

## Bad Blood

A Final Fantasy VIII story by Neb

Squall sat in the passenger's seat of the Ragnarok, quietly looking out of the window. Selphie, piloting, had stopped talking for possibly the first time since they'd left Balamb, and Squall was in no mood to set her off again. Not that he didn't like Selphie— quite the contrary. It was just that this was the first time Squall had been sent on a mission since Ultimecia's defeat three months ago, and he wanted to be sharp.

Upon his return from the time-compressed future, everyone had treated the six of them as heroes, legends. And not just in Garden— they were all international heroes. Some, like Zell and Irvine, adored the publicity, couldn't get enough of talking to the media. But it was Squall they were really interested in. He was the young commander of the Garden, the leader of the group who finally defeated the evil sorceress. Squall didn't feel like talking then and he sure as hell was not about to change his mind. He was a SeeD, first and foremost, and that's how he was going to stay. Hell, he wasn't even the highest-ranking SeeD in Garden, and he totally expected to be despatched on new missions as soon as the fuss had died down (Garden still needed funding, and Headmaster Kramer saw no better way than to rent out SeeDs, same as always). Only when the fuss died down, Cid had done something that Squall found horrifying.

“Excuse me?” Squall had said. He had heard Cid word for word, but was quite unsure whether or not this was some sort of unfunny joke.

“I meant what I said, Squall,” Replied Cid. “I want you to stay on as Garden Commander. You've proven yourself to have a clear head and strength of character, despite your young age. The young students look up to you. They idolise you.”

*Yeah, right,* Squall had thought.

“If you walk down the corridors of this Garden, you'll hear them all talking about you, about how they're so desperate to impress you.”

Squall had had enough at this point. He was never the most talkative of people, but he couldn't contain himself any longer.

“What exactly is it about me that they idolise? What makes me this legendary figure, like some kind of mystic warrior sent from Hyne?”

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Cid shook his head dismissively, before replying. Somehow, his words managed to start to convince Squall. “It’s the intangibles, Squall. Tell me, why did you fight Ultimecia, even though you knew you almost certainly wouldn’t return alive?”

Squall lowered his head. He was losing the argument, and he knew it. But, he wasn’t about to go down without a fight. “Because it was what I was trained for.”

“More than that, Squall. It was because you cared about what happened to the world. What happened to its inhabitants. You didn’t want to be a hero. No true heroes ever do. But you came back, and you are a hero. You owe it to them, you owe it to yourself, to live up to those responsibilities and lead this Garden. It’s your destiny.”

Squall sighed, then reluctantly offered Cid his hand. “You’ve got yourself a Commander then, Sir.”

Cid took Squall’s hand and shook it, a broad smile developing on his face. “Call me Cid.”

Being a hero was fine for Squall. Being a role model was also OK; kind of flattering in a sense (although he wished the students, his crew, in a way, would stop wearing those furry jackets), but what disturbed him most was being taken off active duty. He was a fighter, probably the best in Garden, certainly the greatest gunblade fighter the world had ever seen. But Cid once again had a speech lined up for Squall–

“It’s not all fun and games, being a hero.”

Squall nodded at that– it was hardly fun and games at all. The ritual for new inductees seemed to be “speech by Headmaster Kramer, followed by having your photo taken with the hero”. He felt like an old war–horse, which was dragged out for parades so all the little children could point at it. And he hated it.

“You need,” Cid continued, “To remember that your presence boosts morale. If you’re hurt, or god forbid, killed, then the morale of the Garden will go straight through the floor.”

“You can always hire another Garden Commander,” Squall retorted.

“Yes I can,” Cid agreed, “But I can’t hire another Squall Leonheart.”

Squall conceded defeat at this point— Cid was his boss, after all, and while Squall may have had his ear, Cid’s word was ultimately final. So, Squall sat down at his new desk, delegating out tasks, and watching as his friends, Zell, Irvine (who Cid had made a SeeD following Ultimecia’s defeat, as he wasn’t beforehand), Selphie, Nida (but not Quistis, who had re-assumed her teaching position) went out to the front lines to keep the peace. Squall got slightly depressed, but at the end of the day, he was always happy.

Because of her.

Somehow, this beautiful raven-haired girl had managed to work her way into his life until the thought of life without her was to Squall like living without arms or legs. She’d taken up SeeD entry classes after the defeat of Ultimecia. While she may have been a bit old, at the age of 17, no one could argue that she wasn’t as capable as any SeeD. Nonetheless, Rinoa herself insisted that she be tutored properly, and Quistis had been only too happy to oblige.

