and walk away, which was what he normally did when she tried to talk to him.

She didn't understand him. When she'd danced with him that night at the SeeD graduation ball, she'd seen something in his eyes, something that led her to try and break through the shell he'd erected around himself. She caught flashes of it from time to time, when he thought she wasn't paying attention. It was interest. He was INTERESTED...

Well, so was she. So, maybe he'd teach her about the knot he'd used, and she'd be able to prove to him that she wasn't just useless baggage...

Finally, he nodded and said, "It's called a bowline. And you start like this...."

She'd finished the knot as a knocking at the door alerted her that her time was up. She studied the results critically. The hair had been worked into an identifiable bowline knot, which she slipped over the bedpost at the head of the right side...the side she normally slept on in the bed she shared with Squall.

Then she opened the door and thanked the young guard, Renn, for bringing her laundered clothing to her.

She felt so good at having clean clothes on that she met the dour expressions of her jailers with a bright smile when she entered the main room of the suite.

Then she asked them, "So, what's for breakfast?"

The gunblade slashed through the air with a whistle, following a specific pattern, coming to rest at guard.

Beginner's pattern I, complete. Pattern 2. Focus.

From guard position, Squall flowed into the next pattern, mind blank, letting his body take the lead. It was a release of sorts for him, when nothing else was available, and it was vital to his sanity.


He always started with the basics first. Drilled into the mind and body until they were automatic. Using them as a warm up to the more complicated and advanced patterns that he now knew.


He needed this. Needed to work his body through the routines he'd used since he'd first picked up the heavy, unwieldy gunblade. Needed to challenge his strength, his grace, and his stamina. He needed to.

He needed to be ready to kill without hesitation.

Beginner's pattern 3, complete. Advanced pattern, level 1. Keep the focus. Still water.

The pattern was harder than the first three, more challenging. It forced Squall's concentration to narrow until it was wholly upon the blade and his body, using the gunblade like an extension of himself.

Flow like water. Move like wind. Precise, controlled…

Like water: flowing from one technique to the next. Like wind: hard as a gale, soft as a breeze…

Soft as an Angel's kiss upon his cheek.

Sharp as an adamantine blade, smooth as expensive silk…

Obsidian strands sifting though his fingers…

He would not consider himself to be a master, though many would argue that point. He certainly had mastered this most difficult of weapons to the point that even watching him battle for his life with the gunblade displayed his grace and skill. At a time when style counted for nothing, it was still beautiful to watch.

Working through the advanced patterns, still focusing upon the techniques, the weight and heft of the blade, the surging of his blood, the burning of his lungs… it made him forget, just for a moment, where he was.
It was only the gunblade and the patterns. The deadly dance that he engaged in every day with the only partner that he'd ever danced with. Besides Rinoa, that was.

*An Angel's kiss…obsidian silk…*

*Rinoa…*

The pattern faltered as pain stabbed through Squall's heart. He took a deep breath.

*Focus. Mind like still water…FOCUS.*

He picked up the pattern again, and finished it correctly. But the zen-like state he'd entered while practicing had been shattered by an errant thought. A wisp of memory. A name.

He tried to regain it. Closing his eyes, he stood balanced, still as stone, and simply breathed.

*Calm. Serene. Still water. Focus.*

Breathe in.

*Feet solid upon the ground, weight evenly upon both. Gunblade at guard.*

Breathe out.

*Grounded. Centered. All energy flowing into and from the earth; perfect in stillness.*

Breathe in.

*Mind calm. Serene. Shielded.*

Squall frowned. He didn't need to shield. There was nothing to shield *from*. He tried not to look in the place where Rinoa's presence would normally be found, but it was like having a sore tooth. Even when the ache had faded into the background, it was always there. Always reminding him. He touched that blank spot, wishing he had the power to breach the barrier keeping him from her.

Sighing, he lowered the tip of his gunblade until it rested upon the ground. It was no use, his concentration was well and truly gone now, the momentary peace he got from practicing for war evaporating like smoke in the wind.

A slight scuff of shoe on pavement caught his attention and he turned, watching as Quistis approached.

"So this is where you got to," she said, looking around. The quad had survived the storm surprisingly well. Then again, perhaps it wasn't as much of a surprise as one would think, if one took into consideration the magical protections that the Garden had.

Without the magical barrier that had protected Garden, the quad, along with everything else, would have been destroyed.

It wasn't a surprise to see Squall out there, working with his gunblade. He'd been tense and stressed, and one good way to relieve that stress was to exercise. Quistis was that way herself; sometimes she just had to work up a good sweat to work off a mood.

What *was* a surprise was his complete withdrawal. Oh, he still communicated with her, with Nida, with anyone else he had to talk to. But when that need was past, he shut down. This retreat into brooding silence was unhealthy, and for the life of her, Quistis could not get anything from him.
that would give her a clue to what had caused it.

Whatever it was, it had happened during the hurricane and even though the storm had now passed, it was still bothering him. Part of it, Quistis was sure, was the fact that they were essentially stranded in their current location and unable to communicate with anyone.

There was nothing that Squall liked less than feeling trapped and powerless. She knew why; she’d endured a stint in the D-district prison right along with him and Zell. While she wasn't treated as badly as he was—as squad commander, they'd focused their "interrogations" entirely upon him—she’d heard his screams.

Even now, she shuddered at the memory. Squall had a high pain threshold. Quistis could only imagine what had been done to him to force him to scream in absolute agony like that. Zell and Seifer knew, but the grim looks they’d given her when she'd asked made her think that all things considered, she was better off not knowing.

Having at least a rudimentary understanding of his mindset however did not guarantee that her speculations were correct. Even his closest friends considered him enigmatic at best, infuriating at worst.

Which one of those two options he would be at this point in time depended upon the response he gave her.

"Yes?" he prompted, waiting for whatever it was she had come to tell him or ask him or remind him to do.

Quistis grimaced at his stone-faced delivery. Enigmatic, and infuriating; his blank expression gave nothing away.

"We're still unable to raise Zell or anyone else by radio. Cell reception is unavailable. We still haven't figured out what kind of damage the main propulsion systems have sustained, and they're still inoperable. Until we can get into contact with Zell and have him fly the Ragnarok to FH to pick up the repair techs that worked on the Garden when we crashed into them, we're stuck."

Quistis reported.

"Any other damages to report?" Squall asked her.

"Nothing major. We do have tech teams working on the transmitters, so we should have the comms back online eventually. Really, aside from the damage to the propulsion systems sustained in the crash, everything else is okay. Neither of the main reservoirs was breached, so we've got plenty of fresh water, and the reserve in the desalination tanks is full as well. You have to admit; the Shumi really know how to build."

Squall nodded. Now, it was a waiting game. Until they could bring the comms back online and bring Zell back with the Ragnarok; there was nothing more that they could do. Not with Garden anyway. There was still plenty of work to do.

The sheriff had talked to him about getting a team of SeeDs together and driving out to Balamb Town for a damage assessment. Despite the rough night, and the crash resulting from it, the cars in Garden's motor pool had been secured well enough that none had been damaged. It only remained for Squall to select the team and go.

"We need to go into Balamb and do a damage assessment. Sheriff Douglas asked me about it earlier today. Since there's really nothing critical to deal with here, I plan on taking a team of about
five SeeDs and cadets along with the Sheriff out there this afternoon.” Squall said.

"Do you have anyone specific in mind for the team?” Quistis asked him.

"Not really. Whoever's available.” Squall shrugged.

"All right. I'll send them out. When do you want to go?” Quistis asked.

"One o'clock.” Squall answered.

"Okay. I'll get 'em assembled and ready to go by then.” Quistis said.

"Thank you.” Squall said. He sheathed his gunblade and looked around the quad a moment. There really was surprisingly little damage. Squall knew the Garden's shield spell had to have protected the open area, but it left him puzzled that he could still feel a light breeze ruffling his hair. Apparently, the spell had been refined to tell the difference between a gale and a breeze.

"What do you plan on doing now?” Quistis asked him.

Squall returned his attention to her, answering, "Well, as the cafeteria is now functioning, I suppose I should eat lunch."

"Well, I'd join you but I've already eaten." Quistis said. Squall shrugged. He didn't care either way, Quistis knew. But it worried her, seeing him fall back into an old pattern she'd thought he'd outgrown.

He'd turned to leave when Quistis called after him, "Squall, wait. Something's bothering you. I know it is. What's wrong?”

He paused and looked back at her, answering shortly, "Nothing you can fix."

She folded her arms and said, "Hey, it's me, okay? Quistis? Remember? You are allowed to talk to me. So… talk to me?"

Squall studied her silently. It was on the tip of his tongue to simply say "no" and walk away. She couldn't help him, and she couldn't help Rinoa. Nobody could. Not even he could.

So what would be the point of telling Quistis that Rinoa had been kidnapped just as the hurricane had struck, that he'd been helpless to save her and that each minute, each hour that ticked away took her farther and farther from him? What would be the point?

The point was that she cared. That she wanted to help. If nothing else, she could provide an ear for him to vent to, if he was so inclined. But he wasn't the sort to spill his sorrows to a willing listener, never had been.

Still, he owed her an explanation of why he was leaving them all at his first opportunity. When that opportunity presented itself, Squall would tell her.

Finally, Squall said, "Later.” And walked away.

"This is Fire Cross, Seifer Almasy commanding. Anyone out there?” Static crackled in response, and Seifer adjusted the frequency for what seemed like the hundredth time. He should be able to
raise either Zell or Squall soon; they were within sight of Trabia's shoreline now.

Static crackled and the radio responded, "...eifer? This is ...ell. Where are you?" Seifer adjusted the signal again and was rewarded with a clearer response to his answer.

"We're just off the Trabian coast. Should be within sight of you pretty soon." Seifer answered.

More static, and the signal cleared further, Zell responding with, "I see you now. Good to know you made it."

"It was a pretty hairy night. We lost two trawlers. Is Squall around? I can't raise Garden." Seifer said.

"Neither can I." Zell said.

Seifer frowned, asking, "What do you mean? Shouldn't it be right there by you?"

"It should be, but it's not. I haven't had any contact with Squall or Garden since I got here." Zell answered him.

Seifer swore quietly. That was a possibility he hadn't counted on. What the hell had happened?

"Well, the weather's cleared up, have you tried a flyover yet to see if you can locate them?" Seifer asked.

"Not yet. I was getting ready to when I heard your hail." Zell answered.

"Well, go ahead and do it now then, and let me know what you find. I have four refugees here I rescued from shipwreck that I'd like to get installed in Garden if possible. I don't have the room or the resources to keep them on my boat for very long." Seifer told him.

"All right. I'll let you know in a little bit. I'm taking off now." Zell said. A few minutes later, a scream from overhead sounded and Seifer saw the bright red airship taking off and heading south toward Balamb.

While he waited, Seifer busied himself with putting the boat to rights. Raijin had done a creditable job below decks, particularly with the bilges. But he'd never been good with keeping the decks cleared. This time however, anything that had been lost due to the storm couldn't be blamed on him. Everything had been secured as well as was possible, Raijin being particularly careful about his fishing tackle. It was just ironic, dumb luck that the fishing equipment was one of the few things that had been washed overboard.

Fortunately, it didn't take much work to get the Fire Cross back in shipshape order. Seifer's passengers were all sailors who were bored with inactivity, so had volunteered to help. They were just finishing up when the distinctive roar of the Ragnarok's engines signaled its approach.

Seifer headed back for the cabin, turning the radio back on.

Static crackled and Zell's voice sounded, "Fire Cross, this is Zell on the Ragnarok. I found 'em. Garden's down and it looks like it crashed or something. I'm going to be flying back in a few minutes to see if they need any help. If you want me to take your passengers with me that's fine."

"Yeah, I can have Raijin take them over in the lifeboat, unless you want to do the harness and winch thing to pick them up." Seifer said.
"Uh…lifeboat would be best. Airlifting takes two people; one on at the Ragnarok's controls and the other manning the winch, and its just me here." Zell advised them.

"All right, we'll be right over…" Seifer said, signing off. Then he hollered, "RAIJIN!"

A few minutes later, Raijin and the four refugees had piled into the inflatable raft and were making for the nearby shore. Zell met them there when they landed, and led the men to the Ragnarok while Raijin got back into the life raft and rowed back to the Fire Cross.

The Ragnarok took off again just a few minutes later.

Squall drove the Garden's transport truck overland toward Balamb; the sheriff sitting beside him and the SeeDs who'd volunteered (according to Quistis, at any rate) to go along sitting in the back.

They bumped along on the rough track, not even a road really, just a rough patch of muddy, waterlogged plain that they had to slog through before finally reaching the main road. Squall couldn't drive as fast as he wanted to, not if he wanted to actually get there and not get stuck in the mud or damage the sturdy vehicle they were using.

A particularly hard bump however generated protests from the SeeDs, with one of them saying, "Damn! Could this get any rougher?"

To which Squall replied, "Yes actually, it could." Then he pressed ever so lightly on the accelerator. The resulting bump was satisfyingly tooth jarring, and it left everyone wondering if Squall had lost his mind and was trying to kill them.

"Squall! Take it easy man!" Nida protested, gripping the strap affixed to the side of the vehicle he was sitting on. The sheriff simply swore quietly and held on for dear life.

"You did fasten your seatbelts, didn't you?" Squall asked as he continued negotiating the truck over the plain.

Fortunately that was the last bump before they finally reached the main road. The truck fishtailed slightly as it transitioned from mud and vegetation to pavement, and Squall sped up as their road smoothed out. For a little while, that was.

The closer they drew to Balamb, the rougher the road became, until Squall slowed down and finally stopped. Everyone simply stared in silence at what was directly ahead.

"We can't go any further. The road's gone." Squall said.

Beside him, Sheriff Douglas whispered under his breath, "Oh, my God…"

Squall got out of the truck, adjusting his sunglasses, and walked around to the front of it, studying what was left of the road that led into Balamb. The sun shone brightly, the breeze was sweet, if somewhat cold. In short, it was a beautiful winter day in Balamb. All the better to highlight the utter devastation left behind by the hurricane.

Nothing but a muddy scar remained of the road leading into Balamb. For a full quarter of a kilometer, the road was simply gone. And Balamb? It was gone too. Where they all currently stood, they should have been able to see the quay, the shops, and the hotel…. they should have
been able to see the town.

All that was left was a scum of mud covering everything, and scattered debris with the odd chimney or corner of a building still stubbornly standing. Not even trees had survived. The entire town had been wiped off the landscape, virtually as if it had never existed at all.

"It's all… it's just… gone. All of it." The sheriff said, brown eyes wide, shock evident in his voice. Then he added slowly, "Commander Leonhart, when you're right, you're right. If we'd stayed…" He swallowed, not finishing his statement.

"I wish to hell I wasn't." Squall said in a low voice. The sheriff stared at him, puzzled.

"Why? You saved everyone. In spite of all of this…nobody died. That's impressive. I'm impressed, at any rate." Sheriff Douglas said.

Squall didn't respond. Instead, he continued gazing silently out at the scars left behind by the storm. He didn't expect it to affect him like it did, though it shouldn't be a surprise; Balamb was his home too. His living arrangement in Deling City was a temporary thing; he'd always intended to come back.

But now there was nothing to come back to.

*Nothing to go home to either,* he thought painfully. There was just… wreckaged.

"What do we do now?" Nida asked him softly.

Squall glanced over at him, and then met the eyes of the rest of the SeeDs he'd brought.

"You each have cameras, you were told to bring them." Squall stated, and they all nodded in confirmation. Stepping off of the road and into the waterlogged plain next to it, he began walking toward the remains of Balamb.

"Take pictures. Document everything." Squall said over his shoulder as he walked, heedless of the mud and the wet grass.

They walked silently alongside the remains of the main road into town. No monsters troubled them; they'd all fled to the mountains, driven by the storm. There wasn't even a bite bug around to bother them.

They were still several meters from Balamb's former location when Squall paused, studying evidence of how far the storm surge had come inland. From the beach, Squall could tell it had come in nearly half a kilometer. From the harbor, where the water was deepest, it had come in about half that distance. It was still enough however, coupled with the absolutely devastating winds, to completely obliterate everything in its path.

They all continued their measured trek, the SeeDs spread out and taking both still photos and digital video of the process, recording the damage wrought by nature herself.

Upon reaching what had once been the center of town, Squall stopped, the sheriff standing beside him, and looked out toward the damaged wharf, the stones of the quay battered by the wind and the tides, but mostly still there. Then he turned and looked toward where Zell's mother's house had once stood. Gone, along with all of the neighboring homes. The shops, the café, the pub… all gone; of the train station, nothing was left but twisted girders above the scarred concrete of the platform.
Squall could still feel the cobbled street beneath his feet though it was hidden by the mud and debris, but little else remained.

"Hell of a mess. Nobody's coming back here for weeks. Months even." The sheriff commented.

"We'll have to re-establish communications before we can even start cleaning up," Squall said, then added mentally, *so I can call Zell and have him bring the Ragnarok back…so I can get the hell out of here. So I can hopefully find my wife and bring her home…*

"Yeah, that'll have to be job one… But, *look* at this! I don't even know where to *start,*" the sheriff said, sweeping his arm out to indicate the remains of the town.

Squall took a final scan of the damage, the debris; the mud and the bodies of both marine animals and stray pets that lay scattered about. Gulls and other scavenging coastal birds were beginning to make an appearance, doing their part to aid in the clean up.

Meeting the sheriff's eyes, Squall said, "Well, nothing's going to be started today. Let's head back and we'll figure it out." The sheriff nodded and they turned to leave, Squall bringing the SeeDs to heel with a curt order.

They were just approaching the SUV that they'd driven to get there when Squall heard a telltale scream approaching. Looking up, Squall felt his spirits lift as he saw the sun glinting off the molten red paint of the Ragnarok. It was Zell. He closed his eyes as relief washed over him.

"That was Zell." Nida observed.

"Yes." Squall said.

"Thank Hyne." Nida said.

Squall nodded, agreeing with him.

It took everything he had not to speed his way back to Garden; as badly as he wanted to get there as soon as possible, he wasn't a fool. The terrain was too rough. He ran the risk of injuring himself or his passengers, or damaging the truck. It was sturdy, but not indestructible. An ill-timed bump or a hidden rock could puncture a tire or break an axle.

So he concentrated on driving, guiding the vehicle over the plains until he reached the grounded Garden, to find the Ragnarok resting serenely upon the grass next to it.

He wanted to run, leap up the ramp and into the Ragnarok and take off right that second.

But he couldn't. Not yet. Instead, he walked past it with a single, longing glance before leading the SeeDs and the sheriff back into Garden.

He'd almost made it when Zell came charging out, nearly cannoning right into him.

"Squall! Oh man! You had me worried when you didn't show up!" Zell said, nearly hopping with agitation, talking quickly.

"We couldn't make it." Squall said simply, figuring the reason why was self-evident.

"Yeah, I see that. Listen," he said urgently, gripping Squall's shoulders, "I talked to Laguna… and Seifer… and I brought some fishermen that he'd rescued with me. Laguna called me again as I was
flying over here…” then he stopped, swallowing.

"Squall…” Zell began, voice faltering, "it…it's Rinoa…. she's..."

"I know Zell," Squall said, interrupting him. "I know. I'll talk to you later about it."

Zell frowned, confused, asking, "You know? But how?"

"I don't have time to explain, I need to make a report, and make some plans. Don't go anywhere." Shaking off Zell's grip, he continued into the Garden.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

He'd gone directly to Cid, and together with the sheriff, the mayor and whatever experts on utilities and telecommunications that they could find that happened to be in Garden with them, they began to plan. By the end of the meeting, they had a workable plan of action.

Zell would fly the Ragnarok to FH and pick up as many technicians as he could and bring them back to Garden so they could work on getting the propulsion systems fixed. Seifer meanwhile would be contacted and it was hoped, put the ferries back into service so that they could start getting tools, equipment and materials brought to Balamb so that they could start cleaning up and reconstructing the town, starting with the infrastructure.

The Ragnarok would be put into service toward that end as well.

After the meeting adjourned and everyone had left Cid and Squall alone in the conference room, Squall said, "Cid, I need to leave." Cid stared at him, appearing as though he hadn't understood Squall's statement.

"What do you mean, you need to leave?" Cid asked.

"I mean, I need to leave here. Now." Squall said.

"No. You can't leave, we need you here." Cid said, shaking his head.

Squall's eyes grew cold as he said flatly, "I wasn't asking permission, I was giving notice."

"Squall, we're still in the middle of a disaster. We need everyone we can muster to get through this and you… you need to lead. You are the Commander. The head of the SeeDs. You are the leader. You convinced everyone they needed to evacuate. You coordinated the evacuation efforts, you even drove a truck out to Balamb and went house to house and got everyone out. Because of you, nobody died. You have a responsibility to everyone here. You can't just walk away from it." Cid protested, wondering what had gotten into his erstwhile star student and now current SeeD Commander.

"You don't need me. Nida knows the inner workings of Garden better than anyone aside from the FH technicians we're bringing in to fix it. Quistis is far better with people than I will ever be. Between the two of them, they can handle Garden as well or better than I ever could. Zell knows Balamb, he knows just about everyone in the whole damn town. Between him and Seifer, they can be put in charge of the clean up and reconstruction of the town itself." Squall said.

"We do need you. People look to you to lead. How will it look if you leave now?" Cid asked.
"I know how it'll look. I know what it'll do to my record. If you want to throw me in the brig when I get back, put me before a tribunal, be my guest. I'm leaving, and that's the end of it." Squall said, folding his arms across his chest and staring directly into Cid's eyes.

The silence stretched until Cid finally asked, "Why?"

Squall let out a deep breath and paced to the other side of the room, saying, "Cid, Rinoa's been kidnapped. I need to go after her. I need to find her."

"Squall, when you're in a position of leadership, sometimes you have to make sacrifices...." Cid began.

Squall rounded on him, eyes blazing and cut him off, snarling, "Don't you fucking lecture me about sacrifices Cid! You may have made that decision with Edea fifteen years ago and sacrificed your bond with her to build Garden, but I'm not you!"

Cid's face paled, "It wasn't a decision made lightly. She knew what she faced and she wanted me, and you kids, away from her. We had no choice. It was the only way she could think of to protect us all. Otherwise, Ultimcia would have killed you before you could have even touched a gunblade."

Squall gazed at Cid, silent. He remembered the day that Ultimcia had joined with Edea, though he'd only been five at the time. It was a day that he'd revisit years later as a young adult when he'd been lost in time, trying to find his way home after killing Ultimcia. He'd brought the circle to a close that day, he'd thought. Had he instead set events into motion that would make him into the person he was now? Was there even a difference?

His childhood memories of that day were foggy, but he remembered Edea changing after that. Everything changed. He and the rest of the children were separated, scattered. Some were adopted, others like him and Seifer, went directly to the new Garden academies, which had somehow been completed just when they needed to be.

Finally, Squall said softly, "You drilled responsibility and duty into my head from the moment that I could actually understand the concept. I lived it; I breathed it, for nearly my whole life. You molded me into what I am today Cid. Good, bad, or indifferent. Responsibility and duty were my mantra. My reason for being; it was all I had and all I was. Until I met Rinoa."

"And she let you see there was more to life than rules and regulations. Killing or being killed... She showed you what joy was." Cid said, thinking, like Edea did me...

"Yes." Squall said, then he added, "I did my job. I saved the whole damn town. I consider my duty to be done. It's someone else's turn to be the hero. The only duty I have right now that matters to me is my duty to Rinoa."

"Your sorceress." Cid stated.

"My wife." Squall corrected. "I'm going after her. Tell whatever damn story you want to explain it away, if it'll make you feel better." He turned away and headed toward the door.

"Squall." Cid said. Squall paused, hand on the doorknob and looked back at him.

"Good luck. I hope you find her." Squall nodded his thanks and silently left.

Cid stared at the door as it shut behind him, wondering if, in his zeal to save the world from Ultimcia, he'd pushed Squall too hard. Made him grow up too fast. Forced him to make choices
that no one his age should have had to make. But, it was no use second-guessing himself when Edea's vision had been completely accurate and Squall had been instrumental in freeing her, and the whole world, from the threat that Ultimecia presented.

But of all of Cid's many regrets, the one that hurt the most was his regret at the sacrifice he'd had to make to ensure that Squall could do what he had to do. In pushing him to excel and succeed as a gunblade master and SeeD commander, he'd sacrificed his relationship with the young man he considered his son in all but fact. He couldn't be happier for Squall that he'd found Laguna and that they'd actually established a relationship.

But it hurt to know that for Squall, Cid was simply the Headmaster. His Boss. Nothing more. At least, nothing that he'd been able to detect, at any rate. Edea had been Matron, the only mother Squall had ever had. Laguna was his father by blood. But from the moment that Squall had walked into Balamb Garden as a cadet, he'd been under Cid's wing. Laguna had sired Squall, but Cid had raised him.

It was ironic that while Squall had never acknowledged that, Laguna had. It had been at Squall's wedding reception, last year.

"I want to thank you Cid. It's because of you that Squall has turned into the fine young man that he is. I know I wouldn't have done half as well." Laguna reached his hand out and Cid grasped it firmly. And then had been caught completely off guard when, after a few hard pumps, Laguna pulled him into a rough hug.

The memory brought a ghost of a smile to Cid's face. Then he sighed, the smile fading. He had to call Edea, and let her know what was going on. He opened the door and left the conference room, heading toward his office.

He hadn't needed to ask Squall how he knew that something had happened to Rinoa, like he and Edea, they had bonded as sorceress and knight. Yes, he'd sacrificed that bond at Edea's direction, and it had all but destroyed her. He hadn't been strong enough to stand by her and face the trials ahead, instead, he'd taken the easier path, for him, and constructed the Gardens and trained an assassin to kill his wife or save her soul.

But he'd found that while the bond could be weakened, it could not be destroyed. So, when Squall had gone out at his order to kill Sorceress Edea, he'd hidden in his office, alone, waiting for the anguish that would surely come at his wife's death. Instead, the final blow had tricked Ultimecia somehow into thinking it was a fatal one and she'd abandoned her host for Rinoa, leaving Edea just enough power to heal her wounds and survive.

Now, just a vestige of her magic remained, and Cid somehow had gotten a second chance with her, and he thanked Hyne for that opportunity. Had he been a stronger knight, perhaps things might have turned out differently, and they could have won through together without having to sacrifice the children they'd raised….

"Perhaps Cid, but, the visions were clear. Whatever choices we made would still have brought us to where we are now. I did not wed you for your strength beloved, but for your compassion. THAT is your strength." Edea told him.

Perhaps, but faced with the same choice, Squall's decision would have been a vastly different one. He'd have stayed and fought, side by side with his sorceress-wife, until his last breath escaped from his body. He was a far stronger knight than Cid was.

After leaving Cid in the conference room, Squall went in search of Zell. He was quickly frustrated
by the fact that he had no idea where he would have gone too first. Momentarily undecided, he thought he'd try the cafeteria. If he couldn't find him there, he'd try his quarters.

Fortunately, Zell was in the cafeteria, just finishing up his dinner.

"Meet me outside at the Ragnarok." Squall ordered, then he turned to leave the cafeteria, nearly running into Quistis.

"Squall!" She gasped, surprised, rocking back onto her heels.

He reached out and steadied her, then let her go when she'd regained her balance.

"Sorry," he apologized, beginning to step away from her.

"Squall, what's going on?" she asked.

He didn't have time to get into long, drawn out explanations, so instead he simply said, "I'm leaving. It involves Rinoa, and I'd give you more but I really need to leave now."

He left her staring after him, as he hurried along the corridors of garden, trying to remember if he had anything he needed still in his old quarters. He'd only brought a couple of day's worth of clothing and toiletries, so he decided that there was nothing there he couldn't live without.

The only thing he really needed was his gunblade, which was currently hanging from his hip.

The increased population currently residing in Garden however impeded his progress. That plus the thought that it might be wiser not to be observed actually leaving, made him decide to resort to an escape method he'd employed once before, under more pleasant circumstances.

He detoured to the ballroom and a familiar, if unobtrusive door, punched in the access code and slipped into the maintenance tunnel. The emergency lighting was dim, but Squall found his way out easily, fighting the memories that assaulted him the entire way.

Finding the exit door, he paused, glancing back at the dim tunnel and sighed. Rinoa might not remember it, but it was the very same route he'd taken to spirit her away from their wedding reception so that they could embark upon their honeymoon together.

Memories were tricky things for Squall. Some slipped through his fingers like water; others left a permanent, indelible mark. The imprint that Rinoa had left upon his heart was one of those things that would never fade with time, no matter how many GF's he junctioned.

Zell caught up with him as he was approaching the Ragnarok, asking, "So, what's the plan? What are we doing?" Squall laid his palm against the scanner, and punched in the code.

As the ramp extended and the doors opened, he said, "We aren't doing anything. You are dropping me off in Galbadia and flying to FH to pick up some technicians to fix the Garden. Then you are going to take charge of the clean up and reconstruction of Balamb."

"Me?" Zell asked, incredulous.

"Yes. You. I know you can handle this. I've done my part here. Like I told Cid, its someone else's turn to be the hero this time." Squall said.

Zell swallowed, suddenly gaining a sense of what Squall had felt when Cid had dropped the responsibility of Garden right into his lap by proclaiming him commander and leaving him to sink
or swim. He wondered how his friend had managed not to be crushed by its weight, especially with a battle against Seifer, who was in command of Galbadia Garden at the time, looming.

But this time, there was no battle to fight, no lives on the line, just a clean up and reconstruction job. The only thing Zell had to do was to help rebuild Balamb. Piece of cake. Squall was right; it was Zell’s turn to be the hero now.

Putting his hand out, he looked Squall steadily in the eyes and said firmly, "Yo man, I got this. Let's get going so you can get your wife back."

Squall nodded and gripped his hand firmly before releasing it and leaping up the ramp.

"So, Squall…” Zell asked as they lifted off, "Since I'm like, going to be a hero and all…does this mean I get to be Godfather to your kids?"

"No." Squall answered.

"Aww…Why not?" Zell asked, frowning.

"Rinoa already asked Selphie and Irvine." Squall answered.

"Sure, blame the wife. How 'bout you name your son after me?" Zell asked, grinning.

"Zell, I'm already naming him Saber." Squall said.

"Oh, right. Middle name? Huh? C'mon, Saber Zell Leonhart? Sounds pretty cool to me." Zell urged.

"Zell?" Squall said.

"What?"

"Shut up."

Chapter End Notes

In 1969, a category 5 hurricane named Camille struck the US Gulf coast. It has the distinction of being one of the most intense storms to ever hit the continental United States, making landfall with winds exceeding 200 mph. The resulting devastation was virtually total, with the entire coastline razed to the ground. 259 people lost their lives during the storm. Camille was my model for the Balamb hurricane.
Zell managed to maintain silence until they began their approach to land next to Galbadia Garden.

"So, um… how did you know Rinoa had been kidnapped? I know no one was able to call you."
Zell asked him.

Squall sighed, answering, "I am Rinoa's knight, as well as her husband. There is a bond that goes along with the title. A mindlink. When… our home was attacked, her fear dragged me into the link and I saw…. everything."

He drew in a shuddering breath and continued, "Everything that is, until they put a bangle on her and it all went dark. It must have had a psychic damper incorporated into it like the seals on Adel's capsule. It blocked me out."

"I can't… feel her, touch her… I don't know how she is or where she is. I only know that she's not dead… the bond is still intact." Squall said in a low voice, squeezing his eyes shut. Somehow, he knew that he'd feel it if the bond were severed. He didn't know what would happen to him if it did, but as deeply rooted as their link was, he was certain its effect upon him would be profound.

"Wow." Zell whispered, awed. Then his attention returned to the controls of the airship as he began landing it.

As it settled onto the ground next to Galbadia Garden, Zell told Squall, "Like I said man, I got this."

Squall nodded, then he said, "I know you do. And thank you."

"No prob, bro." Zell said, and then punched the button that opened the doors and extended the ramp, giving Squall a jaunty wave as the latter exited the ship.

Squall trotted down the ramp, turning back to watch as the Ragnarok lifted off again as soon as he'd gotten far enough away. The setting sun was blinding as it washed the crimson airship with fire, and Squall had to shade his eyes. Even so, he found he had to blink spots from his eyes.

A faint shout got his attention and he turned, blinking and just making out a lanky form loping toward him. Irvine.

"Squall! Thank God you're here!" Irvine said, coming up to him and gripping his shoulders.

Meeting his eyes, Irvine nodded. "You know. I thought you did. You got here a lot faster than I thought you would."

"I knew the moment it happened. I saw it." Squall said. Then he swallowed, remembering. Selphie.

"I'm sorry Irvine, about Selphie …" he said awkwardly, looking away. He'd never been good with emotional stuff.

Irvine frowned, and then realized that if Squall had seen the events that had transpired through Rinoa's eyes, he'd seen Selphie get shot. But he hadn't seen what had happened after they'd taken Rinoa away. He didn't know she'd survived.

"Squall…. look man, its okay. She's fine. Rinoa dropped some healing potions next to Selphie as
they were taking her away." Irvine said. Squall sighed and closed his eyes, relieved.

"Good." he said softly.

Nodding, Irvine dropped his hands from Squall's shoulders and said, "Come on. Let's go get your wife back."

They turned and started walking toward the parking area. Squall wasn't at all sure if his car was actually there or still back at his home, but he figured it would be a good place to start. Looking for his 

car anyway. But to start looking for Rinoa, he had to go to the last place she had been. He had to go home.

Fortunately, it wasn't hard to find his car; it had been parked next to Irvine's truck. His set of keys were in his pocket; after seeing Rinoa fish through her purse looking for hers on more than one occasion, he'd taken to carrying the spare set.

They'd just reached his car and Squall was preparing to unlock the door and get in when Selphie called after them and came barreling up to Squall at a dead run.

"Oh! Squall, Squall I'm so sorry!" she cried, launching herself at him and nearly knocking him down. As it was, he staggered back a couple of steps to catch his balance.

Irvine groaned softly and said "Selphie, honey…"

Squall sighed, Trabians…he thought.

"Selphie. I saw what happened." He told her, hugging her briefly and letting her go.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes, saying, "I tried. I tried so hard…"

"I know you did. And you nearly died for it. For her." Squall told her.

"You're going after her, right? I want to come with you. I want to help." Selphie said.

Squall exchanged a glance with Irvine, who frowned and approached Selphie, taking her hands in his.

"Selphie, hon, we've been over this…" Irvine began.

"Irvine, I'm fine! You know I'm just as good as you two, and…" she protested.

"But, you still need to rest." Irvine drew her into his arms and hugged her. "You'll help us more here. I'll have my phone with me and I'll keep in contact with you. But you'll need to stay here and keep us up to date on any new leads that come up."

Selphie bit her lip, torn. She wanted to help, but she also knew that she wasn't quite 100% yet either. And she knew how driven Squall would be to find Rinoa. It would be a grueling quest, and if she were honest with herself, she'd have to acknowledge that Irvine was right. Not only in his assessment that she was still recovering from her injuries, but also that she could actually be more help here.

There were the leads from the hotline that she could forward to them, computer research, analyzing the evidence collected after the attack, lab results… all of that took time, and would be important in the search, but more important still would be to follow what they already had.

As little as she liked the idea, if she stayed behind, they could do both.
"All right." She sighed, "I don't like it, but in this case, you're right."

Irvine tightened his arms around her and kissed her gently, whispering, "That's my girl."

"Take care of yourself," Selphie whispered, "and take care of Squall too. You know his focus will be completely on finding Rinoa. Don't let him drive himself into the ground."

"I heard that. I don't need a keeper." Squall said flatly, glaring at them both impatiently.

"I've gotta go honey. I love you." Irvine said, kissing her again.

"I love you too." she said and stepped back. Irvine went around the car to the passenger's side and got in, with Squall doing the same on the driver's side.

Squall started the car and they drove out of Galbadia Garden's parking garage, headed directly for Squall's house. They traveled in silence, both lost in thought.

Irvine thought of warning Squall of the chaos, the damage that had been wrought in the attack, which had been left as is while they were gathering and analyzing evidence. But then he remembered that Squall had seen the attack through Rinoa's eyes, so he would already know what had been done to his home.

Even so, even knowing that, Irvine wasn't surprised when Squall simply froze when he walked through the door.

He'd known what to expect. He saw the boards on the windows, had seen the attack in his mind. Actually walking into the chaos, the damage left behind however, still hit him like a ton of bricks.

The stale air added to the claustrophobic feel caused by the boarded up windows that shut out the sun. It also concentrated the smell of old blood and decay that permeated the atmosphere. Squall had smelled blood and death before; but never in his own home. Intellectually he knew that this house wasn't actually his, he was renting it. But, he lived there. He'd established a life there with Rinoa. Created memories there in anticipation of the new lives they would soon be adding to it.

To see it now, shattered glass glittering on the floor, blood turning black in great, congealed pools, made Squall's stomach churn. He took a slow step forward, boots crunching on the glass shards, and scanned the room. His eyes blurred and he closed them, remembering….

"Angelo! NO!"

"Rinoa run! Get to the car!"

"I can't Selphie! I can't...!"

He shoved aside the emotional pain for just a moment and tried to focus on the attackers. What they looked like. How they moved. The equipment and tactics they used. Their accents. Most importantly, he focused on their faces. They had not worn masks, had not gone to that extreme to hide their identities, and possibly because they thought their only witness would be under their control.

Remember these faces. He ordered himself. And was surprised when he got a response from Grieaver.

I shall.
Opening his eyes, Squall wiped at the dampness that had gathered beneath them, and quietly asked Irvine, "Where's Angelo?"

"Squall… He's… He's dead." Irvine answered hesitantly.

"I know. Where is he?" Squall asked again.

Irvine cleared his throat and answered, "We… we didn't know what to do with him, and it didn't seem right to just bury him in the backyard without you and Rinoa… so I took him to his vet and had him cremated. His ashes are at my place."

Squall nodded, cleared his throat and said, "Thank you." Then he took a deep breath of the stale, dead air, and walked through the living room, back to his bedroom.

Irvine hesitated a moment, then followed.

Somehow, it was worse for Squall to walk into his empty bedroom and see it as Rinoa and Selphie had left it, with the baby clothes still laid out upon their bed. He nearly lost it then and had to pause a moment, take a deep breath, swallow the lump in his throat and blink to clear the tears that threatened.

Moving the clothes gently aside, he turned to the closet and hauled out his traveling pack, dropping it into his bed with a thump. More gear followed, with Irvine finally rejoining him, as he was midway through packing.

Returning to the closet, he asked, "Need any pulse ammo?"

"You know I do, that stuff's hard to come by." Irvine answered.

Squall wordlessly tossed him a heavy box that Irvine almost dropped due to its heft. He pulled a second box from the closet, opened it and began removing the standard shells from the chambers of his gunblade and replacing them with the more powerful pulse rounds. The extras he placed in the empty loops of one of his belts. Frowning down at that, he realized he was still wearing his SeeD uniform. He would have to change.

As he unzipped his tunic top, Irvine drawled, "I was wondering when you'd figure out how conspicuous you'd be in uniform."

Squall snorted, "I'm not that stupid." Then he pulled off his shirt and rummaged through his drawers, pulling out a black, long-sleeved t-shirt. Pulling that over his head, he went over to his closet and pulled out a black sweater and his overcoat, and tossed them both on the bed on top of his pack. After searching his drawers again, he tossed a black watch cap on top of it and pulled out a pair of jeans.

As Squall continued changing, Irvine told him, "We've interviewed the neighbors and checked out the train station. We know Rinoa was taken out of the city, but she did not leave from the Deling City station. Nobody there recognized her and when we looked over the surveillance tapes, she wasn't anywhere in evidence."

Squall frowned, pausing as he stood to button up his jeans, saying, "They wouldn't have taken her out by boat, would they? Too much risk, what with the hurricane playing havoc with the weather patterns everywhere."

"Tell me about it," Irvine said. Clouds signaling a coming rainstorm had suddenly started building just as Squall had arrived. The brilliant sunset was now becoming obscured by the threatening
thunderheads.

"No, I don't think they took her out by boat, though we did check the marina. Nothing. The neighbors, those that were paying attention at any rate, say that they saw a dark car driving off. If they took her by car...." Irvine continued, then paused.

Squall sat back down and started putting his boots back on, finishing Irvine's thought, "They could be anywhere on the Galbadian continent."

"Exactly. But I don't think they are. Selphie remembered hearing Estharian accents. They might be taking her there." Irvine said.

Squall nodded. He remembered. The only way to get to Esthar from Galbadia was by train. If they hadn't left from Deling City, they had to have gotten onto the train elsewhere, perhaps to make it harder to track her.

"Where's the next closest train station aside from Deling City's Central Station?" Squall asked.

Irvine frowned, thinking, then his eyes opened wide and he stared at Squall, answering, "Timber. You think they took her there to get on the train?"

"It's what I'd do, if I wanted to throw somebody off my trail." Squall said, standing up and pulling on the sweater and the watch cap. Then he buckled on his ammo belts and gunblade. Finally, he put on his overcoat and shouldered his pack.

"Dude. Why didn't you go with a leather trench? It would've looked way cool." Irvine commented.

"Wool's warmer. Even when it's wet." Squall said, tugging the watch cap down until it nearly obscured his scar.

Irvine narrowed his eyes at that and nodded, "Okay, that works. You can still see a bit of the scar over your nose, but you'd have to be pretty close."

"Better than trying to hide it with make-up. I hate that. It never works." Squall said, grimacing.

Then he turned and left the bedroom, asking Irvine, "Do you need to go back to your place and get your gear?"

Irvine followed him, answering, "No, it's already in your trunk. I was just waiting for you to come back. If you hadn't made it back today, I was going to go after Rinoa myself."

Squall nodded, "good." Upon reaching his car, Squall opened up the rear door and tossed his pack into the back seat. Getting into the driver's seat, Squall started the car while Irvine got in on the passenger's side.

"So," he said. "We're starting the search in Timber."

"Yes. And there's an underground contact there that could be very helpful. We're going to pay him a visit." Squall said, backing the car down his driveway.

"Watts?" Irvine asked.

"Yes." Squall said, turning onto his street and driving toward the road leading to Timber. As he did, the gathering clouds added to the gloom of evening, and far off in the distance, thunder rumbled. Another storm was coming, this one spun off from the hurricane that had ravaged Balamb.
Another force of nature was about to be unleashed.

Rinoa had delayed her guards as much as she dared, sweetly thanking them for her breakfast, which she promptly threw up. Then she apologetically asked if they could get her something a little easier on her tender stomach. She ate it carefully, and managed to keep it down, much to the relief of the men escorting her. Then of course, she had to go to the bathroom.

She pushed it as much as she could, but the true irony was, she wasn't even faking. The sudden onset of nausea and subsequent loss of her breakfast was actually as much a surprise to Rinoa as it had been for the men who'd taken her captive. She put it down to stress and anxiety, coupled with the unfamiliar food. But the result of all of this was the fact that they ended up leaving the hotel far later than they had intended to. In fact, they left just before the noon check out time.

"I'm really sorry about that, truly. I guess that's going to have to go on the list of foods to avoid while pregnant." Rinoa said while they led her toward the train station.

The commander of the group glanced over at her and asked, "There's a list?" at Rinoa's nod, he asked, "Would you be so kind as to tell us what's on this list so we can avoid problems later on?"

"How much longer are we going to be traveling?" Rinoa asked plaintively. She didn't want to whine, but she was perilously close to it.

"However long it takes for us to get there. If this morning's issues were an attempt to slow us down Sorceress Rinoa, I assure you it will only prolong the journey and make things progressively more difficult for you." The leader told her coolly.

Rinoa swallowed at this but was undaunted. Yes, it was a delaying tactic of sorts. If nothing else, to make sure that the trail was as fresh as possible for Squall to follow. Still, letting these men know exactly what could trigger stomach upset for her would certainly not hurt. So she told the commander what she was the most sensitive to, food-wise. He paid her careful attention and she could tell he was taking mental notes.

Honestly, while the delay was a good thing, Rinoa didn't much care for tossing her breakfast either.

They were just entering the shaded colonnade that led to FH's restored train station when a distant, distinctive roar was heard. Rinoa looked up with a gasp as she recognized the scarlet dragon-shaped airship, and her spirits lifted. For her captors however, the reaction was vastly different.

"GET HER UNDER COVER!" The commander barked as the Ragnarok winged in and started to land. Rinoa watched, heart in her throat as the ship landed, the doors opened and the ramp deployed. Suddenly it was too much, she had to do something...

"SQUALL! I'M HERE!" she screamed, not even sure that whoever was piloting the Ragnarok was Squall. Not even sure that he could hear her if it was him.

Renn and another man seized her arms and dragged a struggling Rinoa into the shadows of the train station and against the wall behind a pillar, pressing her against it and covering her mouth with his hand.

She couldn't help it; seeing the Ragnarok had ignited a fierce desire to break free and rush up to it,
to escape. To be bodily dragged away so close to freedom and Squall just about drove her wild. So she fought, biting and kicking at her captors and screaming until a stinging slap across her face stunned her into silence.

"What's the matter with you?" Renn snarled quietly at the man who'd hit her.

"She was hysterical. We had to settle her down, she was attracting too much attention." The other man answered.

Turning back to Rinoa, Renn studied her with concern, asking, "Are you okay? I'm sorry about that, but he was right. You were getting too hysterical."

He swallowed, suddenly very aware of the intimacy of their position. He held her tight against his body, pressing her back into the wall. His hand was sealed across her soft lips. She'd bitten him, more than once, painfully, but he kept his hand over her mouth and kept her mostly silent in spite of that. A red hand print marred a white cheek, and tears washed her eyes and tracked down her face. Her breathing was still uneven, her heart still hammering.

"You need to calm down Rinoa. Please. I don't want you to get hurt. I don't want your babies to get hurt." Renn whispered. That did it. She closed her eyes and began to sob quietly. Renn felt the fight drain out of her along with the tension in her body. He gradually relaxed his hold on her as he felt her gradually relax in turn.

But his heart ached for her as he watched her heartbroken sobs, and he couldn't help but pull her into his arms and hold her. He felt the warmth of her body against his, her tears dampening the shoulder of his uniform. He felt the silken texture of her hair as he lightly stroked it, and he envied Squall Leonhart with every fiber of his being.

They stayed like that for what seemed an eternity, and for Renn at least, he wished that it were an eternity. But all too soon, the commander and the rest of the men with them returned.

"Let's get her on that goddamn train before anything else goes wrong." He growled.

"Was it..?" Renn began, trying to ignore the stab of fear churning his stomach.

"No, it was someone else. The blond fellow, Zell. He's here to pick up some technicians per Leonhart's orders. Apparently, he's still trapped in Balamb." The commander answered, urging them toward the train platform, careful to keep Rinoa screened from casual observation.

Renn kept his arm around Rinoa's shoulders, in part to support and comfort her, as well as to gently guide her onto the train. To someone watching from afar, it looked like a young man helping his very pregnant wife with the boarding process, nothing that would excite interest or generate curiosity.

As the train was pulling out of the station, Zell was still negotiating with the technicians at FH, unaware that his best friend's wife was being spirited away right under his nose.