Squall and Rinoa had grown very, very close very, very quickly, and within a week had decided that separate quarters were not for them. Amazingly, despite his dislike of students getting romantically involved with each other, Cid had not only granted their request but had moved them to what was known as “the honeymoon suite” of the Garden, complete with four-poster king-sized bed. Squall had at first been tempted to turn it down, but when he saw the grin on Rinoa’s face, he knew that they’d be happy in their new quarters. They spent every night together, except for the odd one when Rinoa was on an outside training mission, and they were happy. Then, just as Squall was settling down to his new life, Cid called him to his office with a message.

“You’ve got a mission, Squall.” Said Cid from behind his desk, which was now located in front of the lift leading to the bridge.

“Me? I thought I wasn’t active any more.”

“Consider yourself re-activated, Squall.” Cid had a serious tone in his voice. “You’ve been personally asked for, and the money they’re offering is just too tempting. You’ll be gone 3 days maximum, so the effect on the students should be minimal, and you’ll take the Ragnarok to cut transit time.”

Squall had another lapse in self-containment. “Who are “they”, Cid? Who requested my personal presence?”

Cid replied with words that didn’t exactly fill Squall with confidence.

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“President Loire.”

If anyone had become a bigger hero than Squall since Ultimecia’s defeat, then it was Laguna. Sure, he was a bumbling, incompetent fool (as Squall had, rather cruelly, let it be known during their first meeting), but he must have had an ocean full of those intangibles Cid spoke of. Squall had felt a connection with Laguna from the very first moment he experienced “being” him in the dream world Ellone sent him to, but he could never explain it. Still, Laguna had paid for Squall’s presence, and Squall’s presence he was going to get. After managing to persuade Rinoa that she could live without him for three days, Squall (accompanied by Selphie) left on the Ragnarok for Esthar. All the way there, however, Squall couldn’t stop thinking about Rinoa– he had an unusual feeling that something bad was going to happen to her. Fortunately, Selphie was able to put his mind at ease with her constant enthusiasm, to the point where Squall couldn’t remember why he bothered being pessimistic at all. Ever.

“Woo–hoo! Squall! Look!” Cried Selphie from the pilot’s seat. Squall craned his head so he could get a look at what was making the bubbly girl even more bubbly than usual.

“It’s the Esthar presidential palace. We’ve been there hundreds of times.”

“Oh, YOU! You really know how to spoil a moment, don’t you?” Retorted Selphie. Squall had to remind himself that it was just eagerness on her part and not unprofessionalism, but he was itching to get his teeth into this mission, whatever it may be.

The Ragnarok landed at Esthar air station, and Squall disembarked, to be greeted by Ward and Kiros, high–ranking government officials of Esthar, and Laguna’s closest friends. They approached him, and Ward stared down on him.

“Ward says,” Kiros interjected, “The President wishes to see you immediately.”

“Then let’s not keep him waiting,” replied Squall. The old Squall would have probably replied “whatever”, and sat down and sulked for the whole shuttle tube ride to the palace, but the new Squall was noticeably softer. Squall noticed too.

*I’ve been spending too much time with Irvine and Selphie*, he thought. They certainly knew how to talk, and Squall’s one–word answers were getting to be embarrassingly short compared to their ramblings. Before he could complete his thought, however, the car had stopped and Kiros and Ward were gesturing for him to

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disembark and follow them. He did so, up to the doors of the presidential office, where Ward and Kiros dutifully stopped, and opened the door for him.

*He's certainly got them well trained*, Squall thought, before realising that they probably saw it as an honour to work for Laguna, much as his students felt under his command. *Damned intangibles*, Squall thought again. He stepped into the office, to be greeted by the man with whom he'd shared so many memories of the past, the man with whom he felt a strange bond.

"Hi!" Said Laguna, strangely nervous. *So this mission's got him rattled too*, thought Squall.

"P-please, sit down," Laguna gestured to a chair in front of the desk. Squall sat down, as Laguna took his seat behind his desk. There were a few awkward seconds where neither one spoke, Laguna twiddling his thumbs, trying to gather his thoughts. Eventually, Squall broke the deadlock.

"So what's this mission you have for me?" Asked Squall, making Laguna jump with his words. *Geez*, thought Squall, *he's more nervous than I thought*.

"I'll have to come clean to you, Squall," Laguna said, "there is no mission. Not really."

Squall stood up and walked a few paces away. He couldn't believe it— dragged away from his work, his friends, and most importantly of all, the woman he loves, just for this fool to waste his time? Squall was about to make his feelings known when Laguna spoke again.

"I need to tell you something," Laguna continued, "and I'm not sure you're going to be happy about it," he finished, still with that definite nervous tone to his voice.

*Oh what now*, Squall thought, *I'm not going to have to stay here longer, am I?*

"It's—" Laguna stuttered, "It's about your parents."

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There was another uneasy silence. Squall had gathered, from things said by Ward and Kiros (well, mainly Kiros actually) that Laguna had known his parents, but he hadn't given it much thought. His parents were dead. People he'd never known, people he'll never know. The next few minutes were to shatter that perception into a million pieces.

"There's no easy way to say this, Squall," Laguna said, almost as if he were forcing the words out, "but me—er, that is to say, Raine and myself, we—"

Laguna paused again. Squall's mind started racing at this point.

*What? You knew my parents? You were related to them? You tracked them down?*

"Squall," Laguna continued, his eyes closed, his back now turned to the young man whose life he was making ever more complicated, "Raine and me, we were your parents. A—are, are your parents. At least, I am your father, Squall."

Squall simply looked ahead, not quite able to comprehend what he had just heard. Laguna was his father? This moron was actually his dad?

Laguna turned around to face his son.

"Squall," Laguna started, "I—"

At that moment, Squall turned on his heels and stormed out of the room, not saying a word.

"Squall!" Laguna shouted after his son. "Wait! There's so much I need to tell you!"

Squall continued walking down the corridor, past the stunned Ward and Kiros, deeply lost in thought.

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*How can he be my father? Why didn't he tell me earlier? Why did her never try to contact me? Why did he abandon me?* These were just a few of the thoughts running through the young man's head when he turned the corner and, not looking where he was going, walked straight into someone he knew very well.

"Sis!" Squall exclaimed, helping Ellone up off the floor where he, inadvertently, had knocked her.

"Squall!" The young woman exclaimed. "What are you doing in Esthar?"

Suddenly remembering, Squall lowered his head

"It's a long story. I don't really want to go into it right now."

"He told you, didn't he?" Ellone inquired. Somehow, she always knew how Squall felt. After a long pause, Squall responded.

"Yes."

"How are you taking the news?"

"How do you think?" Squall replied.

"Not well, then," Ellone observed. There was another awkward pause, while Ellone waited for Squall to ask her something. Anything. He was not forthcoming.

"You know, Squall," Ellone started, "If you need to talk, I'll always be here for you."

Squall looked up.

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“I don’t feel like talking right now,” he said. He turned around, and walked off again.

“Where are you going?” Ellone shouted after him.

“I’m going home,” Squall replied. “This was a waste of my time.”

Squall marched right out of the palace and onto the shuttle. Laguna ran out shortly afterwards, but just missed him as the monorail departed for the air station. Ellone came running up to Laguna, who was out of breath.

“Did you catch him?” Ellone asked the man who was, effectively, her father.

Laguna, still panting, shook his head.

“Don’t worry,” Ellone said, “I’m sure all he needs is some time for the news to settle in. It WAS a big shock to him.”

Laguna, straightening up, nodded his head in agreement.

“I’m sure that’s all it is. Come on, Ward and Kiros are probably wondering where we are,” he said, as they walked back to the palace, his hand on her shoulder.

Back at the Ragnarok, Squall, still in a foul mood, caught Selphie curled up in the pilot’s seat, deep in the middle of a nap.

“Selphie, wake up. We’re leaving.” Squall commanded as he slumped into the passenger seat, head pointed downwards in the sulk that had been his trademark not so long ago.

“What?” Selphie replied, sleepily. She’d been somewhat surprised when Squall barged in on her peaceful sleep giving orders left, right and centre.

“Take us back to Balamb. This has all been a waste of time,” Squall responded.

“What happened, Squall?” She asked again.

Squall replied sharply– “Selphie? Balamb? Please?”

Somewhat taken aback by the tone of his voice, Selphie simply nodded and keyed in the instructions for lift-off. She’d seen him in bad moods before, but it was a rare occasion when he was truly angry. Re-assuring herself that it was nothing she’d done, Selphie decided to initiate a conversation, fully expecting to get her head bitten off, but deciding it was worth risking it to cheer up her friend.