Lightning flashed and thunder rolled, waking Watts from a sound sleep. Ordinarily, he could sleep like the dead and virtually nothing would wake him. But not this time, this storm promised to be a real intense one. Not as intense, thankfully as the one that had hammered Balamb yesterday.
Nobody had been able to get to Balamb to even report on the damage yet, so Watts had no idea how much, if any, of Balamb still stood and if any of his friends had survived. As the rain started pounding on the roof in a torrent, Watts gave up on sleep and decided to get up for a drink of water.

As he got out of bed, he shivered. The weather had actually been unusually warm for Timber this time of year, but with the rain, the temperature had plummeted. If the trend continued, they'd see snow by midwinter, surely. He put on his robe to shake off the chill and padded into the kitchen, not bothering to turn on the light.

Still blinking sleep from his eyes, he grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it from the tap. Leaning back against the counter, he drank deeply, closing his eyes. When he'd finished drinking, he exhaled deeply, opening his eyes and lowering the glass, glancing toward the dining room as he did.

A sudden crack of thunder with a nearly simultaneous flash of lightning caused him to flinch and nearly drop his glass. When the flash and rumbling thunder came again, illuminating two shadowy forms that lurked in his dining room, his heart leaped into his throat. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

It was a trick of the light. Had to be. He was dazzled by the lightning, rattled by the thunder…. there weren't actually two man-shaped shadows standing in his dining room, were there?

Cautiously, he padded closer, suddenly wishing he'd thought to bring his gun with him. Another blinding flash showed the two forms clearly, and Watts gasped and dropped his glass, shattering it.

"Dude. Turn the light on already before you have a heart attack." Irvine drawled.

Suddenly feeling foolish, Watts flipped on the light and squinted while his eyes adjusted, staring at the two men that occupied the room. Irvine leaned casually against the dining room table, while Squall stood next to him, arms folded across his chest. He knew both men, but that didn't ease his apprehension. In fact, knowing who they were and what they did for a living, seeing them in his house, entering via stealth, and uninvited, scared him even more.

"Shit! Don't you guys know how to knock?" Watts said, trying to calm down. They were his friends. He was reasonably certain that while this was obviously not a social visit, he also wasn't a target. If he were, he'd already be dead.

"You might want to clean that up buddy, otherwise you'll cut your feet to ribbons." Irvine said, nodding at the shattered glass. Glancing down, Watts grimaced and started carefully picking up the larger pieces of glass, gingerly walking over to the trashcan and tossing them in, and returning with a whisk broom and dustpan.

Once he'd finished that task, he asked, "Okay, I get that you're SeeDs and all, but… guys, this is my house. What's going on?"

Then Squall spoke up, saying, "We didn't want anyone to see us come here. Not only to keep your cover safe, but for other reasons as well."

Watts turned his attention to Squall frowning. Last he'd heard Squall had been trapped in Balamb. Yet, here he was in Timber, looking like death incarnate. Something had happened, and Watts knew Squall well enough to recognize the signs that whatever was going on, Squall was out for blood.
Irvine rolled his eyes at Squall's less than informative response, and told Watts, "After the hurricane made landfall, Rinoa was kidnapped. Because he's her knight, Squall knew about it immediately and came back as soon as he could. We're on her trail now and we could really use your help."


"Do you have a computer?" Squall asked. Watts nodded.

"We need any information, no matter how random or insignificant, you may have about any unusual activity in Timber, particularly in or around the train station." Irvine added.

"Okay. The computer's upstairs in the spare room. Follow me." Watts invited, leading them out of the dining room.

As he walked up the stairs with the SeeDs following him, Watts wondered what had happened. He knew Squall had been aware of some machinations regarding his wife, and Watts had been instrumental in funneling that information to him. Somehow, he'd missed something, something crucial, which had enabled these people to succeed in capturing Rinoa and stealing her away from Squall. He'd given Squall everything his sources in FH had been able to confirm, but it obviously wasn't enough.

Upon reaching the room, Watts indicated the computer and said, "Okay guys, knock yourselves out. Do you know what you're looking for?"

Squall nodded, "Yes. I need to see any security tapes that the Timber train station may have recorded over the last two days."

Watts snorted, "Dude. This is Timber. We aren't that sophisticated here. They might have security recordings, but you won't be able to access them from the network."

Irvine swore quietly and exchanged a look with Squall, asking, "What do we do now? I don't like to think we've gone on a wild goose chase. We need some kind of confirmation that they were here..."

"Maybe I can help with that. Why don't you guys make yourselves at home here and let me check it out? I'll be back in a little bit." Watts said, leaving them alone. In no time, he was dressed and out the door.

Two hours later, Watts returned to find both of his unexpected guests fast asleep. Squall had crashed on the bed in the spare room, and Irvine on the couch in the living room.

Of the two, Watts figured Irvine was the safest to attempt waking first.

"Irvine, I'm back. Wake Squall up and get him down here, will ya?" Watts said. And just like that, Irvine was awake. Watts envied them that ability to go from sound sleep to full wakefulness almost immediately. He knew it had to do with their training somehow, the same training which made it so dangerous to try waking Squall up.

He'd have attempted it anyway, figuring simply calling his name would be enough, but he wasn't sure how the man would react to being awakened in an unfamiliar place by an only vaguely familiar voice. While he hadn't been sleep-spelled this time, Watts still didn't want to chance becoming Squall's first target.
When Irvine returned uninjured with Squall in tow, Watts gave him a lopsided smile, acknowledging his cowardice regarding the whole "waking Squall up" process.

"So, whatta ya got for us?" Irvine asked.

Gesturing for them both to sit on the couch, Watts said, "The night guard at the train station is a former Forest Owl. I got him to lend me the security recordings for the last couple of days, but I've got to bring them back before the end of his shift or he loses his job. So we're on a tight time frame here." Opening a satchel he had slung over his shoulder, he pulled out several discs that apparently held the recordings, peering at the labels and selecting one of them and putting it into the player.

Sitting on the couch, Watts turned on his television and started the player. It was the right date, the day that the hurricane had struck, but the wrong time. Too early in the day. Watts skipped forward several hours until it was about the right time, but despite all three of them peering intently at the recording, they didn't see anything unusual.

"Okay, nothing there," Watts frowned, getting up and removing the disc, replacing it with another. Sitting back down he said, "This is a different camera. Different angle. Let's see what that shows."

Watts scanned through the recording like he had with the first one, not seeing anything that caught his attention. He was about to give it up when Squall stopped him.

"Wait. Skip that back a minute." When Watts did as requested, he narrowed his eyes and commanded, "stop." Getting up he walked up to the screen, peering closely at the image and in particular the upper left corner of the screen, nearly out of frame.

"Do you have a view of that location?" Squall asked.

"Yeah, actually..." Watts said, searching through the discs and selecting one. Removing the disc they'd just viewed and setting it carefully aside, he put the next one in. It was the same date as the first two but a different camera angle, one that showed a clear view of the area that had captured Squall's interest.

They all focused intently upon the screen, and as the time approached afternoon, they began to wonder if it was a wild goose chase after all. Then they saw it. It was subtle, but enough for them to notice. A group of men appeared on the freight platform, far from the main crowd, approaching what appeared to be a passenger car. They had with them a rolling pallet with several long boxes on it, and in their midst, though difficult to see, was a figure in what looked like light blue scrubs.

Squall stood suddenly, staring, and whispered, "Its her."

Rounding quickly on Watts, he asked urgently, "Can you enhance it?"

"Way ahead of you." Watts said, getting up and taking the disc out and racing up to his spare room. Squall and Irvine followed.

Sitting down at his computer, Watts put the disc into the drive and brought up the recording. Squall and Irvine watched in fascination as he isolated the image that had captured their interest and manipulated it.

"Ok, the more I magnify this, the more resolution we lose. This is a far shot at the freight platform, and it looks like they're loading freight, but onto a passenger car. That alone is unusual. And here in the middle of all of these guys, who all are wearing the same brown uniform, is this lovely young lady in blue." Watts narrated as he tapped away on the computer keyboard and worked on
the image. In part to let Squall and Irvine know what he was doing, and in part to fill the tense silence that would otherwise have been oppressive.

Watts did his best but couldn't get anything clearer than a rather fuzzy image, but it was unmistakably Rinoa.

"When you take this back, can you find out anything about that particular train car, and where that train was going?" Squall asked.

"Yeah. I can find out about the train car. Its even easier to figure out where that train was going." Watts said, tapping madly at the keyboard again and bringing up the train schedule for the date that Rinoa was kidnapped.

Looking at the timetable, Watts voiced what they all learned simultaneously, "It was going to Fisherman's Horizon."

Squall suddenly started pacing restlessly, saying, "Okay. We need to go. There's really only one place to go by train once you get to FH, and that's Esthar. Unless they load her onto a boat and ship her off to some island somewhere..." He stopped, frowning.

That was a possibility that shouldn't be discounted, but his gut said Esthar. A pregnant woman on a boat at the mercy of the seas and the tides, as well as at the mercy of her own stomach? A group of men dealing with that? No. It would be the train, and Esthar. It was the quickest, and the safest mode of travel, and if they were that concerned with Rinoa's health and safety, that's what they'd do.

"Would they do that, do you think?" Irvine asked worried.

Squall shook his head, "No, I don't think so. The train is safer, and would be less stressful for her. If ... if Odine wants her unharmed, then they'd have to go by train."

"Do you know for sure its Odine that's behind this?" Watts asked.

"No. I don't. And once they get to Esthar..." Squall stopped, swallowing. Esthar was a huge country. She could literally disappear there.

Turning to Watts, he said, "find out about that train car. Send the information to Selphie. Get in touch with your contact in FH and have them check things out there too, maybe they can help us track where they took her after they got her off the train... And..."

"And you need to call your father Squall. He's worried about you and he might be able to help as well." Irvine spoke up. Squall nodded.

"Okay. Can I use your phone? Mine's... broken." Squall asked.

"Might as well. I programmed Laguna's direct number into it." Irvine said, handing it over to Squall.

Squall stared at him, "Really?"

"Yeah, he called me, asking about Rinoa. I had to give him the bad news... him and Caraway. I felt like a complete failure. Still do, actually." Irvine grimaced, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"Irvine, if this is anyone's fault..." Squall began.
"Stop Squall. Just stop. Let's not waste time trying to figure out who gets the blame and just work on getting her back. We can fight about it after that." Irvine said. Squall nodded and left the room.

"You know, if you guys want to rest up before you leave you can stay here for a bit…” Watts began.

Irvine shook his head; "I know Squall's going to want to go right to the train station as soon as he can. Hell, he'd be there already if he could. More than likely, we'll end up sleeping on the train."

Watts grimaced, remembering how uncomfortable that could be.

Squall returned moments later and said, "Let's go. Watts, you need to take those recordings back to your friend there anyway, so why don't you come with us?"

Watts and Irvine both nodded, with Watts gathering up the discs, and followed Squall out into the pouring rain.

Watts called out in order to be heard over the sound of the storm, "You know Squall, I do have a garage, and there are these things called umbrellas that are generally helpful with weather like this…"

Irvine snorted and Squall simply ignored him. Watts shrugged and pointedly opened his umbrella. They all piled into Squall's car, which he'd parked down the street from Watts' house, and Squall drove them all to the train station.

Upon reaching it, Squall and Irvine went directly to the ticket counter and purchased their tickets for the next train bound for Fisherman's Horizon.

Watts disappeared briefly while they were busy doing that and returned, reporting, "That train car you were wondering about Squall? Privately owned by some corporation. Couldn't get the name though, not in that short of time. Let me work on it a bit and I'll get it for you, see if maybe we can't figure out who actually owns it."

Squall nodded, "Okay. Whatever you find, I want you to give to Selphie. She'll be in contact with Laguna and will forward it to him." Just then the station PA announced the imminent arrival of their train.

Fishing out his car keys, Squall tossed them to Watts, saying, "Here, take my car until I get back."

Watts caught the keys deftly, saying, "Okay Squall." Then he added with a grin, "Talk to ya later, sir." Squall rolled his eyes and Irvine snorted at that.

The train arrived moments later with a screech of brakes and both Squall and Irvine shouldered their packs and boarded. Watching them leave, Watts tossed the keys in his hand thoughtfully, mulling over the information they'd discovered thus far and how he might aid his friends in following the increasingly cold and fading trail that led to Rinoa.

As Watts left the train station, it occurred to him that despite the disaster that had occurred in Balamb, Squall had not mentioned anything about it. He'd been so focused upon searching for Rinoa; there was nothing else on his mind but that.

He checked his watch as he got into Squall's car, grimacing as he noted the time. Two A.M. Well, that made it late morning in FH, not too early to call a contact that he had there and tell them of the situation. Maybe they could help Squall and Irvine.
Rinoa sat silent and pale on the train that was taking her from FH, bound for Esthar. She hadn't meant to do what she'd done and tried to escape. It was an incredibly stupid thing for her to attempt and she supposed she was lucky that it had only earned her a slap and nothing worse. But seeing the Ragnarok landing had ignited such an overwhelming desire in her to run to it, and to the prospect of home, that she couldn't hold back.

*Don't fight Rinoa; don't force them to hurt you...*

*But I had to TRY...*

The young guard, Renn, sat across from her, watching her with concern. She'd been thankful for his support, oddly, though he was one of her jailers. She should hate him for his part in this, but she didn't. She knew he was just doing his job. She sensed in him ambivalence about it, and a more than passing concern for her.

"Rinoa." he said softly.

She looked up, wiping at her eyes. They still felt red and watery, and she knew more tears hovered, but she didn't want to give in to them. They were bitter and they hurt. She felt raw enough as it was.

"Here," he handed her a tissue just as he had the day before.

Smiling slightly, she took it and wiped her eyes, then blew her nose.

"I need to ask you a question," Renn said.

Looking up at him, Rinoa cleared her throat and asked, "What?"

"When we... captured you... why didn't you use your magic to fight us?" he asked her.

"When I first became pregnant, using magic made me sick, so I stopped. Squall and I decided it would be safer for the babies and for me if I simply didn't use it at all while I was pregnant. We didn't know how it would affect them, so we decided to err on the side of caution." Rinoa explained.

"I... see." Renn said, frowning slightly. He looked away for a moment, expression pensive. Rinoa studied him as he did.

He was young, easily the youngest of the group that had captured her, roughly about her age or slightly older. His general build and height were solidly average, neither too tall nor too short, neither slender nor bulky. His face was clean cut and chiseled, hair and eyes both dark brown. Were she not already married and very much in love with her husband, she might have found the young man attractive.

As it was, she could only look at him and think of Squall, comparing his dark brown hair to Squall's more vibrant, coppery toned mane; his warm dark eyes with Squall's piercing turquoise. Both men moved with athletic grace and they were both of similar build and height, but Squall possessed an aura of leashed power that this young man lacked.

Rinoa sighed and turned her face toward the window, staring blindly out at the changing landscape. It was sadly ironic to her that she could look at an undeniably handsome young man and simply miss her husband all the more.
He cleared his throat and Rinoa looked over at him.

"I'm sorry about…." He gestured at her face, and then asked softly, "Does it hurt?"

Rinoa nodded, answering, "a little." Renn nodded slightly and silently got up and left.

He returned a few moments later with what looked like a damp cloth. Sitting down next to her, he hesitated.

"Um…I need to…" he began, gesturing awkwardly at her face. Rinoa nodded, and he tentatively reached out and touched her chin, tilting her face until he could get a better look at her.

He frowned, unconsciously gnawing at the inside of his lip as he studied her more closely, murmuring, "It's bruised. Bastard. He didn't have to hit you so hard."

Then he gently placed the cloth, which had been soaked in cold water, against her cheek. He simply held it there for several eternal heartbeats, trying not to be distracted by how smooth her skin was, how soft and pink her lips were.

Clearing his throat and trying desperately to focus on something else, he asked, "Does that feel better?"

Rinoa nodded, answering, "A little, yeah." Then she smiled slightly and added, "Sorry for biting you, by the way."

Renn shrugged. He wasn't about to say "that's okay" because it had hurt and he certainly was not okay with that. But by the same token, he understood why she'd bitten him; he'd have done the same thing in her position.

"Well, I still have my fingers, so I guess no permanent harm was done." He said with a half-smile. Rinoa smiled in response.

Then her smile faded as she softly asked him, "do you know where you're taking me?"

Renn hesitated, and then answered carefully, "Esthar."

"I know…. but where in Esthar?" she pressed.

"Dr. Odine's facility. It's…. remote. Nowhere near the city." Renn answered her, adding, "its in an area that's got a lot of monsters running around. We aren't even allowed beyond the perimeter alone, and we have to be fully armed at all times."

Rinoa nodded. That could be anywhere in Esthar. The bulk of the country's citizens resided in the city. The countryside itself was far too dangerous for any rural population to exist, particularly after the Lunar Cry that had just about destroyed Esthar four years ago and brought a whole new population of monsters down from the moon to plague them.

Rinoa knew from experience just how dangerous some of those monsters could be. They had been escaping from the sorceress memorial and had to run across the desert toward the Ragnarok when they'd encountered the only monster that Squall had actually run from. Up to that point, Rinoa had thought him completely fearless.

"What is THAT?" Rinoa asked, staring at the hideous creature that had appeared out of nowhere. It was slow; it was eyeless, with a large, toothed maw framed by dozens of stinging tentacles. It didn't look particularly dangerous, certainly not as threatening as a dragon or a T-rexaur.
So it had surprised her when Squall had taken one look at it and yelled at them all, "IT'S A MARLBORO! RUN!"

So they all turned and ran, but not before the monster had released some of its toxin. They all mostly got away clean, but Squall, who’d been guarding their rear, had been exposed to it. The poison had nearly killed him.

He lay in a delirium for days while they tried different remedies to counteract the effects of the toxin, finally resorting to strapping him down to prevent him from hurting himself or anyone else while he was raving.

It was Rinoa's touch against his fevered skin that had calmed him. It was her magic that had given the Esuna spell the power to heal him.

Rinoa had learned since that Squall was far from fearless, he felt fear; he simply stared it in the face and refused to let it control him.

The cloth had warmed against Rinoa's skin and Renn removed it, wondering to where her mind had wandered. The soft expression she wore told him that the memory was a pleasant one.

But removing the cloth had caught her attention and she focused on Renn, smiling and saying, "Thank you." He nodded in response and moved back to the seat facing her, feeling helpless.

Lost. He wasn't supposed to sympathize with their captive. He wasn't supposed to find a pregnant, married woman attractive. He wasn't supposed to like her. He was a fool.
"Ugh. Eight hours on a train. How is it I can sleep nearly the entire way and still feel exhausted?"
Irvine grumbled as he dropped his pack on the floor of the hotel suite he and Squall had rented the moment they arrived in FH. Plopping down gracelessly onto the couch, he leaned back and closed his eyes, groaning.

"Beats me." Squall commented, taking his pack into one of the rooms in the suite. Pretty typical for an FH hotel; they used a lot of recycled and re-purposed items in their furnishings, but it had a homey feel despite that, mainly due to the hand-braided rag rug on the floor and the hand-crocheted spread on the bed.

Tossing his pack onto the bed, he turned as Irvine leaned against the doorjamb, saying, "I'm gonna sack out for a little bit. Maybe a few hours horizontal on something that isn't moving will put me right."

Squall frowned, "Irvine…"

"I know what you're going to say. We already know she's headed for Esthar. Fact is, she's already there by now. What good would it do us to race over there when we have no idea where she was taken once she got there? Do you really want to waste days, weeks even, wandering around the central desert looking for her?" Irvine reasoned, then added, "besides, we need to wait for Watts' contact to find us. Who knows, maybe he'll have some information that would be helpful."

Squall sighed, "Fine. You might want to give Selphie a call and see if she's got any updated information to report. Might as well put the time here to good use."

Irvine aimed his thumb and index finger at Squall in imitation of a gun and winked, saying, "Now you're thinkin'."

Squall snorted, pulling off his watch cap and running his fingers through his hair, saying, "Whatever. Let me know when you've got Selphie on the line, I want to talk to her when you're done." Moving his pack onto the floor, Squall stretched out onto the bed, hands folded behind his head.

Irvine yawned and asked, "Why don't you just call her yourself then?"

"She's your wife. Thought she might want to talk to you first." Squall said.

Irvine blinked, and then said, "Oh. Right."

As Squall's eyes drifted shut, Irvine smirked, "Thought you weren't tired."

"Never said I wasn't tired. Just didn't want to stop. Might as well rest while I can," Squall said, eyes still closed. Irvine couldn't argue with that, so he left him to it.

Going into the other bedroom he took off his hat and hung it on the bedpost and stretched out on top of the bedspread, pulling out his cell phone.

Dialing the number, he waited as it rang and Selphie picked up, sounding sleepy, "hello?"

"Hey babe, it's me. How's everything going? Were you sleeping?" He asked her. He smiled as he heard her yawning reply.
"Yeah. Its early morning here." She said.

"Its almost noon here. I don't even know what day it is anymore, we were on that damn train for so long." Irvine said.

"Train? Damn, I wish you'd taken me." Selphie pouted.

"Me too. Just checking in with you sweetheart, letting you know we're okay and fixin' to crash in a hotel here. We stopped by Watts' place in Timber and confirmed that Rinoa had gotten on a train bound for FH. So that's how we're here. We're resting up and waiting for a contact of Watts'. Any new intel to give us?" Irvine asked her.

"Not really. Laguna still is checking into the private security agencies in Esthar. Haven't really heard anything back from him yet." Selphie said. Irvine frowned, "Well, we're pretty certain Rinoa's in Esthar by now. Problem is, we don't know where to go once we get there. We could lose her entirely, as large a country as it is."

"Well, I haven't gotten any of the lab results back yet, it's only been what, two days?" Selphie said, worried.

Irvine frowned. Two days? It felt like ages had passed. Then he remembered Squall had wanted to speak with Selphie.

"I almost forgot, Squall wanted to talk to you after we got done talking…" he began, and he heard Selphie's laugh on the other end of the line.

"Done with me already?" she asked.

Irvine laughed softly, "Baby, you know I'll never be done with you."

"Same here. I love you Irvine. Go ahead and put Squall on." She said. Irvine obligingly got up and carried the phone into Squall's room, placing it on his chest.

"Selphie." He said quietly when Squall opened his eyes. Squall nodded his thanks and Irvine left, intending to lie down and actually sleep this time.

"So, you wanted to talk to me?" Selphie asked.

"Yes. You remember the day Rinoa was abducted, right? How well do you remember it?" Squall asked her.

"Pretty well. I gave a full description to Irvine and the investigative team the SeeDs sent. We also forwarded that information to Laguna." Selphie answered.

"Do you remember faces?" Squall asked her.

"Yeah." Selphie answered.

"We need to find out who these people worked for. If we could find the company name, maybe you could hack into their personnel database and start scanning the photo ID s. If we could put a name to even one face…" Squall began.

"One name could lead to another, and maybe to a location." Selphie finished.

"Right." Squall said.
"I know Laguna's searching for them on his end. I'll do a search too, on private security companies
based in Esthar that are recruiting ex-military or SeeD trained personnel, see what comes up."
Selphie said.

"Good idea. No one ever thinks about what a SeeD washout ends up doing for a living..." Squall
said.

"Exactly. And these guys were very good. Better than your run of the mill rent-a-cops. Which
means it's a high end, very expensive hire." Selphie said.

"That kind of fits what we've found. Some corporation privately owned the train car that they put
Rinoa on, but Watts wasn't able to get the name before we left. I told him to call you with any
information that he might have." Squall told her.

Selphie sighed, "I wish I was there with you guys, helping..."

"You are helping us Selphie. You're a whiz at this kind of stuff." Squall said.

"Thanks." Then she yawned and added, "I'm going to go back to sleep. As soon as I find anything
I'll call you back."

"All right." Squall said, disconnecting the call. He left the cell phone lying on his chest and simply
stared at the ceiling. Despite attempting to sleep earlier, he found he was unable to relax. He knew
that they needed to layover in FH for a little bit to rest and wait for Watts' contact, but he wanted to
be on the train to Esthar now.

He knew his haste would get him nowhere, not if he didn't actually have a direction, but it was
hard to simply sit and wait. They were already two days behind and Squall worried that the trail
would simply vanish when they got to Esthar if they waited for too long.

So, what would he need to do first upon arriving in Esthar? Besides consulting with Laguna that
was. Patience. He needed patience. Like stalking a mesmerize. Move too quickly and you lose the
quarry entirely.

He took a deep breath, trying to find his center and relax. Unfortunately, the busy décor of the
room made it difficult. Sighing, he rolled his head over on the pillow and focused on the bedpost,
which in reality was a cleverly disguised pipe that had been painted black.

Fascinated, he took a closer look at it. He'd taken it for rough-forged wrought iron, rather than
what was apparently scrap steel pipe. The finials on the tops of the posts were the decorative tops
one normally saw on fencing.

It was while he was studying the finial that he saw what he took to be either a thin cord or thick
thread hanging from it. Squinting, he lifted it from the finial and studied it closely, discovering it to
be very cleverly made of hair, and worked into an intricate bowline knot.

Holding it in the palm of his hand, he lightly stroked it, feeling its silken texture, seeing its inky
color and wondered. Was it possible?

What reason would anyone have to carefully braid several strands of hair together and then fashion
a bowline knot from it. It defied logic.

Unless the person doing it had a specific reason for doing so.

A sign. A signal. A reminder. She had been there. She had left that for him, knowing he would
remember that he'd taught it to her, that it was the only knot that she'd mastered.

Suddenly restless, he swung his legs over and thumped his boots onto the floor, sitting up. Staring toward the door, he made a decision and got up, grabbing his watch cap and pulling it down over his forehead again. Stuffing the lock of hair into his pocket, Squall strode out the door, heading downstairs for the concierge desk.

Approaching the concierge, he asked, "Do know anything about whoever stayed in our room before us?"

The young man frowned slightly, and said, "No. Is there a problem with your room Mr. Knight?" Squall suppressed a sigh. It had been Irvine's idea to use assumed names upon check in so as remain incognito. And Squall had agreed. However, the names Irvine had chosen…? Rusty Knight? Richard Head? He supposed it was Irvine's idea of a joke, but he could only be glad that he hadn't gotten stuck with something worse like Harry Balzac or Tyne E Willie.

Especially not Tyne E Willie.

"Well," Squall said carefully, "I think something of theirs might have been left behind. Do you know who they were?"

"Not really, no." the concierge answered, "They used a corporate credit card. All of their contact information goes to that corporation. It looked like they were bodyguards or something for an important client."

Trying hard to remain casual (and Squall wasn't that great of an actor under normal circumstances), he asked, "Who was the client? The President of Galbadia?"

"No," the concierge shook his head, smiling slightly. "Just a girl. Very pretty, and very pregnant. Poor thing had a bit of trouble with her breakfast and delayed their checkout by several hours."

Squall frowned at hearing this. Rinoa shouldn't still be having problems with morning sickness, she was months past that. Then he remembered that stress and other odd, random things like smells could trigger an episode.

"Ah. Well that explains the… hairbrush… I found. She must have forgotten it. I don't suppose you'd have an address I could send it to…?" Squall asked. He doubted very much he'd get so lucky as to actually get the address to where they were taking Rinoa. Odine wasn't that stupid. But if nothing else, the name that the room had been registered under might provide a clue.

"I'm sorry, no. We only have the corporate name that was on the card." The concierge answered.

"Well, maybe they know." Squall commented, shrugging. He didn't want to press, but he did want that corporate name. The trick was acting as though it didn't matter when it did in fact matter very much to him.

The concierge shrugged in turn, saying, "Well if you want to go to all that trouble. I could just send it myself if you'd rather…"

"No, I don't mind." Squall said.

"Okay," the concierge said and turned away for a moment, looking through some paperwork.

"Here we go," he said, returning to the desk. "Whitsand International. They're based in Esthar. Here's the number." The young man wrote it and the business address down on a notepad and
handed it to Squall.

YES! Okay, it wasn't much but it was a start. Squall had to tell himself that it was a clue, but how good a clue remained to be seen. Still, it was difficult not to feel both relief and elation at the information.

Despite that, Squall managed to contain his excitement and simply gave the concierge a slight smile as he said, "thank you."

Upon returning to the room, he doffed the watch cap and ran his fingers through his hair again, pacing aimlessly around the sitting room, and thinking. He couldn't sit still, not with what could be a good lead sitting in his pocket. But he couldn't simply call them up and ask who'd hired them to kidnap his wife and where they'd taken her.

And what about this local contact that Watts had told them about? What could he contribute? Squall knew that he'd need to rest and eat, that haste wouldn't help and might even hinder his search. But he couldn't help feeling impatient.

"You tryin' to wear out the carpet?" Irvine asked. Squall turned and glared at him.

"No. I couldn't sleep. After I talked to Selphie I couldn't settle so I started looking around the room and I found something of Rinoa's. She'd been here in this room." Squall said.

Irvine yawned, scratching at his hair, and commented, "Well, that explains why you're so riled up."

"I went downstairs and asked the concierge about this room's previous occupants." Squall stated.

Irvine's attention sharpened and he asked, "Did you get a good lead?"

"I don't know. Odine wouldn't be stupid enough to give these guys a corporate credit card that would lead directly to him. It may ultimately be a dead end, but I got the name of the corporation the card is billed to." Squall said.

"Well, that's something at least. It may be more helpful than you're thinking it is." Irvine said, then he added, "I don't know about you man, but I need two things right now desperately; a shower and dinner. Wouldn't hurt you to do the same."

Squall glared at him, "I don't need a shower. And I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself, but we're going to be meeting Watts' contact in a little bit. You don't want him to smell you coming." Irvine said with a shrug.

"Fine. Dick." Squall said sarcastically.

"No problem, Rusty." Irvine grinned at Squall's stony expression.

"I get 'Richard Head' as your alias Irvine, that's kind of self explanatory. But 'Rusty Knight'? Where'd that come from?" Squall asked.

"Well, you are a knight, and as for the 'rusty' part... take a close look at that beard you're growing buddy. It's coming in pretty nicely too, you gonna keep it?" Irvine asked him.

Squall frowned and rubbed at his cheeks and chin. He honestly hadn't even thought of shaving for days.

Finally Squall said, "Yeah, for a while anyway."
"Good move. If you want to be incognito, a beard's a good way to start." Irvine nodded, then added, "Well, I'm off to the showers." He turned and went back into his room, closing the door.

Squall sighed and decided on a shower as well. It certainly wouldn't hurt. It might even relax him a bit.

Entering his room, he shut the door and stripped, then went into the small bathroom. Giving in to his curiosity, he peered critically at his reflection in the mirror. The beard was coming in nicely now, finally. It was fortunately not the patchy, scraggly thing that he'd barely managed in the past. And the color...was a surprise. He didn't have much in the way of body hair and he didn't pay much attention to its color. His hair was a medium brown with a distinctly reddish cast to it. His beard however (what there was of it), was a bright, coppery red.

Squall laughed slightly and said, "I'll be damned. Rusty it is."

As he stepped into the shower, Squall wondered what Rinoa would think of his altered appearance, if she should happen to see it. It was still mostly stubble, but he could already tell it wouldn't take long for it to thicken and fill in. For someone who knew him only slightly, the beard, coupled with the partially obscured scar, would serve to keep his identity under wraps.

As far as anyone knew, Squall Leonhart was still trapped in Balamb and dealing with the aftermath of the hurricane. Zell had promised that he would do his best to make sure that assumption was not challenged. He hoped by doing that, it would help in his search.

If Rinoa's captors thought he was still trapped and unable to follow they would relax their vigilance, maybe let something slip. If nothing else, it would give Squall the advantage of surprise when he finally did catch up to them and make it easier to take them out.

Either way, not being easily recognized as Squall Leonhart could definitely provide him with an edge he could use.

Squall finished his shower and dried off, then dressed in clean clothes. He had to admit, he did feel much better; and he was actually hungry. He padded into the sitting room and sat down on the couch, wondering if this particular hotel actually had room service or if he would have to go downstairs to the café.

Irvine joined him a few moments later, fussing with his still wet hair. Squall snorted at that. Despite his promise to Rinoa, Squall decided that if long hair was that much trouble, he'd prefer to keep his on the short side.

"Okay, now we get lunch." Irvine said.

"I was just thinking about that. Do you know if they have room service here?" Squall asked.

"I don't..." he began, when a knock interrupted him. Exchanging a puzzled look with Squall, Irvine went to answer the door. Squall followed, pulling his backup weapon from its holster in the small of his back and thumbing the safety off.

Keeping the gun pressed against his leg and out of sight, Squall leaned against the wall next to the door and nodded to Irvine, indicating that he was ready to back him up if anything happened.

Irvine opened the door and simply stared. Squall couldn't suppress a groan.

"Um...hello?" Irvine asked. The brunette girl on the other side of the door must have gotten her directions mixed up, because he knew for a fact that neither he nor Squall had hired a stripper.
And she undeniably was a stripper. Despite being fully dressed, the outfit practically screamed it. She wore thigh-high leather boots, a tiny leather miniskirt and a white button up shirt that was unbuttoned enough to show off her impressive cleavage.

"Hi. I'm Hootie," She began.

"Of course you are," Irvine said, grinning widely.

"I'm looking for a lion. Do you guys know anything about Forest Owls?" she asked, looking from Irvine to Squall and back.

"You've got to be kidding me." Squall said. Irvine started to laugh and opened the door wider, inviting the girl in.

"Gotta love Watts. Man after my own heart." Irvine said, still laughing.

"This isn't funny." Squall said, scowling.

"Well, this is obviously our contact, so might as well get on with it. Come on in darlin'." Irvine said.

The girl strolled in and circled them both, looking them up and down with interest, saying, "Watts didn't tell me how good-looking you guys were."

Planting herself in front of Irvine, she placed her hands on her hips and tilted her chin up, meeting his eyes, and said, "You're the cowboy, obviously. Kinneas?"

At his nod, she moved over to Squall and smiled, "Now, if you aren't the lion, I don't know who is. Leonhart, right?"

"Yes," he confirmed. Casually replacing the gun back into the holster at his back, and catching the girl's eyes widening as she realized he'd been armed and ready the entire time she'd been talking to them, he folded his arms across his chest and waited.

"So, what have ya got for us darlin'?" Irvine drawled with a smirk, strolling over to the couch, sitting down and propping his boots on the coffee table.

"The people you're looking for are in Esthar," she began.

"We know." Squall said, unimpressed.

The girl nodded. That wasn't hard to figure out, there wasn't much choice in directions from FH if you were traveling by train; either you continued on to Esthar or turned around and went back to Galbadia.

"One of them came into the place where I work. Its interesting what a man will tell you if he thinks it'll get him laid." She smirked.

Irvine chuckled, "Very true." The girl smiled in response. She found his good humor very attractive, quite unlike his incredibly gorgeous but rather cold and silent partner.

"He said he worked for Whitsand International. He made it sound like it was a big deal, very hush-hush, mysterious stuff." She said.

"Again. We know." Squall said, expression cooling further. This was a waste of time.
Exasperated, the girl demanded, "Well, what do you want to know?"

"A name." Squall said.

"Lance. I didn't get a last name. Said he was part of a team delivering some kind of package that required a high level of security." She told him.

Irvine snorted at that. Obviously their concept of 'high level of security' differed vastly from that of the SeeDs, particularly if one of their team members thought it was okay to brag about it to a stripper.

Squall, for his part, was doing his best to contain the simmering anger that had sprung to life at hearing Rinoa referred to as 'a package'. Baggage. An object, not a person. The very concept made him feel ill.

"You got anything else for us, darlin'?" Irvine asked her.

"Not in the way of business," she said, smiling slowly. Running her finger along the low neckline of the shirt, she nudged it open further, putting her…assets… on display.

Licking her lips and gazing at both of them, she added, "But I could do with a bit of fun…you guys game?"

Squall frowned, feeling like he was somehow missing something, particularly when he caught Irvine's wide-eyed stare.

"Um… both of us?" Irvine asked, gesturing from Squall to himself. When she nodded, his jaw dropped. Then he shook his head and grinned.

It took a minute for Squall to figure it out, but when he did he immediately went over to Irvine and grabbed his shoulder, saying shortly, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Be right back sweetheart," Irvine said with a wink before getting up and following Squall into one of the bedrooms.

"What do you think? You gotta admit, it is tempting…" Irvine said, grinning wickedly as Squall shut the door behind them.

"You can't seriously be considering this? Are you out of your mind?" Squall demanded.

"Well, I don't know about you buddy but the thought of tag-teaming that gal with you is very intriguing…" Irvine said, and started laughing at Squall's stunned reaction.

"NO. Not only NO but hell no. Get her out of here Irvine." Squall said, glaring at him, cheeks reddening.

"You wouldn't want to try it at least once?" Irvine asked. He knew he was pushing it, but he was having a lot of fun at Squall's expense. It was all he could do not to just collapse into laughter at seeing his friend so…rattled.

"Irvine? Do you love your wife? Do you want to stay married to her?" Squall asked him.

"Of course I do. I'm just kidding. It is an intriguing thought, but only a thought." Irvine told him, relenting.

Squall sighed in relief, and then asked, "Please, get her out of here? And do me a favor, use the big
head for thinking, okay?"

Irvine chuckled, opening the door, "Okay. But you should have seen the look on your face. Looked like you just swallowed a live fish." He laughed harder at Squall's pungent expletive as he closed the door behind him.

Leaving Squall alone in his room (to cool off), Irvine walked into the sitting room where the girl waited. She stood up from where she'd been sitting and Irvine smiled at her in appreciation. She was really quite spectacular; glossy dark brown hair, creamy skin and eyes the golden brown color of fine whiskey. And her figure…

But Squall was right. The bold beauty she possessed, quite a contrast to Selphie's slender delicacy, didn't do as much for him as it might have in the past.

"I'm sorry darlin' but I'm afraid we're gonna have to pass on the fun." He told her apologetically.

"Really? Darn." She pouted in disappointment.

Taking her hand, Irvine pressed some gil into it and folded her fingers over with his own.

Gently escorting her to the door, he said, "Thank you, Miss Hootie, for your time and for your information. It'll help, I'm sure. If you learn anything more, please let Watts know, he'll relay it to us."

He opened the door for the young lady, and before she walked through she said, "Too bad you guys decided not to play. It would have been a lot of fun. Any particular reason why you didn't go for it?"

Irvine laughed slightly and told her, "I take it Watts didn't mention to you that we were married. NOT to each other, either, despite how it might look."

She laughed at that, saying, "No, Watts didn't mention that."

Then she tilted her head curiously, asking, "This package that the guy, Lance was talking about, you're after it aren't you? What's so important about it?"

Irvine sighed and answered her softly, "The package they mentioned...It's Squall's wife. They kidnapped her two days ago. And yeah, it's important...finding her could be a matter of life or death. She's pregnant with twins...and well... it's a little late in the pregnancy for her to be getting dragged around like this. We really need to find her before something happens to her or the babies."

The girl reached out and gave Irvine's hand a gentle squeeze and told him, "I'll do whatever I can to help. I hope you find her."

"I do too. Thanks again." Irvine said, closing the door behind her.

Re-entering the room, Irvine checked with Squall and volunteered to get them both lunch. He knew the stopover in FH was a delay that Squall was less than happy about, but as he left to pick up their food, he saw Squall searching through a phone directory listing businesses based in Esthar with single-minded intensity.

Irvine knew that Squall had every intention of having at least a direction to go once they arrived there.

_I hope we find where they are so we can free Rinoa and bring her home. These guys don't know_
whom they've fucked with. Irvine thought. He was in perfect agreement with Squall's plans regarding that. Free Rinoa first, make sure she was safe…. then take out the kidnappers. Eliminate all enemies.

The SeeDs were going to bring the rain to Esthar.

It was warm in Esthar this time of year. Of course, it was always warm in Esthar, compared to Balamb or Galbadia. But, it was winter in Balamb and Galbadia, so the weather was correspondingly cold.

It was difficult to feel comfortable in the warm, dry climate of Esthar when one was used to cool, damp winters. Rinoa supposed that it was winter there as well, since the temperatures were a good deal cooler than they were in high summer.

But the warmth, along with her growing babies, was making it hard for her to breathe.

It had to be the warmth, she told herself, despite the fact that the place where they'd taken her was air conditioned and nearly as cold as a winter morning in Galbadia. It wasn't the growing fear that kept prickling at the edge of her mind. It wasn't the anxiety that kept threatening to choke her. It wasn't.

She'd arrived there the day before, and had been taken to a…. cell. Or that's what it had seemed to her to be. In reality, it looked more like a hospital room…in a mental ward. One with barred windows, a heavy security door that locked from the outside, clean, blank white walls, pale gray tile and very little else.

There was at least a bathroom in the room. Rinoa supposed she should be grateful for that. If Odine had intended her to be his guest however, his concept of 'guest accommodations' left much to be desired.

The only sign of warmth in this cold, sterile room departed when the young guard, Renn, escorted her there and reluctantly left with a bleak look in his eyes.

The only thing he'd said to her was that the doctor would be seeing her the next day. She didn't know when, though. Or why.

She'd spent the night on sheets that were a far cry from the silky smooth, finely woven linens that she preferred, on a thin mattress in a tiny bed that left her back aching, wearing the horrid hospital gown they'd left for her because she had nothing else to wear. And she wanted to cry. But she was all out of tears.

Her stomach roiled and bile rose to the bottom of her throat. They hadn't provided her dinner the previous night, nor breakfast that morning, and she was beginning to feel sick. She wondered if they were simply going to leave her and her babies there to starve.

Logically, it didn't make much sense, why not simply kill her if that was what they intended after all, rather than leave her to die slowly? No, they'd taken all this trouble to get her here alive and in good condition, so someone would be along eventually. It didn't help her spiraling anxiety however to be left alone to stare at the blank walls and wonder.

The click of the lock on the door caught Rinoa's attention and she couldn't stop the surge of relief that came over her as a white-clad woman stepped through the door.
"Sorceress Rinoa? The doctor is ready for you now. Come with me." she said.

Not having any other choice, Rinoa complied.

Following the woman down the featureless, sterile hallway had Rinoa seesawing between anger and fear, which left her feeling both lightheaded and nauseated. After what felt like the longest walk Rinoa had ever endured in her life, she was ushered into what looked like a laboratory that had been retrofitted into an exam room.

The cavernous room, filled with a bewildering array of equipment and instruments, all of it incomprehensible and most of it terrifying, did nothing at all for Rinoa's anxiety. Neither did the wizened little man who stood in the center of it, flipping through some papers on a clipboard; black-framed reading glasses perched on the end of his nose.

Glancing up, he said, "At last. Now we can get started."

Swallowing to moisten her suddenly dry mouth, Rinoa asked, "started with what, exactly? Why am I here?"

"With the examination of course, Sorceress Rinoa. You haff made me wait far too long. A summons from Odine should never be ignored." Odine speared her with a cold, emotionless gaze that made Rinoa's flesh crawl.

"Examination?" Rinoa tried to swallow again but couldn't moisten her dry, cottony mouth. She looked over at what looked like a conventional examination table and couldn't hold back a shudder.

Even with an OB/GYN that she liked and trusted, Rinoa could only tolerate the frequent exams as a necessary evil. The thought of Odine's cold, reptilian hands touching her anywhere made her want to retch.

Fighting down the nausea, Rinoa raised her chin and managed in an only slightly shaking voice, "Is that why you've brought me here? So...so you can poke me and prod me like some kind of animal?" Drawing in a shuddering breath, she demanded, voice rising with every word, "Is...is that why you had me taken from my home and dragged across two continents? Is that why you've put this goddamned thing on my wrist?" She shook the hand wearing the hated bangle at him. Suddenly, she understood perfectly why Squall had wanted to strangle the man.

Sobbing openly now, Rinoa screamed at him, "Is that why your fucking goons killed my dog and shot my best friend and...and...locked me away from my husband? Is that why?"

Odine simply watched her emotional display expressionlessly, answering her shrieked question with a simple, "yes."

"You...bastard!" Rinoa cried, gasping, "I hate you! Hate you!" then she added in a venomous hiss, "I hope Squall finds you and crushes the life from your throat while I watch!"

Becoming impatient with her histrionics, Odine waved an attendant over and said curtly, "Onto the table, now."

The woman grasped Rinoa's upper arm in a firm grip, ready to physically force her if she resisted.

She dug in her heels and the woman's grip tightened, but before Rinoa could react, Dr. Odine said blandly, "You must calm down, Sorceress Rinoa. You will not be harmed, I simply must answer some questions which you present. This will be less traumatic for you if you cooperate."
"I will not cooperate. I refuse to be treated like an animal! Do you hear me? I refuse! I am scared, I'm hungry, you've stuck me in a cell with a barely adequate bed and given me this horrid thing to wear…. how is this going to get my cooperation? And all of this just to satisfy your curiosity? You are sick." Rinoa spat angrily.

Odine made a vague gesture and Rinoa felt a painful prick on her upper arm. She turned to see the woman holding her arm withdrawing a hypodermic needle with an empty cylinder. A block of ice formed in her guts.

"What was that? What did you give me?" Rinoa asked, fear mounting as she felt a fuzziness start to creep into her consciousness.

"A mild sedative. It will not hurt you or your fetuses." Odine answered her as the assistant led a still slightly resisting Rinoa toward the examination table.

The fuzziness intensified, and it seemed to Rinoa that the part of her that was still angry, and frightened and resistant was being smothered by white, fluffy clouds. She felt the need to lie down, and the female attendant obligingly helped her onto the exam table.

She watched, a distant part in her mind still screaming in anger and fear, as her arm was extended and a needle inserted into the vein. She wondered how much blood they would take as they kept filling the vials. She began to feel dizzy and tried to drag in a deep breath but for some reason, there didn't seem to be enough air in the room.

Then she felt Odine's cold hands touching her body and she shrank back with a gasp. The sedative couldn't completely numb her into dully submitting to his prodding, but she was also too far under the influence of the drug they'd given her to do much.

Slow tears began to leak from the corners of her eyes as she tried to turn her mind away from what he was doing. From someone whose objective was to keep her and her babies healthy, she could tolerate it. From her husband, whom she loved deeply, she reveled in it. But from someone who cared nothing for her and whom she loathed, it was torture.

She began to feel weak, tired, and cold. The fluffy white cotton in her mind expanded and smothered her. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't see.

As her consciousness faded away, from a long distance, Rinoa heard someone shout urgently, "Doctor! She's crashing!"

An hour later, the nurse assistant entered Doctor Odine's office, prepared to take him to task. The young woman was finally stabilized and resting, though it was a near thing. The effect of the sedative, coupled with the fact that the young sorceress was extremely stressed and dehydrated, had sent her into shock. Fortunately, both she and the babies would recover.

"Doctor Odine, I would like to talk to you." She announced.

The doctor looked up from the results of the blood tests and labwork he'd been working on. The nurse shook her head. The girl had literally been dying under his hands, and the only thing he'd been focusing on was gathering as much data as possible while the nurse had been trying desperately to save her life.

"Ze sorceress is vell, yes?" Dr. Odine asked her.
"Yes, no thanks to you." The nurse answered, scowling.

"Gut. It is interesting that she reacted as she did." Odine commented.

"Interesting? Doctor, she nearly died!" the nurse exclaimed.

"I wonder why...?" Dr. Odine mused.