“Squall, what happened in Esthar?” She asked, trying to put as serious a tone as she could on her normally cheery, bouncy voice.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” was the only response she got. *OK*, thought Selphie, *time for a different approach*.

“You know, I’m only asking because you’ve returned early, and that means we might not get paid for this mission,” Selphie asked. She was sure a question about the financial side of the mission would get him to talk.

“We were paid in advance,” Squall replied. *OK then*, Selphie thought, *so much for that idea*. A few minutes passed while she prepared her next attempt to break down Squall’s defences.

“Did you see President Laguna?” She asked, with a slightly more usual, that is, upbeat tone to her voice.

“Selphie!” Squall snapped. “I said I don’t want to talk about it!”

*Ouch*, thought Selphie, *I’ve definitely hit a nerve there*. Somewhat taken aback by Squall’s tone with her, she was about to give up entirely, at least for the next few minutes, when Squall spoke again.

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“Selphie,” he started, as Selphie braced herself for another reading of the riot act, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout at you. I’m just a little on edge.”

“Squall,” Selphie replied, “You know you can talk to me about anything, no matter what it is.”

“Not this. This is heavy,” he replied.

“Is it about President Laguna?” She asked.

“That obvious, was it?” Squall asked back. Selphie simply nodded, with a sympathetic grin on her face.

“So what’s so heavy that you can’t tell one of your all-time best friends about it?” Selphie asked.

“I suppose I’ll have to tell you sooner or later,” Squall started. “Laguna, he– he claims he’s my father.”

“What!?” Selphie exclaimed. She’d not exactly been prepared for him to say THAT.

“Laguna Loire is my father, incredible as that may sound,” Squall replied.

“Your father?” Selphie asked, before saying– “That is so COOL!”

“Cool?” He asked. That wasn’t exactly the word he’d use to describe it...

“Yeah! I mean, he’s so kind and friendly, he’s warm-hearted, I wish I had a dad like that!”

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Somehow, Selphie's words made sense to him. Laguna wasn't that bad. Sure, he was clumsy at times, but then again, so was Selphie. Sure, he acted like a bit of a prat at times, but then again, so did Irvine. Sure, he said the wrong thing at times, but so did Zell. And he considered all of them family, so what could he possibly hold against Laguna?

Then it hit him.

"Then why did he never come back for me? Why did he leave me at the orphanage when he could have raised me as his son?" Squall asked. That question had been preying on his mind ever since he left Laguna's office, close to 6 hours ago.

"I don't know," Selphie shrugged. "You'll have to ask him that yourself."

Squall sighed as he hung his head. She was right. All this time he'd been running away from the problem when he should have just asked him outright. *Since when did you get so insightful?* He thought to himself about the young woman sitting in the pilot's seat.

"Wanna turn back?" Selphie asked. Squall thought it over for a few seconds, before replying.

"Nah, we're almost home anyway. I'll see if I can get some time off later this month. Then I'll go back." Squall was much calmer now. The next few minutes passed peacefully, until Selphie saw Balamb Garden.

"SQUALL!!" Selphie shouted. This time, her voice was edging closer to out and out panic.

"What's up?" Squall asked, parking himself in the co-pilot's seat. Then he saw it— a 30 ft wide, smoking hole had been blown right out of the eastern side of Balamb Garden. No wonder Selphie was close to panic— Squall was too, only he was better at not showing it. Immediately, his thoughts turned to one thing—

*Rinoa.*

Squall was immediately on top of the situation, grabbing the radio.

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“Balamb Garden, this is Ragnarok. Do you copy? Over.” There was a pause, as Selphie and Squall stared at the radio, expecting a response. None came.

“Repeat, Balamb Garden, this is Ragnarok. What is your situation? Over.” There was another pause, which again was not ended by a voice on the other end of the radio.

“Squall,” gulped Selphie, “you don’t think everyone’s—“

Squall was quick to put her mind at rest.

“No way. The blast’ll have been big, but nowhere near that big. Either the radio’s broken, or they’re too busy to answer us.”

“What should we do?”

“Set us down close to the main entrance. We have to do our best to help,” Squall replied. *And I have to know whether she’s all right...*

They landed about 500 yards from the south gate, to find monsters from the training centre everywhere. They were no match for experienced fighters like Squall and Selphie, but every second they wasted fighting them was another second they were away from the Garden... and Rinoa.

Eventually, they made it in the front gate, and were greeted by a scene of outright chaos, the likes of which had not been seen since the NORG crisis some three and a half months earlier. An exhausted Nida, noticing them, ran right up to Squall.

“Squall!” He shouted, almost out of breath. Squall and Selphie helped him onto a chair.

“What happened here? Where’s Cid? Where’s Rinoa?” Squall had many more questions, but he knew he had to be the voice of reason in these troubled times.

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“A– bomb, in the training centre,” Nida replied. “Cid and Edea are safe on the bridge. I haven’t seen Rinoa.”

*Damn!* Thought Squall. Immediately, he did what all good leaders did, and delegated.

“Nida, Selphie, head to the infirmary. Doctor Kadowaki will need all the hands she can get.”

“What are you going to do?” Asked Selphie.

“I’m going to look for Rinoa,” came Squall’s truthful answer. Secretly, he feared that his nightmare had come true, that Rinoa was– he couldn’t even bring himself to imagine it. He had to find her alive. He had to.

Fortunately, he did not have to look far, as she was standing on the steps leading to the elevator, a bit shaken but otherwise unharmed.

“Rinoa!” He shouted.

“Squall!” Came the reply he wanted to hear. Immediately, she located him in the crowd, and ran down the steps into his waiting arms. They held each other for a brief moment.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he said.

“Not while I have any say in it!” Came Rinoa’s reply. He kissed her on her forehead, when he noticed someone being stretchered away– someone he knew very well indeed.

“Zell!” He shouted after the young man lying unconscious on the stretcher. Immediately, he and Rinoa, hand in hand, rushed over to the medics attending to him.

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“What happened?” Asked Squall.

The medics were no more forthcoming than Nida had been a few moments earlier.

“There was a bomb, and—“

“I know that!” Squall snapped back. He was a little on edge— as would you be if you saw one of your best friends a bloody mess on a stretcher. “What I need to know is who planted it?”

“We don’t know, we’re just taking care of the wounded,” the flustered medic replied, obviously intimidated by the angry SeeD in front of her. Fortunately, Rinoa was on hand to calm him down.

“Squall,” came her tranquillising voice, and immediately Squall was calm and focused.

“How is he?” Squall asked of his injured friend.

“We’re not sure yet,” came the reply from the noticeably less-flustered medic. Obviously Rinoa had calmed her too. “We suspect a concussion, maybe a few broken ribs. He wasn’t too close to the blast zone but he was close enough. He should live.”

At that point the medic, deciding she’d been delayed enough, barged past Squall, taking Zell to the cafeteria, which was serving as an emergency triage facility. Rinoa took the opportunity to fill her lover in on events from her point of view.

“I’m not sure what happened exactly. I was in the cafeteria, queuing up for dinner, when there was this massive bang. The floor shook, I fell over, all the windows broke. When I got back on my feet everywhere was in a state of panic.”

“Everywhere still is,” noted Squall. He spotted a megaphone on the wall. “Time to change that.” He rushed over and grabbed the megaphone, then climbed up onto the wall and addressed the crowd.

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“Attention everybody,” came the now-booming voice over the megaphone. Suddenly, all the commotion died down. “It is imperative that you remain calm, and that those of you who are not doing anything at the moment find a task and do it. Medics, stretcher-bearers, anything, just get to it. There will be an investigation as soon as we’ve accounted for everyone.” He switched off the megaphone, and watched, amazed, as everyone took heed of his instructions and found jobs and did them. Maybe they did idolise him after all... but there was no time to think about that. He grabbed Rinoa again, and proceeded to the emergency stairs.

“Where were Quistis, Xu and Irvine?” He asked of his unaccounted friends.

“All on the second floor teaching. Irvine was showing them marksmanship skills, or something,” Rinoa responded. She was still flustered, but her boyfriend’s presence had calmed her noticeably. Squall took stock of the situation at large.

“Go find Dr. Kadowaki, and do whatever she tells you to,” said Squall. He hated ordering Rinoa about but these were exceptional circumstances. “I’m going to find Cid.” Rinoa nodded, and scuttled off. At least the danger was over for now.

He had just finished that thought, when another explosion, the same strength as the first one, rocked the Garden again, knocking Squall off his feet and sending him crashing to the bottom of the stairs, where he lost consciousness...

He was woken by Rinoa, her concerned face looking down on his. His whole face hurt. Gingerly, he touched his scar. His glove came away wet.