"Does it matter? She was obviously sensitive to that type of drug, and coupled with her stress, agitation and the fact that she was dehydrated, its effect must have been intensified." The nurse reasoned. Odine nodded, and made a notation on the chart he held.

"We will know in the future then, that she is sensitive to this drug. If she must be sedated again, we will use a lower dose." Odine said.

"She shouldn't be sedated at all! Doctor, are you an obstetrician?" the nurse demanded.

Dr. Odine raised his chin and said arrogantly, "I am the great Odine! I am a doctor!"

"But you obviously don't know the first thing about pregnant women. I strongly suggest you engage the services of an obstetrician or at the very least, a nurse midwife or you will kill this girl. If that was your plan from the beginning, then it's far kinder to put a bullet in her head now." The nurse said.

Odine frowned. He'd only just started his work. His subject couldn't die on him, he'd been careful to make sure all of her needs were met; she had a place to sleep and would be fed once she awakened... What more could she need?

"That would be illogical. And unnecessary." Odine said.

Exasperated, the nurse retorted, "what is illogical doctor is treating this girl like an animal. Even you have to acknowledge that your lab rats are easier to work with when they're given cages that they find comfortable and are treated gently when they are handled. Move this girl into a more comfortable room. Give her a better bed, and something besides the hospital gown to wear. Give her something to divert her and keep her occupied. Most of all leave her alone and give her some time to calm down. Stress is the enemy here. Stress will lead to higher blood pressure and increase her risk of preeclampsia. And doctor? Preeclampsia will kill her."

Odine narrowed his eyes, thinking. The nurse was right. How could he have missed it?

"Very well. See to it then." Dr. Odine said, waving his hand at the nurse dismissively.

"Thank you doctor," the nurse said, leaving.

She checked on the young sorceress one more time, to find her sleeping peacefully and her vitals fortunately stable. The nurse checked the IV drip, and made a note on when it would need to be changed on the girl's chart. Then she looked around at the bare, sterile room and frowned. As soon as she was able, she would move the girl to a better, less bleak room.

She had been told that Dr. Odine's subjects were volunteers, and hadn't been given any reason to doubt that. But this was obviously not the case with the young sorceress, and it left the nurse wondering what the doctor's ultimate intention with her would be.

Leaving Rinoa to her rest, the nurse left to get a better, more comfortable room prepared for her.
"Hey Lance, how're ya doin' buddy?" The bartender greeted the sandy-haired young man that had just entered the bar and sat down in front of him.

"Not bad, finally got a few days off." The man responded, picking up the beer the bartender had placed in front of him and nodding his thanks.

"Work getting rough for ya?" the bartender asked, wiping down the bar.

"Yeah. Can't give any details...." Lance began.

"I know, hush-hush, ultra secret blah, blah, blah..." the bartender broke in, snorting. The young man played up the fact that he was a former SeeD, and that his current job in the high-level private security business was even more mysterious and dangerous than his former occupation, but he didn't buy it.

For one thing, he'd heard through the grapevine that Lance had never actually graduated to SeeD, washing out on his first attempt. For another, the real ex-SeeDs that came in to his place, those few that worked with Lance, were considerably more close-mouthed about their work.

The guy may have had some of their skills, but he wasn't and never had been a SeeD.

"I gotta tell you about this hot little thing I ran into though..." Lance said, launching into a description of the stripper he'd met in FH a couple weeks back. The bartender shook his head, laughing quietly, when Lance was forced to admit he hadn't been able to close the deal with the girl on account of his job. Of course.

"I couldn't bring anyone to the hotel with me. But I got her number and who knows, maybe I'll head out there again now that I've got some time off." Lance said, sipping at his beer.

"She sounds like she might be worth the trip." The bartender commented.

"She is. Hey, you see Renn in here lately? I've barely seen him since we finished this last job we did." Lance commented, scanning the bar, completely missing the dark form blending into the shadows on the far side of the dimly lit room.

"Nope, haven't seen 'im for a couple of weeks, come to think of it. Carrie's been wondering about him too. Has he been at work?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah, but he's been kinda weird and mopey lately. Ever since we got back, come to think of it. Haven't seen him much since they reassigned him." Lance said, taking another draft of his beer.

"Well, if they stuck him with graveyards again, that would explain the moping, you know how much he hates that shift." The bartender said.

"Tell me about it. That's probably what's eating at him. I'll try and give him a call later on." Lance said, finishing his beer. That was probably it. Served Rennie right for being so damn good at his job. They only stuck the best guys on graveyard, because it was so dangerous. The last time he had done graveyards, three guys had died when a stampede of mesmerize had overrun one of the perimeter fences. It was amazing the amount of damage the antelope-like creatures had caused.

That was also why both he and Renn had been chosen for the last job they'd done. Only the best
had been tapped for it. The bonus had been particularly satisfying; the casualties they had suffered while earning it however had tempered that satisfaction. Five of their best guys, killed by two women…. and only one of them had been a SeeD. The thought of what Commander Leonhart might do if he caught up to them was downright terrifying.

While he tended to be a little loose-lipped, Lance wasn't a complete fool. He was careful not to give away any details, nothing that could be considered a security breach. Nothing that could be used, at any rate, though he knew he sometimes skirted too close to the edge sometimes, particularly when he was trying to impress a pretty girl.

But they'd been careful, and all of the news reports and other information they'd gotten out of Balamb led them to believe that Commander Leonhart was still there, though nobody had been able to confirm it. Come to think of it, nobody had even seen the commander since the day after the hurricane….

Lance shook his head. No, he was fine. Nobody had seen the commander anywhere else, either. He was probably just busy. Commander Leonhart was notoriously camera-shy when it came to the news media.

Yawning, Lance said, "I'm gonna head home. It's been a long day for me."

"If you manage to get a hold of Renn, tell him Carrie's been asking after him," the bartender told him.

"Okay, will do. See you later." Lance tossed some gil on the bar and left. The bartender, who was occupied with putting the gil into the register and filling another mug of beer, failed to see the shadow in the far corner slip out of the door behind Lance. If he had, he might have revised his assumption that the young man had exaggerated the danger inherent in his job.

Squall padded silently behind his target, unimpressed with the man's grasp of the training he'd received in his attempt to make SeeD. A first year cadet would have been more alert.

It was a difficult and challenging stalk for Squall; Esthar City's broad avenues were well lit, and the grav-tubes made it difficult to sneak up on someone unawares. Once a person entered them, it was impossible to assault them until they reached their destination.

But Squall was a hunter. Stalking a wary antelope or a dangerous monster was no different than stalking a man. It was actually easier, as a matter of fact. A man didn't posses the keen senses that a monster or animal did. As long as he did nothing that would stand out and capture the man's attention, Squall could be breathing down his neck before his quarry was aware of his presence.

Two weeks. Two weeks it had taken him to find this man. The corporate name that he'd obtained from the concierge in FH had been, just as Squall had feared, a shell corporation. A fake. It didn't actually exist. The credit card did however, and it had taken several days of intensive research to find out where the bill actually went and who paid it.

Laguna's forensic accountant, working off the clock so that Squall's father wouldn't have to account for the man's time, had been invaluable in finding that and many other things out. Day by day they painstakingly worked their way closer to their goal.

Squall had needed to shut off the part of his mind and heart that worried about Rinoa, lock away his anxiety and impatience and let the SeeD take over. Once he did that, he was able to concentrate upon the search, coolly following every lead that was presented, fitting the puzzle pieces together
into a whole that made sense.

The exacting patience and analytical attention to detail that he exhibited impressed even those who knew him well.

Finally however, the tiny, tantalizing little bits of information that they’d gathered over the last two weeks had provided him with the first solid lead to Rinoa.

Lance Darien. Selphie had been integral in helping Squall to find him, as a matter of fact. Using the information the accountant had given her, she’d been able to find and hack into the personnel database of the security company that he worked for, and recognized him as one of the men that had been involved in the attack. Upon receiving her emailed picture of him, Squall's reaction had been one of fierce joy.

He finally had a target.

That target had foolishly decided to take the long way home, apparently, rather than take the more secure grav-tubes. Good for Squall, very, very bad for him.

Even in a city as brightly lit, clean and glittering as Esthar City, there were still places where the light didn't shine as brightly. Places where one treaded warily, if they treaded at all. Places that had shadows where crimes were committed. No city was completely free of them.

They passed by one of those places, and Squall seized upon the opportunity presented to him on a silver platter with swift efficiency.

Increasing the speed of his strides, Squall drew closer to the man, and when he was within range, silently flicked his wrist out, casting a sleep spell. As the man slumped, Squall casually caught him and dragged him around a corner and into a darkened alleyway.

Once free from casual observation, Squall bodily slammed him against the wall, slapping him hard across the face to wake him. He could simply have cast esuna, but he didn't want to waste another spell on the man, and it was much more satisfying to wake him this way anyhow.

"Ow! Fuck…Look man; I don't have much but take what you want, okay? I don't need this shit tonight…." Lance said, reeling from the sudden assault.

Then his eyes widened as Squall grabbed him by the throat and said in a low growl, "I don't want your money. I want information. A pregnant woman was brought here two weeks ago. Where was she taken?"

Lance paled. This man was obviously a SeeD, possibly sent by Commander Leonhart to retrieve his wife…the package.

"I don't know what you're talking about…” Lance wheezed, trying to brazen it out. Then he gasped as Squall's grip tightened further, cutting off his air completely.

"Don't lie to me Lance. I know who you are. I know you were there. I know you helped deliver her to her destination. Now, where is she?" Squall demanded, his voice softly menacing.

Lance clawed at Squall's hand, black spots dancing before his eyes before the pressure on his windpipe gradually relaxed and he was able to breathe. He closed his eyes and simply dragged air in and out of his lungs, then opened them again and studied the man who was holding him by the throat.
"If you kill me, you'll never know." Lance said with a smirk.

"There are a lot of very painful, drawn out ways of getting information, most of which are ultimately fatal. If you tell me what I want to know now, I'll kill you quickly. If you force me to drag it out of you, then you'll still die, but it will take a very, very long time." Squall told him. The calm, conversational tone he took while imparting this information to Lance was chilling.

Then he leaned closer and Lance got a better look at the man confronting him. Dark watch cap, pulled low over the forehead, a beard, and cold, cold eyes.... Lance squinted, wondering why they seemed so familiar.

Then Squall moved into a patch of light and Lance gasped, beginning to shake as his cold, ice-blue eyes bored into his.

*It couldn't be...*

Lance looked for and found the scar that the watch cap couldn't hide completely, and saw his death staring back at him. Squall Leonhart *himself* was in Esthar.

"Answer my question Lance." Squall said mildly, then snarled, "*where is my wife?*

"The facility is in the northern forest, built into one of the cliffs. Lots of cover, easy to hide, plenty of monsters to keep the tourists away." Lance answered, swallowing.

"Coordinates." Squall ordered, and Lance gave him the information.

Squall nodded, committing the information to memory, then asked, "Where is she located in this *facility***?

"Sector A. Second floor, room 1406." Lance answered him, then stammered, "P...please commander don't ..." his plea ended in a gasp as the knife Squall held in his other hand was shoved between his ribs and into his heart with surgical precision, stopping it. Squall stepped back and let his body drop.

"Kill you? Too late." Squall said coolly, examining his gloves and finding them clean. Good, they were his favorite pair. Then he casually strolled out of the alleyway and toward a nearby grav-tube, satisfied. It was a good, clean, quick kill. The best kind.

As Squall got onto the transport and spoke his destination, he reflected that those who thought that knives were a messy way to kill someone weren't doing it right.

________________________________________________________

*Another late night...* Laguna thought, rubbing at his burning eyes. Despite everything going on with the search for Rinoa, and Laguna's involvement with it, he still had a country to run. It made for some late nights. Several in fact. But they were getting close, and it was about time. Squall had maintained discipline pretty well, but Laguna could tell with each passing day that his son was beginning to acquire a dangerous edge.

He refocused his attention onto the latest finance bill, trying to actually *read* the damn thing before it was put before parliament the next day.

Suddenly, a fat manila envelope dropped onto his desk in front of him, startling him and prompting him to jump, gasping.
"For your forensic accountant. Overtime pay plus a bonus. Tell him thanks." Squall said.

"God Squall… I love you son but sometimes you scare me." Laguna said, hand pressed against his thumping heart.

"Sometimes?" Squall asked with a quirk of his eyebrows as he pulled a chair over and sat down across from him.

"Okay, most of the time. Makes me glad you're on my team, that's for sure." Laguna said.

"I'm not on anybody's team, remember? I'm neutral." Squall corrected.

"When you're here son, you're on my team." Laguna said with calm assurance. Squall paused, considering, and then nodded in agreement.

Then he leaned forward, eyes intense, and said, "I need your topographical map table."

"You've got something?" Laguna asked, putting the finance bill down. He closed his eyes and sighed in relief when Squall nodded. Then he stood up and led the way to the conference room that adjoined his office and activated the table.

"I've got coordinates to her location." Squall said, then he met Laguna's eyes and added softly, "I… I may have found her dad."

"That's great news son," Laguna said, tears stinging his eyes as he pulled Squall into a tight hug.

Using the touch-table was always fascinating to Squall, and once the map program had been loaded, he took over and tapped in the coordinates. The view shifted and focused on a spot on a rocky portion of the northern coast. Manipulating the image more, Squall got the information he needed on the terrain and plotted the route from Esthar City.

Laguna frowned, "that's a real wild, rough area. I'll make some calls, get a support team together…"

"No." Squall said flatly.

"What? But Squall..." Laguna began, to be cut off by Squall.

"Just Irvine and I. No one else." He said firmly.

"Why? Son, I want to help…" Laguna protested, trying not to feel hurt.

"You've been helping. And not just me; don't think that I wasn't aware that you'd sent millions in gil, tons of material and equipment and dozens of personnel to help out in Balamb." Squall told him.

Laguna laughed slightly, "I didn't think you were even paying attention to that."

Squall grimaced, and admitted, "Yeah, I have been a little…focused."

"So? Why do you feel only you and Irvine should do this then?" Laguna asked him, trying to understand. His background was military, same as Squall, but from different disciplines and philosophies. Laguna had been regular army, part of a unit. Squall was a specialist, used to working alone or in small groups, whose preferred method was a precise, controlled, focused strike.
"Two reasons," Squall answered. "First reason: It'll be harder to see us coming if it's just the two of us, rather than an entire army. The second? Deniability."

Laguna stared at him, brows knitted, asking, "Deniability? What are you talking about Squall?"

"If you're not aware of the term, ask Kiros. He can explain it to you." Squall answered blandly.

"I know what it means, I just don't know how it applies here…" Laguna said, frowning.

"You've already gone way beyond what you should have on my behalf dad. I'm grateful, don't get me wrong. And I know you were careful, but the fact remains, if something happened and it came out that you were using official channels for a personal concern, it could backfire on you." Squall said seriously.

Laguna sighed, knowing he had been skirting too close to territory that could cause a problem for him. He felt the risk was justified however. It did warm him however to see that his son was concerned for his political career. Laguna would have been just as happy to be voted out of office long ago, but change of this magnitude coming from a people so used to the stability of a single ruler came slowly.

Even under Sorceress Adel, it had taken decades, and a brash young Galbadian, to finally effect the change that the citizens had craved. Had Adel's regime not become progressively more oppressive and iron handed, she might still rule Esthar. Even now, there were factions within the government and military-industrial complex, those that had enjoyed certain privileges under Adel, which actually missed having a sorceress at the helm.

"Alright. I understand, but I don't have to like it. What do you plan to do then?" Laguna asked.

"Better you don't know." Squall said grimly.

Laguna nodded. That's what he'd thought. Just like he didn't ask and Squall didn't volunteer how he'd come by the information leading to Rinoa in the first place.

"When will you leave then?" Laguna asked him.

"As soon as possible. I'll need to make sure we've got enough ammo and gear. I also need to get a floor plan of this place." Squall said, frowning. The trick would be getting it. Maybe Selphie could help with that…. Squall resolved to call her as soon as he could.

"Be ready with the Valkyrie for pickup when we call you." Squall told him.

Laguna laughed softly, "So you'll let me do that much huh?"

Squall's lips quirked slightly and he replied, "Sure. You're allowed to rescue stranded hikers. Never hurts to play the hero where people can see it." Laguna nodded in acknowledgment of that observation.

"Well you'd better go get some rest. You're looking a little ragged around the edges son." Laguna said with concern.

"I'm fine. It's this beard. Makes me look like a bum. First thing I'm gonna do when we're done with this is shave it off." Squall said, making a face and scratching at it.

Laguna chuckled, "I have to admit, it was a surprise seeing you show up sporting that. I get why you did it, and it helped to keep your identity under wraps, but it certainly is a different look for
you. I wonder what Rinoa will think of it?"

"I don't know, doesn't really matter to me, I'm shaving it off regardless. I think the most irritating thing about it, aside from the itching, is Irvine calling me 'Rusty' all the time." Squall groused.

Laguna threw his head back in a full-throated laugh, and said, "Son, I never knew you'd grow a red beard, but if you think that's bad, you should see mine. It comes in pure white."

Squall raised his eyebrows, asking, "seriously?" Laguna's hair was still mostly black, though there was more silver in it than there had been four years ago.

Holding his hand up, palm out as though he were making a solemn vow, Laguna answered, "it's the honest truth. And if I don't shave every day, Kiros is absolutely merciless." Shaking his head, Laguna added, "You'd never know the man was over forty. Not a single gray hair or wrinkle, and he gives me no end of grief about it."

A smile lifted the corner of Squall's mouth as he visualized that, and he said, "I believe it. Well, I'm off to bed then. Good night, dad."

Giving Squall's shoulder a squeeze, Laguna said, "Good night to you as well… and good luck. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

Squall nodded and left. Laguna returned to his desk from the conference room and stared blindly at the finance bill before finally giving it up and tossing the thing into his desk. He was about to lock the drawer when he spied the envelope Squall had wanted given to Laguna's forensic accountant.

Checking his watch, he thought that the man might possibly still be awake, so he picked up the phone and called the man's personal phone number.

He hadn't expected Squall to pay the accountant; Laguna had already made arrangements for that. But it was a nice gesture, on several levels. And it helped with…again…deniability. If anyone took it into their heads to audit Laguna's accounts, they would find…nothing.

Judging by the look on the accountant's face when he looked into the envelope, Squall had been more then adequately generous.

Renn walked along the dimly lit hallway checking his watch. The end of yet another long, boring graveyard shift, and Renn was headed home. He supposed he shouldn't complain too much about the boredom. An exciting graveyard shift usually ended in lives lost.

Fortunately, the hexadragon migration had largely bypassed their location this year.

Turning down a hallway marked Sector A, Renn checked his watch again. Six A.M… breakfast was in an hour, maybe Rinoa was awake.

He hoped so. He'd stopped by the room he'd left her in two weeks ago, to see how she was doing, only to find her gone. His heart had nearly stopped, thinking the worst had happened. Fortunately, the nurse attendant that had been caring for her came out of the room just at that moment with a meager bundle of Rinoa's belongings and had prevailed upon him to help her prepare a different room for Rinoa.

While doing so he was informed of Rinoa's close call and it had angered him to learn that Odine had been so callous and careless with her and her unborn children. It didn't make him feel any better to realize that his first assumption might well have been a correct one, had the nurse been
just a little less attentive and alert.

So, at the nurse's direction, he helped her move Rinoa to a better, larger room. And helped bring in a soft, brightly patterned throw rug to hide the dull gray tile, a small side table with a brightly colored covering to match the rug, another small table and two chairs, some framed pictures to add interest to the blank, unrelieved white of the walls, and a larger, sturdier and more comfortable bed for her. The result was a great deal less bleak than the room she'd been in before, and if it was not as comfortable as her home, at least it wouldn't have her going insane within a week.

After they were done, the nurse had asked him if he'd be willing to look in on her once in a while.

"In this whole damn place, you're the only person who's shown an ounce of concern for her. She needs that. She's far more fragile than even she knows." The nurse had told him. She'd said she would even cover his time, but he demurred. It wasn't necessary, he told her he'd visit after his shift.

He hadn't managed to come every day, not every shift was as uneventful as the last week had been. But Rinoa seemed to understand, though she couldn't hide how badly those hours alone had worn at her.

So Renn would come by in the mornings, at the end of his shift, and visit with her as she took her breakfast. Sometimes they'd talk, sometimes play triple triad. And Renn would try not to think about how her smile seemed to be brighter for him every day he came by.

She needed a friend, and a friend he would strive to be for her. He knew she was deeply in love with her husband, and even though each mention of him turned the knife in Renn's heart a little more, he listened and let her talk of him. It hurt though, to know she would never feel the same way about him that Renn felt about her.

So, he listened, and he ached, and he learned far more about Squall Leonhart than he'd ever wanted to know.

Little, inconsequential things like the fact that blue was his favorite color, he hated tuna salad, and that he liked cats, but loved his wife's dog. There were other, not so inconsequential things as well, such as the fact that he sometimes had nightmares because of what he did for a living. Or the fact that while he had doubts and fears like any man, the stuff he was made out of had him tackling those fears and doubts head on, gunblade singing.

It put a human face on him, fleshed out the character that the media had seized upon and enlarged. It somehow made Renn feel worse at his involvement in stealing the man's wife from him. He didn't want to think of his enemy... his rival... as a person.

Finally reaching the door to Rinoa's room, Renn knocked softly.

He waited a couple of minutes, and when he heard Rinoa say, "Come in." He unlocked and opened the door.

"Hi Renn," She smiled at him. She'd already showered and dressed, wearing the robes that were common in Esthar. She missed her own clothes, he knew, but had gotten used to the flowing garments favored in this country.

"Good morning Rinoa. How is everything?" Renn asked her, smiling back.

"Well, I managed to sleep okay," she said, sitting on the edge of her bed and rubbing at her abdomen, adding, "it's getting harder and harder though. They're getting big."
Renn frowned, concerned. They both knew that sooner or later, she’d have to give birth, and the thought that Squall would not be there for that was tearing at her. At least Odine had actually taken the nurse attendant's advice and brought in a midwife. It worried Renn however; with twins, one of them breech, the potential for tragedy loomed large for Rinoa.

For the moment at least, it seemed that the doctor was still interested in the possibility of a live sorceress giving birth successfully. Why or what he was ultimately trying to find or prove was incomprehensible to either of them however.

And Renn could tell that each day she spent caged up, each round of tests she took, each time she had to endure Odine's probing questions and questing hands, she died a little more inside. To see that light in her eyes dimming a little more each day was killing him.

So he did his best to divert her and show her that to him at least, she mattered, and was important.

"I finished that book you brought me." Rinoa said.

"Did you like it?" Renn asked her.

"Yeah, it was a fun read. A lot of funny bits to it." Rinoa smiled at him again.

"Good, glad you enjoyed it." Renn smiled back. Just then, Rinoa's breakfast arrived.

"I'd better go…" Renn began reluctantly, intending to leave her to eat in peace.

"Please stay? I mean, if you don't mind watching me eat, that is. Are you hungry? Maybe I can convince nurse hatchet to get something for you…" Rinoa said, finding her way to a small table and sitting down with her plate.

"I'm fine. And I don't mind at all." Renn said, pulling a chair over and sitting down opposite her.

Then he laughed, remembering her reference to 'nurse hatchet' and he asked her, "So what's this 'nurse hatchet' all about? I thought the nurses were treating you all right. Do you have a problem with that one?" he jerked his head toward the door that the nurse had just left through.

Rinoa grimaced, "She's one of Odine's favorites. Built like a behemoth, with the personality of a brick. A real joy to deal with."

"Sorry to hear that. They aren't…. hurting you… are they?" Renn asked her softly, dreading her answer.

Rinoa shook her head, "No, not really. As long as I behave myself, as Odine puts it, they're actually pretty gentle." Then she frowned, worried, and asked, "You won't… get into any trouble for visiting me, will you? I…I'd hate for you to lose your job…"

She looked so worried, so lost in that moment, that Renn reached out and took her hand, warming it with his own and giving it a gentle squeeze. He ran his thumb over her knuckles, fascinated by how smooth her skin was, how delicate the bones were. When she squeezed his hand back, his heart leaped.

Clearing his throat, he said, "No, I'll be fine. They're okay with it."

"Probably because your visits are the only thing that's keeping me sane." Rinoa said, looking away and toying with her food before taking another bite.
Renn swallowed and looked away a moment, momentarily at a loss for words.

"So, how's your mother?" Rinoa asked him.

"Oh, she's doing fine. Always on me to visit more, of course, but being stuck way out here, I only manage to get into Esthar City on the weekends," Renn said.

"Really? I guess I never thought about what you did after work. You don't go home then?" Rinoa asked.

"Its so far out here, it would be insane to try commuting back and forth…. assuming I could afford a car sturdy enough to handle the trip on a daily basis. The route to get here isn't even really a road, just a track. You remember, don't you?" Renn asked her. She nodded. The drive out had been an hours long, torturous ride in the dust and the heat that had left Rinoa so exhausted, she'd barely noticed how drab the room was that they'd stuck her in. Not at first anyway.

"So… everybody here lives on site?" Rinoa asked.

Renn nodded, answering, "There's barracks for us, dorms for the lab techs and other staffers. They do two-week rotations here, then get four days off before starting a new shift. I'm due for some leave time in a few days myself."

"So, what do you normally do after your shift here then?" Rinoa asked him.

"Well, apart from visiting you, I shower, sleep, eat…normal stuff. Not much else to do really besides that." Renn answered her.

"You don't have a girlfriend?" Rinoa asked.

"No. Kind of hard to keep anything going when you only get to see each other on the weekends." Renn answered.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that…" Rinoa said sympathetically.

Renn shrugged, "Not much I can do about it."

Rinoa finished her breakfast and pushed the plate aside, asking him, "How did you end up with this job? You're obviously intelligent and capable, you could have done anything."

Renn sighed, "Well, to be honest, when I signed on with the company, I was desperate, and this was the best job I could find. They actively recruit ex-SeeD, ex-army; even people that were trained as SeeDs but washed out or couldn't pass the field exam. And the pay is very good."

"So, you're ex-SeeD then?" Rinoa asked, wondering if she'd ever seen him before.

Renn shook his head, "No. I trained for it, in Galbadia Garden. Tried my first field exam at sixteen and failed miserably. Nearly died. Tried again two years later and almost made it but again, I failed. I was set to try one last time at nineteen, but my father died suddenly and that was it for me. I had to quit and take care of my mother and little sisters. I guess I could have tried again; I was pretty sure I'd have made it that time, and the pay as a full SeeD, even entry level, would have been enough to take care of my family."

Intrigued, Rinoa asked, "So what made you finally decide to quit?"

"My mother begged me to. She'd just lost my father, and didn't want to lose me too. So I quit. I
tried to find work in Deling City but that was when everything was going to Hell under President Vinzer Deling. Wasn't much work to be had. Tried Timber, but that didn't work, what with the Galbadian Army occupying it. You know…" he smiled briefly as Rinoa nodded, and continued, "I ended up hanging out in Winhill of all places, helping a couple of semi-retired SeeDs keep the place free of marauding monsters."

Renn studied Rinoa's hand intently, gently rubbing his thumb over her knuckles again as he went on, "We stayed there for a few months, we struggled, but we were mostly okay. Then, the whole world went crazy. Or at least it seemed like it did. Next thing we knew, Deling was dead, and Sorceress Edea had taken over and declared war on the SeeDs. We didn't know all the details but when the dust had settled and the world had gone back to normal, your father, General Caraway, ended up in charge, putting everything back together. Work opened up in Timber first, then Esthar, and I was offered this job. The pay was good, and my mom and sisters were excited about moving to Esthar and seeing what it was like, so I took it."

Interested, Rinoa asked him, "How old are your sisters?"

"Treesie's …" Renn knitted his eyebrows, thinking, and answered, "she's twelve now. And Sarie's nine."

Rinoa smiled at his obvious affection for his little sisters, commenting, "I'll bet they really look up to you."

Renn laughed slightly, "I wouldn't say that, but we get along okay. They're good girls, both of them."

"I'm sure they are…" Rinoa said, and was interrupted by the door opening again, admitting 'nurse hatchet'.

She took the mostly empty plate, speared Renn with a glare, and then told Rinoa, "Dr. Odine will see you in an hour. Be ready."

Rinoa nodded, swallowing, and her hand tightened its grip on Renn's. She was trying hard not to show it, but the frequent tests and examinations did bother her, quite a bit.

Pulling her hand free, she searched for and started to put her slippers on, sitting on the edge of her bed and grunting from the effort of working around her huge baby belly.

"Stop. I can't watch this. Let me help." Renn said, coming over to her and taking the slippers from her.

"Okay. Beats holding my breath while I try it myself. I swear, every time I put my shoes on I have to do that. Both babies press on my diaphragm so much I can't breathe when I bend down like that." Rinoa said with a breathless sigh, taking a deep breath again as Renn knelt down and picked up one of her feet.

Cradling her foot in one of his hands, he put the slipper on, then set it down and did the same with the other foot. Giving her ankle a gentle caress, he set the foot down and stood. Reaching out, he took both of her hands in his and helped her to her feet.

"I guess I'd better go." He said softly, gazing down at her.

Rinoa nodded, licking her lips and asked, "You'll be back tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. My rotation doesn't end until Friday." Renn answered her, attention caught by the
movement of her tongue. Her lips, so pink and soft, tempted him…. badly. He wanted to taste them, drink in their essence… He caught his breath and cleared his throat.

*Get a grip man,* he berated himself. He couldn't…. *shouldn't* be thinking like this.

Rinoa swallowed and nodded. She would be left all alone for those four days while he was off. No other human contact beyond the nurse attendants and Odine. She wasn't sure she could stand it.

"I'll uh... see you tomorrow." he said, releasing her hands and stepping back.

And froze in surprise as Rinoa flung her arms around him and buried her face into his chest, clinging for all she was worth. He held her gently, stroking her hair and allowing her to take what comfort she could. Trying to ignore the pulsing ache in his heart.

"It'll be okay, Rinoa. I'll be here for you..." He whispered. She nodded mutely and gave him a tremulous smile as he left.

But the ache followed him all the way to his barracks room. When he finally got there, he shut the door firmly behind him, slamming his fist against the wall and cursing fate at finally allowing him to fall in love…with a married woman.

Leaning back against the wall, Renn slid down until he sat at its base, staring blindly at nothing, arms resting on his knees. The realization that he'd foolishly allowed himself to fall in love with her was yet another knife to his already wounded and bleeding heart. He went from the extreme of wanting Squall Leonhart dead and consigned to the deepest hells, to wanting to rescue Rinoa and unselfishly give her back to him.

Oh, he wanted her for himself, make no mistake about that, but she'd told him about the bond she had with her knight/husband. He didn't want to believe it. But watching her whither away in that wretched confinement away from *him*…he had to. She was miserable, and no amount of pretty flowers or soft carpets or diverting books would change that. If getting her out of this hellhole and back to her husband would make her happy….

It was insane. It would never work.

Renn frowned; turning the idea over in his mind, wondering if he *could* in fact, make it work. Get her out of there and back home. It was risky. It was dangerous…for the both of them, but more so for her. If he were going to do it at all, it would have to be soon. He didn't know how long she had before the babies would be born, but it couldn't be very long; everyone he'd spoken to told him that twins tended to be born early.

And Odine, in his arrogance, had only deigned to bring in a *midwife,* to help with a twin birth, one of them breech. It would be a disaster, and Renn greatly feared that Dr. Odine's hubris would cost Rinoa her life.

He had to get her out of there. Somehow.
Dr. Odine studied the data obtained from the latest round of testing that the sorceress had endured, fascinated. All of the physical parameters were falling well within the normal range for a normal pregnancy, aside from the unfortunate positioning of the female fetus.

The *magical* parameters however, *that* was truly interesting.

For years, Odine had worked on a method to measure the magical power that a sorceress possessed, and from there, measure the magical *potential* of a prospective heir to that sorceress. He had learned, as a result of those studies, how the magic worked, and how a sorceress used it. What he had learned he had been able to put to practical use, developing the Odine Bangle as a means of inhibiting that power, should it become necessary.

Working with Sorceress Adel as the ruler of Esthar had both its benefits and its risks. While she had given him virtual carte blanche to do what he would in his research, she had also been very demanding…. and unforgiving of those who did not do as she wished.

So, while he had enjoyed almost total freedom under Sorceress Adel, *at first*, as time wore on and her rule became increasingly paranoid and stringent, Odine began to sympathize with the growing movement against her.

Used to keeping mum, keeping the bulk of his research under wraps and only divulging information on projects that would be considered unthreatening to the sorceress, Odine had found it easy to work in secret against her. Building this lab had been integral to his success.

It was here that he developed the technology that had allowed him, decades later, to put an end to Adel's rule and prevent her from transferring her magic to a successor and perpetuating her evil. The cryostasis, the pod itself, the seals that incorporated both magical inhibitors *and* psychic dampers… all of that, that whole project, had come to fruition just as Laguna Loire had made his way to Esthar in search of Ellone.

Dr. Odine's study of Ellone and her power had been at the behest of Sorceress Adel, and since it was an officially sanctioned project, he'd conducted it in the lab that *she'd* provided to him. Adel had wanted Ellone because of her special talent, *not* a magical power, which had originally been thought, but a unique ability inherent within Ellone's mind.

Adel had thought that Ellone would make a powerful successor, and Odine's study of her had confirmed that the girl had a great deal of potential. But then, Laguna Loire found her, and Odine had found it easy to blame the girl's captivity upon Adel's demands.

And despite good-hearted president Loire's emphasis on ethics and accountability, the strictures and restrictions placed upon Odine's research, he had persevered. This lab had been built with his own funds, operated outside of Loire's restrictions. Dr. Odine had not complained about the president's directives because quite simply, they didn't affect him.

It was interesting to think that all that he'd learned and done before in his previous studies was now being used to unravel a true miracle. A pregnant sorceress; something that had never happened before.

Dr. Odine studied the data gathered and found that Sorceress Rinoa's reserve of magical energy was extremely high. She must have had a great deal of potential; unable to choose a successor,
Edea had simply released her power and it had found its own way to Rinoa. Perhaps directed in part by Ultimecia. Likewise with Adel when she'd met her demise. That potential had called the magic to her; the girl hadn't had a choice.

But because Rinoa had been physically adult at the time that she'd received the power, it had not affected her. Cellular growth was unaffected, so the babies were developing normally. Cellular degeneration was minimally affected...so while Rinoa was aging, it was at a slower rate than normal. Not as slowly as Edea, who appeared ageless, but still, more slowly than anyone else would. By contrast, her knight would, in time, show his years in graying hair and wrinkles, but Rinoa's appearance would lag years behind him. It already did.

Odine studied a recent photograph of the two of them and found ample evidence of this theory. Squall had matured from a seventeen year old boy to a young man of twenty-one and his stature and appearance had changed accordingly. Rinoa's had not, not enough to be noticeable at any rate. Despite being roughly the same age as her knight, she still looked seventeen.

Another thing that fascinated Odine was the sorceress-knight bond. Edea had been very willing to talk with him about her bond with Cid, how each tended to balance the other. From her he'd learned that the bond was all encompassing, both a mental and a physical melding of two separate individuals. It made Odine itch to find a means to learn more about how it might affect the sorceress in her pregnancy. However, it would require that the knight be present as well.... and that would be impossible.

The sorceress had been tractable and relatively easy to deal with, despite her unwilling participation in his studies. The knight.... would not be. In fact, it would be far too dangerous to even consider capturing him and bringing him here. The last time that had been attempted did not end well for the individual who'd tried.

It would be easier to kill him. Odine considered that, weighing the risk versus the benefit. The risk in doing that was the distinct possibility that it would kill the sorceress as well. It had happened before, in a similar situation where a sorceress had married her knight a millennium ago. As Odine was not interested in killing his pet subject, killing her knight was out of the question.

Unless.... the Odine bangle that Rinoa wore had a psychic damper, blocking out the link between sorceress and knight, as well as a magical inhibitor. Blocking the link would make her unaware that her knight had died. The inhibiting effect of the bangle might also, theoretically, block the backlash of power when the bond was severed. If that backlash was nullified, her life, not to mention her sanity, might be preserved.

And if it was preserved, might she then bond with a new knight? One that was more.... tractable? It was an intriguing thought, and if that situation could be engineered, it would give Odine the means to study the bond in depth.

Then the doctor shook his head. Not yet. It wasn't time to study that yet, but that did give him an idea of how he might go about it.

For now, he had more than enough to occupy him, watching and waiting for the birth of the sorceress's babies and what that may mean to his research and to the world in general. Would Sorceress Rinoa produce the first ever hereditary sorceress, and even more rare, sorcerer? Would both infants be born with the ability to use magic? How would that affect them and their development?

There was no question about releasing Sorceress Rinoa once she had given birth. Once in his possession, Odine was loath to give her up. Besides, releasing her would simply invite the
vengeance of her knight. No, once Odine was done with his studies of Sorceress Rinoa, he would
do with her what should have been done four years ago. She would be frozen in cryostasis and
locked away in a vault deep in the ground below his lab. Forever.

Rinoa got up early. Not normal for her, certainly, but now it was part of her routine. She feared
oversleeping and missing Renn's visit, not realizing that he would simply come back later if she
had. It frightened her, how important his visits had become.

She liked him, certainly, he was good company; he made her laugh when the whole situation she
was in made her cry more often than not. He diverted her and took her mind off how lonely she
was, how badly she missed Squall, how scared she was that she'd never see him again. But she was
becoming dependent upon his visits, and that dependency frightened her.

It brought up a deep-seated fear that he was her last lifeline to sanity. That if he stopped coming
she'd simply go mad.

It also brought up another fear that she'd been trying hard not to think about. The look in his eyes
when he saw her, and the way he smiled at her, his gentle manner…. Used to reading her poker-
aced SeeD, Rinoa was able to read Renn like an open book. He was falling in love with her.

That left Rinoa with a whole new set of anxieties; she liked Renn. But she loved Squall. That
wouldn't change. She couldn't give Renn what he wanted and needed, and she feared what he
would do if she didn't return his feelings. What if it became too painful for him to see her
anymore? For either of them? Then what?

She would be left alone. She didn't think she could stand it, if she was.

*You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, Rinoa.* Squall's voice, speaking in calm
assurance, echoed in her mind as she remembered him telling her that.

*I'm only strong when I have you at my side. I need your strength now Squall, I can't do this alone.*
Unconsciously, Rinoa began toying with the bangle on her wrist, shifting it, rolling it around,
scratching at it. She hated the thing, hated everything about it. It wasn't the fact that it took her
magic away from her, she didn't care about that, she rarely used it anyway. No, it was the fact that
it blocked out the bond as well.

She couldn't feel Squall, speak to him, or draw strength from him. She had only her own, frail spirit
to rely upon, and each day she spent captive and subjected to Odine's endless curiosity, she felt a
little more of it leached away.

So she clung to her routines. She got up early, she showered, she waited with growing anxiety for
Renn's visit, for him to speak with her and smile at her as she ate her breakfast. And she tried not to
see the light in his eyes for her, tried to be friendly but not so much so that he'd take it for
encouragement. She also tried not to think about Renn's leave, coming up in just a few days.

She couldn't… she wouldn't ask him to stay; he needed time with his family. But she wanted to,
badly.

She had lingered over her shower, lost in thought, and was running late, so was still dressing when
she heard the light knock at her door. He always waited for her to respond, giving her the courtesy
of privacy, allowing her the time to finish getting dressed if she was running late. Of all of the
people who came and went in Rinoa's room, he alone did that.
"In a minute!" she called out, pulling the robe on and starting to zip it up. She got about halfway when the door opened and he came in, freezing in his tracks and quickly averting his eyes. Rinoa snatched the robe closed with a gasp.

"I…I'm sorry Rinoa," he stammered, cheeks red. "I thought you said 'come in'. Well, I heard 'in' anyway and the rest was a little muffled…” he trailed off and swallowed.

Rinoa quickly finished dressing and said, "I'm okay now Renn." She almost wanted to laugh at his mortification. The only thing he'd gotten a glimpse of was her big, pregnant belly and the industrial strength bra she now had to wear. The stuff of fantasies, she was sure. Well, if nothing else, maybe seeing the real thing would cool his ardor a bit. She only hoped it wouldn't scare him off completely.

It did certainly throw him for a loop, leaving him awkward and embarrassed.

After puzzling over it for a moment, Rinoa decided the best way to deal with it would be to simply ignore it and move on.

"So, how was your shift this morning Renn?" she asked him.

He stared at her for a moment, frowning slightly, then answered, "It was fine. Uneventful save for the fact that they were a man short on the previous shift."

"Somebody didn't show up for work?" Rinoa asked, curiously.

"Yeah, Lance. You remember him, he was the guy that slapped you in FH." Renn answered her. Rinoa nodded, she did remember him.

Then she shrugged, "Maybe he decided to quit."

"Maybe," Renn said doubtfully. He knew Lance. It wasn't like him to simply quit without at least giving Renn a call…

"Does that make more work for you?" Rinoa asked him.

Renn shrugged, "they had to extend my shift a bit to cover the gap. So, now I'm on a ten-hour shift, rather than an eight hour."

Rinoa grimaced, asking, "Does that mean you'll be coming later tomorrow morning?"

"No, I just start my shift earlier. They'll have it covered by my leave though, so I won't have to worry about that." Renn answered. Rinoa swallowed, not wanting to think about being alone for the duration of his leave.

She glanced around the room, appreciating the effort made to make the surroundings as comfortable as possible. He'd had a hand in it, he'd confessed to her, and his contribution warmed her. But the lovely pictures on the wall couldn't hide the fact that there were no windows. Rinoa hadn't seen the sun, felt the wind on her face, in two weeks. She turned her mind away from that disturbing thought, knowing she would go insane if she dwelled upon it.

"Rinoa?" He asked her softly, concerned at her distraction. She turned toward him, but before she could say anything the nurse entered, bringing her breakfast in.

Rinoa sat down at the table and started poking at her breakfast. She was hungry, it seemed as though she always was. But her appetite had fled her, driven away by the butterflies in her stomach.
and the odd restlessness that had infected her that morning.

"Are you feeling okay Rinoa?" Renn asked, noticing her picking at her breakfast instead of actually eating it like she normally did.

"I don't know. I'm hungry, but I'm not. It's like my body wants to eat but I'm just not interested in food, if that makes any sense." Rinoa frowned, nibbling a little at her food then putting the fork down with a sigh.

Renn frowned, "it doesn't. Of course, everything you have to deal with here certainly can't be helping."

Rinoa nodded, and gazed wistfully toward the door, saying, "there are no windows in here. I haven't seen the sun, breathed fresh air, smelled flowers, felt the wind in my face, since I was brought here. Everything here smells stale. The food tastes like sawdust. I only eat it because I have to." Then her voice dropped to a whisper as she said, "I have this feeling that I'll never leave this place." That I'll never see Squall again.

Renn swallowed down a lump as a single tear tracked down her face. He reached out and gently wiped it away, then caressed her cheek. Standing up, he came around the table and pulled her into his arms, hugging her close.

He stroked her hair as she rested her head on his chest, and looked down at her as she looked up at him, her cheeks still washed with tears. Then he bent down and covered her lips with his own, kissing her.

He'd intended the kiss to be innocent, meant to comfort. But once he'd tasted her, felt her soft lips against his…. he was lost. He felt warm silk, tasted sunshine and peaches, and couldn't help but deepen the kiss, transmitting his need, his desire, his longing to her.

So swept away was he in the moment, that he only gradually became aware of Rinoa's hands, pressing against his chest, pushing at him. Then he felt Rinoa's tears, wetting his hand where it rested against her cheek.

He broke off the kiss, swallowing hard. Hoping he hadn't just destroyed everything.

"Please…Please stop." Rinoa whispered, more tears coursing down her cheeks, eyes tightly closed.

"Rinoa… I'm… I'm sorry. I…" his voice trailed off, and he simply gazed at her, feeling helpless.

Then she buried her face into his chest and sobbed brokenheartedly, hands fisted into his shirt.

"I miss him, Renn. I miss him. I'm sorry but I can't…" Rinoa gasped brokenly.

"Shh…" Renn whispered, eyes stinging. "I know.

I know you can't ever be mine. I know you don't…love me…"

"Maybe I should go." Renn said softly. But Rinoa clung to him a moment longer, and he stroked her hair gently once again. Her sobs gradually quieted into sporadic snifflses and Renn felt her gently push at him again. He let her go and she turned away, reaching for a tissue, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

Clearing his throat, he began, "Rinoa, I…" The door opened just then to admit 'nurse hatchet', interrupting what he was about to say.

Instead of what had been on the tip of his tongue to say, Renn told her, "I'll see you tomorrow
Rinoa. I promise." Rinoa nodded and Renn left.

Renn shut the door behind him quietly as he left Rinoa's room, turning and walking down the hallway, thoughts still focused on her. On the kiss... the kiss that he'd had no right to take. He had already come to the conclusion that when he left to go on his leave, he would take her with him. The nurse had been right in her assessment when she'd commented that Rinoa was more fragile than anyone thought she was. She was hanging on, but only just.

_What had he been thinking? Why had he kissed her?_

Renn knew that it would mean the end of his job, and possibly even his life if he did that, but for the first time in his life, that didn't matter to him. This was far bigger than his petty concerns. If he did nothing else right in his life, he at least had this.

The trick would be getting her out of the facility before anyone realized she was gone. He'd already checked a car out to drive to Esthar City. He did that on every weekend and scheduled leave. So, nothing unusual there... and as long as he stuck with his schedule and left when he normally left, nobody would have cause to be suspicious.

But getting Rinoa to his car and hiding her until they had cleared the gate.... that would take some thought.

Renn thought about security camera locations and shift schedules and who had been assigned to monitor the security cameras and when the shift would change.... and had an idea. A gap in the scheduling, due to Lance's disappearance; a minuscule one, maybe only a half-hour or so, maybe less, where there wouldn't be anyone staffed to monitor the cameras. They'd tried to work it out so that everything was covered, but that little gap had snuck in.... and Renn didn't think the supervisors had managed to correct it yet.

He hoped not. He and Rinoa could use that gap, and provided they moved quickly enough, get out to his car and away before anyone was there to review the recording or see the live feed. Thinking of Rinoa's condition though made him worry that she might not be up to a mad dash out to the parking lot. She'd try though, he knew she would. The promise of freedom would be enough impetus for her to make the attempt.

Then he'd simply throw some of his clothes over her and tell the gate guard that he was bringing laundry home for his mom to do. Again, nothing too unusual there, though he tried to do it on his own when he had the time.

Reaching his barracks room, Renn yawned, fatigue hitting him suddenly. He needed a shower and sleep, in that order. Then it was back to work far sooner than he was ready for. When his shift ended the next morning, he'd tell Rinoa of his plans, and make sure she was ready to leave with him when he ended his final shift.

In two days, they would **run**.

---

Squall tossed a bag into the back of the rover they'd rented for the first leg of their journey and it landed with a heavy thud. He turned away to grab another one and Irvine tossed one of his bags in as well.

"Did you ever manage to get a floor plan of this place?" Irvine asked him, placing his rifle case and satchel full of pulse ammo carefully into the vehicle. Squall tossed their tents and his backpack in with the rest of their gear.
Frowning, he answered, "No. Selphie couldn't find it, and I didn't want to wait any longer. I know where it's located though. I've got the route plotted out."

Sighing, Irvine squinted at the overcast sky and said, "Well, if that's what we've got, I'll take it. It's more than we had before." Then he added with a frown, "Looks like we're in for some weather."

"Good. Won't be much fun being out in it, but it'll make us harder to see." Squall said.

Irvine nodded agreeing, then grimaced thinking of the wet, uncomfortable nights they had ahead of them. It was winter, and apparently, Esthar did get rain. In the environs about the city, the desert was still relatively warm and dry. But the northern forest was in a higher elevation, and it got downright cold there.

*Not,* fortunately, cold enough for snow however, for which Irvine was immensely grateful.

Grabbing yet another duffel, this one apparently chock full of ammo and other, very heavy items, Irvine chucked it into the rover with a grunt.

Taking his hat off briefly, he scratched at his hair and asked, "is there anything else we need to bring? Looks like we've got it all."

"Actually, there *is* one more thing…" Squall said. Irvine frowned, looking at the items already in the rover and frowned. They already had more than enough for this trip. Almost more than they could carry, and they were going to have to hike a fair distance to get to this place, because the road was way too rough once they got close and because they didn't want anyone to see them coming.

"What?" Irvine asked, wondering what in the world Squall would want to add to the pile.

"This." Squall said, handing him a long, black case.

"Squall, I already brought my Exeter…" Irvine frowned, confused.

"Open it." Squall told him.

Irvine did as directed and simply stared at the contents. Letting out a long breath, he lifted out the long, black, deadly looking weapon. It was a sniper rifle…top of the line, and horrifically expensive, but worth every penny and then some. It had a dull black, non-reflective composite stock, so it was half the weight of a standard rifle. Included in the case was a silencer and an optical scope that had both low-light and infrared settings. It was beautiful.

"Happy birthday." Squall told him.

"Squall," Irvine said, still engrossed in studying and caressing the rifle, "I love you."

"Hey, don't look at *me.* This was Selphie's idea. She threatened my earring, again, if I didn't get this for you since I didn't see fit to send you home to her by your birthday." Squall said, holding both hands up defensively.

Irvine sighed happily, "I love my wife."

"Good to know. Now, the optics and the silencer, those were my contribution. I figured they'd come in handy." Squall admitted.

"Come here, you," Irvine grinned, setting the rifle down and reaching for him.
"Irvine, what are you…?" Squall asked warily, backing off.

"Sorry bro, but this deserves a big, wet kiss." Irvine said, grin getting wider.

"Irvine, wait! Okay, you're seriously beginning to worry me….Ugh!" Squall cringed back as Irvine caught him, squeezing him in a bear hug and planting a kiss on his cheek.

Squall shoved him back, glaring, and growled, "Get off me! I know it's been awhile but you already know I'm not your type." He brushed himself off, shaking his head.

Irvine laughed, "No, not with all that foliage on your face you're not. Besides, you ain't as pretty as you used to be. I'll stick with my wife if it's okay with you."

"Thank god." Squall said fervently, and Irvine laughed harder.

Still chuckling, Irvine went back over to the rover and picked up the rifle again, sighting through the scope and peering down the barrel. He'd have to sight it in before they actually used it, so maybe they'd hunt some mesmerize on the way to the facility.

He carefully placed it back in its case, gently caressing it one last time before shutting it.

Squall raised his eyebrows when Irvine turned back to him, asking, "Should I leave you two alone?"

Irvine chuckled, "Wouldn't hurt. It's been a long two weeks."

Squall simply grimaced and shook his head, saying, "let's just go."

As they got into the vehicle, Squall told him, "By the way, it shoots high velocity AP ammo. There's a bag of it in the back."

"I can't wait to try it out. Feel like grilled mesmerize for dinner tonight?" Irvine asked him.

"As long as the only thing you do is kill it. I'll eat it raw before I let you cook again." Squall said, starting up the engine.

"Fine by me. I kill 'em, you cook 'em. Just two guys out hunting." Irvine said, stretching his legs out.

Squall nodded. As far as the rental agency or anyone else knew, they were just two good buddies, Russ and Dick, out on a hunting trip.

As they were filling out the forms to rent the rover, the rental agent had asked them curiously what they were hunting, to which Squall had answered blandly, "game."

"What sort of game?" the man had asked.

"Big game." Irvine had answered. Undeterred, the man had then launched into a discourse of what could be hunted in what areas. It went on so long Squall had been sorely tempted to silence the man so they could leave. Fortunately for them both, Irvine seemed genuinely interested in what the man had to say.

"You know," Squall said, recalling that, "you didn't have to encourage the guy. We could have been gone long before now."

"Well, he did know an awful lot about the critters 'round about here. Particularly in the area we're
going. Could be useful for us to know." Irvine said, shrugging.

Squall considered that, and decided that Irvine was right. It never hurt to know as much about what you were facing as possible.

"We should be close enough to where we want to be by tonight." Squall said.

"We're still going to actually hunt right? I want to sight in that rifle." Irvine said.

Squall didn't actually want to stop, but he also wanted Irvine to be comfortable using his new rifle. So, in spite of the extra time it would require, Squall nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. We'll see about getting a mesmerize and getting your sight calibrated. Let me know if you need my help with that." Squall said.

"I might need you to pace off some distance." Irvine said.

In the early stages of the trip, there was an actual road, but it gradually deteriorated into a rough dirt track. After about four hours, two of it on a joint-rattling butt-battering dirt road, even Squall needed a break. Finding a likely spot, he pulled off the "road" and stopped.

"What do you think?" Squall asked Irvine.

Getting out of the rover, Irvine stretched, grimacing as his joints popped and crackled, and looked around. Narrowing his sharp eyes, he scanned the sere surroundings. To the uneducated eye, there was nothing but empty, trackless desert. Powdery tan dust underneath a crusty layer of broken, darker reddish tan rocks of various sizes. A few scrubby bushes and a sprinkling of desiccated grass was the only vegetation that could be seen. The ground was relatively flat, but it gradually rose into undulating hills. Irvine knew that if the game he sought were anywhere, it would likely be in a fold of those hills.

Turning back toward the rover, Irvine headed toward the back and said, "This'll do."

He opened the back and got the rifle out, double-checking the barrel and the rest of the rifle's components. Squall, ever the consummate professional, had also been considerate enough to thoroughly clean the packing grease from the rifle, a thoughtful act which Irvine found surprisingly touching.

"Hey, Squall, which bag has the ammo in it?" Irvine asked. Squall indicated the one, and Irvine opened it, finding several clips already loaded with the ammunition the rifle took. Slapping one into the weapon, Irvine put the scope on, took off the safety, and drew the bolt back.

Slinging its strap over his shoulder, Irvine said, "Alright. Lets go get dinner."

With Squall following, Irvine headed right for one of the low hills, figuring he'd get a wider view of the area. Upon reaching its crest, he lay down on his belly and got ready to start calibrating the sight. Just for fun, he'd brought the silencer as well, interested in seeing how well it worked and if it would affect the weapon's accuracy. He worried that it would make the rifle muzzle-heavy, until he saw the built in bipod on the bottom of the silencer.

Squall lay down next to him, spotting scope set up and ready.

Scanning the area, Irvine asked Squall, "anything on your end?"

"No." Squall answered.
Irvine waited, and while Squall chafed inwardly at the time they were spending, he concentrated on spotting for Irvine and maintained silence otherwise. Movement at the periphery of his scope caught his attention and he focused on it, disappointed (and a little impressed at the scope's power) to learn it was a large lizard.

Then Irvine said to himself, "Well, hello there darling. Care to join me for dinner?" Squall swung his spotting scope over and focused on the direction Irvine was aiming, and saw a large mesmerize buck with a truly impressive bladed horn. A quiet *pfft*! Sounded from the rifle, and the buck dropped.

Irvine peered through the scope for a moment longer, then said, "hmmm. Okay, let's go get it and see where I hit it." Getting to his feet, he slung the rifle over his shoulder and Squall picked up the spotting scope and followed him.

"That silencer worked real well." Squall commented.

"Sure did. I could take out a dozen people before they woke to the fact they were under attack. I'll have to see if it did anything to the range or accuracy." Irvine said.

"Shouldn't have." Squall said.

"We'll see. I was aiming for the eye." Irvine said.

When they came upon the buck Irvine whistled at the size of the horn; it was even bigger than he'd thought when he saw it through the scope.

"Nice trophy." Squall observed.

Irvine agreed, and asked Squall, "You want it?" He indicated the horn.

Squall shook his head, "No. I've got a bigger one at home. How about you?"

"Same here," Irvine said, then he squinted his eyes and peered closely at the buck.

He nodded in satisfaction, saying, "Got 'im right through the eye. Sight's dead on. How'd you do that? These things almost always have to be calibrated before you can use them."

"Selphie ordered that rifle when it started looking like you weren't going to be home in time for your birthday. She ordered it from the gunsmith in Esthar that does all my remodels, and apparently a lot of yours as well. He remembered how you liked your sights set." Squall explained.


Glancing over at Squall, Irvine asked him, "So, who gets to do the dirty work?"

"Doesn't matter to me." Squall said.

"Here," Irvine said, handing Squall his hunting knife. "You're better with blades than I am."

Squall took his overcoat off and laid it aside carefully, then took Irvine's knife without comment and set to work skinning and butchering the animal. It wasn't long before he'd finished and the meat was piled neatly on the skin.

Bundling the skin over the meat, Squall whispered a blizzard spell...a deliberately weak one... and froze it.
Putting his overcoat back on, Squall picked up the bundle and they started back to the rover, with Irvine commenting, "I don't know how you manage to do that with as little mess and fuss as you do. Me? I'd be smeared with all kinds of crap."

Squall shrugged. He'd gotten dirty, there was no way to avoid it; but he hadn't been soaked with blood and other fluids, though he could easily have been.

"Probably because I actually get out of the way when I bleed it out. My hands are a mess though," Squall said, showing Irvine his blood and fat-smeared hands.

Upon reaching their vehicle, Squall opened the back and piled the meat and hide onto a tarp and wrapped it up. Then he handed Irvine a jug of water. Irvine opened it and drank deeply, then poured a bit over Squall's hands. After rinsing them off, Squall shook off the excess water.

They both got back into the vehicle and continued on their way.

"You think all that meat back there'll be thawed by the time we make camp?" Irvine asked.

"Yeah," Squall answered. "We've still got hours yet before we're even close to that place."

"So, do we have a plan? Any idea of what we're facing?" Irvine asked him.

Squall shrugged, "I couldn't get a floor plan of the facility itself, but I do know that they have a staff of thirty security personnel, all of them either former SeeDs, ex-army specialists or SeeD-trained. We'll have to do a recon scout around the perimeter, see if we can get a sense of where they're all going to be."

"Sounds like fun." Irvine grimaced. "What about inside? It's going to be tricky going in there blind."

"No help for it. We'll just have to make sure we're junctioned and stocked with protection and healing spells." Squall said.

"So, in other words, we're just gonna wing it." Irvine stated.

"Yeah, pretty much." Squall replied.

"Okay. So, if I'm understanding you correctly, the plan is…what? Waltz in there, kill all the bad guys, rescue your wife and waltz back out again, hopefully with everyone's hides intact?" Irvine asked, shaking his head.

"In a nutshell, yes. I know I normally plan the shit out of things Irvine, but there are too many things I don't know, and I didn't want to wait on the information. I know where she is. We'll deal with the rest as it comes." Squall said.

"Well, if anyone could pull this off, it's you." Irvine said.

"And you. I couldn't do this without you Irvine. That's why I brought you along. I'd have asked if you hadn't volunteered. We could use Zell too, but he needed to be in Balamb helping to rebuild things." Squall said seriously.

Irvine leaned back in his seat and said, "You don't need me along. If you had to, you could do this on your own. But I'm glad you included me."

They lapsed into silence as Squall concentrated on negotiating the challengingly rough road, the
sun setting and clouds building behind them as they did.

The terrain climbed gradually from the barren desert lowland and its broken hills, to lush forest interspersed with yellow-tan buttes. The temperature acquired a cool bite, corresponding to the higher elevation and the winter season, and the deepening twilight also brought thicker clouds.

It was nearly dark when Squall finally found a likely spot that met all of his exacting requirements for a camping spot/staging point. It was in a copse of thick brush, so their rover could be easily hidden, backed against a cliff so their campfire would not be too easily seen, and there was even a free-flowing spring nearby.

Best of all, it was within a half-kilometer of where Rinoa was being held.

Irvine volunteered to setup the tents and organize their gear while Squall dealt with getting the fire going and cooking their dinner.

It didn't take long for Irvine to get their campsite squared away, and he joined Squall at the fire, sniffing appreciatively at what was in the process of becoming dinner.

"Smells good," he commented, finding a likely looking log in the thick brush and dragging it over to sit on.

"Almost done," Squall said, checking the steaks that were searing nicely and dripping fragrant juices into the fire, causing it to sputter. When he judged they were cooked enough, he put them onto separate plates and handed one to Irvine along with a knife and fork.

Setting his plate aside, Squall returned to the back of the rover and delved into a small cooler for two of the beers that he'd brought along, and grabbed the salt and pepper.

"Here," he said, handing one of the beers to Irvine.

"You brought beer? Seriously?" Irvine said incredulously, grinning at him as he popped the top on his.

"We're not doing anything tonight, so we might as well relax. Besides, it IS your birthday today. So, piss-poor as this party may be, it's the best I can do at the moment." Squall said, opening his bottle and giving Irvine a salute with it before taking a sip and setting it aside while he concentrated on sprinkling salt and pepper on his steak. Once finished, he held it up to Irvine who nodded.

Taking the condiments from Squall, Irvine said, "Dude, this is more than I even expected. So, no complaints from me…. if I can't celebrate my birthday with my wife, I can at least celebrate it with my brother. I'm surprised you even remembered."

Squall shrugged, "Selphie reminded me. And it got me to thinking, so I decided to bring the beer along and added a bit to your gift."

"Well, reminded or not, it was thoughtful of you. Thanks." Irvine said.

Squall nodded and they lapsed into silence, concentrating on eating. The meat was flavorful, seasoned just enough with the salt and pepper to enhance it, and surprisingly tender, considering the size and probable age of the buck. Somehow, Squall had even managed to include a couple of small potatoes, baked in the coals.

"Where'd you get the potatoes from? I don't remember seeing you pack them." Irvine asked him.
"Found 'em." Squall answered.

"What? You dug them up? I didn't know wild potatoes grew out here." Irvine said.

Squall nodded, "out by the spring."

Irvine chuckled, "nice to know your kids won't starve. At least someone at your house can cook."

Squall smiled slightly, saying, "Rinoa's getting better at it. Did I tell you she learned how to bake chocolate chip cookies for me? I didn't expect her to do that."

"No. You didn't." Irvine said softly.

"She uh… she knew how much I'd liked them so instead of baking a cake for my birthday last year, she made me a giant cookie instead. She put a big candle right in the middle of it. I didn't even want to celebrate it but we'd just gotten married and well…she convinced me." Squall said, staring wistfully into the fire.

Squall suddenly blinked and looked away, saying in a low voice, "I want her back Irvine. I miss her."

"We'll get her. You know we will. We'll scout the area tomorrow and work up an attack plan." Irvine assured him.

Squall nodded. Irvine was right, but it was so hard, being so close, and yet, still so far from her. His heart wanted him to charge in, guns blazing, and rescue her. His head told him he needed to use more sense and as much planning as possible, to make sure they all made it out alive.

Irvine drained the last of his beer and set the bottle aside, saying, "Well, I'm about ready to turn in for the night. You want to take first watch?"

Squall shrugged, "sure." He'd junctioned Diablos, along with Bahamut. And as always, he had Griever with him. No monsters would bother them…. unless they wore human forms. That was what Squall was standing watch for.

Irvine got up and headed toward his tent, turning back to see Squall picking up his gunblade case.

"Good night Squall. Wake me in four hours." Irvine said, ducking into his tent.

"Alright. Good night." Squall said, laying his gunblade across his knees and checking the edge.

He took the pulse bullets out, setting them aside, and checked the barrel and the rest of the gun portion of his weapon, making sure it was clean, then wiping it lightly with gun oil. Then he picked up his honing stone, specially made just for the adamantine blade. It was embedded with finely crushed diamond, the only thing that could hone the material the blade was made from. Dropping a bit of honing oil upon it, he slowly ran it along the edge of the blade, making only a few passes before flipping the blade over and doing the same thing to the other side, adding more oil when it was needed.

He checked the edge again, finding it clean, and sharp enough now to split one of his hairs, plucked from his head and laid lightly upon the edge of the blade. Taking a soft cloth from the case, he wiped the oil off the blade, polishing it. The translucent blue of the adamantine seemed to glow more brightly from his attentions afterward, as though the weapon were responding to its master's touch.
The task completed, Squall reloaded the weapon, returned the materials he'd used caring for it to the case, and the gunblade to the holster he wore at his hip.

Tomorrow, they'd scout, and based upon what they learned, they'd plan. If the weather and fate cooperated, they'd attempt their rescue late tomorrow night or early the next morning.

If anything or anyone got in Squall's way then, the last thing they'd feel was how sharp the blade was.
Cry Havoc...

Rinoa paced her room restlessly. She hadn't slept well the previous evening, tossing and turning so much that she was left feeling tired and achy. The discomfort inherent in her current condition, along with her anxieties and worries about what had happened that morning had both contributed to that.

She worried that despite Renn's promise that he'd come by; he might change his mind, the kiss and her response to it too painfully fresh. And truly, she couldn't blame him. She also couldn't lie and lead him to believe she felt more for him than she actually did, simply for the pleasure of his company. She wasn't like that.

She liked him. And her heart had ached for him at the completely lost, hurt look in his eyes when he'd left yesterday morning. He'd said he understood, and aside from the kiss, hadn't demanded any more from her than what she was willing to give. But it was patently obvious what he wanted, and what he felt.

A knock at her door made her jump slightly and despite her anxieties regarding their relationship, her spirits immediately lifted.

"Come in Renn." She said. He slowly opened the door, cautiously peeking around it first to reassure himself that she was indeed ready to see him. Rinoa smiled at him and he grinned back sheepishly as he closed the door. Then his grin faded and he leaned back against the door, sighing.

"I'm sorry, Rinoa, about yesterday," He said hesitantly, avoiding her eyes.

"It's…okay. I'm not angry at you or anything." She said, rubbing at her tummy. The babies must have started a gymnastics competition or something, because they were kicking and moving around like there was no tomorrow.

Renn nodded, and said, "I can't excuse it, and I shouldn't have kissed you like that, but… I don't regret it."

Rinoa was about to respond when one of the babies, Julia, she thought, kicked her sharply in the ribs, making her gasp. Immediately Renn frowned in concern, coming over to her.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

Rinoa took a deep breath and let it out, trying to relax, and told Renn, "Yeah. One of the babies just kicked me really hard. I think Julia's finally trying to get herself reoriented in the right direction. Meanwhile, I feel like I'm being battered from the inside." She rubbed at her abdomen again, trying to soothe her mounting discomfort.

"May I?" Renn asked, hand poised above her stomach. Rinoa nodded, giving him permission. He gently placed his warm hand against her stomach, fascinated at the fluttering movements he felt. A strong kick against his hand startled him and he flinched back with a gasp.

"Wow. They're really alive in there, aren't they?" He asked, awed. He'd never felt anything like it before. He'd seen pregnant women before, but had never become intimate enough with one to actually feel what she was carrying around inside of her. He didn't know, really, what he'd expected. He knew that there were two living entities inside of Rinoa; he supposed he just didn't expect them to be this active.
Rinoa nodded, laughing slightly, "Yes, they are. And I'm glad they are too." Renn's cheeks colored
slightly as he realized how silly his question had sounded.

Replacing his hand against Rinoa's side, he smiled slightly as he felt the movements continue,
asking, "do they do this a lot?"

"Yeah, but not this much. They've been very active this morning for some reason." Rinoa answered
him.

Renn moved his hand, caressing Rinoa's abdomen lightly, saying, "I've never felt anything like this
before. Thank you for sharing it with me." Rinoa swallowed, then gently placed her hand over his,
stopping the caress. There was only one man she wanted to touch her like that, and it wasn't Renn.
He sighed, taking the subtle hint, and withdrew his hand.

"What about your mother? Didn't she let you feel your sisters when she was pregnant with them?"
Rinoa asked him. Renn shook his head.

"I was already a cadet in Garden at that point. I didn't get to see her or my dad much." Renn
answered her.

The nurse appeared with Rinoa's breakfast and he joined her at the table. She felt calmer now; the
moment she'd shared with him had put her in a better, less anxious frame of mind.

As Rinoa started on her breakfast, this time with a better appetite than she had the previous
morning, Renn fell silent, thinking about what he had planned and hoping that it would work.

But first... "I need to ask you a question, Rinoa." Renn said softly.

Rinoa met his eyes and frowned, worried about what he might ask. She remained silent however,
and waited, not wanting to jump to any conclusions. When she didn't respond, Renn hesitated, then
reached out and gently took her hand.

Frowning slightly down at their joined hands, he asked, " Does he… treat you okay? Are you…
happy… with him? I… I just… I need to know." I need to know you'll be okay...

Rinoa squeezed his hand slightly and whispered, "Yes. To both questions." Renn nodded and took
a shaky breath. Sometimes, doing the right thing hurt like hell.

Licking his lips, he said, "My leave starts after my shift ends tomorrow morning."

Rinoa nodded, heart sinking and said, "I know." He's not coming back. He's going to leave me
here...

Meeting her eyes, Renn said, "I want you to come with me."

Rinoa stared at him, and asked, "What?"

"I'm getting you out of here. I can't watch them kill your spirit day by day. It's killing me to see it."
Renn said.

"Why?" Rinoa asked, afraid that he would expect something from her she couldn't give.

Letting go of her hand, he reached out and caressed her cheek, saying softly, "I think you already
know. I love you. I know you don't feel the same way about me. I know you love your husband,
and I respect that. Hell, I admire it. I didn't expect to fall in love with you, I didn't plan it... you
were just an assignment. But your courage, your spirit, and yes, your beauty; even pregnant with another man's children Rinoa, you attracted me."

Rinoa covered his hand with hers, leaning into it. He smiled sadly at her, and her heart ached for him.

Swallowing and blinking unshed tears from his eyes, he continued, "I saw that courage, that spirit, starting to erode and I just couldn't let them destroy you like that. You didn't deserve that. Yes, you're a sorceress, but you're also a woman, a flesh and blood human being who deserves the same kind of respect and consideration that anyone would demand. In the eyes of many here, you're damned because of a freak accident, and because you have this power, you're suddenly less than human. I couldn't leave you to them."

"Oh, Renn..." Rinoa whispered, tears starting to flow. They both stood and Rinoa wrapped her arms around him, sobbing quietly.

"You're taking me home?" She asked, sniffing.

"Yes. Or as close to it as I can get." He answered her softly, rubbing his hand up and down her back.

Then Rinoa gazed up at him and stroked his cheek, saying softly, "You know I don't feel the same way about you, but you're wrong in thinking that I don't love you. You've kept me alive, and kept me sane, the entire time I've been here. And now, you're getting me out of here, setting me free. How could I not love you for that? And I do love you Renn, I just love Squall more."

Renn closed his eyes then and crushed her to him, whispering, "God Rinoa, I wish I'd met you first...." Rinoa, wisely, did not respond to that. But she also didn't resist when his lips covered hers once more for a last, desperate kiss.

Pulling back, he whispered, "Be dressed and ready tomorrow morning. We've only got a short span of time to do this, so we have to move fast. Once we're out of here, I'll drive you into Esthar City and drop you off at the Presidential Palace. I'm sure President Loire can get you home from there."

"He can. Thank you Renn, thank you so much... this is the most unselfish thing I've ever seen anyone do. Squall will be so happy ..." Rinoa began, eyes shining.

Renn's eyes hardened for a moment, and he interrupted gruffly, "I'm not doing this for him. I'm doing this for you." Then his expression softened and he stroked her hair, saying, "be happy Rinoa. If I can have nothing else, I can at least have that."

"I will. Thank you Renn." She said.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Morning dawned in fog and cold. Rare for Esthar in general but not for the season or the location where Squall and Irvine currently camped.

Squall had built up the fire and was in the process of cooking their breakfast, while Irvine was striking camp and packing up. The camping gear, tents included, would be stashed back in the rover. The other gear they'd brought would be sorted between them. Some of it put back into the vehicle, some brought along, depending upon what they decided to use.

Irvine was just finishing his task when Squall came up to him and handed him a cup that steamed in the cool morning.
"Coffee? Bless you." Irvine said gratefully, taking a sip and sighing. The man could make coffee over an open fire better than anyone Irvine knew. Certainly better than he could; Squall's opinion of Irvine's coffee included a suggestion to use it as an engine degreaser or paint stripper.

"You about done here?" Squall asked him. Irvine nodded.

"Breakfast is ready." Squall told him.

"Great." Irvine said, following him back to the fire and taking the plate Squall handed him. More of the mesmerize meat, sliced thin and cooked with powdered eggs, making the standard SeeD rations more palatable.

"How much meat did we end up with from that buck anyway? There's no way we're going to be able to eat it all before it goes bad." Irvine commented as he ate.

"Well, I only took the best cuts, but we still ended up with about thirty pounds. Shame to waste it all but you're right, there's no way it'll keep, even if I hit it with a blizzaga spell." Squall said, sipping at his coffee.

"So? What are you going to do with it then?" Irvine asked.

"I'll think of something." Squall said.

Looking up at the sky, Irvine commented, "nice weather for a skulk." Squall nodded, agreeing with him. Cold and overcast, with just enough fog to make visibility difficult but not impossible, it would aid in their scout.

Once they'd finished eating, Squall took care of the fire while Irvine rinsed the plates and cookware in the stream, putting them away with the rest of the camping equipment.

Picking up his satchel, he made sure some extra clips and the silencer were in it, and slung it over his shoulder, bandolier style. He did the same thing with his rifle after making sure it was clean, loaded and the scope securely affixed with the lens cap on.

He turned to see Squall adjusting the straps in his back-carry harness, putting it on over his buttoned-up overcoat.

"You're using the back carry today?" Irvine asked him.

Squall nodded, "too much heavy brush to wear it on the hip." Tugging the watch cap down over his forehead, he brushed the hair from his eyes. Finally, he took the spotting scope and stuck it in one of the pockets of his coat.

"So, I assume you know where this place is and how to get there." Irvine said.

Squall nodded and headed into the forest, saying, "yes."

Following after him, Irvine asked, "Care to share?"

Hopping over the spring, Squall continued into the gloomy forest, with Irvine doing the same. Then he stopped at the edge of what looked like a clearing and waited for Irvine to catch up.

It wasn't a clearing. It was a drop off into a rock-filled ravine. But in the distance, Irvine could clearly see their goal, even through the morning haze.

Wordlessly, Squall took out the spotting scope to scan what he could of the facility. Irvine pulled
the rifle off his shoulder and removed the cap from the end of the scope, doing the same.

"They built it into the cliff. Interesting." Irvine commented, peering through the scope at the facility.

"No windows. I can only see one entrance from this angle. What about you?" Squall asked him.


"Probably. There are a lot of monsters in this area." Squall answered him.

Irvine nodded, saying, "Behemoth, chimera, torama, and the real baddies, hexadragons."

Squall nodded, and then said, "they won't bother us, Diablos is repelling them."

"Good." Irvine said, still studying the facility.

Directing his attention to the broken terrain that separated them from their goal, Squall said, "Let's go take a closer look."

"Okay. I assume we're climbing down here?" Irvine asked. Squall nodded and picked a route with good hand and footholds. Fortunately, the sheer portion of the climb was relatively short, and they were in the ravine itself in no time.

Irvine realized quickly that the reason Squall picked that particular route was because of the rough terrain. It was harder to navigate, but more direct, and it afforded a lot of cover in the form of huge, tumbled boulders, twisted trees and scrubby bushes. But it was also more dangerous.

It sloped steeply, and the footing was treacherous with loose, moss-slicked rocks. They worked their way down the ravine in silence, concentrating on the footing and trying to avoid a slip. They weren't entirely successful; each had more than one close call. Eventually however, they made it to the bottom and worked their way closer to Odine's secret lab.

The overcast day deepened the shadows in the forest, and Squall's dark clothing helped him to blend in. But the forest had been cleared several meters back from the fence, giving them no cover to get any closer.

Stopping at the edge of the cleared area, he and Irvine studied their goal in silence. They both noted the blinking lights at intervals warning of a powered fence. They saw the security cameras and the currently unlit lights spaced along the fence line. They took note of a dirt road or track running along the inside perimeter of the fence, indicating that it was patrolled regularly with an off-road vehicle of some type.

They worked their way slowly, gradually, around the perimeter of the facility, keeping to the shadowed forest and maintaining silence. They would share their observations back at their staging point when they started working on their attack plan.

The gray, gloomy day was giving way to dusk when Squall and Irvine returned to their original starting point. In unspoken accord, they both turned and made their way back to their campsite. By the time they reached it, thunder was beginning to rumble threateningly in the distance.

They didn't speak until Squall had finished cooking their dinner.

"What do you think?" He asked Irvine. Irvine frowned thoughtfully, taking a bite of his dinner.
"Doable. I can take out the lights and the cameras easily. Same with any sentries that happen to wander along. The trick'll be getting through that fence." He said finally.

Squall frowned at that. That was going to be a trick.

"We need something big. A diversion or something to draw the guards to one spot." Squall said.

"Yeah, and then what? We still need to get through the fence, and blowing it up will just attract attention." Irvine frowned. More thunder rolled, louder this time. Lightning flashed seconds later.

"Maybe. But it won't attract as much attention if it's a lightning strike. One that shorts out the fence." Squall said, gesturing as though he were casting a spell.

Irvine grinned slowly, saying, "Right…and I can simply take out anyone that comes to check it out." Then he asked, "Which way do you want to go in? The rear delivery entrance is just as heavily guarded as the front, and I wasn't able to make out any emergency doors."

Squall frowned, "any emergency exits would likely be alarmed anyway, as heavy as their security appeared to be. We'll have to go through the front I'm afraid. We'll at least have the cars in the parking lot for cover until we get to the front doors."

"Great. And then what? Just walk up to those doors, knock on them and ask politely for them to bring you your wife?" Irvine asked sarcastically.

"I figured we'd just blow the doors in with a pulse round… and be ready for a fight once we get in." Squall said.

"That'll work. So what about this diversion of yours? What do you have in mind?" Irvine asked him.

"Do behemoths eat carrion?" Squall asked Irvine in turn.

"You know they do. Oh, I get it! The rest of that mesmerize meat. You think it'll be enough to lure a behemoth out to that place?" Irvine asked. The giant, carnivorous rhino-like monster would definitely do some serious damage to the fence if it could be induced to attack it.

"Should be." Squall answered.

"How do you plan on making it attack the fence? I assume that's your intent, right?" Irvine asked.

Squall raised his eyebrows and got up, going over to the duffel he had brought and digging through it. Pulling out a small metal box, he brought it over to the fire and opened it. Resting inside a foam cocoon was a small vial containing a thick, greenish-brown liquid.

Squall carefully picked up the vial and held it up, saying, "Yes, that is my intent, and this is what will do it."

Irvine frowned, asking, "What is that?"

"Marlboro venom. Just a drop of this on the meat and the behemoth will go berserk." Squall said, carefully placing the vial back into its case.

"Where did you get that? I know the item shop in Esthar City sells some rare stuff, but I've never seen them carrying that." Irvine asked him.
"I didn't buy it." Squall answered.

"You mean you actually went out and killed a Marlboro and milked the venom from its tentacles? When?" Irvine demanded.

"About a week ago. Thought it might come in handy." Squall answered.

"And you went alone? Are you fucking insane? You could have gotten killed!" Irvine exclaimed.

"Well, I thought it would be worth the risk. It's very potent venom. Just a drop will give a man a horrible death. Besides, I had my GF equipped with auto-potion and I had plenty of Aura spells. I had the thing sliced and diced before it even knew what hit it." Squall answered.

"You need to stop this lone-wolf shit man. You can't do that anymore, not with kids coming and your bond with Rinoa and stuff. Its not just you anymore." Irvine said severely.

"I know! Irvine, I know. It was a calculated risk." Squall defended, though he secretly agreed with him. He hadn't thought much of it then, but Irvine was right. At the very least, he should have invited him along for backup.

"I think you need to rework your calculations, commander." Irvine said quietly.

Squall sighed, "I know Irvine. And I have, for the most part. Now can we get back to work on this?"

"All right, fine. And you're right; you have changed quite a lot. You don't do the lone wolf thing quite as much as you used to." Irvine admitted.

Then he asked, "What are you going to do with the rest of it? There's a lot of it there."

"I thought I might put a little along the edge of my gunblade." Squall answered.

Irvine whistled, and commented, "If the razor sharp edge doesn't do the trick, the liquid death you've got there certainly will. Little bit of overkill though, don't you think?"

Squall shrugged, "maybe." Maybe he wouldn't use the venom on his gunblade. The blade itself in his hands was deadly enough. Irvine was right; putting poison on it would be overkill. Besides, Squall had just cleaned and polished the blade, and found he didn't like the idea of smearing it with the oily, green-brown venom.

He set the box with its deadly contents aside and glanced up as another crack of thunder announced the arrival of the storm.

Irvine peered skyward as the fat raindrops began hissing on the fire and observed, "It occurs to me that this idea of luring a behemoth with that meat may not be as well considered as we'd thought."

Squall frowned, looking up at the sky as well and saying, "If the rain gets any heavier, we'll have to think of something else. It'll be harder for the thing to catch the scent of the meat in the rain."

"Well, if we're gonna do anything, we'd better do it now. I'm not real keen on climbing back down that ravine while it's raining buckets on my head." Irvine said with a grimace.

"Right," Squall said, standing up and gathering his gear. "Let's go."

They both carefully selected the items they felt they'd need the most, both knowing that traveling light and moving fast would be more important than bringing heavy hardware with them. Irvine
had both of his backup pistols in his double shoulder holster along with his new sniper rifle slung over his shoulder. In addition to his weaponry he carried his satchel full of ammunition. Squall had his gunblade, strapped to his back along with the extra pulse rounds in his belt and along length of the scabbard that held the gunblade. He also carried the skin-wrapped packet of meat.

They both went back to the ravine, and paused for a moment, then Squall asked Irvine, "you remember seeing some behemoth sign when we scouted out here earlier?"

"Yeah." He answered.

"I've told Diablos to stop deterring monsters. So we'll have to be alert. But if we can find a behemoth trail, maybe if nothing else we can simply lure one to the fence with live bait." Squall said.

"Live bait meaning you. Dammit Squall…” Irvine protested.

"Between the two of us Irvine, who's the faster runner?" Squall asked.

Irvine sighed, admitting, "you are. Fine. I'll be backup. Which part of the fence are you shooting for?"

"Well, we're going in through the front, so as far to the opposite side as possible would be best." Squall said.

Thunder crackled again and a lightning flash snaked across the sky, portending a violent storm. The wind picked up as well causing the tree branches to sway. The rain was still light, but it was getting heavier by the moment.

"We'd better get moving," Squall said. After making sure the bundle of meat and hide he was carrying was securely tied together, Squall simply dropped it over the side of the ravine, where it landed at the bottom with a moist splat. Then he carefully climbed down, with Irvine following.

Upon reaching the bottom, Squall picked up the packet, finding it surprisingly intact, and continued along the route that they had taken earlier. As he did, he felt a mental nudge.

Knight Lion-heart, we are hunting?

Yes Griever. We are going to get my wife. My…mate.. Squall responded.

That is good. The night is dark however, and your vision is poor. The GF said.

Can't be helped, though I can see fairly well, all things considered. Squall sent.

Use my eyes. They see well in the dark. Griever told him.

How? Squall asked, mystified.

Close your eyes. Do you feel my strength? Griever asked.

Yes…Squall said. He did too. With each Guardian that Squall junctioned, a different effect was gained. Some, like Cerberus, enhanced his speed and agility, others his ability to use magic. Some gave him increased physical strength and stamina. With Griever, it was a different connection than a junction, so an altogether different effect was felt.

He had the increased strength and speed that came with junctioning a powerful GF and in addition, he also had the senses that the Guardian possessed. Squall found the result nearly overwhelming.
His own senses, hearing and scent in particular, were considered keener than normal. For a human. But when he opened his eyes, he nearly stumbled in shock. Suddenly, he was bombarded with incredible amounts of sensory input that left his head spinning from the effort of processing it all.

Squall didn't realize he had come to a halt and was simply standing frozen while his mind sorted out and cataloged the new information until Irvine nearly stumbled into him and stopped with a quiet curse.

"Squall, what's going on? Why'd you stop?" Irvine asked him, puzzled.

"Ahhh!" Squall winced, covering his ears. "Irvine, don't shout!"

Irvine frowned and lowered his voice, "Squall, I wasn't shouting. Are you okay man?"

"Griever… did something." Squall said vaguely. Irvine began to worry. Squall was standing still, eyes tightly closed. As Irvine watched he dropped his hands from his ears and took a deep breath. Then he opened his eyes and focused on Irvine. As he did, a sudden flash of lightning brought an answering flash from his eyes.

"Holy shit!" Irvine gasped, backing off and staring in shock.

"What?" Squall asked.

"What the hell did Griever just do to you Squall?" Irvine asked, shaken.

"He told me to use his eyes…they see better in the dark than mine..." Squall said.

"Dude. That is the …freakiest thing I've ever seen." Irvine said, still staring at Squall's eyes.

"What do you mean?" Squall asked, frowning.

"Your eyes are glowing. Kind of like a cat's, only with this weird, violet color, not green." Irvine said.

"Oh." Squall said, then glanced around, catching the scent of the creature he was looking for. Even in the rain, he could still smell the behemoth. He could see much better now, though without the rich palette of colors that human eyes could see. Instead, he saw in high contrast black and white, much more clearly in the darkened forest than he could with his own eyes.

"Come on. There's a behemoth nearby." Squall led the way down the ravine and Irvine followed, trusting to Squall's improved eyesight. Even to Irvine's own keen vision, the rainy darkness was a true challenge.

"What are you gonna do? Poke it with a stick?" Irvine asked sarcastically, trying hard to ignore his apprehension.

"No, I thought I'd wave a bag of meat under its nose and take off running." Squall said.

"Brilliant. Lure it with an appetizer and piss it off by making it chase the main course. You won't need the Marlboro venom to make it go berserk." Irvine said.

Squall didn't comment. Instead, he concentrated on tracking the monster. He hoped in getting close enough to get its attention, it would begin to stalk them, and he could simply lead it to where he wanted it to be. He smiled slightly in satisfaction as the creature took the hint and began to follow them.
So he and Irvine led the behemoth on a twisting route through the forest around the perimeter of the facility. The rain grew heavier as they walked, pattering on the leaves of the trees, wetting and chilling them both. Catching the interest of the behemoth was easy. Despite the rain diluting the scent of the meat, Squall could smell it easily, and so could the monster. A particular scent from the behemoth, one that Squall could only call "aggression", alerted him of the creature's intent to attack.

"Irvine," he said, "you might want to get up in that big tree over there." Squall gestured toward the one he meant, a big, solid-looking oak tree.

"You want me to get up into a tree. In a rainstorm." Irvine said.

"Yes. While you're up there, I want you to start shooting all of the cameras and lights that you can hit." Squall said.

"You do realize that you're asking me to climb a giant lightning rod in a thunderstorm." Irvine said.

"Would you rather be a side dish?" Squall asked him, hearing the monster stealthily working its way closer to them, preparing to charge.

"Good point. Okay, I'm climbing." Irvine said, whispering a float spell to help him up.

He did so just in the nick of time, as Squall suddenly bolted toward the fence, the behemoth breaking cover and charging after him milliseconds later. Cursing under his breath, Irvine quickly affixed the silencer onto the end of his rifle and flipped cap off the scope, setting it for low light. Resting the barrel on a tree branch, Irvine tried to ignore the sight of Squall racing toward the fence with death hot on his heels.

Then his focus narrowed to the cameras spaced along the fence line, and Irvine systematically picked them off, challenging himself to see how far he could shoot before he missed one. When he ran out of cameras, he started on the lights.

Before he did however, he froze, attention caught by the deadly race that Squall was running. Even without GF enhancement, Squall had blazing speed. With it, he managed to keep ahead of the charging monster, but only just.

As they grew closer to the fence, Squall tossed the packet of meat to the side, no doubt hoping the monster would go after it. Unfortunately, the behemoth was smarter than either Squall or Irvine had thought, and it ignored the meat in favor of the prey it was chasing. The rain was coming down harder at that point, making the footing more chancy, and it was nearly Squall's undoing.

He raced as close to the fence as he dared, hoping the monster's momentum would take it right into it, and dug deeply into the muddy ground, intending to make a sharp turn and race along the fence at the last minute. But it was too wet by that point, the mud too slick. Squall's feet went right out from under him and he went sprawling, virtually at the monster's feet.

Squall scrambled desperately for purchase in the slick mud, struggling to at least get out of the way, never mind get to his feet, knowing he'd never make it before the behemoth had him. He saw the mad, red eyes of the beast bearing down on him, horns lowered and fangs bared, and he knew he was dead. He felt a moment of sorrow for Rinoa and their babies, not knowing if the bangle would block his death from affecting them or not. He hoped that it would.

Just before the creature reached him however, something even bigger hit it from the side with a challenging roar, knocking it into the fence and taking down a good portion of it. The monster
wretched and cried as the electricity sizzled along its body, electrocuting it.

Squall finally got to his feet, staring at the creature that still snarled, bristling at the dying behemoth and standing firmly between it and Squall. Griever.

"Thank you." He said, rain dripping off his face and washing the mud from him. He was beyond cold, beyond wet. But the weather so far was playing right into their hands, so he wouldn't complain.

You are welcome, Knight Lion-heart. Griever said, and then just like that, it was gone, ducking back into the dimension where it lived.

As Squall turned to make his way back to the forest, he heard glass shattering just above him, and the security light went out. More lights followed, the quiet sound of the silenced rifle easily covered by the rumble of thunder.

He increased his pace to a lope, knowing that they had a lot of ground still to cover before they actually got inside the place.

Squall reached the tree where Irvine had set up just moments later. Irvine dropped from an overhanging branch just as Squall approached, landing firmly on the now soaked loam in front of him.

"Have a nice run?" Irvine asked, heart still pounding from his friend's close call.

"Yeah. How was the lightning rod?" Squall retorted breathlessly as they started toward the front of the facility.

"Marginally less dangerous than playing tag with a behemoth, apparently. Good thing Griever saved your bacon." Irvine answered.

"Very." Squall agreed, then he added, "nice work with the lights and the cameras. If that doesn't get their attention, I don't know what will."

"Well, I aim to please, my friend." Irvine said as they made their way through the forest, just skirting the edge of the cleared area. It wasn't too many minutes later that a pair of headlights, slicing through the rainy gloom, began traveling along the fence line toward where the behemoth had been downed.

As they both worked their way toward the front entrance, they saw more lights moving in the direction they'd just left. Repair crews apparently, maybe with some extra guys along to make sure more monsters weren't lurking about now that the perimeter fence had been breached. Good. The more men out working on fixing the cameras, the fence and the lights, the fewer there would be to fight once they got into the facility itself.

Renn was about halfway through his shift when the storm hit and everything seemed bent on going straight to hell. It was all pretty boring and uneventful up until that point, and Renn was looking forward to the end of his shift when he and Rinoa could make their escape.

But then the storm hit, and then something else, something big, hit the fence near the rear of the facility, taking out the cameras and the security lights. Two guys had been sent to assess the damage, and they reported that a large behemoth had charged into the fence for some reason and taken down about ten meters of it.
So Renn had been sent with several other guys to protect the repair crews in case any other monsters took it into their heads to attack in the rain and the cold.

"Would you look at the size of that thing? I'm glad it's dead, I wouldn't want to face it otherwise." One of the men assigned to protect the repair crew commented. An intense discussion from the direction of the repair crew concerned the best method of levering the monster's carcass off the still electrified fence.

"If it's still hot, tell 'em to shut it down until we can get that carcass moved and the fence put back up, otherwise we can't do a damn thing!" The supervisor of the repair crew was shouting into his radio, trying to get the power turned off so that the crew could go to work.

"Weird that the cameras and lights both would go. The monster didn't even touch 'em." Another man wondered. Renn looked up at the light nearest to where he stood, curious himself. He couldn't see anything in the rainy darkness however.

It took a half hour, standing in the rain, getting soaked to the skin despite the rain gear, before the power to the fence was shut down, they got floodlights set up and they could get to work moving the monster. It was a complicated, challenging process involving everyone present. Six men, Renn included, climbed over the monster's body to the other side of the fence and looped some ropes over its horns. Then they had to bear down and pull, while the crew on the other side pushed against the fence or used poles as levers to get the monster moved.

"Okay! Ready, GO!" The supervisor ordered, and Renn hauled on the rope he was holding, grunting and cursing along with the rest of the men. The carcass shifted but only slightly, and Renn found the mud and wet grass too slick to really put his back into the pull. The rest of the men present were experiencing the same problem.

Then they tried looping the ropes around the rear legs of the beast while the crew pushed from the front. That worked a little better, but it was still slow going dragging the monster off the fence enough so that they could get to work on repairing it.

"One more time guys, we've almost got it!" The supervisor urged them. Renn rolled his eyes and sighed, then bent to the ropes again and dug into the muck the best he could. Then he hauled along with the rest of the guys, grunting from the effort. They were all pulling so hard that when the carcass finally slid off the fence the sudden slackening of the ropes caused them to stumble and some to fall.

Renn unfortunately was one of those that sprawled face down into the mud with a curse. He got up, grumbling, and flipped a rude gesture at one of the guys that was laughing. They all began climbing over the behemoth's body and over the downed fence back into the facility itself.

"Hey Renn, check this out!" one of the men in the crew motioned Renn over, pointing to the monster's side.

Renn came over, curious, asking, "What?" Then he saw what the man was pointing at and stared, awestruck. The behemoth was the size of a large truck, but something else, something bigger, had attacked the thing, apparently throwing it into the fence and leaving four jagged slashes in its side.

"There's something bigger out here? Shit! We gotta get that fence fixed, fast!" another man exclaimed after he too saw the slashes.

Renn looked around, suddenly aware of how exposed he was outside the fence; such a flimsy thing really, but the electricity usually kept the monsters at bay unless they were really determined to get
in, which wasn't often. They typically tended to hunt easier prey. And the migrating hexadragons also tended to simply go around them rather than try and cut through the property, though they did have a few stubborn ones attempt it occasionally.

Hitching his shoulders uncomfortably, Renn continued climbing over the monster, and crossed the downed fence back to the right side. He couldn't help feeling that something out there in the rainy dark was watching them, waiting for the perfect moment to attack.

Squall and Irvine had paused for a moment, watching as the men had struggled with moving the behemoth.

"What do you think? Should I take them out?" Irvine asked. There were about a dozen men out there, some obviously for security, others for repair work.