*Damn*, he thought, *it’s bleeding again*. However, he had no time to worry about that. The whole Garden was once again in a state of panic.

“How long was I out?” Asked Squall.

“Only half a minute, maybe,” came Rinoa’s concerned response. Squall immediately sprang into action again, retrieving his discarded megaphone. Even from his vantage point at the crossroads of the south gate, stairs and the ring corridor, he could see daylight through where the training centre once stood.

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“Attention, everyone,” Squall’s voiced came through the megaphone for the second time in as many minutes, “Again, it is vital that you do not panic and stick to your given tasks. Anybody currently in the training centre is to finish what they’re doing and evacuate immediately. Everyone else, once you’re done, assemble in the quad.”

Again, his voice had a calming effect, as everyone diligently went about their tasks. Quickly, Squall located Troy, the Garden’s resident explosives expert, and dispatched him to the rebuilt quad. Squall was damned if he was going to send the students of the Garden to their death. Again, he set off up the stairs, this time clinging onto the handrail as he climbed. On his way up, he noticed that a few of the monsters had escaped the training centre, but fortunately, there were plenty of SeeDs on hand to deal with it. He continued up to the third floor, and entered Cid’s office.

There, he found Cid, Quistis and Xu waiting for him. He entered and took the seat they had been reserving for him. Cid filled him in on the exact details of what happened, where exactly the explosions had taken place and the current casualty report from Dr. Kadowaki. He also explained that they had heard his radio calls, but could not respond. Satisfied with these explanations, Squall excused himself, explaining that he had a Garden to help out, and went back downstairs to help the students get a bearing on what had happened.

It was a full seven hours before they managed to calm everything down to a reasonable level. The training centre had been fully evacuated and sealed, except for the investigation team currently trying to piece together what had happened, and the wounded were, well, less wounded. Zell too was conscious, and asking for hotdogs.

*Guess he’s going to be fine, then.* Squall thought with a smirk. However, he then had to stifle back a yawn. It was 2AM and he was shattered. Legendary hero he may be, but he still needed his sleep, same as everyone else. Cid had ordered an investigation that wouldn’t be finished until at least Midday, so Squall had ordered everyone to get some rest. *Guess I had better follow my own orders, then,* thought Squall, as he headed to his and Rinoa’s room. When he entered, he was in for a surprise— Rinoa had not gone to bed, but had in fact waited up for him. She greeted him with a smile, and he responded in kind. He walked over to her, and gave her a hug and a kiss, much like he’d done several hundred times before.

“I thought I ordered you to get some sleep,” Squall joked.

“You know how I am with following orders,” Rinoa responded.

“We’ll see about that,” Squall said, as in one swift move, his hands were under Rinoa’s thighs, and he had lifted her and dumped her on her back, on the bed. Rinoa didn’t seem to mind too much, as she lay there,

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smiling. Squall removed his boots and his jacket and joined her on the bed, trying not to show that he was exhausted.

“You tired?” She asked.

“Nope,” Squall lied.

“Fibber,” she responded. She could always tell the instant Squall was lying.

Squall closed his eyes. “Okay, today has been a bit tiring, I’ll admit, but I’m fine.”

They laid there for a few seconds, before Rinoa asked—

“So what did they want you for in Esthar?”

*Damn! Laguna!* Thought Squall. In all the commotion, he’d completely forgotten about it. Still, he was in no mood to tell anyone about it now, while he needed his sleep.

“Angel,” said Squall, addressing Rinoa by his pet name for her, “It’s a long story. Can I tell you tomorrow morning?”

“Sure,” replied Rinoa, “you need your sleep. Garden needs it’s commander sharp, especially now.” She leaned over and kissed him again. “Good night, Squall.”

“Good night, Angel,” replied Squall, turning off the light. Within 30 seconds, he was sound asleep.

Six hours later, at 8AM, Rinoa’s alarm clock went off, and she awoke, alarmed to find herself alone in bed. Obviously Squall had decided he needed his sleep, but only up to a point. She rolled over onto his side of the bed, somewhat surprised to find herself rolling onto a piece of paper. Obviously Squall had left her a note. She

picked it up and read it.

“Dear Angel,” it said, “I’m sorry to have left you this note but I needed to get up and be active. I’ll be in the cafeteria until 9, if you want to continue that conversation we started last night. Love, Squall”

Rinoa put down the note and smiled. *Typical Squall*, she thought, *ever since he became commander he can’t not be doing anything*. She slowly got up and headed to the shower, then dressed and went to meet her boyfriend in the cafeteria.