Squall considered that, and then decided against it. He saw what appeared to be a foreman or crew chief talking on a radio, communicating with someone on the interior of the facility itself. Unless Irvine was very, very fast, there was a chance the man would be able to raise the alarm and make things much more difficult for Squall and Irvine. And even if Irvine was able to kill everyone out there, a lack of response from the radio might likewise raise an alarm.

Besides, he didn't want to waste time and ammunition on an unnecessary battle.

Finally, Squall answered, "no. Save the fight for when it really counts. Let's go."
Rinoa was getting anxious, waiting for Renn, and worrying. He was running late. Breakfast had come and gone with Rinoa's stomach too knotted for her to do much more than pick at it. It didn't help that her back was aching and she was feeling nauseous.

_Had something happened to him? Please, please hurry..._ she worried. Now that escape was imminent, she couldn't bear the thought of being left behind.

A quick knock at her door left her nearly limp with relief, and she said, "Come in!"

Renn entered, closing the door behind him, and Rinoa rushed into his arms, gasping, "Oh, you're here! I was so worried..."

Renn pulled her close and whispered, "I'm sorry, I got here as quickly as I could. Things started getting really nuts during my shift. A behemoth either charged or was actually _thrown_ into the back fence, all of the lights and the security cameras are out... Things get really crazy around here any time a thunderstorm hits. I was starting to worry that I wouldn't be able to get away."

"So was I. Thank God you made it." Rinoa said, hugging him. Renn's arms tightened around her in response and he kissed the top of her head lightly.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked her softly.

"Yes. Oh, yes... Let's go!" Rinoa whispered breathlessly, her smile so brilliant and beautiful that Renn's heart ached.

Taking her hand, Renn opened the door and looked up and down the hall. Finding it clear, he hurried down it, tugging Rinoa behind him.

She went as fast as she could, and Renn glanced back at her, worried at her labored breathing. Then she stumbled and nearly fell.

"I'm sorry Rinoa, are you okay?" He asked her urgently.

"Yes," she nodded breathlessly. "I'm just really out of shape..." Her back was aching again, and she rubbed at it distractedly.

"We need to hurry. I want to get us out of here before anything else goes wrong." Renn said, and then glanced down at Rinoa's feet. "No wonder you tripped. Your shoes are untied." He knelt down and tied them quickly.

"Yeah, its kind of hard for me to tie them properly anymore." Rinoa said.

Renn stood and caressed her cheek, saying, "You should have said something. You good to go now?"

Rinoa took a deep breath and nodded, and they were off again. The place was a maze, and she had to trust to Renn's guidance, otherwise she would never have managed to find her way out on her own. She did her best to keep up, and despite his urgency, Renn moderated his pace for her.

But instead of subsiding as she continued on like she had expected, and like they had in the past, her aches continued. Indeed, they increased, to the point that it was getting harder and harder for
They had just turned down another hallway, Renn urging her on softly when sudden, intense pain flared from her back and radiated through her abdomen, taking her breath away and leaving her nauseous. She stopped, gasping, and couldn't hold back a low moan, clutching at her stomach.

"Rinoa, what are you…?" Renn turned back to her when she'd suddenly stopped, and saw her white faced and panting with pain.

Licking her lips, she said, "I just need a minute…" she closed her eyes and tried to catch her breath, rubbing at her belly. She tried to calm herself, set aside her mounting fear and delve deep, touching the tiny minds within her. They couldn't form actual, coherent thoughts yet, but Rinoa got a sense of anticipation from them. They were ready…for something.

She had just caught her breath when pain ripped through her midsection again, forcing a cry from her lips and sending her to her knees. She knew then what her babies were ready for. They were ready for birth. She was in labor.

"Rinoa?" Renn gasped as she collapsed with a cry.

"Oh, no, no, no, not now…" She was moaning. She took a deep breath, trying to breathe through the pain as sweat began to gather on her brow. Renn returned to her side and let her lean against him, supporting her.

"Not now? What do you mean, not now… Oh my God! Now?" Renn gasped as Rinoa nodded, tears gathering in her eyes as she did.

"I was so hoping I'd get out of here first…. Oh my God! Now?" Renn gasped as Rinoa nodded, tears gathering in her eyes as she did.

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"Oh, no…" Renn sighed softly. So close. So goddamn close. They were just moments from reaching the exit and getting out of there. But now, that was impossible. He thought about the rough, battering road, the hours of travel it took to get there, and his heart sank. There was no way he could get her out now, it was too late.

The only option they had now was to get her to the delivery room that had been set up for her.

"Rinoa, come on. We need to get you some help with this." Renn said, urging her to her feet.

"Renn," she was sobbing. "Renn please, I don't want to do this here… I want Squall. I want my husband….

"Rinoa, we don't have any choice. I can't take you out of here now, its too risky. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you." He said, stroking her hair. He tried to think back and calculate how long it had been since she'd stopped and cried out with pain, trying to figure out how far apart her contractions were. She may not want to have her babies in this place, and Renn couldn't blame her, but this wasn't a process that could be easily halted once it began.

"Come on," Renn said, standing up and pulling her with him. "We can't stay here. I don't know how far things have gone or how long it'll take, but much as I love you, I'm not up to delivering your babies." She sniffled and wiped at her eyes, giving him a watery smile as they started back the way they came, toward the lab/delivery room that Odine had set up.

Leaning heavily on him, Rinoa asked, "You did take basic first aid, right?"
"Yes, but it didn't cover delivering twins." Renn admitted.

Rinoa was about to comment but another contraction stole her breath. She moaned again, clutching at Renn as the pain built gradually until she felt she was being crushed by it. It left her gasping and shuddering, dragging in sobbing breaths.

"Another one?" Renn asked her. She nodded wordlessly, still trying to breathe. Six minutes, Renn judged. Six minutes from the last time the pain had struck her. When she'd recovered somewhat, they continued on, slowly making their way toward the delivery room.

They had to pause periodically when the contractions hit so Rinoa could catch her breath and recover from them before continuing on. By the time they reached the delivery room and Renn was able to alert a passing nurse, they were five minutes apart and getting harder…and much more painful.

Then it was all confusion and chaos as the nurse alerted the midwife, who arrived breathlessly with her assistants, Odine arrived moments later and Rinoa was whisked away into the room itself.

"No! No please! Stay with me! I can't..." Rinoa clutched at Renn's arm as she was being pulled away from him, and another pain, the hardest one yet, forced a sobbing scream from her.

"Rinoa…Wait, what are you…?" Renn protested as an orderly pushed him back when he tried to follow her. "Come on! You can't expect her to do this alone! Let me in, she's scared, she needs someone to support her! She needs me!"

"He iz not needed here." Odine said coldly, and then turned to Renn, saying, "If you would be of zervice, zhen make sure ve are not disturbed. Guard ze door."

"Goddammit! You cold blooded little bastard!" Renn shouted angrily as the doctor swept into the room and the orderly shoved Renn back roughly. He briefly considered attacking the man and knocking him cold, but he didn't want to bring violence anywhere near Rinoa. Not now. It wouldn't help her and might even make things worse for her.

Instead, when the doors were shut firmly in his face he slammed both fists against them impotently with an angry curse. Pain stabbed through his heart as he heard Rinoa's cries clearly through the door. He leaned back against it and closed his eyes, feeling completely helpless. The real hell of it was, in the midst of her pain and fear, while she'd reached for him, it wasn't him that she was calling for. It was Squall.

Squall and Irvine finally reached the front part of Odine's lab complex and studied the setup.

"Two guards at the gate, in a guardhouse." Irvine said, breath steaming in the cold, damp air.

Squall nodded and said with an accompanying puff of vapor of his own, "Take 'em out."

"Okay," Irvine replied. "Right after I get these cameras." Several virtually soundless reports, muffled by both the silencer and the still crackling thunder, told of the destruction of the cameras. Two more sounded and Squall, who'd been watching through his spotting scope, confirmed that the guards were downed.

Squall glanced over at him and Irvine tried hard to ignore his chills at the jeweled, catlike glitter in his eyes from the reflected lamplight.

"All right. Lights are next." Irvine said, shooting them one by one.
Thick darkness enveloped the area and Squall commented, "power's still off on the fence." Irvine's eyes narrowed. He'd noticed the warning lights on the fence were off as well.

"Must still be working on it. Good. All we need is a pair of wire cutters…" Irvine said, then trailed off as Squall started walking toward the fence.

"Or a Thundaga spell." Squall said, calling the lightning. It gathered in his hands, forming into a spitting ball of plasma. When it was powerful enough, Squall flung it at the fence. It exploded in a burst of light that nearly blinded Irvine, leaving a smoking hole in its wake that Squall casually strolled through.

Irvine ran to catch up, asking breathlessly, "That was a thundaga spell? How the hell'd you do that?"

"Short answer? I'm married to a sorceress." Squall said, increasing his pace to a lope.

"Oh. Right." Irvine said, increasing his pace as well.

They both ran toward the parking lot, knowing it was only a matter of time before someone decided to check out the reason behind the blown out lights and the non-responsive gate guards. Indeed, they'd been incredibly lucky up to that point, having encountered no resistance at all as yet. They both knew that would change, and didn't even have to discuss casting protection spells as they ducked from car to car, stealthily working their way toward the entrance of the facility itself.

As they did, the rain slackened, much to Irvine's relief. Squall gave no sign that the cold and wet was bothering him, but having spent all night out in it with him, Irvine knew that Squall had to be just as cold and uncomfortable as he was. So far however, despite the danger of hypothermia, Squall still appeared to be as sharp as ever, no doubt due to the GF's he'd junctioned. Irvine likewise had junctioned a couple of Guardians. An operation like theirs virtually required it. It gave them an edge that not many people or even armies could match.

Irvine noticed a gradual lightening of the sky; vaguely surprised that so much time had elapsed from the moment they had set out on this mission to this point, nearing its end. It was still dark, but dawn was not far off.

As they trotted through the parking area, Irvine with his guns out and Squall with his gunblade ready, a pair of headlights could be seen trundling along the fence line.

Irvine noticed them, and said, "looks like we're going to have company." They both ducked into the cover of a car that was parked closest to the doors.

Squall flicked a glance toward the fence and nodded, then responded, "up ahead too. I can hear them coming."

"Bout damn time. I'm seriously unimpressed with the security of this place." Irvine commented, then he asked, "can you tell how many?"

Squall fell silent for a moment; his eyes narrowed, and he strained his newly enhanced senses. He could hear the footsteps approaching but because the sound was muffled by the closed door and distorted by the confined space, he couldn't determine the number. And he couldn't smell them because they had yet to emerge from the building. Finally, he shook his head.

Irvine leaned his back against the vehicle and checked the magazines on all of his firearms, making sure they were all fully loaded. Then he pulled his rifle around and checked the clip, dropping it out and slapping a fresh one home and cocking it.
"All right. You take the front. I'll be watching our backs, and see if I can pick off the guys coming along the fence." Irvine said, flipping the cap off the scope, setting the bipod at the end of the barrel on the trunk of the car and peering into the eyepiece.

Irvine led his target carefully, homing in on the headlights first then tracking upward, doing his best to compensate for the reflected lighting from the instrument panels and the headlights. He got the driver first, and the truck he was driving careened out of control as he slumped, crashing into the fence.

He grumbled a curse under his breath as the passengers leaped out and took cover behind the vehicle, though Irvine was able to pick off a couple of them before they did. He kept his scope trained on the truck, trying to see if anyone moved, but knew he couldn't play a cat and mouse game tonight. There was no time for it.

"Squall," Irvine said. "I got a few of 'em but not all. So they'll likely be calling for reinforcements as we speak." He whipped his rifle around and quickly took the silencer off. He didn't need it now, and it did make the rifle muzzle-heavy. Okay when stationary, but awkward when moving.

"They're not here yet. You ready?" Squall asked him, attention still trained on the portal several meters ahead of their current position.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Let's bring the rain, brother." Irvine said. Squall silently moved back and let Irvine use the hood of the car to rest his rifle on while they waited for the men to emerge from the doorway.

"You bring the rain. I'm bringing hell." Squall said. Irvine snorted at that.

Then their opponents emerged and Irvine picked them off, one by one, commenting, "This is a really bad bottleneck. Rotten design. I could shoot these guys all day as they come out unless they've got another exit I don't know about."

"Yeah, well we don't have all day, and they're blocking the way in." Squall growled. He couldn't explain the sudden sense of urgency he had except that he was so close to reaching Rinoa that every delay added to his anger and frustration.

"Well, what are you gonna do about.... Squall? Shit!" Irvine swore as Squall got up and casually walked toward the entrance, completely unconcerned with the fact that he was making a target of himself. There were several men just inside the doorway, taking cover against the walls, weapons trained upon him, ready to fire. He didn't care. He didn't even flinch as a shot rang out to be turned aside by the protection spell that he'd cast.

Squall leveled his gunblade at the doorway, supporting the flat of the blade upon his arm to steady it, still strolling calmly toward the entrance. Then he stopped, cocked the hammer, and fired.

The pulse round exploded the doorway in a blinding flash, wiping out the men that had been waiting just inside it.

Resting the gunblade on his shoulder, Squall turned back and raised his eyebrows at Irvine, asking, "You coming?"

Then he strode through the smoking wreckage of the doorway, announcing loudly, "anyone that doesn't want to die better get out of my way!"

They'd only gone a few meters down the hallway when a troop of men rounded a corner, shooting at them.
"Looks like they didn't hear you." Irvine said, returning fire.

"Too bad for them." Squall said, slashing his gunblade through the air, preparing to charge. Irvine's covering fire accounted for about half of the men, while the rest concentrated their fire at Squall, who ran at them with the blade held high. The protect spell still held, deflecting the bullets that otherwise would have killed him.

Some of the men, seeing Squall's unstoppable charge, simply fled. Those that attempted to put up a fight died as he descended upon them like a wolf among sheep. The gunblade sang through the air as Squall cut down first one man, then another.

A couple of the men were gunbladers as well, and they attempted to contend with him, but Squall went through them easily, blocking and parrying one while knocking the other back with a kick, sending him sprawling. Slipping through the first man's guard, Squall slashed his throat and he fell, blood spraying. Then he whirled to block the second man, who'd managed to get to his feet in the meantime.

Then it was blow after lightning fast blow, beating the man back until he created an opening and slipped his gunblade into his opponent's chest, killing him. Two sharp reports came from Irvine's direction, taking care of the remaining two men. Glancing over at Irvine, Squall nodded and flicked the blood from his gunblade, turning to continue his progress down the hallway, Irvine running alongside.

"So, do you have any clue at all of where we're going?" he asked.

"Nope." Squall answered.

"Outstanding. So, the plan is, what? Run around this maze killing everyone in our way until we find her?" Irvine asked.

"Yes." Squall answered. As they ran, an alarm began sounding, prompting Irvine to laugh.

"These guys are really on the ball, aren't they?" He smirked.

"Yeah. Well that little skirmish we had was just a warm up. Things will definitely get worse from here. How's your protect spell holding out?" Squall asked him, loping easily down the hallway.

"Still good. How about you?" Irvine asked him.

"Fine for now." Squall answered, then added, "don't go for the GF's or high-level spells unless things get really thick."

"Okay. What've you got stocked anyway?" Irvine asked, curious.

"About a dozen Aura spells, thirty meltdown spells, fourteen meteor, and fifty Ultima." Squall answered.

"Fifty Ultima? How'd you manage that?" Irvine asked.

"Refined some rare items. Plus I had some in reserve in case I needed it." Squall answered.

They both fell silent as they continued down the corridor. Thus far, they hadn't turned off on any of the branching hallways, mainly because while neither knew where Rinoa actually was, Squall did at least have a room number and a section. He just needed to figure out how to get there from where they were. So as he ran, Squall was paying close attention to any signage that might offer a
clue of where he was. A sudden whiff of something caused Squall's nose to itch and he sneezed. Rubbing at his itching nose in annoyance, he slowed his strides and focused on a corridor crossing the one they were traveling.

The scent became stronger and mingled with the odor of several different men, and along with it came the sound of several footsteps and voices.

"To the left. More men coming." Squall said, indicating the crossroad they were approaching. Then he sneezed again.

"Okay. Something fly up your nose?" Irvine asked, puzzled.

"No. Someone up ahead is wearing some really obnoxious cologne." Squall answered, wrinkling his nose in a grimace.

"I can't smell it…" Irvine said.

"Of course you can't, but right now, I can smell you a mile away without any cologne on." Squall said.

"Really? What do I smell like?" Irvine asked, curiously.

"A wet dog." Squall answered.

"That's your coat. I can smell the damn thing from here." Irvine said.

Squall sniffed at the sleeve of his coat and said, "So it is." The wet wool dragged at him but it did keep him warmer than he would have been without it. And it did smell like a wet dog. But then, so did Irvine, owing largely to the fact that he had a wool fleece lining to his leather duster.

"So how do we want to play this?" Irvine asked when they paused, nodding up ahead toward the waiting ambush.

"Recast protect, just to make sure it doesn't wear off in the middle of a firefight, I'll cast Aura on us both, and we throw everything we've got at them." Squall said. Irvine nodded and cast protect on himself. Squall meanwhile recast his protect spell, then cast Aura on himself and Irvine.

There were times, Irvine reflected, that Squall could be truly frightening. Once the spells had been cast and they were ready, Squall's expression became cold and set. When he glanced over at Irvine, violet fire flashed in his eyes once again and he bared his teeth in a feral expression that was not a smile. Irvine gulped at what had to be a trick of the light, because there was no way he'd just seen hints of Griever in Squall's face…. right down to the fangs.

Then, he let the lion off the leash and charged.

Squall's focus narrowed to its most basic, hardwired protocol. Target, response. Each target was an obstruction to his goal, and Squall cleaved through them with cold ruthlessness. They were not men to him; they were merely obstacles.

Irvine's rifle cracked out several times, each shot felling a guard, while Squall's gunblade sang a counter point to its wielder's deadly dance. He slashed high, beheading the man directly in front of him and followed through the deadly arc and slashed the next man's throat. He ducked a gunblader's attack, disemboweling him and kicking him aside to deal with yet another attacker,
twisting to deflect his attack then sweeping the man's leg out from under him and sending him sprawling. A single, decisive thrust through the man's chest dealt with him, and Squall was off again to his next opponent, his next target.

It was a blur to Squall, it was all action and reaction, and all too soon there were no more opponents left to fight. They were all either dead or had fled. He strode through the carnage left behind without a backward glance, his heart still pounding and his blood still surging, the warm rush of power from the Aura spell still carrying him forward with deadly purpose.

Squall scanned the cold, sterile hallway that he stalked down, still searching for the sector that held Rinoa's room, his face and body liberally spattered with blood not his own. The warm, metallic tang of it nearly overwhelmed the other scents he could detect: the fading traces of the men he'd killed, the fear of those whose courage had failed them, causing them to flee. Fainter still were the traces of the disinfectants and cleaning fluids used to clean the floors, walls, and other surfaces.

Then he rounded a corner and froze as he caught wind of a familiar scent. He dropped to one knee, placing his hand upon the wall and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Hers. Taking another breath, he detected the scent of someone who had been with her, a man. He smelled what he took to be concern and anxiety from his traces, and from Rinoa, fear, and pain.

"Squall?" Irvine asked, watching his odd behavior. He reminded Irvine of a tracking dog that had just caught the scent of its quarry.

"She was here. With someone…. a man. A little more than an hour ago." Squall said, then he frowned, rising to his feet again, and added, "she's…. hurting. I'm smelling pain, but there's no blood-smell, and no trace of it."

"Can you follow the scent?" Irvine wondered, feeling a little odd about asking.

Squall nodded, and took off like a shot, prompting Irvine to groan and start after him, calling, "Do I need to put a leash on you?"

"Not if you want to end the night in one piece." Squall shot back. Irvine rolled his eyes and loped along in his wake.

Squall raced along the hallway, his attention focused upon following Rinoa's trail, becoming more and more excited as the traces became stronger. His concern mounted as he detected the chemical changes in her scent that her pain and her fear caused, and he wondered about the man who accompanied her and what role he played in it. Was he the cause of her pain? The anxiety evident from his scent-trace argued that he probably wasn't.

Squall rounded another corner and saw a man leaning against a pair of doors, head tilted back against it. He looked like he might have been standing guard, but his attention seemed focused upon the other side of the door, rather than the hallway he was standing in. Catching his scent, he matched it to the trail he'd been following; he was the man who'd been with Rinoa. Setting his jaw grimly, Squall started down the hallway. If Rinoa was on the other side of those doors, then one sentry was certainly not going to stop him from going through them.

A muffled scream from the other side of the doors sent Squall's heart into his throat and lent wings to his feet as he sped down the hallway toward them.

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Another cry from Rinoa, and Renn closed his eyes in anguish. That helpless, useless feeling persisted, despite his attempts to reason his way out of it. His plan had been a good, solid one, but
not even the best planning could beat fate. He only hoped that fate wouldn't be as cruel as he knew it could be. What would become of Rinoa and her babies unfortunately had to be left to fate and the whims of a heartless scientist, a fact that Renn hated.

He would get her out. Somehow. If nothing else, he'd attempt to make contact with her husband, who must surely be looking for her now, and lead him to this place. Perhaps between the two of them, they could rescue Rinoa and her babies.

Waiting outside the door as she cried out periodically as the contractions grew closer together, it seemed as though hours had passed. When the alarm went off, Renn jumped in surprise, and glanced at his watch. Just a little over an hour had elapsed since he'd brought Rinoa to the room.

Looking down the hallway, he heard footsteps running as a group of guards headed in the direction of the entrance, running past him.

"Hey, what's going on?" He asked them.

One of the men glanced back and said, "It's a breach! Intruders at the main entrance. You want to come? We could use you."

Renn shook his head and replied, "No, I'm stationed here. Sorry man."

The other fellow shrugged and continued down the hall with the rest of the group. Renn stared after them, trying not to hope.

There was only one person that Renn could think of that would attack this place. And if it was whom Renn thought, then the men that were headed toward the entrance were all dead.

*If it IS you Commander, then you'd best hurry. Your wife needs you.* Renn thought. He closed his eyes and sighed, leaning his head back against the door, and wincing as Rinoa cried out again.

Eventually, he heard pounding footsteps, growing louder, coming toward him. Renn opened his eyes and swallowed, trying to ignore the fear that began screaming in the back of his mind for him to run. Instead he held his ground. He would die or he would live, but either way he would do so facing what was to come with his eyes wide open. Fool or not, his parents hadn't raised a coward.

So he simply waited, leaning against the door with a casual ease that he in no way felt, and watched as death incarnate charged up the corridor, naked, blood-streaked gunblade ready. He felt as though he was facing a charging lion or torama, and just like dealing with those creatures, he knew instinctively that if he ran or showed any kind of aggression, he'd be dead in a heartbeat.

It might have worked, had Rinoa not chosen that precise moment to let out a heartrending, sobbing cry. Then all Renn was to Squall was a target to go through, and he attacked.

Irvine was a few strides behind and saw Squall charging at the young man who didn't raise a weapon or make any aggressive moves, and he felt sick.

"Squall! Wait! No! He's not even armed!" Irvine yelled, racing to catch up and stop him before Squall did something that would haunt him forever.

Fortunately, Renn wasn't stupid, and when he saw that Squall was bent on attack, he ducked out of the way, narrowly avoiding decapitation. The gunblade bit deeply into the wood of the door, splintering it, and Squall whirled, pulling it free and coming after Renn again. The gunblade whistled through the air again and again as Renn dodged blows that had enough power behind them to be deadly if even one of them landed.
Backing away, he fetched up against the wall hard and was knocked off balance, and wasn't able to recover in time to duck what he knew would be a deathblow.

Desperately, he called out, "Julia Raine!" as the gunblade sang toward his head, thinking there was no way that a blow with that much power behind it could be checked. Squall froze, staring, and Renn swallowed as he felt the blade resting against his neck with just the lightest of touches. Somehow, Squall had stopped the blade dead from a full force blow.

"What did you say?" Squall asked him, eyes wide.

"Julia Raine. Saber." Renn answered. He swallowed nervously again as he saw Squall's hands tighten upon the handle of the gunblade until the knuckles whitened.

"How do you know those names?" he demanded.

"Rinoa told me."

Squall's eyes narrowed, and he accused, "you kidnapped her."

Renn shook his head in denial and clarified, "I followed orders." They stared at each other then, Squall not moving so much as a millimeter. With his face partially obscured by a full, coppery red beard, Renn would not have recognized him were it not for the distinctive scar that the watch cap only partially hid and his cold, piercing eyes.

"Look, I know what I did, and I'm not proud of it. This isn't about me." Renn said, and then gestured with his head toward the door. "I'm not going to stop you. She's in there. She's been calling for you for the last hour."

Squall frowned slightly, confused at the young man's manner. Slowly, he moved the gunblade away from Renn's neck, never taking his eyes off of him, wiped it on the hem of his coat and slid it back into the sheath, wincing inwardly at putting it up without a thorough cleaning.

Finally, Squall asked him, "Why?"

"She's in labor." Renn answered him.

Squall's eyes widened and he gasped, "What? But it's too early!"

"Go." Renn said. Squall whirled without another word and pushed at the doors, bursting through them.
Rinoa tossed her head from side to side, biting her lips, trying unsuccessfully to hold back another cry as another painful contraction struck her. A sobbing moan was forced from her despite her efforts to contain it however. She gripped the railing on the bed and tried again to breathe through the pain as the nurse midwife had encouraged her to do. Sweat bathed her face but she shuddered, chills striking her. They kept the room too cold.

The nurse, noticing her convulsive trembling, asked her, "are you cold?" Rinoa nodded wordlessly. Something indistinct was said to an orderly who left, returning quickly with a warm sheet. The warmth soothed her somewhat, but it didn't ease the pain.

And no one there gave a damn about how frightened she was. Oh, the nurse midwife was quietly encouraging and competent enough to remain calm in the face of Rinoa's travails. Everyone was calm, efficient, and quiet…but aside from the midwife and the nurse, no one spoke directly to her. They had strapped her to so many different machines that beeped and whooshed and made other sounds that Rinoa couldn't identify that it left her simply confused.

One of them, the one making the whooshing sound, she'd heard referred to as a fetal monitor. It let everyone hear the heartbeats of both babies. Another one monitored her heart rate and respiration, but there were other machines connected to her that Rinoa had no idea of their purpose.

When Renn had brought her in he'd attempted to come in and support her, and in Squall's absence, any kind of support and encouragement was preferable to none at all, but he'd been thrust back and banished from the room. So Rinoa was left to face this all alone, and she didn't know if she was up to the task.

She wanted her husband desperately, and couldn't help calling out for him, despite the fact that he was nowhere near.

Squall, please, please… I need you. I can't do this alone; I'm not strong enough… I'm so scared, and it hurts so much…

The pain finally subsided a little and Rinoa relaxed, trying simply to breathe. The contractions came in waves, getting harder and more painful as time wore on. They were still holding steady at about five minutes apart, give or take, and had been for an hour or so.

The midwife checked her and glanced over at Dr. Odine, reporting, "eight centimeters. Fully effaced but the water hasn't broken yet."

Rinoa craned her head around, looking toward the doors and around at everyone there. The orderly that had shoved Renn away still stood closest to the doors, while Odine watched her with such intensity that it made Rinoa's skin crawl. Fortunately, he stood well off to the side and she didn't have to endure his touch. On the other side of the bed she lay in was all of the machines, and beyond that was an area where Rinoa supposed the babies would be weighed, bathed and placed in warmed bassinets. At least, she hoped they were warmed.

She wanted to cry but couldn't, not when she was fighting for air every time the pain struck her. Besides, the nurse had calmly told her that her hysterics would only serve to exhaust her faster, and she'd need all of her strength and then some to deliver the babies.

"Break it zen." Dr. Odine ordered.
"You have the neonate team ready, right?" The midwife asked.

"Yes." Odine replied.

"Okay." The midwife said, then addressed Rinoa, saying, "We're going to break the water for you Rinoa. When we do, the contractions will get harder, and closer together; don't start pushing until I tell you to."

The nurse did as she'd advised Rinoa, and a warm rush of fluid resulted, with Rinoa shifting uncomfortably at the odd sensation. Then a hard contraction came immediately afterward that caught Rinoa by surprise, and she let out a yelp, then as the pain built and crushed her, a gasping, wailing cry.

She squeezed her eyes shut and grit her teeth, sobbing for breath, and as tears leaked from her eyes, sobbing for Squall as well.

"Where are you? Squall…I need you…" She moaned, gripping the bedrail so hard her knuckles were white, bathed in sweat while shivering at the same time. The waves of pain surging and receding had already gone on for what seemed like an eternity, though the nurses thought that the labor was progressing especially quickly. Even so, the midwife had said it could be hours yet before the birth itself. Rinoa didn't think she'd have the strength to withstand hours of this type of pain. It was draining away her energy, sapping at her will.

Dimly, she heard the nurses, the midwife, and the other attendants in the room with her discussing her. The machines made their noises; the babies' heartbeats whooshed quickly and without pause on the fetal monitor, while Rinoa's beeped steadily as well on the machine meant for her. On top of all of that however, Rinoa suddenly heard what sounded like an alarm.

She nervously looked around, asking, "What's that? What's going on? Is there a fire?"

"No," the midwife answered her calmly, "don't worry about it, just relax and breathe."

Don't worry about it? Rinoa watched as an intense, low-voiced discussion took place between Dr. Odine and the orderly. Something was going on, and it increased her anxiety as the alarm kept sounding, grating on her nerves. Then another contraction started and Rinoa couldn't think of anything else but the pain.

Through a haze of pain, fighting for air in the throes of the latest contraction, Rinoa moaned, sobbing as it built and built. As the nurse had warned her, the contractions were coming harder and faster, exhausting her despite the speed of her labor. Fatigue dragged at her and she hadn't even started to push yet. As the contraction loosened its grip upon her body, Rinoa laid back limply on the bed, eyes closed and panting. She heard the nurse say something about "transitioning", and Rinoa knew that she should know what that meant. But she couldn't think of it. She couldn't think of anything.

Something crashed against the doors outside, startling her and making her jump. She shifted nervously, staring in that direction and fearing what might come through them, feeling completely helpless and hating it. Then another contraction started and Rinoa squeezed her eyes shut again and screamed. It seemed to go on forever, and it became the center of her focus, but Rinoa gradually became aware of a flurry of activity near the doors. A low voice, one that sounded familiar, was snarling something angrily at someone.

When the contraction ceased, Rinoa lay sobbing weakly on the bed, praying for it to be over with and knowing that it would get worse before it got better. Then a hand gently stroked her hair back,
wiping sweat from her brow and face. At first, she thought she might have finally lost her mind from the pain and was now hallucinating. Squall couldn't possibly be there; he was still in Balamb…. Wasn't he?

"Rinoa… I'm here." A voice said quietly.

Rinoa opened her eyes and stared uncomprehendingly at the unfamiliar face that peered anxiously at her. Then she met a pair of beautiful turquoise eyes and saw the scar.

"Squall?" She asked, eyes flooding with tears. Oh, please, let it really be him…

"Yes." He nodded. He was real, he was solid, and he was there. Somehow, he'd made it, just in time.

She flung her arms around him and clung with all her strength, sobbing into his neck while he whispered comfortingly into her ear, supporting her with his solid strength. He was clammy and wet, streaked with blood and disheveled, but to Rinoa he was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. Then another contraction hit and Rinoa let out a gasping cry, tightening her grip on him as she rode it out. Squall bore it stolidly, giving her an anchor to cling to, rubbing his hand up and down her back.

Helping her lay back onto the bed, Squall took her hand and frowned down at the bangle on her wrist.

"We need to get this off of you." He said, working at it.

"Squall, no," Rinoa managed, grasping his hand with hers and stopping him.

"Why? Rinoa…" Squall began, and she stopped his lips with her fingers.

"I… don't want you to feel this. It's too much…" she said. She didn't want to share her torment with him, he'd already undergone horrific torture years before and she didn't want him to relive it as she went through hers.

Then he bent down and kissed her deeply, and whispered, "I promised, remember? We go through this together. It's the only way I can support you, give you my strength. Whatever happens, Rin, I'm with you."

Tears filled Rinoa's eyes again and she reached up, caressing his bearded cheek, fascinated by its texture and color, whispering, "I love you."

Squall smiled slightly at her and replied, "I love you too." Then he frowned down at her wrist again, turning it to and fro and puzzling over how he might remove the bangle. It was a different design than one he'd seen before, and he cursed in frustrated anger at being unable to figure out the catch before another contraction struck Rinoa and she clutched at him, gasping and moaning.

When the storm ceased and Rinoa was catching her breath, conserving her strength for the next one, Squall stroked her hair back again and said, "I'll be right back honey. I'm going to get that goddamned thing off your wrist." He kissed her gently on the cheek before reluctantly leaving her side.

Then he stalked menacingly toward Dr. Odine, finding a grim satisfaction in the way the little man shrank back fearfully as he advanced, appearing more afraid of Squall than of the tall sniper that held a gun against his head.
When he'd burst into the delivery room, heart in his throat at Rinoa's cries, he couldn't go immediately to her side, much as he'd wanted to. He first had to deal with the orderly who made an abortive attempt to stop him. And he had to secure Odine. There was no way in hell that Squall was letting that little bastard get away.

"Don't," Squall had warned the orderly with a steely look in his eyes, "unless you want to die right now." The man backed off, swallowing.

He'd then stalked past the orderly toward Dr. Odine, Griever snarling in the back of his mind, urging him to kill. He very nearly did, but managed to stay his hand…. with Ellone's help.

As he approached Dr. Odine, he'd sent a questing thought out to Ellone, hoping she could hear him. She'd always connected with him, never the reverse, so Squall didn't even know if he could contact her. But he tried anyway, hoping, and was immensely relieved when he felt her surprise at his mental touch.

**Squall?**

Sis, can you tell Laguna send a pick-up to these coordinates? He'd sent, including the directions to reach Odine's lab, adding, Make sure he sends along a full emergency medical crew, including an obstetrician and a pediatrician.

_The babies?_ Ellone had sent, her alarm coming through the link plainly.

_Yes. Please, tell him to hurry._ Squall replied as he reached Dr. Odine.

Incredibly, Dr. Odine had the audacity to be angry at Squall's invasion, demanding, "You are trespassing here! Leave immediately!"

"Oh, I don't think so." Squall had snarled, seizing the diminutive scientist by the throat and lifting him off his feet. "I've come for my wife. And I'm not leaving without her."

It would have been ridiculously easy to crush the man's windpipe, strangling him, and Squall had been sorely tempted. Squall wasn't normally sadistic, not by any means. Killing was often a part of his job and he didn't derive any pleasure from it, he simply did it and moved on with little or no emotion surrounding it. Usually.

But this time the thought of strangling Odine with his bare hands, of watching his eyes bulge and his tongue protrude as Squall slowly throttled him, was very pleasurable indeed. He narrowed his eyes and his grip tightened, and Odine's hands clawed at him; fear stark in his dark eyes.

Then…

Squall! Don't! Don't kill him! Ellone sent urgently

Squall didn't bother articulating a response, he simply sent a low, rumbling growl, with Griever echoing it.

Don't Squall! Brother, Please! Uncle Laguna says let the courts handle it. Ellone tried again, begging him to stop.

They won't. You know they won't. Squall had replied stubbornly.

You have to let THEM decide. Besides, we may still need him. Ellone had told him.
Squall didn't think so, but it was Ellone's urging that had finally convinced him not to kill the little man right then. Relenting, he opened his hand and dropped the scientist as though he'd been holding something noisome, and walked away, wiping his hand on his coat as he did.

As Dr. Odine lay crumpled on the floor, retching and sobbing for air, Squall had turned to Irvine, who'd followed him in, telling him, "Keep an eye on him."

"You got it bro," Irvine had said, cocking his pistol and aiming it at the scientist, adding, "you ain't goin' nowhere, little man."

Now, Squall simply stared coldly down at Dr. Odine and ordered, "Take the bangle off of her."

Odine shook his head, protesting, "you cannot, it iz not safe…." Odine's near pathological distrust of sorceresses always set Squall's teeth on edge. Rinoa had never threatened anyone, and yet he still persisted in seeing her as either a specimen to be examined or a danger to be contained.

It wasn't worth the time and air it took to explain to the man that in treating Rinoa like he had, he was in danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. By treating Rinoa like the enemy, he might force her to become the enemy. Squall hoped that by reestablishing his link to her and to their children, he could ground her, and prevent that from happening. He knew that she didn't want to become the world's enemy, but depending on how she'd been treated, she might indeed become the monster everyone feared.

"You have more to fear from me than from her. Take it off. Now." Squall growled.

Odine scuttled over to Rinoa's bed, doing his best to stay out of Squall's reach, mindful of both his near strangulation at the young SeeD's hand and his wife's fervent wish that he would crush the life from him as she watched.

Upon reaching her bedside, Dr. Odine licked his lips, curiosity once again coming to the fore and asked, "ven ze bangle iz removed, you vill mind link? Ze bond vill be reestablished, yes?"

"What do you think?" Squall asked him, becoming impatient.

"I think zhat you vill. It vill be interesting to observe zhiss." Dr. Odine pronounced, recovering somewhat his arrogant demeanor and unable to hide his curiosity.

"Just do it." Squall ordered. Rinoa met his eyes and reached her hand out to him, and he approached and took it, squeezing it gently. Gazing down at her, he waited for the bangle to be removed and its binding effect released.

Rinoa shifted uncomfortably as another contraction started and her grip tightened upon Squall's hand, moaning as the pain built. Odine, curious at how immediately the link would be re-established and how it would affect Squall, chose that precise moment to remove the bangle.

Squall felt the binding removed, and sighed in relief as he felt Rinoa's mind touch his. Then pain slammed into him, catching him by surprise. He gasped, eyes going wide, and swayed, gripping the bedrail for support until his knuckles whitened. He wanted to collapse to his knees and scream, but instead he remained upright, grunting and breathing through gritted teeth.

"Fascinating…" Odine whispered, transfixed at the sight.

"What the hell? Squall, you okay man?" Irvine asked. It looked as though he'd been on the verge of collapse. Then he remembered Squall telling him that he could feel Rinoa's pleasure when they linked… and her pain.
"Are you feeling that?" Irvine asked incredulously. Squall nodded wordlessly, squeezing his eyes shut and dragging in a deep breath. Irvine shook his head in wonder. Right before his eyes he was seeing something he didn't think he'd ever see again. It wasn't in the plan for him to be present at the birth of Squall's children, but he couldn't regret the happenstance that had given him a front row seat.

A whispered oath brought Irvine's attention to the door guard, who was staring with wide eyes at the proceedings.

"Shit, Rinoa." Squall gritted out breathlessly, "Oh, shit. You've been dealing with this for over an hour?" It never seemed to end; it just built and built, crushing them both beneath its weight. Rinoa's hand crushed his in a death grip, and he in turn was grasping the bedrail like it was his only lifeline.

"YES." She answered him as she writhed and cried out.

When it was over, they were both sweat-drenched and gasping, and Squall leaned his forehead against Rinoa's, eyes closed, saying roughly, "Sweetheart, if I ever doubt your courage, ever, remind me of this."

"Trust me, I will." She answered breathlessly. He whispered a laugh, then took a deep breath and straightened up, looking around for a cloth to wipe the sweat off Rinoa's and his faces.

He noticed the nurses, staring at him in shock, Odine watching with intense interest, Irvine doing his best to watch Odine, the orderly and the door guard that he'd nearly killed, who were all in the room, and he frowned. Too many people. Too many variables, and he couldn't deal with them all. Not now. He hoped that Irvine could handle it should something bad happen because Squall wouldn't be able to.

Focusing again on one of the nurses, he asked her, "Could I get a cloth please? And some ice chips?" Rinoa's mouth had gone dry, and Squall could sense her thirst.

"Of course." The woman answered and left. She returned a few moments later with a dampened towel and a cup full of ice chips and he nodded his thanks.

Rinoa gratefully took a small chip of ice when he handed it to her and let it melt on her tongue, closing her eyes and laying back on the bed. Squall sponged her face off gently, trying to shove aside the worry that had gathered in the back of his mind. With the reestablishment of their bond however, he could tell that while she was still frightened by the whole process she was enduring, she felt more confident now that he was with her. That confidence warmed him.

Threading his fingers through hers, he sent "You're tiring."

"The contractions are really taking it out of me. We haven't even gotten to the pushing part yet. I've been told that's the hard part." Rinoa sent with a sigh.

"Take my strength. Use it. That's what I'm here for." Squall replied. Rinoa nodded gratefully and Squall felt her drawing it from him through their link. It was an odd sensation, like blood seeping from a wound. Quite the opposite of what Rinoa had done once before during their lovemaking. Then, she'd drawn from the power they'd both created and fed it back to him.

The power drawn from Squall sustained and supported her through the next eternity as they both endured the increasingly short intervals between contractions. While linked to her, Squall gave Rinoa as much encouragement as he could, helping her with some pain management techniques
that he knew, giving her an anchor to cling to when the pain threatened to overwhelm her.

Finally, the midwife checked on Rinoa's progress and said, "It's time to push now Rinoa. When the next contraction hits, I want you to bear down as hard as you can for as long as you can."

Rinoa nodded, and Squall sent, "Take a deep breath, then exhale while you push. It might... help."

There was a certain rhythm to the waves of contractions, and they both had gotten a sense of the peaks and valleys. So just before the next peak began, Rinoa took a deep breath and forced her mind to calm. Then, as the contraction began she grasped the bedrails and sat up, grunting loudly through gritted teeth as she did as instructed and pushed. And pushed, and pushed.

The contraction ended and she fell back, panting, to rest against Squall's solid chest. He half-sat, half lay crosswise on the bed behind her, offering his body as a backrest. He kissed her temple gently and wiped at her face again with the cloth, sending his wordless approval of her efforts. The interval was all too short however before another hard contraction forced Rinoa to again bear down, crying out from the sheer effort involved. The cycle was repeated again and again, with Rinoa trembling from fatigue despite the strength that she was drawing from Squall.

They were both sweat-drenched and hovering on the verge of exhaustion when the midwife encouraged Rinoa, "One more hard push Rinoa, we're almost there."

"Good," Rinoa said in a weak, breathless voice. Then the final contraction hit and she sat up, grunting and pushing for all she was worth, drawing more and more energy from Squall as she did. She felt her son, Saber, slip from her body as the midwife exulted, "A boy! You have a son Rinoa!"

Rinoa was too tired to look; instead she rested against Squall with her eyes closed, panting. She knew, all too soon she'd have to do it all over again to deliver Julia.

Squall on the other hand, craned his neck to see what his son looked like. He was tiny, red and squirming, covered in goo and making odd, mewling noises. Squall frowned as they cut the umbilicus and took the baby to be weighed and checked out, worried. Was he okay? Was everything normal? Weren't babies supposed to give a good, healthy cry once they were born?

"Four pounds, three ounces. Fifteen inches." The neonatal nurse announced while working on cleaning up Saber and taking his vitals. Squall swallowed, unable to hide his concern.

"So tiny..."

The midwife caught his worried gaze and reassured him, "for all that your son was born over two months early he actually looks pretty robust. He is small, but then twins usually are anyway. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"How does he look?" Rinoa asked, eyes still closed, exhausted.

"He looks...weird. I guess he's healthy though, from what they're saying anyway. He's really tiny Rinoa." Squall answered, sponging her face off and kissing the top of her head. She caught his concern about that and his approval of her hard work, and squeezed his hand.

"Okay Rinoa, I need you to push again, just a little. We need to deliver the placenta." Rinoa nodded and grunted slightly, exhaling as she did as directed.

A slight respite from the hard work of delivering Saber was all Rinoa got, then the hard contractions started again as Julia's turn came up. Rinoa drew heavily from Squall's energy, and he bore it up as well as he could, but he too was beginning to tire. The echoes of Rinoa's pain, the effort she was expending and the draw upon his reserves, combined with the fatigue he was already
feeling. Out all night in the rain, fighting his way to her side... even with GF support, it was beginning to catch up to him.

And Saber's birth, while exhausting, had been relatively easy. Julia's would not be.

Rinoa leaned her head back against Squall chest with a whimpering moan as the first contraction struck. He held steady and through their link, through the red haze of pain, did his best to help her endure it.

"You're doing great Rin," he encouraged her, letting her feel his admiration at how she was handling everything so far.

"I'm so tired... I just want this over with already." She responded.

"Hang in there sweetheart. It'll be over with before you know it." Squall sent, sending his love along with his strength. She took it gratefully, letting him know how much she appreciated his support.

"If we ever do this again..." She began.

"If we ever do this again, don't be upset if I make sure that I'm completely drunk first. No man should endure this sober." Squall sent with a smile. Rinoa laughed quietly.

"Don't start pushing until I tell you," the midwife instructed. Rinoa nodded, concentrating on her breathing.

Things progressed much more quickly with Julia's birth, the contractions speeding up until they were nearly constant. When the midwife quietly urged Rinoa to push, she mustered her fading strength and did her best.

One, two times... then the midwife gasped and said urgently, "Stop! Stop pushing Rinoa!" Rinoa gripped Squall's arms and whimpered again, biting her lip as the pain washed over her.

"Why?" Rinoa asked breathlessly, though she suspected it was because Julia hadn't turned, despite her apparent efforts to do so just a few days ago.

"She's a breech. A true breech. I have to see if I can push her back a little and bring her feet down at least..." the midwife said, taking the opportunity between contractions to do that.

"A true breech?" Squall asked, ice forming in his gut. What was a true breech? And why did the midwife look so scared?

"She was coming out butt first, with her legs tucked up against her belly. There's no way she'd get through the pelvis that way." The midwife answered him, then addressed Rinoa, saying, "I need you to relax as much as possible." Squall swallowed back his growing fear as he watched the midwife carefully work on maneuvering the baby into a better position.

Then as the pain built and began to peak on another hard contraction, the midwife urged, "Okay, start pushing Rinoa, and let's see if we can get your daughter out."

Rinoa did so again, pushing hard, and Squall held on with her, noticing that the fast, steady whooshing noise that he'd been hearing in the background slowed as she did. The midwife noticed too, frowning.

Another push, and the whooshing sound slowed noticeably.
The midwife stopped Rinoa, and told her, "Okay, I need you to just relax a minute and breathe. We're going to get you some help with that." A nurse approached with an oxygen mask that hissed quietly and fitted it over Rinoa's mouth and nose. The whooshing noise picked up its steady rhythm once again, and Squall finally figured out that he was hearing his daughter's heartbeat.

Encouraged, the midwife directed Rinoa to proceed. In a fog of pain and crushing exhaustion, she did her best, Squall supporting her and allowing her to draw what she needed from him. The delivery, done as delicately as possible in deference to the fragile life that was struggling to emerge was still a difficult one. Julia was tiny, so tiny that she passed through the pelvis without getting stuck. But the cord, despite their best efforts, was compressed while in the birth canal.

When the whooshing sound of his daughter's heartbeat stopped, Squall's own heart dropped like a stone. When he saw the midwife pull the baby free, he swallowed down a lump at how tiny and lifeless she appeared. They didn't cut the cord from her immediately; instead leaving it connected awhile longer, hoping it would sustain her. When she moved slightly, Squall sagged with relief. She wasn't dead then.

That sign of life was all the neonatal team needed to encourage them, and they sprung into action, cutting the cord and whisking the newborn away to care for her.

Panting despite the oxygen mask on her face, Rinoa leaned against Squall, eyes closed. He still felt the steady draw as she pulled energy from him, and he began to feel weak and lightheaded.

"Is she… okay?" Rinoa asked him.

"I… don't know." Squall answered her honestly, wiping her face gently, heart aching.

"Okay Rinoa, one more time, got to deliver that placenta…" the midwife said. Rinoa rallied her flagging strength and gave another hard push...and something went wrong.

The placenta came out, but so did a lot of blood. Too much.

Eyes closed and resting with Rinoa, he felt her growing weaker, despite the energy she was drawing from him. It seemed to be bleeding out as fast as she drew it, and Squall frowned, eyes still closed, wondering why. Then he deepened the link and saw the tear, saw her lifeblood pouring from it.

"She's hemorrhaging!"

No…

Dimly, he heard the nurse urgently calling for IV fluids and for whole blood, only to exclaim in dismay when told there was none available. No surgeon to repair the damage, no blood available to replace what she was losing. Rinoa was bleeding out and they couldn't save her. And through their link, she was taking him with her.

He held on, anchored her, and called for Griever's support.

Help me Griever. Help me save her. He begged.

I can only give you my strength Knight Lion-heart. You are the anchor to that plane, not I. Hold her. Do not allow her to pass into the darkness. Griever answered.

Squall opened his eyes and stared down at Rinoa, eyes blurring at how limply her head lolled back in his arms as he shifted her, how shallow her breathing had become, how pale she was. In his
mind he felt her life-spark dimming, receding away from him, and he reached out and grabbed it fiercely.

"Stay with me Rin. Please stay." He pleaded.

"So...tired...want to sleep..." She responded, and Squall wanted to weep.

"Don't leave me. Please..." he sent. He held her back from the darkness that wanted to swallow her up, barring her from the eternal rest that she craved. Leaning heavily upon Griever's strength, he reached into the diminishing pool of power that only Rinoa could tap, desperately hoping that he could draw from it as well, because Rinoa had grown too weak to do it herself any longer.

Fiercely pushing the oxygen mask from her face, Squall cradled her cheek, brushing his thumb over her pale lips. Then, as she had done once, he kissed her, sending the power he'd drawn into her, casting a healing spell along with it. As he did, he tried not to think about how cold and lifeless her lips felt. Instead, he concentrated upon finding the wound that threatened her and healing it, stopping the flow of blood.

In the periphery of his consciousness, he heard several sighs of relief as the bleeding ceased. But her blood pressure was still dropping; even with the fluids they were giving her. She was still slipping away. She needed a transfusion, and their only option was to draw from a live donor.

Lifting his head, Squall thrust his arm out at a passing nurse, saying, "Take my blood."

The nurse frowned, "what's your blood type?"

"AB positive." He answered.

The nurse shook her head, "She's A positive. We need someone that's A positive or A negative, O positive or O negative."

"What about me?" Irvine offered.

"What's your blood type?" The nurse asked.

"A positive." He answered.

"I'm O negative." Renn said, stepping forward. Irvine gave him a puzzled frown, then shrugged. The more donors there were, the better.

"You'll do. Over here." The nurse said, leading them off to the side to get them prepped.

Denied the chance to donate blood to Rinoa, Squall instead continued funnelling power to her. His own strength was at low ebb, but he still held firm, envisioning himself as a rock, rooted deep in the earth. He held Rinoa's spirit anchored to that rock, holding them both back from the tide that tried to draw them inexorably into a swirling whirlpool leading to oblivion.

Of all the battles he had fought in his still relatively short life, this one by far was the most important. He wasn't merely fighting for Rinoa's life, but his own as well. Even if she didn't drag him into the darkness with her, a distinct possibility, because Squall could feel its draw upon him as well; Squall couldn't envision his life without her. He couldn't think about trying to care for both of their children on his own, (and wouldn't consider any other possibility but both babies being well and healthy) trying to make his way through life, trying to survive, without her.

"Rinoa. Stay with me. Talk to me, please." He sent, eyes closed, head resting against hers. At first
glance, it appeared that Rinoa was dead and he was overcome with grief. But the monitor still beeped its steady beat, slowly, but it showed that Rinoa's heart still beat, and that she still breathed. She wasn't dead yet, and with any luck she would survive.

"Tired...babies okay?" Rinoa sent with great effort.

Squall didn't know, but he reassured her anyway, "they're ...fine." He hoped he wasn't lying. He ignored the nurses that tried to move him out of the way, stubbornly remaining where he was, cradling Rinoa in his arms.

They worked around him instead, seeing that he wouldn't be moved. A pale arm was extended; a needle inserted into the vein, rich, red blood feeding into it. With every drop, the darkness receded.

Through all that long eternity, Squall held her in his arms and in his heart, steadfastly refusing to let her go. Exhaustion dragged at him, a different kind of darkness beckoned. Not the darkness from which there was no return but the darkness of simple unconsciousness. He felt the danger pass her by, death warded off by a knight and a guardian, felt her sink into a restful sleep, and let himself go.
Renn walked slowly along the brightly lit hallway, footsteps echoing on the patterned tile floor. The hospital in Esthar City was a huge, state of the art facility. Even so, it still had an aesthetic sense to it that echoed the rest of the city. Warm gold, turquoise and blue were the main color schemes, the décor done in a manner that soothed the spirit and delighted the eye, particularly on the maternity floor.

As he walked, he wondered if he wasn't doing something incredibly foolish. Perhaps he was, but he had to see her. He needed to know she was okay. As far as Squall and the other SeeD knew, he was simply a door guard that had volunteered to donate blood to save her life. He had no intentions of disabusing them of that notion.

He swallowed back a lump, remembering how close she'd come to dying, how her husband had fought a desperate, silent battle to save her. She'd never offered anything to him but friendship, and he'd understood and accepted what she'd given him, wishing for more, yet knowing it was not to be. When he'd seen Rinoa finally reunited with her husband, had watched as they both worked together to bring their children into the world, he finally understood what Rinoa had tried to explain to him about their bond.

It was something unique to sorceress and knight, something so complete, so all encompassing, that one literally could not live without the other. Rinoa had told him that she feared that if Squall were killed, she would die too. He didn't realize that the opposite might also be true for her knight. Either way, whatever he had to offer her paled in comparison to that.

So, he was here, in this hospital, to see how she was doing, how both babies were doing, and to say good-bye to her. She would go back to her life with Squall, and Renn? Well, he'd deal with the aftermath of the debacle brought upon them all by Dr. Odine.

He was under no illusions on that score. The best he could hope for was minimal prison time, mitigated hopefully by his actions in attempting to free Rinoa and then donating blood to save her life. He'd answered all the questions the investigator had asked honestly, not trying to downplay his role at all. He wasn't high enough in the chain of command for an offer of amnesty for evidence to be considered. A presidential pardon of course would get him off the hook, but that all depended upon what President Loire himself thought about the situation and his involvement in it.

As he approached the room that he'd been told she was resting in, he noticed the tall Galbadian sniper slumped down in a chair next to the door, long legs stretched out in front of him, rifle across his lap and hat pulled down over his eyes. He looked for all intents and purposes, asleep.

Renn quickly discovered that it was either a ruse, or the man was an exceptionally light sleeper when the rifle was suddenly leveled at him and the sniper's sharp blue eyes met his.

"Now, what would a glorified security guard be wanting with my friends?" Irvine asked him coolly.

Renn swallowed. Obviously, they weren't taking any chances with either the sorceress or her husband while they were both incapacitated.

" I just… wanted to see how she was doing. I don't mean any harm to her. Or her husband." Renn answered honestly. Irvine laid the rifle down across his lap again, still keeping the business end pointed at Renn.
Folding his arms across his chest, he asked, "why?"

Renn sighed, "We got to be friends, Rinoa and I, while she was there. I… I care about her."

Irvine nodded, "I figured as much. Few people willingly go a couple pints short for a stranger. They're still out. Rinoa is anyway. Squall's fighting it but he's pretty well done in too."

"Can I see…them?" Renn asked, hesitantly.

"You can, but be careful and don't wake 'em. Especially not Squall. He's a little…twitchy … right now. Scared the hell out of a nurse just a few minutes ago when she went in to check on them. She ran out of there convinced he was going to go on a rampage." Irvine answered, chuckling.

"What happened?" Renn asked, intrigued.

"She startled him out of a sound sleep and he popped up with his gunblade ready. Took me awhile to smooth things over and calm everyone down. I keep trying to convince him that I've got things covered out here so he can go ahead and just sleep, but he's being stubborn. He's blaming himself for all of this, I know he is. I'm hoping Sis can talk some sense into him when she gets here."

Irvine answered with a sigh.

Renn frowned. This obviously wasn't the best time for a visit, but truthfully, he didn't know if he'd have another opportunity.

"Sis?" Renn asked, curiously.

"Ellone Loire. Squall's father adopted her before he was born. They both ended up at the orphanage where I and some of our other friends were and she sort of became everyone's big sister." Irvine explained.

"Oh. Well, may I?" Renn asked, gesturing toward the door.

"Be my guest. Don't say I didn't warn you." Irvine answered. Renn nodded, acknowledging Irvine's pronouncement.

Renn turned toward the door and took a deep breath, hesitating for a moment before quietly opening it and walking through.

The first thing he noticed was Squall. He'd planted himself firmly between the bed and the door, ignoring a comfortable looking couch against the far wall in favor of two chairs. His feet were propped on one chair, while he sat, or rather sagged, much like his cohort, in the other. He apparently hadn't taken the time to change clothes or anything in the few hours that he'd been there, wearing the same damp, bloodstained, battle-damaged coat that he'd shown up in. His eyes were closed, his breathing steady, his head leaning back against the chair, fatigue etched plainly upon his face.

The second thing Renn noticed was the naked gunblade resting across Squall's lap with the barrel pointed toward the door. His hand rested upon the handle, and the blade itself seemed to glow with an eerie blue light. It looked much cleaner than when Renn had last seen it. Squall had obviously taken the time to do a more thorough cleaning than simply wiping it on the hem of his coat.

Rinoa lay in the bed beyond him, pale and still, but resting easily if one went by the indications on the machines she was connected to. Her pulse, respiration and blood pressure at least seemed to be within normal parameters. Renn swallowed, blinking his blurring eyes. This was harder than he'd thought it would be.
Not for the first time, Renn wondered what it would be like to be in a relationship like theirs. To experience that total sharing of mind and heart. It could be both the most wonderful and yet the most frightening thing a person could experience all at the same time, and the fact that the couple in front of him managed it and appeared to be happy indicated a level of trust between them that few could achieve. To have someone know you so thoroughly, know all of your secrets, the good, the bad, the ugly, and still love you was nothing short of miraculous. A weaker person with that knowledge could abuse it; make the other person's life a living nightmare.

Renn took a quiet step toward them and stopped, undecided. He didn't want to invade their space, particularly as touchy as Squall was said to be, but he didn't want to simply hover in the background…

"If you're going to do something, then do it before I kill you out of sheer irritation." Squall's voice startled Renn, who only just managed not to jump. Renn stood frozen as Squall's eyes slowly opened and stared fixedly, warily, at him. The hand that rested on the gunblade shifted subtly, tightening its grip.

"What do you want?" Squall challenged.

Renn swallowed, "I wanted to see…her. To say goodbye." He stood firm, meeting Squall's cool gaze with his own, and wondered… did he know?

"She's asleep. And I'm not waking her." Squall said firmly.

Renn nodded. He wouldn't have asked him to. He'd hoped to have a moment in private with her, but he realized now that it wasn't possible.

"Are the babies okay?" Renn asked.

Apparently deciding that Renn meant no immediate harm, Squall relaxed and sighed, answering, "as well as could be expected I guess."

"Are they going to make it?" Renn pressed, worried.

Squall nodded, closing his eyes briefly, answering, "Yes."

Renn swallowed, eyes stinging, and looked away, saying softly, "I wish I could have done more. Tried harder…. something…"

"You did enough." Squall said.

Renn turned back to him, meeting his eyes again. He knew. It shouldn't have been a surprise, really. Renn figured it had to be damn near impossible to keep a secret from someone when they had the power to simply pluck it out of your mind.

Rinoa sighed and shifted in the bed, and Renn studied her for a moment. Her dark hair spilled in an unruly tangle across the pillow, her face still so pale it looked translucent. Even now she looked beautiful. But it was never just her beauty that had attracted him; it was her… who she was. He suspected her husband's heart had been captured the same way.

Finally, Renn cleared his throat and said, "I'd better go. Could you…?"

"Pass along the message? Yes." Squall said.

"Thank you." Renn said, and turned to head toward the door. He'd just grasped the handle when
Squall stopped him.

"Renn." He said, confirming to Renn that he did indeed know about his relationship with Rinoa. He wouldn't have learned Renn's name any other way but through her; he hadn't really spoken to anyone else since arriving, focusing completely on his wife.

Renn turned back, curious and just a little worried. Had the time and place been different and Squall not completely exhausted, Renn would have been more than a little worried. It's not every day you face the husband of a woman you've fallen in love with, knowing he was aware of that fact, and walk away unscathed. In that respect, Renn counted himself very lucky indeed.

Feeling his mouth suddenly go dry, Renn asked, "Yes?"

"Thank you. For helping." Squall said.

"You're welcome." Renn said, then opened the door and left.

Ellone arrived an hour later with a change of clothes and toiletries, demanding that Squall shower and shave before she'd even come near him. Out of deference to Rinoa, who was still sleeping, their argument was a largely silent one.

Squall, you're being silly. Irvine's guarding the door, and I'll stay here with Rinoa and watch over her. Now take that shower! You're chilled, tired, and won't be doing anyone any good if you don't take care of that. She sent, hands fisted on her hips and a stubborn expression on her face.

But, Sis... Squall protested, knowing he was losing the battle. She didn't boss him around often, usually because when she did, she invariably got what she wanted.

Squall, don't argue with me. Get showered and comfortable and go get some REAL sleep or I will MAKE you sleep. Ellone sent firmly.

"Okay, fine." Squall relented, taking the clothes she'd brought with him into the en-suite shower, setting aside his gunblade and removing the scabbard from his back before entering it. Once there he stripped, piling his drying but still mostly damp clothing by the door and stepped into the hot spray, mind and heart both numbed by fatigue. Ellone was right, he was pretty useless at the moment, and it was no good pretending otherwise.

Squall closed his eyes and let the hot water sluice down his body, warming him and relaxing his stiff, aching muscles. Ducking his head under the cascading water, he wet it, intending to wash it. Instead, he found himself suddenly wracked by shuddering sobs as his emotions finally caught up with him.

He put it down to physical and emotional fatigue, too tired to hold anything back any longer, too much emotion to contain. He had his wife back. His babies would eventually, hopefully, be okay and they'd all go home together. Home. He suddenly craved it desperately, though it would be days, possibly even weeks before he and Rinoa could take their children home. In the meantime, they'd stay in Esthar until the doctors gave them the all clear.

Bracing himself against the tiled wall, he tilted his face back, letting the water wash away the tears. The storm of weeping ceased, and Squall was able to continue with his shower, feeling cleansed both inside and out afterward. Finally finished, he turned off the water and grabbed a towel, drying himself and wrapping it around his waist.

Wiping the condensation off the mirror, he examined his beard. It was impressively thick, and
Squall puzzled over how he might go about shaving it off, not seeing any shaving supplies immediately to hand. Searching through the things that Ellone had brought, he found a razor and some shaving cream. Taking the items, he set to work.

Several minutes later he emerged shaved and dressed in the t-shirt and jeans that Ellone had brought him.

"Now there's the brother I know and love. Come here." Ellone said standing up from the chair she'd been sitting in and opening her arms. He walked into her arms and hugged her close.

"Thank you," he whispered, closing his eyes and resting his cheek against her head. They simply held each other then, Ellone rubbing her hand up and down his back.

Finally, Ellone whispered, "Why don't you go lay down and get some sleep? I'll stay here with you guys."

Squall pulled back and kissed her cheek, saying, "All right." Then he walked over to the bed and gently stroked a lock of hair away from Rinoa's forehead. He bent down and kissed it gently, caressing her cheek, then went over to the couch and lay down.

It actually was very comfortable, and some thoughtful someone, a nurse probably, had even left a pillow and light blanket. Squall stretched out, scrunching the pillow under his head and closed his eyes, sighing. The fatigue that Squall had been fighting for the past several hours pressed him into the couch, and he finally relaxed and allowed sleep to claim him.

Ellone went over to the couch and shook out the blanket, draping it over Squall and pulling it up over his shoulders. Touching his forehead lightly, she brushed a lock of hair away, much as he had done with Rinoa, and gently nudged him into a deeper sleep. Satisfied that he would be dead to the world for the next several hours while he took the much-needed rest, she returned to the chair next to Rinoa's bed and watched them both sleep.

A gentle hand woke Rinoa from a sound sleep and she struggled from its grip to blink blearily up at the nurse who'd awakened her.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Leonhart, but we need to see if your milk's come in. The babies need the colostrum. We've been feeding them formula while you were resting, but they would benefit more from your milk." The nurse said softly, offering her hand to help Rinoa sit up.

Yawning, she looked around the dimly lit room, smiling as she noticed Squall sleeping soundly on the couch. He'd apparently showered and shaved, and she sighed at seeing the face she loved so much once again.

"He certainly does clean up nicely, doesn't he?" The nurse commented with a smile as she helped Rinoa adjust the hospital gown and attach the breast pump. Rinoa hissed as the machine started drawing at her sensitive flesh. An odd tingling started in the breast, and fluid began flowing into the attached receptacle.

"He does…Oh!" Rinoa exclaimed softly as the other breast began tingling, then fluid began leaking from it.

"Here." The nurse handed her a cloth, telling her, "Put pressure on it. That should help. We're almost done with this one." Once finished, the nurse switched the pump to the other breast, which had begun aching. It was a relief for the pump to start drawing the milk from it, easing the
pressure.

When they were done, the nurse capped the bottle with the resulting liquid in it, holding it up to the light and taking note of the amount. She appeared satisfied, though Rinoa thought it was a pitifully small result for so much time spent obtaining it, and felt both disappointed and worried.

"Is…is that going to be enough for both of them?" Rinoa asked.

"This should be more than adequate for both. We might even get two feedings out of it for each." The nurse said, packing up the pump and supplies that it came with.

"But it's so little…" Rinoa said, biting her lip.

"So are your babies. Don't worry; your body will adjust the volume of milk to their needs. So long as you either nurse or express the milk on a regular basis, you shouldn't have to worry about not having enough." The nurse reassured her.

"Oh. When can I see them? Are they both doing okay?" Rinoa asked.

"We'll have to check with the pediatrician. If he says its okay, you and your husband should be able to see the babies tomorrow. They're both very fragile right now, your daughter especially. But this more than anything else will help them grow stronger." The nurse answered, holding the bottle up again before putting it back into the kit she'd brought with her.

"I need to get this down to them. Why don't you try and get some more sleep?" the nurse suggested then added, "We'll need to do this again in another couple of hours." while helping her to readjust her gown again. Rinoa nodded and lay back down and the nurse left.

She sighed and shifted, noticing a shadowy form slumped in the chair next to the bed. She reached out with her mind and discovered that it was Ellone, asleep in the chair. Rinoa smiled, glad to see her and yawned again, closing her eyes.

She was hovering on the edge of sleep again when Squall brushed the surface of her mind lightly. She felt his wordless longing to be with her, and she sent a loving welcome. The bed was almost too small but they were used to the single bunk in Squall's quarters at Balamb Garden; so they managed, snuggling close together.

Squall slipped his arms around her and pulled her close, burying his face in her hair, breathing her scent and reveling in it.

"I need a shower." Rinoa sent.

"I don't care." Squall responded. The scents left behind by the sweat that had dried on her body, the blood and birthing fluids she'd lost, and the essence that was uniquely hers, were not offensive to him. Instead, they were comforting. She was in his arms again, and he was home.

Rinoa for her part simply crossed her arms over his and sighed, happy beyond measure to have them wrapped around her once again.

"I've missed this. Missed you." Rinoa sent, letting him feel her joy.

"Me too." Squall responded in kind, kissing her softly on the back of her neck. Sighing, then smiling as Rinoa shivered at the feel of his warm breath at the nape of her neck, Squall closed his eyes again, slipping back into sleep easily. Rinoa smiled too as she felt him relax, then closed her eyes and joined him in slumber.
Two hours later, the nurse who came to wake Rinoa to obtain more milk for the babies was treated to a touching sight. The young mother in the bed lay snuggled in the arms of her handsome husband. The nurse smiled at the sweetly romantic sight wishing she didn't have to wake the girl so soon.

The other occupant in the room, the husband's sister, yawned and stretched on the chair she'd been sitting, and sleeping in.

"Hi there." She greeted the nurse quietly.

"Hi. I hope you don't mind, but we need some more milk for the babies." The nurse said, crossing the room to wake Rinoa.

"I don't mind at all." Ellone smiled, getting up and disappearing into the bathroom briefly.

The nurse touched the young woman's arm, gently waking her. When she stirred, yawning and stretching, her movements apparently woke her husband. He took a deep breath and slowly opened his eyes. The nurse smiled reassuringly at him, appreciating how truly beautiful his eyes were. Framed by dark lashes a woman would kill for, they were a clear, warm blue with hints of green. Stunning. And fortunately, this morning, they were calm and serene.

A shower and a good, long rest had not only improved his appearance but taken the edge off of his temperament as well. The nurse remembered when they'd arrived there, both either asleep or unconscious, with the young man literally curled protectively around his wife.

His attitude then had bordered on dangerous when they'd had to separate the two of them briefly in order to examine the young mother. The doctor had taken one look at the fearsome weapon her husband still had strapped to his back and thought better of trying to examine him, instead diagnosing exhaustion and stress and calmly advising him to get some sleep.

He'd tried, but apparently was still feeling a little threatened. Understandable, when the full story had been revealed to the hospital staff. Obviously the arrival of his sister had calmed him enough that he was able to get some deep, restorative sleep.

He shifted to allow his wife to sit up and watched the entire process with interest. He didn't ask any questions or make any comments; he just remained silent while watching them. The nurse was rather grateful for that. Certainly the young mother was more at ease with him there; the milk let down much more quickly than it had the first time they'd expressed.

When they'd finished and the young woman's gown had been readjusted, the nurse asked her, "How are you feeling today Mrs. Leonhart?"

"Much better. A little sore and stiff in places…and very hungry, but otherwise fine." Rinoa answered.

"Well, the doctor will be up a little later to check on you. If he gives the okay, we can get that IV and catheter out of you and let you get up and around." The nurse smiled at Rinoa.

Rinoa sighed with relief, saying, "Great! I'm dying for a shower."

"You should be okay to take one after the doctor's had a look at you. Let me get this down to the babies." The nurse said.
"Are they doing okay?" Rinoa asked, worry plain in her expression. Her husband's expression was more guarded, but his attitude echoed hers.

The nurse sighed. The infants, mere hours old, were still so fragile it was impossible to predict their outcome. And she wasn't a neonatal nurse or a pediatrician, so couldn't give the young couple an accurate assessment of the condition of their babies. She didn't want to give them false hope, or needlessly give them cause to despair.

When they'd arrived, the young mother herself had been close to critical, and the only reason she had survived at all was largely due to two young men who'd generously donated blood on her behalf. One of the men, a close friend of the husband's, had also claimed that the husband had managed to heal his wife, saving her life. That was difficult for the nurse to believe, but given the fact that both young men were SeeDs, she supposed it might be true. She'd heard that they were capable of amazing things.

But while the girl had been recovering, the pediatrician had not been able to speak with her or her husband regarding their twins, and the nurse wasn't sure how much to tell them. Not that there was anything bad to report, but again… she didn't want to provide false hope. Things could take a turn literally in a heartbeat.

Still… "Well, they're holding their own, and feeding well. Your milk is doing them a world of good Rinoa. Beyond that, I really can't say. But the pediatrician will give you more information now that you're up and alert." The nurse answered. They both nodded, sighing, and the nurse left to continue on her rounds.

As she closed the door behind her, she noticed that the lanky Galbadian SeeD that had been guarding the door was absent. Perhaps sent home to rest. She hoped so, though she missed his good humor and flirtatious smile.

Continuing down the hallway toward the lift, she wondered if all SeeDs were as attractive as those two young men, and if so, where she could find one.

"Ugh. I feel like a cow." Rinoa groused after the nurse had left.

"You don't look like one." Squall observed. The process of expressing milk to feed their children had been fascinating. The books he had read had prepared him for the fact that nature had provided a means for Rinoa to feed their babies. And Rinoa had told him she intended to breastfeed. But it was still decidedly odd for him to see his wife's breasts put to the use that nature intended…. sort of. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"They've certainly been milking me like one." Rinoa frowned. Ellone laughed slightly.

"Well Rinoa, when the babies are strong enough, they'll let you nurse them, so you shouldn't have to be 'milked' quite so much." Ellone said.

Turning to Squall, Ellone added, "Squall, I told Irvine to go to your place here to crash. He was almost as exhausted as you and he needed a break."

"Okay." Squall nodded, then added, "could you do me a favor Elle and see if you can find some clothes that Rinoa can wear?"

Rinoa chimed in, "Just a robe, a nightgown and underclothes for now, Ellone. I don't think I left anything here that'll fit me."
"All right. I'm going to go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat. Want to join me Squall?"
Ellone invited.

Squall shook his head, answering, "later. I want to wait here to see what Rinoa's doctor says about
how she and the babies are doing."

Ellone nodded and said, "okay. I'll be back later guys." She leaned over and gave Squall a kiss on
the cheek, then squeezed Rinoa's hand and left.

After she left, Squall stretched and carefully extricated himself from the bed, needing to answer
nature's call. The hospital bed really was too narrow for the two of them, but cuddled close
together, they had just fit. It left little room for movement however, and Squall had grown stiff.

Once he'd taken care of that, he returned to Rinoa's bed, seating himself on one of the chairs next to
it and taking her hand. Kissing it, he leaned his cheek into the palm, releasing her hand and
allowing Rinoa to caress his face, then his hair, closing his eyes.

"I like you better without the beard." Rinoa commented.

Squall smiled slightly, "I didn't much care for it myself. It itched and provided me with a rather
annoying alias."

"An alias?" Rinoa asked, intrigued.

"Yeah. We had to let everyone believe that Squall Leonhart was still in Balamb, so I couldn't use
my real name, any more than Irvine could. So I decided to grow the beard, figuring that it would
make me harder to recognize. Irvine came up with our alter egos: Richard Head for him, and
because of the color of my beard, Rusty Knight." Squall explained.

Rinoa started laughing, "Rusty Knight? I can't see you as a 'Rusty'."

"Irvine said it was because my beard had grown in red." Squall said, shrugging.

"Well, it was a very nice color. But I like seeing your face better." Rinoa said. Squall smiled
briefly, then threaded his fingers through hers.

Frowning slightly down at their joined hands he said softly, "Your…. friend…. came by, asking
about you."

"Friend?" Rinoa asked, puzzled at first.

"Renn." Squall said. It didn't surprise Rinoa that he knew. They'd linked so tightly, shared so
deeply while she was in labor that he would have learned of their relationship. Not that she had
anything to hide anyway.

"What did he want?" Rinoa asked.

"He just wanted to see how you and the babies were doing…. and he wanted to say goodbye." Squall answered.

Rinoa squeezed his hand, sensing his emotions, and sent privately, "You're upset."

"Of course I am. But not at you. Never at you. You didn't choose to be placed in that position, and
at least he was there to give you comfort when I couldn't. I don't even really hate the guy; he
seemed a fairly decent fellow despite his involvement in your kidnapping." Squall sent, but his
feelings showed plainly that he was less than happy, particularly about the fact that the man had kissed his wife.

"If you saw my memory of that kiss, you know how I felt about it." Rinoa sent him.

"Yes. I know." Squall responded. He'd seen her memory of that moment, experienced what she'd felt as Renn had kissed her. While frightened and emotionally stressed, desperately seeking comfort, she had been surprised by Renn's kiss. And chief among the swirl of thoughts and emotions that had accompanied it was her longing for him.

"I guess my biggest problem is the fact that I know I'm not perfect. I love you with all my heart and I do my best to make you feel that, let you know how much you mean to me. But... I make mistakes, forget things, and sometimes get too focused on other stuff so, yeah, I'm jealous. Jealous that he'd been there for you instead of me. And... I guess, I'm maybe a little worried that you'll decide he's... better." Squall sent hesitantly.

A flood of love from Rinoa reassured him, and she sent, "Never."

"Did you say anything to him?" she asked.

"Not really. You were still sleeping and I didn't want to wake you. But I let him know you were going to be okay, and the babies likely would as well. It seemed...important to him. And... I thanked him." Squall answered.

Rinoa smiled at him then. For someone who had little experience with matters of the heart, Squall was handling this far better than she'd thought he would. It was quite a different feeling for her, since Squall was in the public eye far more than she was, he got a lot of attention from female admirers. Mostly, they irritated him, so Rinoa never had to worry about anything happening, but sometimes it bothered her nevertheless.

Now suddenly Squall was faced with a similar situation, and Rinoa could tell it left him a little off balance and insecure. Even though Rinoa had been involved briefly with Seifer before she'd met Squall, that had ended and the rivalry between the two young men had never really been about her. Quite simply, Squall had never had to deal with a possible romantic rival. In light of that, it was somewhat surprising that he would be so...gracious about it.

"You thanked him? Why?" Rinoa asked, puzzled.

"He helped you. Comforted you, kept you sane, and in the end, he helped to save your life. I healed the wound that nearly killed you, but I couldn't replace the blood that you'd lost. I was losing you anyway, despite my best efforts. It took four pints of blood to stabilize you. Two each from Irvine and Renn. If they hadn't done that, you'd have died." Squall answered softly.

Rinoa swallowed, eyes starting to tear, and whispered, "I only remember being really, really tired.... and you telling me to stay with you. You held me back...held me here, didn't you?"

Squall nodded. He felt her need to be held and stood, leaning over the bed to wrap his arms around her.

"My greatest fear was and IS, losing you. I couldn't let you go. But I couldn't save you on my own, either. Whatever Renn may have done in the past, he's made up for it by helping you, at least in my mind. He didn't have to do that. He didn't have to care about you or our babies." He thought, stroking her hair.

"You never had anything to worry about Squall. While I may have come to care for him, even love
him in a sense, my heart always has been and always will be yours. I can't help that he fell in love
with me, but I can't regret that it motivated him to help me." Rinoa responded.

Gazing into her eyes, Squall sent, "I'm glad that he did, but that doesn't mean we're going to go out
and have a beer together, mind you. I may be grateful that he helped, but not THAT grateful. I've
never been good with sharing."

"You don't need to worry. I'm all yours, Mr. Leonhart." Rinoa sent with a smile.

"Likewise, Mrs. Leonhart." Squall responded, lowering his lips to hers and capturing them in an
ardent kiss. His intent was to kiss her so thoroughly, so completely, that she forgot Renn's kiss,
remembering only him. So he poured his heart, his soul, everything he felt for her into that kiss,
branding her lips with his, imprinting it into her mind.

Rinoa took what he gave her and held him close, responding in kind. The passion was there, it was
always there; but banked and set aside for the time being. They both knew that the time and the
place simply wouldn't allow for anything more than a kiss. It didn't dampen Squall's desire, despite
his knowledge that anything of a more intimate nature wouldn't be possible for quite some time.

Just having her in his arms, tasting her lips and breathing in her warm scent was enough for him.
After two weeks without her, just having her back was all he wanted, all he needed. The rest could
wait.

Someone cleared their throat loudly, and said, "Commander And Mrs. Leonhart, I hate to interrupt,
but I think this might be a good time to discuss a few things with the two of you."

Squall and Rinoa reluctantly separated and directed their attention to the person who spoke, after
trading a pink-cheeked, sheepish smile with each other. The white coat and stethoscope identified
him as a physician.

"I'm Dr. Geitz, and I'm here to check on your wife and see how she's doing." The doctor said,
stepping forward and offering his hand. Squall took it and shook it firmly, then reclaimed Rinoa's
hand, half sitting, and half leaning against the edge of the bed.

A nurse entered with various supplies, and the doctor added, "Now commander, you're welcome to
stay if you're both comfortable with that. If not, then this may be a good opportunity to get
something to eat. Even tough-as-nails SeeDs need to eat sometime." He grinned briefly at Squall
who smiled slightly back.

Rinoa squeezed his hand and let him know she wanted him there, so Squall told the doctor, "I'll
stay." He didn't watch the examination however, instead focusing his attention on Rinoa. Despite
his willingness to be there to support her, he did find the process a little disconcerting.

"Well, that's interesting," the doctor commented, "no bleeding. Both placentas were delivered
intact?"

"Yes." Squall answered.

The doctor frowned then, saying, "When you both were brought in, the only information that I got
was that your wife had encountered difficulties and had hemorrhaged, losing quite a bit of blood.
Your friends had donated just enough to save her, but no one told me how they'd gotten the
bleeding to stop or to what extent. Apparently, they managed to stop it completely."

"I healed her." Squall said.
"You? How?" the doctor asked.

"SeeDs use magic in battle. Some of the spells we use are for healing and support." Squall explained briefly.

"So, you were stocked with these spells and were able to employ one." The doctor said. Squall nodded.

"Well, that's one less worry, I suppose. No need to watch for overly heavy postpartum bleeding in that case. No tears or sutures, nothing to worry about getting wet, so a bath or shower won't be a problem for you Mrs. Leonhart, provided you feel strong enough to manage it." the doctor said.

"I'm sure I can. I feel pretty good right now." Rinoa said.

"Well, that's good to hear, but I do want you to take it easy and get plenty of rest. And I might not need to say this, considering that you were actually present at the birth commander, but you may want to…curtail…. your amorous activities for awhile." the doctor advised.

"I'm aware." Squall said dryly.

"Not all amorous activities, I hope." Rinoa said.

"Well, no. Aside from actual intercourse, anything you're comfortable with is fine, so long as you use common sense. But I do suggest you at least make sure you're rested." The doctor said, biting back a smile at the SeeD's reaction. Had the young man actually blushed?

Taking his gloves off, he said, "Since you look like you're ready to be mobile and I don't see any reason to keep you tied to the bed any longer, I'll go ahead and have the nurse remove the IV and catheter. If you feel up to eating something, just ring the nurse and let her know, otherwise you can take a shower if you'd like."

"All right." Rinoa said.

"Well, you two have a great morning, and if you need anything or have any questions, let me know." the doctor said, shaking Squall's hand, then Rinoa's, before leaving.

The nurse took care of the tubes and wires connected to Rinoa, leaving her with only a bandage on the hand that the IV had been connected to.

After she left, Squall asked, "Are you going to take a shower?"

"Yes. I hope Ellone gets back soon, I really don't want to put this thing back on." Rinoa said with a grimace, twitching the hospital gown she wore.

"Do you want me to stay here?" Squall asked her.

"No." she shook her head, "if you want to get something to eat, go ahead. I know you're starving right now."

When he hesitated, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just want to wait until I'm sure you can manage the shower on your own, that's all." He answered.

"Okay." Rinoa said, and taking a deep breath, drew the bed-covers back and swung her legs over the edge of her bed. Squall stood next to the bed; watching closely, ready to help if she needed it.
Standing carefully, she swayed and Squall gently steadied her, saying, "Maybe this should wait."

"I can do this! Just give me a minute." Rinoa said, and then took a deep breath. She still felt a little lightheaded but firmed up her knees and took a step. When she remained steady, she took another step. The lightheaded feeling persisted, but it faded gradually as she continued toward the bathroom. Squall continued to hold her elbow lightly, and they both crossed the room slowly, until they were at the door that opened into the bathroom.

Rinoa took stock then, and while she felt both tired and sore, it felt good to be up and out of that damned bed, so she soldiered on. She thought she might have just enough energy in her to manage the shower, but not much else.

"Don't push yourself honey," Squall sent, concerned. She opened the door and went through, shutting it firmly in his face.

Squall lingered though, unwilling to leave Rinoa alone, until she sent an exasperated, "Squall, stop hovering and go eat already. I'll be fine." The he heard the water come on and sighed.

As he turned and reluctantly made his way toward the door he sent, "Elle should be along soon with some clothes. And there's like this...thing...there, if you need the nurse you just pull it, I guess. And..."

"Squall?" Rinoa sent, both amused and annoyed.

"What?" He asked, pausing and looking toward the door, unable to hide his sudden anxiety.

"GO!" She sent forcefully, prompting Squall to cringe slightly.

"Ow. Okay! Okay, I'm going." he sent, exiting the room and heading toward the cafeteria.

As he did, he checked his watch, frowning at what he saw there. He remembered showering after Ellone had arrived...was it just yesterday? He didn't know. He had no idea how long Rinoa had been in labor, how long it had taken them to get here, how long he'd been either unconscious or asleep. He'd lost all sense of time. He knew once things got more or less back to normal though, he'd regain his bearings. At the moment however, he felt adrift. In safer waters perhaps than before, but still...adrift.

He rubbed at his cheeks as he stepped into the lift, finding them roughened by stubble once again. He'd obviously been asleep for more than a few hours. Despite that, he still felt tired, drained, and very hungry. Well, the trip to the cafeteria was his first step in the process of restoring those resources he'd used up over the last several hours. Stepping off the lift, he followed the posted directions to the cafeteria, entering it.

The smell of coffee brewing and food cooking sharpened his hunger, though he was glad that the "Griever effect" had faded long since and his senses had returned to their normal state. Otherwise the scent of the coffee would have been overwhelming to him.

Now however, it was comforting in its prosaic normality. He got himself a cup and made his food selections from what was available, not caring overmuch what it was, as long as it was edible. Despite it being hospital food, it wasn't terrible, and Squall was so hungry it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Sipping at his coffee, he sighed. It felt like a hundred years had passed since his last cup of coffee, the last time he'd eaten. Everything felt different. He felt different. The only thing that didn't was the feel of Rinoa in his arms; the taste of her when he kissed her, the smell and texture of her
hair…*that* was the same. But everything else… he felt like he'd just returned from a long journey to a distant land to find everything that should be familiar to him suddenly alien. Or, like Balamb….*gone.*

He knew at least part of that stemmed from the fact that he'd been in battle-readiness for so long that he was having a difficult time coming down from that. He sincerely regretted the incident with the nurse. Fortunately, he came to himself before he actually hurt her. Irvine had helped too; had helped Squall to focus and find his bearings and had helped the nurse to calm down and understand Squall's reactions.

A good, deep sleep had also helped. Squall suspected Ellone had assisted with that, because he wouldn't normally have gone that far under, not as stressed and…. nervy…. as he'd still been. It was a relief to him however to be able to take a step back from the edge he'd been on and to finally begin to relax, even if only a little bit.

A burst of joy from the back of his mind prompted Squall to smile slightly and ask Rinoa, "*Shower go well?*” He'd been paying attention to her as she'd showered, but only passively, and had caught her disappointed feelings about the current state of her body along with how good it felt to be clean. He resolved to talk to her about that when the opportunity presented itself.

"*Ellone's back…and Laguna's here too, anxious to see the babies. They both are. I've had to disappoint them by telling them that the pediatrician has to give the go ahead and he hasn't even let US see them yet.*" Rinoa answered.

"*Has he been by yet?*” Squall asked.

"No. Not yet. I told Laguna where you were, he's on his way down." Rinoa told him. Squall thanked her silently and she sent him a mental caress.

Squall waited, sipping at his coffee, empty plate pushed aside. He gazed around the cafeteria, studying the décor, which was attractive, understated, soothing; the occupants, mostly doctors, nurses, other employees and visitors. One wall was almost entirely glass, showing off a spectacular view of Esthar City, glittering in the bright morning sunlight.

Laguna caught him staring pensively out of the window, apparently deep in thought. He was happier than he could ever express to see Rinoa alive and looking so well after the harrowing ordeal she'd endured while bringing his grandchildren into the world. *His grandchildren*. Out of deference to their current surroundings, Laguna tempered his enthusiasm, though inside he was dancing, singing and doing all sorts of silly things guaranteed to terminally embarrass his son. But he couldn't help but give in to the temptation to embarrass Squall just a little.

"*Poppa Laguna's in the house!*" He crowed happily, laughing as Squall rolled his eyes and sighed.

"*Poppa Laguna? Seriously?*” Squall asked, grimacing.

"Hey, I'm still too young and studly to be *Grandpa* Laguna!" he grinned, winking at a nearby nurse who smiled back at him.

"You sound like a two-bit dictator. Would you sit down, please?" Squall said, shaking his head.

"Well," Laguna said conspiratorially, "according to some folks, I *am* a two-bit dictator."

"So? Retire then." Squall said, shrugging indifferently. Laguna sighed. Squall was obviously not in the mood for his silliness.
Sitting down across from Squall, Laguna sobered and said, "I wish I could son. I really do."

"Caraway managed it." Squall said.

"Caraway had only been in power for a few years, and never intended to stay for that long. Me on the other hand, I've been President for over two decades. Much as I would love to get these people used to the idea of voting for their next head of state, its still an uphill battle. Trust me son, I don't want to die in office. I actually do want to retire and take my life back, just like Caraway did. Be able spend time with my grandkids and to spoil them silly, if I'm so inclined." Laguna said.

"Regime change is never easy, even if it's a peaceful one." Squall commented.

"No, it isn't." Laguna replied, and then he asked Squall, "How are you feeling son? You still look a little tired."

"Better. More rested, thanks to Sis." He answered.

"I notice the beard is gone." Laguna commented.

Rubbing at his stubble, Squall grimaced, "Yeah, but I need to shave again."

"The girls didn't like it." Laguna stated.

Squall shook his head, "no more than I did. Elle pretty much demanded I shower and shave before she'd even come near me. Rinoa told me she liked my face better than the beard. She almost didn't recognize me when she first saw me with it."

"No news yet on the babies, at least that's what Rinoa tells me." Laguna said.

"Well, the nurses are being very circumspect, but they come to collect milk from Rinoa on a regular basis for the babies, so I figure they wouldn't be doing that if something were really wrong. If there was anything to worry about, I'm sure they would have told us as soon as we were conscious enough to understand it." Squall said. He hoped so, anyway.

"Well, you two haven't been up and conscious yourselves for very long either. I have to confess something Squall. When I saw you two both out like that…for a second I thought you were both dead. When Irvine told me that Rinoa had nearly died, and you had nearly gone with her, I couldn't believe it." Laguna swallowed and blinked away tears as he added roughly, "just like Raine. Almost exactly like Raine. But you were there for your wife, and I wasn't for mine. I can't help but wonder… would I have made as much of a difference to her as you did to Rinoa?"

Closing his eyes in anguish, he whispered, "would I have been able to save her too?"

"Dad. Stop." Squall said. He didn't want Laguna beating himself up over something so long in the past.

"I'm sorry son. It's been an emotional couple of days for me." Laguna said, taking a deep breath.

Reaching out, he gripped Squall's hand tightly, saying, "all that matters now son is the fact that you were there, and you did save her. And I'm so glad you did…"

"But that's just it dad, I didn't save her. Not by myself, anyway. I held onto her as hard as I could, I healed her and stopped the bleeding, but she'd already lost too much blood. She was slipping away from me, and all I could do was to hold her with all my strength for as long as I could… and then go with her when my strength gave out. She made it because Irvine and Renn volunteered to donate
blood to save her life." Squall explained.

"But she *did* make it. And so will your babies, I know they will. And that's all that really matters." Laguna said.

Squall nodded, agreeing with him.

"*Squall, the pediatrician's going to be here in a few minutes... could you and Poppa Laguna come up here please?*" Rinoa sent.

"*You too Rin?*" Squall asked, exasperated.

"*I think it's cute. Laguna's just adorable when he's excited like this. He's going to be a wonderful grandfather.*" Rinoa sent, adding her memories of Laguna's uninhibited, childlike joy at seeing her awake and bright-eyed, and learning that his grandchildren seemed to be doing well.

"*It's ridiculous.*" Squall groused.

"*You'll get used to it.*" Rinoa sent, amused.

Noticing Squall's momentary distraction, Laguna asked, "Rinoa?"

Squall nodded, "*the pediatrician's on his way to her room. She wants us there too.*"

And just like that, Laguna's excitement returned and he bounced to his feet, saying, "*Great! Let's go son!*" Squall set his coffee cup down and got to his feet, following Laguna out of the cafeteria.

As they walked down the hallway, Laguna gave him a conspiratorial grin and challenged, "*Race you to the lift!*" Then, to Squall's surprise, took off running.

"Are you kidding me? Laguna...Dad! Are you *insane*?" Glancing quickly up and down the hallway and finding it clear, he loped after Laguna with an exasperated growl.

He quickly caught up with Laguna, who was waiting on the lift looking as innocent as if he hadn't just gone tearing down the hallway at a dead run.

"*Slowpoke.*" Laguna grinned at him.

Squall rolled his eyes, and said, "*Grow up.*"

Laguna's grin got wider and he retorted, "*Not if I can help it.*" Squall sighed. Fortunately, the lift chose that moment to arrive. As he and Laguna boarded, he couldn't help but feel his spirits lifting right along with the elevator car.
Squall and Rinoa stood close together in front of the two isolettes that contained their twins. The nurse had cautioned them both to wash their hands thoroughly and don masks as preventative measures, which they did without demur. The doctor had prepared them earlier for what they'd see once they got there, but still, seeing all the tubes and wires hooked up to their babies was… frightening.

Squall slipped his arm around Rinoa's waist and pulled her close, leaning his head against hers as they watched their children breathe.

"Thirty-four weeks is not a bad number for these little ones. For preemies, they're actually pretty good size." The nurse commented reassuringly.

"Really?" Rinoa asked hopefully.

"Yes, we've had them come in at two pounds and still manage to pull through. Obviously, the smaller they are the tougher it is for them, but these little guys of yours actually have a pretty good chance." The nurse smiled at them.

Squall nodded but remained silent. The doctor had explained that while both babies had a good chance of survival, they were both still in a fragile state, so would require support until they grew stronger. Saber mostly needed just monitoring and feeding, and a little help with breathing, but the doctor had said he was progressing well so far. Julia, the smaller of the twins at fewer than four pounds, needed pretty much the same thing but a little more aggressively than her brother. As a result, she had far more tubes and wires connected to her than Saber. The doctor had explained the breathing support was mainly to prevent neonatal apnea. The thought that either of his babies might simply stop breathing had stirred a gut-deep fear in Squall, and he was immensely grateful for the support that would prevent that.

"The first twenty four hours are the most important. Getting mum's milk into them as soon as possible certainly helps. For right now, we're keeping a close eye on them. So far their biggest challenge is temperature regulation and breathing. So that's why they've got the tubes in them." The nurse explained.

"Can I…touch them? Please?" Rinoa asked wistfully.

"Yes, but gently. Depending on how things go, we'll let you guys hold them and get you started actually breastfeeding instead of expressing milk for them." The nurse answered.

Biting her lip, Rinoa reached out then with a finger and lightly stroked Saber's cheek, marveling at how soft and delicate the skin was. Both of his little hands were balled up into fists, but when she touched the back of one lightly, it opened like a tiny flower. Smiling gently, she put her index finger into his palm and his fingers immediately curled around it, grasping it. Her eyes stung at the strength with which he gripped her finger. She could still feel his tiny mind, his unformed thoughts, even though he was now separate from her. She felt his recognition of her, and she sent him her love, letting him know mommy was there.

Squall, after glancing inquiringly at the nurse and getting an encouraging nod and a smile from her, stepped closer to Julia's bassinet and peered closely at her. Neither infant was red or covered in goo anymore, having been washed clean and dressed in diapers and tiny knit caps; pink for Julia, blue for Saber. They looked like perfectly normal, if very small, newborn babies. They looked….
Greatly daring, he reached his hand down into the bassinet and let his daughter's tiny hand wrap itself around his finger, gripping it instinctively, squeezing with surprising strength, considering her fragility. Reaching straight through to his heart and squeezing it as well. He swallowed convulsively, seeing the relative size of the baby compared to the size of his hand. She was only half again as big…. if he picked her up right now, she'd just fit into both cupped hands. Experimentally, he gently disengaged his finger from Julia's grip and cupped both hands together, just above her. He was right. She would just fit.

He sensed her recognition of him, and unbidden, his lips curled into a smile and he whispered, "Hi, baby. It's your daddy." She moved slightly and made a quiet, muffled noise.

"Now that you've both rested, we want you down here as often as possible. Not only to bond with them but to also get used to caring for them, and of course, so Rinoa can get the hang of breastfeeding them, if you intend to continue that." The nurse said quietly, charmed by the young father's fascination with his baby daughter.

"Yes, I do." Rinoa said.

"Good. That's the best thing for them." The nurse said approvingly, then she added, "I nearly forgot to ask you… What do intend to name them? We can put their names on their cards."

Squall exchanged a glance with Rinoa and answered, "Julia Raine for the girl, and Saber for the boy."

The nurse got two new cards out, a pink one and a blue one, and put the children's names on them, asking, "no middle name for the boy?"

Squall shook his head, answering, "no."

"There we go. Now we know what to call them." The nurse smiled as she slipped the cards in the appropriate holders on the bassinets.

Squall studied the card that had been slipped into Julia's bassinet, reading it: Julia Raine Leonhart. Female, three pounds, ten ounces, fourteen inches. So tiny… He thought. Turning his attention to Saber's bassinet, he read that card as well: Saber Leonhart, male, four pounds, three ounces, fifteen inches.

"Should we make a birth announcement? You know Laguna's dying to shout it from the rooftops." Rinoa sent privately.

"I'm surprised he hasn't already." Squall responded.

"He was tempted, but he told me he reconsidered. He didn't want to steal your thunder." Rinoa replied.

"We'll make an announcement, but not yet. Maybe when we're ready to take them home." Squall told her.

"Okay." Rinoa said, leaning into him briefly.

They lingered, watching the nurses care for the babies, watching their breathing, their tiny, sporadic movements as their diapers were carefully changed. They were encouraged to stay, and stay they did, long enough that Rinoa was able to provide another meal for the babies without the
nurses having to fetch it from her.

Eventually, they had to leave, though they were encouraged to return after they'd each had a bit of a rest. The babies too, needed to sleep, although to Squall, it seemed as though that was all that they did. They returned to Rinoa's room and to Laguna, who was waiting impatiently for them.

"You two were gone so long I was beginning to worry. How are they doing?" Laguna asked, anxiously. He'd been terribly disappointed that he wasn't allowed to see the babies yet. The hospital had restricted visitors to just Squall and Rinoa for the moment, at least until the babies were stronger. He knew the reasons behind it and understood, but that didn't stop him from wanting desperately to see them for himself.

Squall shrugged, "they seem to be holding their own. According to the nurse, they're getting stronger by the moment. They're feeding well, anyway."

"So? Stats?" Laguna prompted.

Squall exchanged a glance with Rinoa and answered, "Saber's four pounds, three ounces and fifteen inches. Julia's three pounds, ten ounces and fourteen inches."

Laguna stared at them in shock. When they'd been picked up at Odine's facility, the babies had already been in warmed bassinets and the emergency medics that he'd brought along had taken charge of them so quickly he hadn't gotten a look at them and had no idea of how small they were.

"My God. So tiny…" Laguna said, swallowing.

Squall nodded, and the corner of his mouth quirked upward in a half-smile as he held his cupped hands together, saying, "They haven't let us hold them yet, but Julia…if I cup my hands like this, she'd just fit in them. Saber's a little bigger, but not by much."

Laguna smiled in response to the wistful expression he saw on his son's face, saying, "You've fallen in love with her already, haven't you?"

"Both of them." Squall nodded. He didn't bother trying to explain to his father that he'd fallen in love with his children the first time he touched their minds before they were even born.

Rinoa smiled at them, and then yawned suddenly. While she had rested well and was recovering from her labors, she hadn't yet regained all of her strength and found that she tired easily as a result.

"I'm sorry guys but I'm feeling the need for a nap. Since the kids are sacked out in the NICU, I might as well do the same." Rinoa said, climbing back into the bed. Squall helped arrange the pillows for her and she lay back, closing her eyes, fatigue crashing down upon her. She drifted off to sleep with Squall caressing her hair lightly.

Before she let sleep take her however, Rinoa sent to Squall, "What do you plan on doing while I'm napping?"

"Besides watching you sleep? I don't know. Go to our apartment here, take a shower, check in with Irvine and Zell maybe?" Squall sent with a mental shrug.

"Not a bad idea. Say 'hi' to Selphie and Quisty for me if you happen to talk to them." Rinoa said, then sighed and slipped into sleep before Squall could respond.

Bending down, he kissed her forehead softly and caressed her cheek before reluctantly leaving her side and gesturing for Laguna to follow him out of the room.
"I think she pushed it a little bit today." Squall commented, glancing toward the door.

"She's going to be okay, right?" Laguna asked, worried.

"Yeah, she just needs rest." Squall answered. He hesitated, torn. He didn't want to leave her alone, but knew she was in good hands at the hospital. She was no longer in any danger, but Squall still found it hard to trust in these strangers that they were currently among.

"What are you going to do now?" Laguna asked him.

"I don't know. Go to our apartment here maybe? Shower, shave, check in with Irvine and Zell and everyone...." Squall answered vaguely, shrugging.

"You don't want to leave her alone, do you?" Laguna asked him. Squall shook his head.

"No, I don't. I know we've mostly taken care of everything but..." Squall's voice trailed off. Laguna gripped his shoulder, saying, "I know. If you'd like, I'll stay here with her. Just so she won't be alone. Or Elle can."

"If you don't mind..." Squall said, knowing he was being ridiculous and unable to shake off his anxieties completely. Maybe he just needed to get out of there for a little while and start picking up his life again. If he could.

"I don't mind at all. Go on, get some fresh air and clear your head a bit. We'll be okay here." Laguna said encouragingly.

Taking his father's advice, Squall decided to walk from the hospital to the Presidential Palace and his apartment there. Since he didn't live in Esthar full time, he decided to go ahead and just keep the rooms that Laguna set him up with on his first visit there. Over time, it had become a second home to he and Rinoa.

As such, items had been added and left there, things that they wouldn't necessarily need or have a use for in Balamb. Mostly, it was clothing, since space was limited in their quarters in Balamb, and packing quite honestly was a pain. The clothes they had left were more appropriate to the warmer climate and were of more use in Esthar than in Balamb or Galbadia.

That wasn't to say that it was always warm in Esthar. Squall rubbed his arms against the positively brisk air, wishing he knew what had happened to his coat, and tried to remember the date. Irvine's birthday had been the day they'd set out to get Rinoa. They'd assaulted the compound early the next morning, and the twins were born that day. The hours? Days? Since had passed in a blur of exhaustion.

Finally he gave up in frustration and stopped at a coffee shop, bought a cup and a newspaper, and continued to his apartment.

Upon his arrival he was greeted by Irvine who was currently kicked back on the couch watching the news.

"Hey there, how's everything?" Irvine asked.

"Fine so far. What've you been up to?" Squall asked him, setting the newspaper down and sipping at his coffee.
"Well, I was considering heading down to the hospital again to see how you guys were doing. First couple times I tried that you were either dead asleep or gone. How're the babies?" Irvine replied.

"Okay, I guess. Aside from needing some extra care and support, the doctor seems to think they're doing well." Squall answered with a shrug, idly leafing through the newspaper. Noticing the date, he frowned.

"How the hell did I lose two days?" he asked.

"Well, you were a little occupied with other concerns buddy. Rinoa was in labor for several hours, and afterward, you both were unconscious for quite awhile. You woke up when the doctor had to move you to take care of Rinoa, but even he could tell you were out of it. Hell, when Ellone sent me over here yesterday, I crashed and burned a good twelve hours sleeping myself, and I didn't do half of what you did." Irvine answered.

"I don't remember that. Not at all." Squall's frown deepened.

"Not surprising. You were on autopilot. Obviously, Ellone managed to convince you to get some real sleep. You look much more relaxed. So, what's the plan today?" Irvine asked him.

"Shower and shave and… I don't know. Check in with Zell I guess, see how things are going in Balamb." Squall answered.

"You know, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to think about getting that rover we rented and all our gear back here." Irvine said, and then added, " I borrowed some of your cleaning fluid and gun oil by the way. Hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind. I'll see if Laguna could take you out there to get it, if you don't mind driving it back." Squall said.

"Sure, I could do that." Irvine said, and then asked with a grin, "So, when do I get to see my god-children?"

"When the doctor says it's okay for visitors. Right now, he only wants Rinoa and I there." Squall answered.

"Well, do me a favor and take some pictures next time you're in there, will ya? Me and everyone else are dying to see them." Irvine said.

"Everyone? Who'd you call?" Squall asked.

"So far, just Selphie. But I know Laguna wants to see them as badly as she does, if not more so." Irvine answered.

"All right, I'll bring a camera next time I see them." Squall said. He finished his coffee and disappeared into the bedroom, pulling his shirt off on the way.

"Hey, by the way man, you seriously need some groceries if you're going to be staying here for awhile." Irvine called after him.

Squall popped his head through the doorway and said, "So? Pick some up. Rinoa and I are going to be in the hospital most of the time, and will probably just eat in the cafeteria."

"All right, I guess I could at least pick up some coffee..." Irvine said, frowning as Squall went back into the bedroom. The shower started not long afterward.
He emerged a few minutes later, putting on a clean shirt, freshly shaved, hair still damp.

"You know, nothing's keeping you here Irvine, you can go home to Selphie any time you want." Squall commented.

"I know that. I'm just waiting to see the fruit of your loins…or the spawn of Diablos. Too early to tell yet which it is." Irvine said. Squall, who'd been drying his hair once again, threw the towel at him. Irvine ducked, chuckling.

"They're my kids Irvine." He said flatly.

"You sure? Rinoa was starting to get a little cozy with 'ol red and freaky awhile back, wasn't she?" Irvine teased. Squall simply folded his arms across his chest and glared.

"Okay. Not getting the joke, obviously." Irvine stood, resettling his hat onto his head.

"I would if it was funny." Squall said, still glaring. Irvine frowned, wondering, not for the first time, if he'd pushed things too far. Sometimes with Squall, it was hard to tell…. until his fist landed on your jaw.

"I'm not trying to be insulting, just trying to lighten things up." Irvine said, holding his hands up in surrender.

"Well, don't." Squall said. Walking into the kitchen, he picked up the phone, taking a seat at the dining room table.

"Right. Well, I'll just go get some coffee, shall I?" Irvine said, gesturing toward the door. Squall nodded absently, dialing the phone.

"Say 'hi' to Zell and everyone for me." Irvine said as he reached for the doorknob.

"Alright." Squall replied.

Sunset glared through ragged clouds at the remains of the port city of Balamb, illuminating the skeletal structures rising from foundations scoured clean by the storm. Two and a half weeks after the hurricane had destroyed the city, the debris had finally been cleared away and rebuilding had begun.

Zell sat atop one such structure, nails held in his mouth as he hammered one down into the wood in front of him. Taking another nail, he positioned it carefully and began hammering it when his cell phone rang.

Taking the remaining nail out of his mouth and dropping it into the pouch on his belt, Zell answered the phone, "Yo, this is Zell."

"Hi Zell, how's it going up there?" Squall asked.

"Squall? Wow man! I haven't heard from you since I dropped you off in Galbadia! How's the search for Rinoa going?" Zell exclaimed, sitting back on the roof truss he was working on.

"We found her. She and the babies are doing fine, they're in the hospital here in Esthar." Squall answered.
Zell frowned for a moment, wondering at Squall's phrasing before it finally hit him and he asked, "Rinoa had the babies?"

"Yes." Squall answered.

"Awesome! Congratulations bro!" Zell said enthusiastically, punching his fist in the air. It overbalanced him and he had to grab the beam he was sitting on to prevent a fall, nearly dropping his phone in the process.

Then he sobered and asked, "It's too early, isn't it? She wasn't due until January."

"Yeah…things were a little…tricky during the delivery, but Rinoa came through it okay, she's recovering, and the babies need a little support right now but they're doing fine otherwise." Squall answered.

"Well, that's good to hear. So, when are you guys coming home?" Zell asked.

"I don't know yet. Could be days, or weeks. Depends on what the pediatrician says. When the babies are strong enough we'll come back to Balamb." Squall answered.

"Well, that's good. Let us know. A lot of people are wondering where you are. Two weeks without even a glimpse of you has gotten people curious. You gonna call Quistis?" Zell asked him.

"Yeah, that's my next call." Squall answered.

"Good. She'll probably ask you about some kind of press release or something, she was trying to get in contact with you but you were dug in deep, wherever you were." Zell said.

Squall didn't comment on that, instead asking, "So what are you doing right now?"

"Helping to put a roof on the Balamb Hotel. Or what's in the process of becoming the Balamb Hotel." Zell answered.

"You've started rebuilding already? You got things cleared up quick." Squall said, impressed.

"Well, we had a lot of help. Laguna sent tons of material and equipment. Dollet, Timber and Galbadia got the undersea train tunnel pumped out and the track repaired in record time, and they've started shipping manpower and supplies in that way too. We've had SeeDs and cadets from Trabia and Galbadia Gardens in here helping as soon as the trains started running again, and Seifer too had the ferries running overtime as well until then. We've had volunteers from Esthar and FH coming up too. It's really kind of amazing, how many people decided to pitch in." Zell said.

A cold breeze picked up off the ocean, prompting Zell to shiver, despite the heavy dark blue sweater and knit cap he was wearing. He'd been out daily since being given the job by Squall, doing his part to help clear up the debris and rebuild Balamb. Everyone had. To see even as much progress as this was amazing given the relatively short time that had passed since the disaster.

It felt good to see that and to know that he'd risen to the responsibility given to him by his friend and commander.

"Well, it sounds like you're doing a good job Zell. I'd better go. I need to call Quistis." Squall said.

"Thanks, man. Give Rinoa and the babies my love. Talk to ya later." Zell said, disconnecting the call. Then he grinned. His best friend was a daddy.
Slipping the hammer into the loop at his belt meant for it, Zell climbed carefully down from the roofing trusses and hit the ground running. He headed up the suggestion of the street he had once lived on with his mother, to the bones of the home that was beginning to take shape there.

"Ma! Hey, Ma! You'll never guess who I just talked to! It's Squall Ma! He's a daddy!"

Squall's conversation with Quistis followed roughly the same lines, but with the added twist of the statement to the press that Zell had mentioned. Squall had quite honestly forgotten that as commander of garden and leader of the evacuation, he was in fact a public figure…one who had suddenly disappeared from the public eye for two weeks without explanation. While he didn't much care for the idea, he knew he had to say something, so between the two of them, they worked out what Garden's official statement to the press would be on his behalf.

Quistis had told him she'd be more than happy to be his spokesman, and since Squall wasn't likely to be back to Balamb any time soon, he thanked her for her willingness to deal with something he preferred to avoid whenever possible.

"Who do you think I should call about this? Dawn Sweet or Kelsie Reynolds?" Quistis asked; naming two well-known media personalities based in Deling City.

Squall frowned thoughtfully, considering the question. He'd never met Dawn Sweet, but he knew her from the morning news program that she anchored. Kelsie Reynolds however, he had met, recalling an interview he'd done with her during the SeeD games several months ago.

He remembered her as being both professional and fair, and while she was persistent in the pursuit of a story, she wasn't obnoxiously so. While he couldn't actually say that he liked her, he could say that he disliked her less than the other media types he'd had to deal with in the past.

"Call Kelsie. She's always been fair." Squall answered.

"All right then. I'll get right on it." Quistis said, then added, "You know, you really should hire another press agent or a secretary or something Squall, someone that can handle this for you. There are so many other things that I'd rather be doing, and I can do them much better than I can do this stuff."

"You're doing fine Quistis, and if I haven't said so before I'm saying it now; I really appreciate the help." Squall assured her.

"No problem. You just stay there and take care of Rinoa and the babies. Let us know when you're coming back…and send us pictures! I'd love to get a look at your little ones." Quistis said.

"All right, I'll see what I can do. You and everyone else seem extraordinarily interested in seeing them. They're just babies." Squall said, grinning slightly on the other end of the line, subtly teasing her.

"They're your babies, and you know everyone will really want know what they look like." Quistis said.

"I'll get you some pictures as soon as I can." Squall said. A brush against his mind alerted him that Rinoa was waking and looking for him.

"I've got to go. I'll talk to you guys later." Squall said.
Okay, give Rinoa a hug and kiss from me. And congratulations Squall." Quistis said warmly.

Squall cut the connection and started looking for his camera, finding it just as Irvine returned from his shopping trip. He didn't get much, only coffee, but that was really all either of them needed at this point anyway. Squall put the coffee away and invited Irvine to return to the hospital with him.

"Rin awake?" Irvine asked as they walked back to the hospital.

"Yeah. I thought she'd sleep longer, but she's up now." Squall answered. He'd managed to find a sweatshirt to fend off the cold. While not as icy as Trabia or cold as Galbadia, Esthar did get chilly in the winter, and it was nearly December. Seeing the heat-adapted Estharian citizens bundled up even more warmly than the sweatshirt Squall was currently wearing did afford him some private amusement however.

"You guys going to see the babies when you get there?" Irvine asked, curiously.

Squall paused a moment, consulting silently with Rinoa, then answered, "probably, but not until after Rinoa's had a chance to visit with you. So you won't have completely wasted a trip."

"Wouldn't be a waste. I could always flirt with the nurses." Irvine said with a shrug. Squall snorted. Irvine grinned and winked at him, saying, "now that's just between you and me, mind you."

"I'm not lying to Selphie, so don't even think about asking me." Squall said flatly.

"Who, me? Now, why would I do that?" Irvine said, feigning innocence. Squall gave him a droll look, and Irvine sighed.

"Okay, work with me here, buddy. It's called banter. I say something witty and exaggerated, you say something equally witty and we just go back and forth, like a tennis match. I know you've got it in you; I've seen glimpses of it. Give it a try, you might enjoy it." Irvine said.

Squall simply stared at him, mystified, and asked, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Irvine rolled his eyes and sighed, "Okay. Not getting it. Maybe your head's not in the right place yet."

Squall frowned, "Maybe." He lapsed into silence, still frowning slightly.

Irvine glanced over at him again and sighed quietly. He knew Squall had a sense of humor, he had seen it in action before. The unexpected prank that he'd pulled on Irvine's apartment as payback for his bachelor party one startling example of that. To date, Irvine had yet to hear of anyone pulling off a similar prank even half as brilliantly.

But then, Squall had approached the whole thing as though it was a secret mission of utmost importance, employing his considerable skills in setting booby traps. In other words, he went with what he knew, was familiar with, and comfortable with. The only difference between that and a prank really boiled down to the materials used. Instead of tripwire explosives and other lethal traps, he'd employed shaving cream and silly string.

It hinted at a deeply buried but wicked sense of fun, a subtle wit that only needed encouragement to be displayed.

They arrived at the hospital in no time at all, with Squall feeling better for the brief walk and fresh air. Laguna had been right; a very odd thought to Squall. Sometimes it was hard to reconcile
Laguna's childlike silliness with the sometimes brilliant and wise statesman he'd become. He knew Kiros had definitely had a hand in that; he couldn't credit Laguna alone for it. But then, odd things would slip out that put him in an altogether different light, and show Squall that time had in fact given his father a wisdom entirely his own.

Squall had already alerted Rinoa that he had Irvine in tow, so she was ready and beaming happily when they entered her room. Laguna too, jumped up grinning and gave Irvine an enthusiastic handshake that turned into an impromptu half-hug.

Ellone had somehow found a nightgown and robe combo that not only looked comfortable but also... to Squall at least... actually cute. Of course, he was admittedly biased, but a good long rest and a shower had done much to restore her.

Squall and Irvine both approached Rinoa's bed, Squall hanging back a bit to allow Irvine to give her a hug and kiss on the cheek before he took his place and claimed her hand. Then he bent down to give her a quick, soft kiss in greeting.

"You look much better Rinoa. Does my heart good to see you happy and smiling." Irvine said sincerely, placing his hand on his chest and smiling down at her.

"Thank you Irvine," Rinoa said simply.

"So, anything new to report?" Irvine asked her.

"Not really. Although in this case, no news is good news." Rinoa said. Squall nodded in agreement.

"Oh!" Irvine exclaimed as an idea struck him, "Hey Squall, hand over your camera for a moment." Squall did as he'd requested, frowning.

Then he rolled his eyes as Irvine gave him an impish grin and said, "Okay guys, give me a nice, bright smile. That means you too, stoneface." Rinoa smiled brightly, but Squall was stubbornly resistant until she poked him in the side. He turned and met her eyes, and they gazed silently at each other for a moment before he smiled at her. Irvine snapped the picture then, capturing a moment too perfect to pass up.

Irvine gave him the camera back, admonishing him once again to take plenty of pictures of the twins. Then Squall asked Laguna if he'd arrange to have Irvine dropped off at their campsite so he could bring back the rover. Laguna was happy to oblige, and they both left shortly afterward, leaving Rinoa and Squall to once again head to the NICU.

Time had no meaning for them there. They both watched their babies raptly, watched them breathe, watched them move, and watched them live; feeling profoundly thankful for that fact. Rinoa ached to hold them, and finally the nurses obliged her, seating her next to Saber's isolette in a comfortable chair that reclined back. They handed her the carefully swaddled infant and directed her to hold him close to her, laying him on her chest over her heart. The sound of her heartbeat and her body heat both soothed the baby, and Rinoa sent a flood of love to him and to little Julia, who still slept in her isolette.

Squall simply watched, nearly forgetting the camera he had in his pocket. He wanted to hold his babies too, but was keenly aware of how fragile they were and how strong he was by comparison. They could be hurt so easily by even one wrong move, that it frightened him.

The baby nuzzled close to Rinoa's chest, making quiet grunting noises, and she rubbed his back gently, dislodging his little knit cap in the process. She felt the warm weight of the baby on her
chest, heard his quiet sounds, and smelled the downy shock of black hair revealed by the loss of his cap. She closed her eyes and inhaled his sweet scent, closing her eyes and smiling gently.

Squall swallowed a lump at the image, and finally remembered his camera, snapping a picture of it. He took two more pictures for good measure, and then directed his attention to Julia's isolette, taking several pictures of her as well.

"She's a little delicate yet for cuddling, what with all the things we've got her hooked up to, but if you'd like we can let you hold her a little bit." A nurse suggested.

Squall frowned slightly, worried, and asked, "How? I can't pick her up with all that stuff…"

"No, but here…lay your hands flat, palms up in the bassinet, here…” the nurse directed him, and Julia was carefully moved into his hands. She did just fit into both hands. It was awkward; bending slightly over the bassinet like he was, but Squall didn't care.

"It may seem silly, but the best thing for these babies aside from all the support they're getting is love. You'd be surprised how well a baby can improve just from receiving love from their mommy or daddy." The nurse smiled gently at them, then asked him, "would you like me to take a picture of you two?"

"Yeah," Squall answered, "but I stuck my camera in my pocket." He sincerely hoped that the nurse wouldn't take it as an invitation to go after it. Irvine might have tried that trick, but not Squall. Fortunately, she had a handy solution to that dilemma.

"I have one. I can get a copy of it to you in no time." The nurse smiled, retrieving the camera. She snapped away, not bothering to ask him to smile (pointless because of the mask), taking several shots of Squall's hands cradling his tiny daughter. He stood nearly frozen, afraid to move as he felt her almost negligible weight and the warmth of her body in his hands.

She squirmed and made a noise, and Squall got a feeling of unhappiness from her. He swallowed, and tried to figure out what he was doing wrong to disturb her, and his anxiety increased as Julia's fussing became more pronounced. He shot a panicked look at Rinoa, who smiled gently at him.

"Squall…Honey relax. Your anxiety is feeding into her and scaring her." Rinoa sent.

Meeting Rinoa's eyes, Squall nodded indicating that he understood, and then took a deep breath to calm himself. As his anxieties faded away, he projected calm, and smiled to himself as he felt Julia's discomfort cease as she received what he was sending her and fell back to sleep. After that, he simply held her.

All too soon, he was forced to relinquish her to the nurse, who carefully repositioned the baby in her isolette.

Squall stroked his finger on her cheek, lightly, and asked the nurse, "Can I take her cap off, just for a second? I want to see if she has hair like her brother, and what color it is."

"Sure, but carefully, of course." The nurse answered.

"Of course," Squall replied, gently removing the cap and running his index finger over the top of Julia's head. The soft hair was fine and very light in color. Squinting and leaning closer, he saw a definite coppery hue to it. He wondered what color her eyes were. He was already aware that it would be several weeks before they would know for sure.
He snapped one more picture of Julia before the nurse put her little cap back on. Rinoa provided more milk to feed both babies, and Squall watched with interest as they were fed. Both he and Rinoa paid strict attention to how the nurses cared for the babies, though it would be a little while yet before they would be able to do it themselves.

It seemed to Squall however that the babies did seem to be getting stronger and livelier, virtually by the hour.

As he and Rinoa returned to her room at the hospital to pack what few personal items they both had there in preparation for her discharge, Squall reflected that as long as their babies continued to thrive and grow stronger, he couldn't be happier.
"Hi there Saber." Squall said softly to his son as he began to change his diaper under the watchful eye of the NICU nurse. He had already decided that he would not talk to his children in that silly baby talk that some people used around infants and small children. Absolutely not; he'd leave that for Laguna, who seemed to have permanently gone round the bend where that was concerned.

The first time Laguna had been able to actually see and hold his grandchildren, he'd been so ecstatically happy that Squall couldn't help smiling at his enthusiasm. Both babies seemed fascinated with their "Poppa Laguna" as Squall had reluctantly agreed to call him, staring up at him with rapt interest.

Then he began talking to the babies in a language that Squall had never heard before. Only one out of ten words that he uttered was even identifiable; the tones and inflections that he gave them made it nearly impossible to understand what he was saying. And the facial contortions that went along with it were so alarming to Squall that he nearly called a nurse, fearing that his father was having some kind of a seizure.

Finally he asked Laguna in concern, "Dad, are you okay? Are you having a stroke or something?" Only when both Laguna and Rinoa burst out laughing did Squall realize that his father was acting so strangely on purpose.

Suddenly, a memory he'd shared with his father came to mind, where Laguna had done the exact same thing with Ellone, incurring Raine's wrath. He almost laughed then, realizing that he had more in common with his mother than simply DNA.

Rinoa's hand grasped his gently and she sent in amusement, "Wow, that was an exhausting whirlwind of emotions you just projected. I'm surprised the babies didn't pick up on it."

Squall gave her an exasperated look, "If he does this every time he's around them, they're going to grow up with speech impediments! Can't he just talk to them like a normal SANE person?"

"He's a grandpa for the first time Squall, he's entitled to act a little silly. Give him a break, can't you see how happy he is?" Rinoa reasoned, squeezing his hand and leaning into him.

"Ugh, fine." Squall responded, "If he wants to act like a complete idiot, I suppose that's his prerogative."

Recalling Laguna's antics on that day made Squall determined to use a normal voice whenever he interacted with his children. Fortunately, Rinoa was of a similar mindset, so he only had to endure Laguna's silliness.

The nurses had encouraged him to speak to the babies, telling him that the sound of his voice soothed them. Perhaps. Maybe it wasn't so much the sound of his voice as it was the fact that in softening the tone and inflection so that it was soothing to them, it forced his mind into a calm and serene state as well. He and Rinoa had discovered early on that both babies were little mood barometers, picking up what they both felt very easily.

They had both puzzled over that, wondering if they should try to shield the children, then discovering that until the babies had a little more cognitive control, they wouldn't really be able to. Squall and Rinoa could shield thoughts from the infants, but not emotions. Perhaps it was just as well, for it made it easier to anticipate their needs. If the babies could feel what Squall and Rinoa
felt, the opposite was also true.

"So, have you been behaving yourself for your mother? Of course you have. You're too little to be big trouble right now, aren't you? That comes later." Squall said, wrinkling his nose at the mess he was cleaning up. He was doing pretty well, he thought, wiping the baby clean and powdering where he needed to be powdered, slipping a fresh diaper underneath his bottom…and ducking an unanticipated fountain of liquid originating from his son's penis.

"Hey now!" Squall said in mock severity, quickly clapping the diaper over the baby's groin. "You need to give daddy a little warning there, kiddo. I already had my shower today." Sighing, he reached for another diaper, giving the nurse a rueful look. Rinoa, who was seated in the recliner nearby nursing Julia, laughed softly.

"Maybe when you're old enough, we'll get your uncle Irvine to teach you marksmanship. Nobody's got better aim than him." Squall said.

Rinoa snorted, "not according to Selphie. Besides, isn't that supposed to be your job?"

Diapering finished, Squall rearranged the baby's clothing, saying, "Well, yeah…if you're talking about …you know…but I was talking about shooting a gun Rinoa."

Carefully cradling Saber in his arms, Squall added smugly, "As for the other, well, you know I never miss."

Rinoa snorted again. Squall frowned.

"I don't." He repeated.

"When was the last time you cleaned the bathroom dear?" Rinoa asked him.

"Ah…" Squall's frown deepened as he tried to remember.

"Exactly." Rinoa confirmed.

Squall couldn't scratch his head as he currently had an armful of baby, so instead he looked down at Saber and said, "I guess your daddy needs to sharpen up his skills so as to teach you properly, otherwise the females in your life will give you no end of grief."

Laughing softly, Rinoa said, "Speaking of females, Julia's finished. Is Saber hungry?"

"Didn't you um…pump out the other one?" Squall asked.

Rinoa shook her head, "No, I thought I'd try nursing them both this time. I can still pump if he's not hungry. But hurry, this is really starting to hurt."

"Okay." Squall said, putting a cloth over his shoulder and handing Saber to the nurse so he could take Julia from Rinoa. The nurse then handed Saber to Rinoa who encouraged him to nurse. Squall watched her while he laid Julia against his shoulder, supporting her head the way he'd been told. Then he started rubbing gently on her back. He was rewarded with a quiet belch from his tiny daughter and he smiled.

The medical professionals at the Esthar hospital didn't want to release the babies until they were sure that both he and Rinoa were comfortable caring for them, that the babies themselves were out of any kind of danger and perfectly healthy, and that Rinoa and the babies all were on the same page when it came to breastfeeding.
Squall had thought that they would simply know how to go about it when given the opportunity. It had surprised him to discover that the babies had to learn how to breastfeed. Apparently, preemies in particular tended to have difficulties in that area. It had taken several days for both babies to get the hang of it. They would still be going home with the breast pump however as a backup.

The plan was for Squall and Rinoa to alternate feedings whenever possible, so while one child was nursing, the other breast would be pumped and the results stored for when the other one was hungry. Then Squall could take over and feed the other baby and give Rinoa a little extra rest. Not that there'd be much for either of them, not for awhile yet at any rate. They both already knew that they'd be lucky if they got even two hours of sleep at a stretch at any given time.

Saber suckled halfheartedly for a few minutes and fell asleep. Rinoa gently detached him from her breast and patted his back softly. Squall meanwhile had reluctantly returned Julia to her bassinet and took Saber from Rinoa as well, putting him in his bed. Then, wincing slightly, Rinoa attached the breast pump and expressed the rest of the milk remaining, sighing in relief as the pressure eased.

"Better?" Squall asked her. Rinoa nodded.

"You guys ready to take them home?" the nurse asked them.

"Oh, yeah, definitely. We're just waiting for the doctor to give us the go ahead to take them back to Balamb." Rinoa answered eagerly.

"Do you have a nanny or someone lined up that can help you? At least for the first few weeks, you'll find an extra pair of hands invaluable." The nurse said.

"I hadn't thought about a nanny…" Rinoa said, frowning. She'd thought that between her and Squall, they could handle the babies themselves.

"Ellone said she'd be willing to help us out for a little while. She's got some vacation time she hasn't used yet. She told me she's dying for an excuse to play with the babies." Squall said, adding mentally, "I hope you don't mind…I kind of forgot to mention it to you when we talked about it."

"No, I don't mind at all if it lets me actually SLEEP once in awhile." Rinoa smiled at him, adding, "I love your sister."

The nurse smiled at them both, saying, "Great! Well, now we just need to wait on the pediatrician, and he's going to be in tomorrow to check on them. If he says its okay, you should be able to take them back to Balamb with you then. Meanwhile, I want you two to go to your home here, rest up, and be ready to hit the trenches tomorrow."

"Yes ma'am!" Squall said, saluting her smartly.

The nurse laughed, "You don't need to salute me, Commander Leonhart! I'm a civilian!"

Squall raised his eyebrows and answered gravely, "Standard military protocol ma'am; medical professionals outrank everyone."

"It's true." Rinoa confirmed to the nurse.

"Well, that's good to know. Although I know a few doctors that would take unfair advantage of that." The nurse said with a grin, adding, "you two go on and relax now, and we'll all see you tomorrow."
They both walked slowly back toward the Presidential Palace hand in hand, enjoying the brisk evening air. Even in winter, Esthar's sunsets were brilliant displays of color and light, made more dramatic by the more frequent cloud formations. And on those rare days that it actually rained on Esthar City; a true, hard, sluicing rain that scoured everything clean, the sunrise the next morning was absolutely glorious.

"If everything goes well tomorrow, we'll be cleared to take the babies home to Balamb." Rinoa stated.

"Yes." Squall answered.

"When will we actually leave?" Rinoa asked him.

"Probably the next day. I'll have Zell come pick us up in the Ragnarok." Squall answered.

"What about… everything… we left in Deling City?" Rinoa asked.

"I don't know." Squall sighed, "I vaguely remember Selphie saying something about that, but I don't remember what she said. It was weeks ago and I was halfway out of my mind trying to find you. So really, not much else registered with me if it didn't have anything to do with where you were."

"They left the house such a mess…" Rinoa said sadly.

"I know." Squall said. He did remember sending funds to the owner to pay for clean up and repairs, but at that point had already decided that he wouldn't be returning to Deling City. With or without Rinoa.

"It was a lovely house," Rinoa thought wistfully.

"I couldn't go back there. Even if everything was cleaned up and put back to the way it was…I'd remember seeing what was left behind. I'd remember losing you there. Losing Angelo…" Squall's thoughts trailed off, but Rinoa understood what he meant. That sense of comfort, security, that one associated with home was forever shattered. That place would never be home to them again.

"You got me back though. You held me while I was struggling with giving birth. You gave me your strength when I was dying. You gave me a reason to hold on and stay here." Rinoa sent. Squall paused then, and pulled her into his arms.

"I couldn't let you go." He said softly, gazing down at her and caressing her cheek. There was more, of course. So many things he could tell her; such as how much he'd missed her joyful presence, her beautiful smile… how the thought of living the remainder of his life without her, of trying to raise their children alone was simply devastating to him. All of that and more he could tell her, but it all came down to three words.

"I love you." He whispered, then bent down and kissed her softly.

Pulling back, he reclaimed her hand and asked, "Are you hungry?"

"You have to ask? It seems like I'm always hungry. I thought that would stop after I had the babies, but now I'm providing food for them too…" Rinoa sighed. They turned and continued on into the Palace, getting on a grav-tube transport to take them to the floor their apartment was on.
"You're doing a good job at it too," Squall said, letting her feel his admiration. "The babies have both gained so much weight in just the last week it's amazing. I thought we'd be here for weeks. Instead, we're going home in just under two weeks with the twins."

Rinoa leaned her head against his shoulder and sighed, "I have to admit, it'll be good to see everyone again. But I saw the news reports… Balamb's pretty much gone, isn't it?" Seeing the devastation left behind by the hurricane had brought tears to Rinoa's eyes. The shops on the waterfront, the café, the hotel, and Zell's family home…all of them gone. It boggled the mind, and made Rinoa incredibly proud that it was largely due to Squall's efforts that there was no loss of life.

"Yeah, but they've made some serious headway on rebuilding it. I'm really impressed with how Zell's taken charge of it and gotten things moving so quickly." Squall said.

"It shouldn't be a surprise, Balamb's his home too." Rinoa commented.

"I didn't say I was surprised, I said I was impressed." Squall clarified.

Rinoa smiled up at Squall then and squeezed his hand, asking, "might there be a commendation in it for him?"

Squall raised his eyebrows with a half smile, answering, "There might. Depends on how well he can drive a nail."

Rinoa poked him in the side, prompting him to flinch, saying, "I'm almost certain he can beat your mad skills in the area of carpentry, Commander Hotness."

"If you're referring to the unfortunate picture-hanging incident, I'll have you know that that does not qualify as carpentry. And what's this 'Commander Hotness' business all about?" Squall asked her as they arrived at their destination. Taking her hand again, he helped her to her feet and they started walking toward their apartment.

"Well?" He prompted, as they walked.

Rinoa smiled and answered, "I overheard a couple of the nurses talking. They had to have been referring to you; there wasn't any other Commander anything in the NICU. Apparently, you're the sexiest new daddy they've ever seen. You brightened up the day for a lot of nurses."

Squall sighed and rolled his eyes at that, saying, "I don't see how you can stand it. Doesn't that bother you? It does me."

Rinoa laughed softly and replied, "It would if you were like Irvine. But the fact that you're completely oblivious to it makes it kind of cute. Besides, I get to be married to Commander Hotness, while every other woman has to simply dream about it. Makes me feel pretty damn special."

Reaching the door to their apartment, Squall opened it and ushered her inside, closing and locking it behind them before taking Rinoa into his arms again.

"You are pretty damn special." He said, kissing her and adding, "who else could marry Commander Hotness?"

"Who else indeed?" Rinoa asked, kissing him back. His arms tightened around her and he deepened the kiss, caressing her new, softer curves and letting her know how badly he wanted her. Breaking off the kiss, he nibbled along her neck, prompting her to moan softly.
Rubbing his cheek against hers, he whispered, "I think we should order in tonight. I'm not in the mood to cook."

Rinoa closed her eyes and shivered as his breath tickled her ear. Hyne, he was killing her. She hadn't felt his hands on her body in so long…. without thinking, her own hands stroked up his back and down to his tight backside, pressing him closer, feeling ample evidence of his interest. It was no use trying to hide it, they'd both linked out of habit and he could feel her arousal just as strongly as she could feel his.

But…. "We can't..." She sent regretfully, body humming in sympathy with his; desire a gnawing ache nipping at them both.

"Not intercourse, no. I was there too, remember?" He sent, fluttering feather light kisses along her cheeks while slipping his hands beneath her shirt and caressing her back. She gasped as his hands found and cupped her breasts, fondling them gently.

Capturing her lips again, he tasted her and teased her, kissing her breathless, finishing his previous thought, "But if there's one thing that neither of us lacks, its imagination."

"Oh. Right..." Rinoa thought as Squall swept her into his arms and carried her into their bedroom. She did have a moment or two of anxiety regarding her body and what pregnancy had done to it. She worried about her slack, mushy belly, she worried about milk leakage at an inopportune time, and she worried about how Squall would see her and what he would think.

It turned out, she needn't have worried.

Squall showed her with his hands, caressing her soft curves gently, with his lips, kissing where his hands had led, with his body, its excitement proudly displayed once his clothes were removed, exactly how he saw her. His mind and heart filled in the blanks that his light kisses and gentle touches left, leaving no doubt in Rinoa's mind that he still found her beautiful and desirable.

She in turn let him know in a similar manner how much she loved and had missed the satin-over-steel feel of smooth skin and taut muscle, his scent and his taste as she trailed her lips down his chest. The power she had to make him gasp and moan, as she loved him with her hands and her mouth, drinking in his essence and finding completion along with him. Their mutual climax, when it came, left them both shuddering, their long separation adding to its pent-up power.

They snuggled together afterwards face to face, still breathing hard, bodies still resonating from their lovemaking. Gradually their pounding hearts calmed down as Squall lightly trailed his hand up Rinoa's back and along her side, seemingly unable to stop touching and caressing her.

Kissing her softly, he asked, "You still hungry?"

Yawning, Rinoa rolled onto her back and stretched, answering, "Yeah."

Propping himself up on one elbow, Squall transferred his attentions to her front, kissing her shoulder and stroking his hand down her ribcage and over her abdomen.

Stopping and letting his hand rest there for a moment, he asked her, "What are you in the mood for?" Rinoa shrugged, and then winced in discomfort, gently moving Squall's hand away from her stomach.

"Sorry. Still sensitive there?" He asked her.

"Yeah, feels like your hand is resting right on my guts." Rinoa answered with a grimace.
"Probably is. Give it time; things will go back to normal eventually. When your doctor says it's okay, I can help you tone that up if you want. It'll help the backaches." Squall offered.

"What do you mean?" Rinoa asked, frowning.

"Abdominal muscles support the lower back. Right now, yours aren't supporting anything, so every time you bend down to lift the babies or anything else, all the work is being done by your lower back. That's why it aches at the end of the day." Squall explained. He'd noticed her discomfort but hadn't had a chance to talk to her about it.

"Oh." Rinoa said. "Well, that explains it. As far as dinner goes... I don't know. I'm not in the mood for anything fancy or heavy... soup and a sandwich maybe?"

"Coming right up." He said, getting out of bed and pulling on his pants. Leaning over her, he kissed her deeply, lingering over it before pulling back and caressing her cheek.

Rinoa watched him as he left to call in their dinner order, then got up and located her robe. She was immensely grateful to the nursing staff for giving them this night. They seemed to understand that both she and Squall needed this opportunity to reconnect with each other. Rinoa knew that even with Ellone's help times like this would be rare, though she resolved to do her best to make time for their sharing. Not only for Squall, to reassure him that despite the current restrictions placed upon their physical relationship, satisfaction could be obtained by other, more creative means, but also for herself.

Fortunately, those restrictions were temporary, and they were already two weeks into it, but Rinoa and Squall were both in agreement on one point: it was going to be a long four weeks.

Laguna glared at the sheaf of papers in his hands and resisted the urge to fling them across the room. Squall wasn't going to like this. At all. Hell, he didn't like it either, but no one was above the law, not even the President.

That didn't stop anger from simmering just below the surface as Laguna thought about how close Odine had come to destroying not only Squall's life but Laguna's as well. But that was why he'd turned the investigation over to the Judiciaries.

Because Dr. Odine's selfish and self-important actions had nearly killed Laguna's daughter-in-law and his grandchildren, had nearly taken them from Squall and from him, he couldn't come close to being objective.

He tried. He tried to see the larger picture; something he'd done so often over the last twenty years that it was nearly second nature with him. He knew that if he hadn't turned Odine over to the proper authorities he risked becoming the one thing that he hated the most: a petty despot that used his power and position to serve his own selfish desires.

But damned if he wasn't tempted to put a bullet in the bastard's head himself and hang the consequences.

He glanced at the papers again, trying to ignore the nausea that started as he read the preliminary findings of the investigative team. The goddamned report wasn't even finished yet; they had barely scratched the surface of what had turned out to be well over twenty years of secret research. The records in Odine's facility dated back several years before Laguna even arrived on the scene to put an end to Adel's rule.
Some of what had been found so far in Odine's notes, his copious, meticulously kept records was frightening. Not only with regard to his human-based, genetic research, though that was bad enough; no, the theoretical research… that was truly terrifying.

Squall's rhetorical question of over a year ago came back to haunt Laguna. *If Odine thought nothing of treating a four-year-old girl like a lab animal, what else might he do if left to his own devices?*

It turned out that Odine had, for nearly thirty years, been left to his own devices and the results made his Junction Machine Ellone, which in this time was still just a crude prototype, look like a toy.

A knock at his office door made him jump, and he called out, "come in."

"Mr. President, your son is here." Laguna's secretary stuck her head in the door, announcing Squall's presence.

"Thank you Ms. Landon." Laguna said, and she nodded, stepping aside to allow Squall to enter.

Getting up and coming around his desk, Laguna reached out and gave Squall a hug, marveling at the strides they'd made in their relationship over the last few years. He sincerely hoped that the news he was about to give his son today wouldn't destroy that completely.

Pulling back, he studied him and asked, "How are you doing son? You look well rested." Dropping his hands from Squall's shoulders, he stuck them in his pockets.

Squall smiled slightly and answered, "The NICU nursing staff was nice enough to give Rinoa and I the night off. She'd stored more than enough milk to get the babies through the night, so they decided to give us a little bit of a break."

"I take it the babies are doing well then?" Laguna asked. He'd been by to visit them as often as he could, but his duties didn't always correspond with the hospital's visiting hours.

"Very well. We still have to get the final okay from their pediatrician, but we're reasonably certain we'll be able to take them home today." Squall answered.

Laguna smiled, then sighed sadly, saying, "Then its home to Balamb."

Squall nodded, "Yes."

"When do you plan on leaving?" Laguna asked.

"Tomorrow, or as soon as the doctor clears us to travel." Squall answered.

"Well, I'm happy for you, but I can't say that I'm glad to see you go." Laguna said with a sigh, leaning back against his desk and glancing down at the report he'd left there.

"I know." Squall replied, then asked curiously, "that wasn't why you asked to see me, was it?" It didn't fit. If Laguna had wanted an update on the babies, he could simply have called. If he'd wanted a visit with Squall, he could have arranged for them to go to lunch together or simply have stopped by… Even as busy as he was, Laguna did have some spare time.

"Partly." Laguna answered, fiddling nervously with the wedding band he still wore.

Finally, he reached down and picked up the papers on the desk next to him, saying, "I asked you


here because of this. I hesitated about telling you...about this. You've been busy with Rinoa, with the babies, I hoped you'd forget about Odine and just move on with your life."

Squall's expression went blank and his eyes hardened into chips of ice. He opened his mouth, but Laguna raised his hand, stopping him.

"I know. Much as I wished you'd just move on and concentrate on your life, it wouldn't be fair to expect you to simply walk away from this. Hell, I wouldn't. Odine needs to answer for his crimes and you need that closure. Much as I wish I could give that to you son, it's out of my hands." Laguna said.

Tapping the papers against his palm, he continued, "I handed the investigation to the Judiciaries. I had to son, I had no choice; not even I am above the law. Anyway, this is their preliminary report on their findings." Holding it out to Squall, Laguna waited as he took it and read the report.

Squall frowned as he tried to make sense out of what he was reading. It was pretty obvious that Odine had been operating in secret for far longer than anyone had even imagined. They were still digging up evidence in the lab that was damning, to say the least.

Squall's anger mounted as he read, until he finally burst out, "House arrest? He nearly kills Rinoa and our unborn babies not once but twice with his selfish irresponsibility and he fucking gets house arrest?" Tossing the report onto Laguna's desk with a short curse, he crossed over to the window behind it, raking his hands through his hair.

"I should have killed him when I had the chance." Squall said bitterly, staring out the window.

"Why didn't you?" Laguna asked, curious.

"Ellone. She begged me not to." Squall answered shortly.

"So that's why..." Laguna said under his breath.

Squall turned to look at him with a frown, asking, "Why what?"

"A couple of days before you and Irvine took off to get Rinoa, Elle told me Edea had called her out of the blue about something, but she didn't say what it was." Laguna answered.

Squall's frown deepened, "What's that got to do with anything?"

Laguna sighed, "Edea is still a sorceress. Not as powerful as she used to be, granted. The bulk of her power was given over to Rinoa when she released it. But she still has some power, and one of her talents has always been the ability to see the future. I remember her telling me about that when she came up here with you guys that first time, four years ago."

Squall looked thoughtful as he said, "Ellone told me we would still need him. I didn't want to believe her, but just a few minutes later I had to get him to take the bangle off of Rinoa. I couldn't work the catch, it was a new design and I couldn't figure it out. I didn't have the time to work on it; Rinoa needed me right then. If I had killed him when I had him in my hands, I wouldn't have been able to get the goddamned thing off of her. I wouldn't have been able to link with her, support her, and give her my strength. I wouldn't have been able to heal her and hold her back from death. She would have died."

Laguna nodded, swallowing, trying not to think about what if. It was a game he'd tortured himself with for far too long. Twenty-one years in fact. When he'd learned that Squall was Raine's son... his son... "What if" chased around inside his head until he thought he'd go mad.
"There's more son. Finish the report. You should know all of it. All that we know at this point anyway." Laguna said.

Squall returned to the desk and picked up the report again, continuing his reading. When he was finished he simply dropped it on Laguna's desk, but remained silent.

"I keep remembering that question you asked me, just before you and Rinoa got married. Your instincts were right on the money son, just decades too late. Junction Machine Ellone was just a side project for him. There's more, and worse, that he'd come up with than that. We've just scratched the surface, and so far my best scientists are hard-pressed to make sense of what they've found. Much as I hate to admit it, we still need Odine. This...thing that he's built... it's so damned dangerous only Odine would know how to handle it safely." Laguna said softly.

"You shouldn't even be thinking about handling it at all. You should be thinking about destroying it. Or failing that, containing it in such a manner that it can never be activated." Squall said severely.

"That's what I meant. There's no question about it ever being used. Even if it works the way Odine thinks it will, the consequences... Well I can't even imagine what it would do." Laguna said, then added, "I know you think Odine got off lightly with just house arrest, but please bear in mind, we aren't done with this investigation. Once it's concluded, more and stiffer punishment will be considered, depending on what we turn up. For right now though, we've seized all of his assets, restricted his access to the outside world and confined him to his home under twenty-four hour guard. At the moment, that's all we can legally do."

"Meanwhile, he's got a doomsday device that he's been working on as a fucking hobby in his basement." Squall said flatly.

"Of his lab, son. It's not anywhere near his home." Laguna clarified.

"You know, I'm not stupid, but this stuff...I barely understand what he was trying to do. A dimensional portal? Was he really trying to open a doorway into another dimension? Why? What possible purpose would that serve?" Squall demanded.

"From what Odine himself explained, he was trying to open a window, not a doorway, into the dimensional plane that the Guardians exist in. Part of his GF research, I guess. He wanted to see what their world looked like." Laguna answered.

"You and I both know a window can be used as a doorway as well." Squall said.

Laguna nodded. He had no idea of how far into the future Squall traveled to fight and eventually defeat Ultimecia, nor did Squall himself. He had no frame of reference, though it had seemed to him as though it was hundreds of years, when Laguna had asked him. He had no idea what the world was like in that time or if the actions of today would have an effect upon that possible future. Edea had told him that the existence of Ultimecia had been just one future; there were numerous possibilities that sprang from the decisions made in this timeline.

Fate played only a small part in the final outcome; no future was set in stone. So what would the final outcome be if Odine's theory was proved sound and one could open a window, or doorway, into a different dimension? What would one see? And if that window were in fact a doorway, what would come through?

Time and space had already been proven as malleable as taffy. Add manipulation of dimensional planes, and the very fabric of reality could be in danger. It was enough to give a man a headache.
Particularly if that man wasn't given to theoretical scientific studies in general.

"This can never be used. And Odine must be dealt with, permanently." Squall warned him.

"Son, kidnapping and reckless endangerment aren't capital crimes here. Let us continue the investigation, we've already got leads that he used human subjects without their knowledge or consent, some of whom were never found. If murder can be proven, then by all means, he'll get what's coming to him. But we have to do it the right way. In the meantime, he's no threat; we've got him about as wrapped up as we can. The only thing that he can do now is think, and we have no control over that." Laguna said.

"You don't maybe…" Squall murmured, a speculative look on his face.

Laguna frowned at that odd statement, then his eyes widened in dawning horror, "Squall! Don't even think it! Rinoa may have that kind of power, but what would it do to her, for you to ask her to use it like that?"

Squall studied Laguna, expression unreadable, and then sighed, "You're right, it would be terribly unfair to her." Worse, it would destroy her; destroy everything that Squall loved about her. Once she took a step in that direction…. No. Better not to even go there.

Then Squall's expression hardened and he said coldly, "You need to finish it Laguna. Finish him. Or I will."

"Squall… son…" Laguna said, suddenly hurt. Squall only used his given name when he wanted to distance himself from Laguna, either in a professional context when he was working or on a personal level, when he wanted emotional space. Mostly though, he did it when he was angry.

Squall folded his arms and glared, silent, as Laguna said, "Believe it or not Squall, I know exactly how you feel, and I agree with you. But we can't, not while we're still sorting though everything we've found so far, and everything we've yet to find."

Greatly daring, Laguna approached his son then and gripped his shoulder gently, saying, "Lest you forget, this affects me too. That's why I had to… step away from it. To lose Rinoa, whom I love like a daughter because of what she's brought into your life, to lose my grandchildren…. there's no way I could be objective. I promise you, I will keep you up to date on everything that's happening here. Regardless of what Odine's ultimate fate ends up being, he won't trouble you or your family again. You have my word on that. In the meantime son, please, let it go. Let the investigation run its course."

Squall simply stared at him, poker faced. He understood what his father was telling him and while he didn't like it, there wasn't much he could do about it. Not overtly anyway. But Laguna knew him, better than Squall had thought he did and when he specifically requested that Squall leave it alone, Squall knew he meant completely.

Despite the fact that as a SeeD, Squall possessed deadly skills that more than one Government leader had wished could be put to their use, Laguna rarely took advantage of them. Certainly not in the manner that some of those leaders might have, given the opportunity to have someone with Squall's particular abilities at their disposal. Even after more than twenty years in politics, Laguna was still an open, honest, and genuinely decent person. He'd never lost the charismatic integrity that had attracted so many of Ethar's citizens and gained him the job of President.

Squall knew that Laguna would never ask him to kill someone; it was not in his nature. Nor would he want Squall to take it upon himself to kill on his behalf for any reason. Acceding to Laguna's
unspoken request that Squall not act covertly as well, Squall nodded slightly, reluctantly agreeing.

"Fine." He said, then added, "I'd better go."

Laguna nodded, then hesitantly asked, "are we…. okay?"

Squall frowned; confused at the question, before he realized Laguna had worried that the news he'd provided might somehow affect their relationship. As angry as he was at the situation, he knew that Laguna had acted with his usual integrity and couldn't fault him for it. In other words, he had done exactly what Squall would have, had their situations been switched: set aside his feelings and acted as the leader he was, not the father, or in Laguna's case, grandfather, he'd just become. Laguna was a far more noble person than should ever exist in politics.

"We're fine dad. I'm pissed but I get it. I'll talk to you later." Squall said, shrugging off Laguna's hand and leaving the office.

"Well, Commander, Mrs. Leonhart, it looks like you've got a couple of very healthy, happy babies here." The pediatrician said, taking his gloves off and smiling down at the infants. While still small, they had both gained weight and size and looked just like any other newborn baby, active, pink and healthy. Necessary vaccinations had been given, the usual cautions provided, and clearance to leave Esthar and transport the babies to Balamb was forthcoming.

The doctor smiled at Squall when he immediately took charge of his tiny daughter, thinking that this image of the SeeD commander was a far more endearing one than the stern and serious Commander Leonhart that people were used to.

Rinoa took charge of their son and smiled up at the doctor, "It's pretty amazing how much they've grown in just the last couple of weeks."

The pediatrician nodded, "Indeed. Well, they were both sort of making up for starting out so early. There shouldn't be any long-term problems, at least, none that I've been able to see hints of. They weren't too early, and they got good support and great nutrition from you Mrs. Leonhart. So I see no problem in letting you take your babies home with you today and taking them to Balamb tomorrow, if that is your intention."

"It is." Squall answered.

"Well then, I guess we're done here. Feel free to call me at any time, if you have any questions. Have you got a pediatrician in mind for when you return home?" The doctor asked them.

"Yes." Rinoa answered.

"Great. Nurse Garan will help you with the checkout process. In the meantime, Commander, Mrs. Leonhart, you two have a wonderful day." The doctor said, shaking both of their hands before leaving.

They left the hospital a few minutes later, each loaded down with a carrier containing a baby and an absolutely mind-boggling array of items that went along with them. There was no question of actually walking back to the palace with all of that stuff, so they took advantage of a nearby grav-tube and were whisked back to their apartment in moments.

Upon arrival, Squall called Zell, who would fly the Ragnarok in the next day to pick them up. In twenty-four hours, they would be back home in Balamb.
Squall gazed down into the bassinets containing his babies, watching them sleep in the predawn darkness. He listened to their breaths, their soft noises. Smelled the sweet scent of baby powder, lotion, milk, and baby. In the four weeks since they'd returned home, both he and Rinoa had gotten into a sort of routine, aided by Ellone when she had been there, of alternating feedings so that each of them managed at least two hours of sleep.

The babies were sleeping longer now, but every now and again, Squall's anxieties would get the better of him and he'd be compelled to get up and check on them. To make sure that they were still breathing. It wasn't as bad as the first few nights after they'd returned home. It seemed as though Squall was up every hour, checking on them when he didn't hear them fussing or feel their need.

Rinoa's arm gently encircled his waist and she leaned into him, thinking, "Worrying again?" He draped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close, kissing her hair.

Squall knew better than to try and hide what he felt, so he simply answered, "Yes. I'm always worried about them. I have a feeling that I always will be."

"Welcome to fatherhood honey. If it makes you feel better, the first few nights after we got home I had horrible nightmares." Rinoa confessed.

"I did wonder about that. I thought it was MY anxieties that were bothering you. What sort of nightmares were they?" Squall sent.

"Terrible ones. Ones where I'd do something stupid and hurt them, even kill them. Sometimes it would be a stupid accident, sometimes deliberate. Sometimes I'd have these nightmares where I'd done nothing at all and they'd simply be...dead. They're so fragile, so tiny...I know they're healthy and they're as strong as any newborn baby can be, but still..." Rinoa sighed, pressing closer to him.

Squall frowned down at her, "Rin, why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"Because I figured it was just anxieties, fatigue, you name it. You and Ellone, you've both done wonderfully with showing me that I'm not in this alone. Turns out, that's all it was. They're not bothering me as much anymore." Rinoa responded.

"Well, that's good. But please, if ...if those feelings get worse, please tell me?" Squall sent; letting her know his concern was mainly for her.

"I will. Now come back to bed, we've got hours yet before either of us has to actually be awake. Best not to waste it." Rinoa sent. Squall nodded silently and allowed her to tow him back to their bed.

As they cuddled together, Rinoa whispered, "My doctor's appointment is tomorrow."

"Which doctor's appointment? Didn't we have the twins in to see their new pediatrician last week?" Squall asked her quietly.

"My OB/GYN. Six weeks, remember?" Rinoa reminded him.
"Oh. Oh... that doctor's appointment." Squall sent, kissing her gently under her ear and caressing her now much tighter abdomen. Once given the okay by her doctor, Rinoa had taken advantage of Squall's offer and had begun doing gentle exercises to strengthen her middle. As her abdominal muscles got stronger, her backaches eased until now they were all but gone.

The obvious side benefit to that was the fact that Rinoa's figure had mostly returned to its former shape. Mostly. As she was currently breastfeeding the babies, and would be for some time to come, that portion of her anatomy had definitely changed. But it was a change that Squall had no problems with…. at all.

Blinking sleepily, Squall yawned and pulled Rinoa tighter to him, letting her feel how happy he was that by tomorrow evening, things would truly be back to normal between them. Rinoa smiled. She couldn't wait either.

The day that Squall and Rinoa had returned to Balamb they were greeted by a veritable mob of well-wishers; the entire population of Balamb and Garden, along with several media representatives, had all gathered to greet them.

Quistis had already gotten Squall's okay on the press statement that they'd released on his behalf two weeks prior to his arrival, and both he and Rinoa had fielded numerous requests for photographs of the infants and interviews. After some initial hesitation on Squall's part, he agreed to release a photo of the twins to the press. He hadn't yet decided on doing an interview however.

The resounding cheer that rose from the gathered crowd when they emerged from the Ragnarok left Squall both surprised and a little embarrassed. Of course, he'd never been very comfortable with the more public aspects of his job as commander. Still, he put a good face on it and gave a sketchy wave as he escorted Rinoa and Ellone, each carrying one of the babies, down the ramp.

Rinoa had smiled over at him and sent, "I know this makes you uncomfortable, but I personally think you deserve it. You ARE their hero you know."

"But it wasn't just me, everyone here played their part. Don't they deserve recognition too?" Squall responded.

"Of course they do sweetheart. And I know you'll figure out a way to do that." Rinoa sent.

But Squall didn't have a clue of how to do that, and really, the only thing he had on his mind right that moment was getting back to his place and figuring out where they were going to put the babies while he worked on getting all of their belongings back from Deling City.

Fortunately, that was something he didn't need to worry about. When he, Rinoa and Ellone entered his room, they were greeted by all of their friends. They had all gathered there to throw an impromptu welcome home/ baby shower, organized by whom else but Selphie.

In addition to organizing the party, she'd also taken it upon herself to get everything from Squall's home in Deling City packed up and brought back to Balamb, a fact that Squall quickly discovered, once he glanced around his apartment.

Rinoa happily hugged Selphie, thanking her effusively for doing them that service, and she said, "Well, Irvy helped too, once he came home."

Squall meanwhile thanked Irvine and Zell, who both grinned down at the currently sleeping babies.
"Wow, they've gotten big since the last time I saw them," Irvine commented.

"They're way cuter than the picture you sent last week." Zell said.

"Thanks. I'd better put them to bed. Did you guys set up the bassinets?" Squall said.

"Yeah." Irvine nodded. Squall thanked them and brought both babies into the bedroom and put them to bed.

When he returned, he said, "Thank you Selphie, for doing this for us. I honestly hadn't a clue that you were planning this."

Selphie smiled at him and said, "Well, I did ask you about it, and I believe your response was 'whatever'. I took that to mean 'thank you Selphie, I appreciate the help'."

Rinoa came up then and smiled at Selphie, slipping her arm around Squall's waist, saying, "I'm sure that's exactly what he meant, right?"

"That's right." Squall agreed.

The party was kept short and simple, in deference to the time difference between Balamb and Esthar, as well as the needs of the two currently sleeping infants in the other room. Gifts were handed out, with Selphie and Irvine both presenting Squall and Rinoa with a small beautifully carved wooden box.

"I stopped in Timber on the way home and picked this up. Zone made it, Watts had it carved; it's made from spicewood. They wanted you to have something nice to put Angelo's ashes in. They both say they're planning on coming up soon to visit you guys and see the babies. Watts has to bring your car back anyway." Irvine explained, handing them the box. Selphie, her eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears, gave Rinoa Angelo's collar.

Rinoa took the collar and hugged Selphie, thanking her. Squall took the box and the collar and put them on a nearby shelf. Feeling the weight of the box, Squall figured that Irvine had already placed the ashes in it.

It engendered many a comment over the next several days as Caraway paid them another visit. He'd made the trip from Deling City to Esthar several times to see Rinoa and the babies, gratified at their progress and his daughter's recovery. He was, fortunately, the polar opposite of Laguna, gingerly handling the babies as though they were spun glass, gravely speaking to them as they stared up at him. Before he left, he offered to see if the breeder who'd produced Angelo still had his parents. If so, then when Squall and Rinoa were ready, he could get them both another dog. It wouldn't be exactly the same, but it would be close.

Edea and Cid too, noticed the box when they came to visit, both offering their sympathies when informed of its contents.

The first couple of weeks back were a blur of exhaustion for them both, and Ellone's help then was deeply appreciated. Gradually however, the babies took more at every feeding and slept longer in between. By the time Ellone left to return to Esthar, Squall and Rinoa had more or less gotten a sense of the twins' sleeping and feeding patterns, and had even begun to more or less work on a schedule.

And each day as they grew bigger, stronger and healthier, Squall simply watched in fascination, as both children also seemed to get even cuter. Both he and Rinoa experienced a little frustration however when they noticed that both babies' eyes remained a colorless gray even as their hair
colors became obvious.

Saber had his mother's inky black hair, while Julia…. Was a redhead? While confusing on the surface, a little thought brought the conclusion that it was Squall's genetics that produced that vibrant color. While not obvious, he did have red tones to his hair, as did his mother. And while he knew nothing at all of his family tree on his mother's side, it wasn't too difficult a stretch to consider the possibility of a titian haired family member existing somewhere at some point.

As far as the eye color went, both Squall and Rinoa knew it could take several months before it actually developed. It didn't stop them from wondering if both children would have their mother's brown eyes, or their father's clear turquoise.

Once the babies had settled into a routine, Squall began pitching in with the reconstruction efforts, lending a hand despite being officially on leave. His return to work as commander ironically coincided with Rinoa's six-week checkup, so he wouldn't be able to help with the babies. Selphie had fortunately volunteered to baby-sit while Rinoa went to her doctor's appointment.

He supposed he really didn't have room to complain. The manner in which he'd left had him thinking that he wouldn't in fact be Commander any longer. He was prepared for that possibility, though deep down, he did wonder what he'd do if that weren't part of his life. He hadn't considered how much a part of his identity it had become.

Rinoa's checkup and his return to work also coincided with the completion of the Balamb Hotel. Roughly eight weeks after it had been leveled by the hurricane, the hotel was rebuilt and once again opened for business.

"Are you sure you and Irvine are both going to be okay with this?" Rinoa asked Selphie anxiously.

"YES. Rin, for the hundredth time, we are going to be okay. You've got more than enough milk stored for us in the fridge, so I say, if you want to rent a room in the hotel for the night, go right ahead." Selphie assured her.

"You know I can't go that long without nursing or pumping or something, I'll be in agony." Rinoa said, looking over her wardrobe choices and feeling more and more apprehensive by the moment.

"Well, okay, maybe overnight is a bit of a stretch for you at this point. But seriously, take as long as you can Rin. You both need a break." Selphie said.

Biting her lip as she pawed through her clothes, she wondered, "Will I even be able to get into any of these dresses? I mean, I don't weigh but a pound or two above what I did before I got pregnant but…"

"Rinoa, trust me, you look great. Aside from the stretch marks, nobody would be able to tell you'd ever been pregnant. One thing though…. That nursing bra's gotta go." Selphie said.

"Stretch marks?" Rinoa moaned, adding, "I need the nursing bra, what if I… um… spring a leak?"

"Well, I say pump both out real good, that should hold you for a couple of hours at least. And wear this." Selphie advised, holding up a merry widow Rinoa had bought for her honeymoon.

"Oh, I don't know. That thing was snug before I got pregnant…" Rinoa frowned.

Selphie shrugged, "try it on, see if you can still wear it."
"Okay." Rinoa said, removing her bra and struggling into the lingerie. It took a bit of adjusting, but it fit more or less like it had before, with the exception of the top…. which was much too tight. Even adjusting the straps brought only a little relief. It wouldn't take long for it to be painfully uncomfortable.

"Wow, you really are spilling out of the top there Rin. When Squall gets a look at that, I don't think you'll be wearing it long enough to be uncomfortable in it." Selphie grinned.

"All right. I still don't know what dress to wear…" Rinoa frowned. She and Selphie both debated the choices, finally settling on a deep, midnight blue silk dress that worked with the lingerie and showed off Rinoa's enhanced cleavage wonderfully.

"Okay, that takes care of that. Now, just give me a few minutes to take care of this." She said, getting the breast pump out. Selphie obligingly helped Rinoa out of the lingerie to allow her to express milk from her breasts, then once that task was done, helped her back into it.

Selphie went to put the resulting milk in the fridge while Rinoa continued getting ready. Squall would be home in just a few minutes, and she wanted to be ready to go as soon as he arrived.

Meanwhile, Squall was just finishing up in his office, feeling just slightly overwhelmed by all the catching up he needed to do. There was no question of even attempting to finish it all on his first day back, so he wisely decided to put the unfinished work aside to tackle when he came in the next morning and began shutting down his computer.

A knock at his door had him grimacing and calling out, "come in."

"Hey man." Irvine sauntered in, and grinned at him, "I came up here to remind you that you have a very important date tonight, Commander sir, but it looks like you actually remembered. Bravo!"

"Yeah, well, there's no way I hell I'll get all this stuff done in one day, so there wasn't any point to even trying." Squall said, locking his desk.

"What do you guys plan on doing tonight? Like I have to ask…" Irvine commented with a smirk.

Squall gave Irvine a droll look as he locked the door to his office, saying, "The Balamb Hotel's just reopened today and they're having an open house. Thought we'd check it out…"

"And maybe rent a room? Hmmm?" Irvine asked with a wink.

"Irvine, you do realize that if we do rent a room, you and Selphie might end up babysitting all night." Squall warned as they headed toward the lift.

"Hey, take all the time you need buddy." Irvine grinned at him, punching the button to the appropriate floor.

"Sure, you say that now. But have you ever dealt with newborn twins before?" Squall asked him.

"How hard can it be? All they do is eat, sleep and poop, right?" Irvine asked. Squall burst out laughing. The bell rang as they reached their floor and the left the elevator, with Squall still chuckling.

Finally he said, "Sure Irvine. Sure." My friend, you are SO going to get educated… he thought in amusement. Not that the twins were at all difficult, they were actually very sweet and not at all as fussy as some he'd heard of…. and he'd heard of a lot, while they'd been in the NICU ward at the Esthar hospital.
"Oh! Hey, I almost forgot. Here…” Irvine pressed several small packets into Squall's hand.

"Irvine, what…” Squall began, then glanced down and saw what they were. Condoms.

"Just in case. Give your wife a break man, she just had twins." Irvine said.

Squall was about to protest, then realized that he and Rinoa hadn't actually gotten around to discussing that sort of thing, and the fact was, if she'd managed to get pregnant once, it was very possible it could happen again. Another pregnancy this soon after giving birth? No. It would be horribly unfair to her. Not to mention actually dangerous. After nearly losing her to childbirth, Squall found he wasn't willing to take that risk again. So instead, he stuffed the condoms into his pocket and thanked Irvine for his thoughtfulness.

They arrived at Squall's room to find Selphie cradling Julia in her arms, cooing softly to her while feeding her a bottle. Irvine smiled at the sight and approached her, giving her a soft kiss on the cheek.

"Hi baby. How's everything goin?" Irvine asked her.

"Fine so far." She answered.

"Where's Rinoa?" Squall asked.

"She'll be out in a minute. How was work?" Selphie asked him.

Squall shrugged, "It was work. Why do you ask?"

"I heard something about a new garden?" Selphie asked him.

"Oh. We got a request several weeks ago from Dollet; they want to build a Garden there. All of the other Garden headmasters have reviewed it and were just waiting on me to look it over and offer my opinion on it before they approve it." Squall answered.

"So? What do you think about it then? A new Garden in Dollet?" Selphie asked him, interested.

"I don't know yet, I've just barely started to review the proposal. At least they've gotten a little more creative with the name." Squall said.

"Oh yeah? What do they want to call it?" Irvine asked, interested.

"Radiant Garden. I guess its more interesting than simply calling it 'Dollet Garden'." Squall answered, wondering what was taking Rinoa so long, and trying to decide if he should stay in his uniform or change into civilian clothing. Like any intelligent man, he decided to consult his wife.

"Rin? Should I change or stay in uniform?" He sent.

"Hmmmm... You're just wearing your normal one, right? Not the formal dress uniform?" She responded.

"I don't wear my formal uniform to work sweetheart, you should know that by now." Squall answered.

"Then change. I'll be out in a minute." Rinoa responded.

True to her word, Rinoa emerged from the bedroom and smiled radiantly at Squall. Her hair was pinned up in an attractively messy style that had inky dark strands framing her face. Her makeup
was subtle, enhancing her dark eyes, flawless skin and ruby red lips. But the dress…. the midnight silk flowed down her body like water, hugging and showing off each curve.

Both men simply stared, with Irvine mumbling, "Damn!"

Selphie grinned over at Rinoa, saying, "Told ya. I think you just shorted out Squall's brain."

He silently agreed with her. He was married to this woman, but suddenly felt like he'd just met her and couldn't think of a goddamn thing to say.

Rinoa for her part sent her appreciation of seeing him in uniform, telling him, "On second thought honey, you look sexy as hell just as you are. Don't bother changing. Let's just get out of here."

He slipped his hands around her now slender waist when she approached him, pulling her against him in a hug, and murmuring, "Selphie, Irvine? Don't wait up for us."

Irvine grinned broadly at the aggressively sexy image Rinoa projected, appreciating her and Selphie's efforts in that direction. There was no question of Squall resisting that.

Taking his hat off, he fanned himself with it, saying, "Whew! It's getting hot in here! You guys better go before the place goes into meltdown."

Rinoa smiled at him and Selphie, pulling out of Squall's arms for a moment to approach Selphie and stroke little Julia's cheek. Then Squall reclaimed her and they turned toward the door.

Before they left, Rinoa asked Selphie anxiously, "You have Squall's new phone number, right?"

"Yes. We'll be fine guys, you go have fun." Selphie reassured them.

They headed toward the garage, and Rinoa smiled over at Squall, catching an echo of her apprehension coming from him as well.

"Nervous about leaving them, aren't you?" Rinoa asked.

Knowing it was no use denying it when Rinoa could detect it easily, he nodded, "Yeah. I am. Is that weird?"

"No." Rinoa reassured him, squeezing his hand. They reached his car, which had been returned to them by Watts awhile ago, and got in.

"It's really impressive that they got the hotel rebuilt so fast. Eight weeks? They'll be able to hold the Midwinter Ball there this year after all." Rinoa said, watching the countryside slide past, the Alcauld plains washed with wan winter twilight. The road had been rebuilt too; it had been the first thing that had been rebuilt. It made it easier to get the debris cleaned up and the necessary heavy equipment into the area to begin reconstruction.

The cobbled streets were once again clean, homes and businesses in various stages of reconstruction. Squall smiled over at Rinoa as she exclaimed at seeing Ma Dincht's home virtually completed, lacking only a coat of paint and some interior finishing touches.

"Yeah, Zell's pretty proud of that. Lots of people have pitched in to help though." Squall commented.

"You included. Have your carpentry skills improved then?" Rinoa smiled over at him.

"They must have. All of my fingers are intact." Squall shrugged. Rinoa laughed. Then quieted as
they pulled into the parking area near the harbor.

Squall quickly got out of the car and came around to her side, gallantly opening the door for her and helping her out of the car.

"My, aren't we the gentleman tonight?" Rinoa smiled.

"I have my moments." Squall smiled back. Rinoa turned and gazed out at the harbor as Squall shut the door.

"Rin?" he asked, taking her hand, seeing her attention focused out to sea.

"It's… so beautiful…" She whispered. It was. The quay had been repaired, and looked like it always had, with ships moored along the rebuilt wharf. Fishing boats, trawlers, sailboats, and houseboats, along with the amphibious assault craft the SeeDs used moored in their own secure slip, all lined up neatly in their assigned spaces.

Seabirds cried and sailed on the freshening breeze as the sun set over the ocean, the diffuse winter light still managing to dust the scene with gold. But the sunset itself was what had caught and held Rinoa's attention.

Ragged, wispy clouds were dragged across the sky by the breeze, gilded by the setting sun, tinted with rose and vermilion as twilight advanced into night. As they both watched, the golden light faded and crimson light blazed across the sky.

"Red skies at night…" She said softly.

"Sailor's delight." Squall said, slipping his arm around her waist and kissing her cheek.

"What's that mean?" Rinoa asked as she followed his silent encouragement and walked with him toward the hotel.

"It's a maritime proverb. It's an omen of fair weather in the morning." Squall answered her as they reached the hotel and walked in.

"Oh, my…" Rinoa said, eyes wide as she scanned the lobby of the hotel, awestruck. It looked like the original Balamb Hotel…but somehow, better. Larger, brighter, the décor echoed its seaside location in blues and greens, much like the original did, but here and there subtle changes could be seen. New furnishings, fresh flowers, plush carpeting along with the smell of fresh paint and varnish added to the hotel's new ambience.

Squall led Rinoa through the lobby, crossing the threshold of two opened double doors that led to a beautifully decorated ballroom that seemed to contain the entire population of Balamb.

The hotel manager, and the owner, both greeted them enthusiastically, with the owner exclaiming, "Commander Leonhart! We weren't aware that you and your wife were coming! Welcome! There's champagne and refreshments over there, just help yourselves!" The man urged, waving them toward a table at the far end of the ballroom.

The manager however, said, "Not before I greet Mrs. Leonhart properly." Turning his attention to Rinoa, he said, "Thank you so much for coming my dear, you look stunning." Taking her hand into both of his, he gave her a wide smile, bending down to kiss it gently.

"The hotel looks lovely. Better than it did before, actually." Rinoa smiled back at the man.
"Thank you. Well, enjoy yourselves, I think we all deserve it." the man said, waving his hand into the ballroom itself.

Squall nodded with a slight smile and escorted Rinoa into the ballroom, feeling more than a little smug at the frankly admiring looks she got.

"You're actually enjoying the fact that I'm being ogled by just about every male here?" Rinoa sent in surprise.

"Hell yes. Just like you get to go home with 'Commander Hotness', I get to go home with my stunningly gorgeous wife. How could I NOT love that?" Squall sent.

"Took you long enough to mention it." Rinoa thought, sending her amusement at his tongue-tied reaction earlier.

"Well, Selphie was right. You DID short-circuit my brain. Of course, you blow my mind on a regular basis anyway..." Squall responded. Rinoa laughed softly, catching his meaning.

They meandered their way though the gathering, Rinoa smiling and greeting friends that they both knew, Squall too, shaking hands and visiting with people. It shouldn't have surprised him that so many people greeted him so warmly; he was a member of their community too. It was the main reason why he'd expended so much effort into saving the citizens of Balamb from the hurricane; he cared for them. All of them; from Captain Charlie, decked out in his uniquely pirate-like splendor, sipping a dainty glass of champagne, to the mayor, greeting everyone with his usual bombastic humor, to the sheriff, who gripped Squall's hand firmly in greeting.

But he didn't feel as though he merited all of that adulation. He'd gotten them out of harm's way, sure, but the true heroes, at least in Squall's eyes, were those who'd pitched in and started to rebuild the town in the aftermath. He'd played his part, but he wasn't the only one.

"Squall! Hey, I didn't know you and Rinoa were coming! How're the babies?" Zell bounced up, giving Squall an enthusiastic hug, pounding his back, before pulling Rinoa into a considerably gentler embrace and kissing her cheek.

"They're fine, Irvine and Selphie are babysitting tonight." Rinoa said, smiling.

Zell chuckled, "Wonder if they'll end up rethinking the whole parenthood idea." A petite, pretty brunette came up to Zell and slipped her arms around his waist, kissing him on the cheek.

"Hey baby," He smiled, kissing her back.

"Oh, I'm sure they're little angels, aren't they?" The girl smiled at Rinoa.

"They are indeed. But, they are babies. Angels or not, they can be exhausting." Rinoa smiled back.

"So I hear. I'll bet it feels good to be out for a change. I have to say, you're looking great Rinoa." The girl said in admiration.

"Thanks. And yes, it does feel good." Rinoa sighed then, looking around the ballroom and saying, "This place looks amazing. I understand you had a hand in this Zell? Along with rebuilding your mom's house?"

"Yeah," Zell said shrugging.

"Looked like you were almost done." Squall said.
"Yup. Ready for paint in a few days. You in?" Zell asked him, grinning.

"Sure." Squall said, smiling slightly as Zell clapped him on the back enthusiastically.

"Awesome! It'll be a blast!" He grinned. His grin faded as his girlfriend whispered something to him, then widened.

"Hey guys, I'll talk to ya later. Have fun!" he waved at them as his girlfriend led him away.

Rinoa smiled at Squall, asking, "wonder what they're up to?"

"Not what you think," he smiled at her, gesturing toward the center of the ballroom where some couples were dancing. Zell and his girlfriend were gliding gracefully around the room, pressed close together.

Rinoa raised her eyebrows and said, "Well, that is a surprise. I didn't think he knew how to dance like that." Taking her hand, Squall started threading his way through the crowd.

"Well, you know," he said casually, "we did go to the same school together. Took the same classes, even ended up graduating the same day." Then he stopped and pulled her close to him, and Rinoa suddenly noticed that they were in the middle of the ballroom where people were dancing around them.

"Approach your target unobtrusively at a dance party, remember? If I could figure out how to dance, he certainly could as well." Squall said softly, beginning to guide Rinoa in time to the music.

"How could I forget?" Rinoa smiled up at him, enjoying the way his body spoke to hers as they moved together on the dance floor. Folding her hand in his, Squall rested it against his chest and leaned his cheek against her hair, sighing.

He smiled slightly to himself, knowing she was fully aware that his apparent reluctance to dance with her was mostly for show now. He enjoyed it as much as she did, mainly because he got to hold her in his arms, although sometimes it was fun to surprise other people with how well he danced.

They worked their way around the room, gliding as gracefully as Zell and his girlfriend had. They ended up near the edge of the dance floor when the song ended.

"I think we need to check out the rooms upstairs." He suggested, his emotional overtones showing Rinoa plainly why he was so interested in doing that.

Rinoa smiled up at him, "I agree." Taking her hand, he led her out of the ballroom and up to the front desk. After a brief exchange with the concierge, he got a room key and they headed upstairs.

"That was quick. I'd have thought they'd be booked up because of the party." she commented as they walked down the hallway, looking for their room.

Squall smirked slightly at her, saying "I reserved the room earlier today. I wasn't sure if we'd get to use it or not, but I went ahead and did it just in case." They finally reached the room, which turned out to be a suite, much to Rinoa's surprise.

She gasped as he unlocked and pushed open the double doors with a flourish, "Squall it's gorgeous! But isn't this a bit extravagant? I mean, I would love to stay the entire night, but..."
"Don't worry. It didn't cost as much as you think." He said, locking the doors behind them. The spacious suite had a kitchenette and dining room, as well as a sitting room. Plush carpeting in cream covered the floors, polished wood gleamed everywhere: the dining room table, end tables in the sitting room, the coffee table. A couch and loveseat occupied the sitting room, both comfortably overstuffed and upholstered in a pale blue and cream pattern. That same color scheme, with just a hint of sea green, was echoed in the wallpaper.

Rinoa walked across the room, taking it in, Squall following her as she investigated the bedroom, spying the glass-paned doors at one end, which obviously led to a balcony.

She turned then and smiled at him, asking him, "You really dig balconies, don't you?"

He approached her and slid his hands around her waist, smiling down at her, saying, "Some of my fondest memories involve balconies. So, yeah, I really do dig them."

"Which one is your favorite?" Rinoa asked curiously.

Squall's smile turned wistful as he answered, "The day that Garden became mobile… remember? It was just floating along on the sea; we had no real control over it. They'd just made me commander, and here you came, waltzing into my room to wake me up and ask for a tour."

"I remember that. You seemed so… irritated. Like I got on your nerves. I didn't think you liked me at all, you were just putting up with me because you had to." Rinoa said, her own hands slipping around his waist.

"I was, at first. You did get on my nerves. You confused me, attracted me, irritated me… my whole world was thrown into disarray and you seemed to be at the center of it all. I didn't know what to do or how to feel… but then, I took you out to the balcony after walking around garden with you. You looked back at me, with the wind in your hair, and this sparkle in your eyes… and smiled. You were so beautiful… and I was lost. I've been lost ever since." Squall said softly, bringing his hand up and stroking her cheek lightly before bending down to kiss her.

He started lightly at first, asking, rather than demanding. Tasting and teasing, sipping at her lips, wanting more but not pushing, never pushing. When she pulled him closer, he deepened the kiss, feeling her excitement echoing his.

He brought his hands up and buried them in her hair while still kissing her, pulling it loose from the pins holding it in place, combing his fingers through the warm, fragrant silk. Obsidian silk… he thought, a memory coming to him then. It had gotten longer, reaching nearly to the middle of her back in a thick, glossy fall.

As always, when he was with her, he let himself go. No worries, no outside distractions were allowed to interfere with their time together. It was only she, and he, and what they shared. He felt from her the same hunger that he felt; the breathless desire to feel her smooth skin against his, to sink into her warmth and love her until passion exhausted them both.

He kissed and nipped gently at her shoulders and neck while working the zipper down her back, moving the straps aside to allow the dress to fall to the floor. Rinoa's eager fingers were likewise working at removing his tunic and unbuttoning his shirt, at times interfering with Squall's efforts and prompting them both to laugh at each other.

"Like a couple of horny teenagers…" Rinoa murmured in amusement.

"Wasn't that long ago." Squall grinned between kisses, adding, "But we're not teenagers any more."
"No," She replied, kissing his chest as she unbuttoned his shirt, "we're not."

He stepped back to allow Rinoa room to pull off his tunic and shirt, studying what she had been hiding under her dress with interest. He couldn't articulate what it did to him, so he simply let Rinoa feel how it affected him. Motherhood had given her curves that the lingerie she was now wearing showed off wonderfully, and he couldn't resist the urge to run his fingers along the neckline of the garment, trailing them over mounds of her breasts.

Rinoa meanwhile was running her hands all over Squall's chest before trailing her hands down to his trousers while gently pushing him back toward the bed. She got his belt unbuckled and pants undone, had just slipped her hands over the firm curve of his buttocks when he distracted her with yet another searing hot kiss.

From him, she sensed how much he enjoyed feeling her hands on his body. He also sent his frustration at the obstruction her lingerie presented to his exploration of her body. He pressed her close, trailing light, tantalizing kisses down her neck and along the top of her decolletage, before finally turning her around.

Pushing her hair aside, he made her shiver as he kissed the back of her neck, whispering, "while I truly love your inventiveness with regard to your wardrobe choices, and this thing looks sexy as hell on you… it has to come off. I want to feel and taste your skin." His hot breath on her neck, the sexy rasp of his whisper, the words he said… all made Rinoa shiver again as he worked at removing the garment, finally stripping her to bare skin.

Then her knees went weak as his hands slipped around her from behind, leaving trails of fire as he pressed her close, the warm skin of his chest and torso flush against her back. Her head fell back against his chest and she closed her eyes, a hot thrill of excitement going up and down her spine as he continued kissing and nibbling her neck, ears, and jaw line. It prompted her to arch her back, inviting Squall to trail his hands up over her ribs to cup and caress her breasts.

When one of his hands trailed lower, fingers finding and caressing her intimately, her legs quivered in response and she moaned.

"I can't stand it… you're killing me…" She thought, fighting for breath.

"Can't have that, can we?" He responded, pausing in his manipulations long enough to finish undressing. He thought about the condoms in his pants pocket, and Rinoa caught it and smiled at him.

"It's taken care of sweetheart. Don't worry." She sent. She was warmed by the concern that had prompted that "just in case" preparation.

Squall heaved a heavy sigh of relief, sending, "You sure? I don't want to risk you getting pregnant again this soon…"

"Absolutely. Now come here. We have some unfinished business to attend to." Rinoa crawled up onto the bed and laid back against the pillows, stretching her arms out to him, a beautifully sensual expression on her face. It drew Squall like a moth to a flame and he joined her, drawing her close and tracing her contours yet again. Thigh to hip, hip to waist, waist to breast, and back again.

He followed his hands with his lips, teasing and tasting her moist flesh until she was shuddering, her aching need feeding into and stoking Squall's need as well. They hadn't denied themselves any intimacy besides actual intercourse, so neither actually felt deprived. However, neither could deny that when Squall finally positioned himself and entered her, they both felt a sense of homecoming.
He paused then, detecting slight discomfort on Rinoa's part, asking, "Okay?"

"Yeah, I will be." She whispered, smiling at him.

He kissed her gently then, sending, "We'll take it slow. I didn't think you'd be this TIGHT, after..."

"Well, it HAS been awhile." Rinoa sent, and stroked her hands down his back, letting him feel her appreciation of his smooth skin, the play of his muscles beneath it as he shifted. Her hands wandered lower, and she squeezed his butt slightly, silently urging him to further action.

After hesitating a moment, he continued, keeping his movements slow and gentle, paying close attention to her comfort level. Gradually, the sensations he felt from Rinoa became more pleasurable, and he relaxed, moving with more assurance.

"You feel so good..." Squall thought, letting her know how much he'd missed this aspect of their relationship.

"So do you." Rinoa responded in kind, letting him know that despite the initial discomfort, feeling him stretching and filling her stole her breath and drove her wild. She clutched at his back, digging her nails in and holding on tight.

Heat rose, breaths came short. Tension mounted and coiled tighter and tighter as their sensations fed off each other. Passion took the lead and they both rode its crest to the peak, Rinoa tumbling off the edge with a gasping cry first, with Squall following after her.

He kissed Rinoa gently in the aftermath, feeling her heart beating just as heavily as his. Raising himself up onto his elbows, he shifted to a more comfortable position, withdrawing from her. He could still feel the afterglow of their lovemaking, the power that turned Rinoa's eyes golden still a pool of warmth between them.

Squall reached up and caressed her cheek, moving his hand lightly back over her hair, moving his fingers through it. There was nothing to be said, nothing that needed to be said. The softness in his eyes as he gazed at her showed plainly what he felt.

Sighing, he laid his head on the pillow next to her and draped his arm over her waist, pulling her close against his body.

"I've missed this. What we'd done before, while it satisfied us both, left me feeling.... incomplete, somehow." Rinoa whispered.

"Me too." Squall murmured, blinking sleepily at her. Working all day and helping Rinoa with the babies, had eaten away at his reserves. It was the same for Rinoa. Of course, it didn't help that neither of them had bothered with dinner, he realized as his stomach chose that inopportune moment to remind him of that fact.

"You're hungry too, aren't you?" Rinoa smiled at him.

"Yeah. Guess we should do something about that." He said, yawning.

"I don't want to get up and get dressed though." Rinoa said, stretching languorously and rolling onto her side, facing Squall. She cuddled close, tucking her head beneath his chin and sighed as his arm came around her and caressed her back.

"Don't have to. We're in a hotel remember? Room service." Squall smirked at her and rolled away, reaching for the phone on the bedside table.
"I love room service." Rinoa smiled at him.

"What are you in the mood for?" he asked as he dialed the number.

"Besides you? Surprise me," she said. Stretching again, she got up and went to use the facilities, picking up Squall's shirt to use as a cover up along the way. She smiled back at him as she caught his appreciation of the sight.

After she left, Squall pulled his pants on, deciding it might be a good idea to be decent so as not to embarrass the staff. He still didn't think they'd be able to spend the whole night there, so decided to make the most of the time they had.

When their food arrived, Squall generously tipped the man and went into the bedroom to inform Rinoa. A waft of cold air greeted him from the opened balcony doors, and Squall walked through them to see Rinoa leaning against the stone balustrade.

He shivered slightly in the chill and came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her and asking, "Aren't you cold?"

She leaned back against him and answered, "Yeah, but look at this view. Gorgeous." She indicated the expanse of beach that their room faced, the starlit surf providing a soothing whisper in the background. Far off in the distance and inland, Balamb Garden's lights could be seen clearly.

He gazed in that direction and asked her silently, "Can you feel them from here?"

"Yes. Can you?" She responded. Noticing her serene attitude, he concluded that she hadn't sensed anything of concern.

"Only through you. I can sense them on my own when I'm in the same room, but my talents in that area aren't as strong as yours." Squall answered.

Kissing her neck, he told her, "Dinner's here. Still hungry?"

"Yeah." She answered, turning to face him.

"Then let's go eat." He said, kissing her.

They stayed in the room as long as they could, enjoying the dinner brought up immensely before making love once again and even falling asleep for a while. But Rinoa's aching, milk-heavy breasts finally prompted them to reluctantly get dressed and leave, heading back home to Balamb Garden.

________________________________________________________________________

A soft whimper woke Rinoa, and she felt Julia's hunger as she fussed. Rolling over to get up, she noticed that Squall was gone. Yawning, she put her robe on, wondering where he was. Picking the baby up, she carried her into the living room where their new rocking chair sat. It soothed both her and the babies to rock while they nursed, and made things much easier for Rinoa.

She glanced at the clock as she sat down and rearranged her clothing to allow Julia to nurse, noting that dawn was not far off. Perhaps Squall had gone out on a run.

Then she glanced toward the couch and smiled. Squall lay stretched out on the couch, sound asleep. Saber lay on his chest, also sound asleep, held securely in place by Squall's hand. The other hand rested on his stomach. An empty baby bottle sat on the floor next to the couch.

Rinoa's heart squeezed at the sight, and she desperately wished she had a camera handy. She knew
there would be plenty of such moments, but this one was just so precious it had to be recorded. Unfortunately, even if she had a camera handy, she wouldn't have been able to snap a photo…not while she was busy nursing Julia at any rate.  

So she contented herself instead by watching both him and the baby sleep, remembering the boy he had been, not so long ago, and loving the man he'd grown into now.  

When the baby was done with nursing, Rinoa carried her back into the bedroom and gently changed her diaper, finally managing to do it without waking her. Laying the infant back into her bassinet, Rinoa returned to the living room and gently took Saber from his father, putting him back into his bassinet as well.  

Returning to the living room one final time, Rinoa sat down on the edge of the couch next to Squall and stroked his face gently, brushing lightly across his mind, waking him. He sighed, stirring, and blinked up at her.  

"Come back to bed sweetheart." Rinoa whispered.  

He nodded wordlessly and followed her into the bedroom, fingers tangled with hers. When they got into bed he folded her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. She responded by tightening her arms around him before relaxing and gradually returning to sleep, with Squall joining her. For this moment in time at least, all was right with the world, and both Squall and Rinoa couldn't have been happier.  

Chapter End Notes  

Author's Note: Yes, I did include a random KH reference in here (a couple of them, actually...) but that does not mean I have any intention of writing a crossover. I don't own the games and have never played them, so I'm not familiar at all with the story. HOWEVER, that may change if I do manage to get ahold of KH and KH2 and actually play them. Meanwhile, you all have my permission to let your own imaginations go wild.  

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!