When she arrived, however, she had a struggle finding him amongst the throng of people— medics, wounded, and people who simply wanted their breakfast. She was surprised, however, to find Squall in the third group, eventually locating him sat with a serious-looking Quistis and Irvine at a table at the back, munching on a croissant. Noticing her, he waved her over (he couldn’t shout as his mouth was full), and she sat down opposite the table from him, where he had set her breakfast down for her. However, she wasn’t very hungry.

“How’s Zell?” She asked, ignoring her food.

“Not good,” Quistis replied. “He’s stable, but the Doctors say he’s fractured his skull. He should make a full recovery within a couple of months.”

“Is he here?” Rinoa asked, looking around. This time, it was Irvine, the usually cheerful sharpshooter who responded with the low tone of voice that had become standard in the Garden since the bombings.

“No,” Irvine said, “He’s being kept in the infirmary, with all the other badly wounded.”

Rinoa nodded, then paused before asking the question she’d been dreading to ask.

“Was anyone killed in the explosions?” She asked, quietly. Suddenly, Quistis and Irvine both directed their attention towards their hands, leaving Squall to deliver the bad news.

## Bad Blood

“Wayne and Nicole didn’t make it,” Squall glumly informed her. Rinoa gasped and put her hand to her mouth— Wayne she didn’t know too well, but she had been friends with Nicole, and the news had upset her. Noticing this, Squall reached across the table and gently squeezed her hand. Irvine took the opportunity to speak.

“We’re gonna find the bastards who did this, right?” He asked.

“Absolutely,” Squall replied. “The investigators are almost finished. We will find out who was behind this.” There was another brief pause, before Rinoa spoke again.

“Squall,” she started, “Last night you said you were going to tell me what happened in Esthar.”

Squall looked down. He hadn’t wanted to tell Rinoa under these circumstances. Or Quistis or Irvine, for that matter. Nonetheless, the subject had reared its ugly head, and he had no option but to reply.

However, as if on cue, the PA system sounded, and Cid’s voice was heard, summoning Squall to his office.

“Looks like it’ll have to wait,” Squall said. He got up and left, but not before kissing Rinoa on the cheek. When he had gone, Irvine spoke up again, noticing Rinoa’s untouched breakfast.

“Ya know, you really should eat something,” he said. Much of the time, the responsibility of cheering people up fell on his shoulders, and he felt that this was one of those times.

“I’m not hungry,” Rinoa replied. Usually, Irvine prided himself on his way with women, but he was falling flat on his face here. Fortunately, Quistis was there to throw him a lifeline.

“Squall did say that they’d find whoever was responsible,” she interjected. Rinoa looked into her friend’s bespectacled face, usually stern, but on this occasion was relaxed into a friendly smile. However, Rinoa was still depressed.

“But that won’t bring Wayne or Nikki back, will it? Or repair Zell’s fractured skull,” Rinoa retorted.

## Bad Blood

“I know,” Quistis replied, “but at the moment, it’s all we can do.” Rinoa nodded. Quistis had a point, but it didn’t make her feel any better. Maybe Squall would have some good news when he finished meeting with Cid.

Squall walked into his meeting hoping for some good news. *Maybe*, he thought, *just maybe whoever’s responsible has turned themselves in. Maybe they’ve had a crisis of confidence or something. Anything!* Unfortunately, the news Cid had for Squall was not good. Squall opened the door to Cid’s office.

“Ah, Squall. Sit down, please.” Cid’s tone of voice was a lot more serious than normal. Squall sat down, realising that his hopes for good news were about to be dashed spectacularly.

“Have the investigators finished yet?” Squall asked.

“Not yet,” Cid replied. He fidgeted for a while, before delivering the bad news. “Squall, today in the mail, we received a package containing a videotape. It was addressed to you.”

“Why did I not receive it?” Squall asked.

“We’re screening all incoming mail against explosives,” Cid responded. That made sense to Squall– Cid was probably humiliated that he let *those* bombs go off, he wasn’t about to let anything through his grasp. “Squall,” he continued, “I think you should watch this tape, and watch it very soon indeed.” He handed Squall the package. Squall flipped it over and read the handwritten address–

Squall Leonheart,

Balamb Garden.

Squall knew he recognised the handwriting from somewhere, but couldn’t put his finger on it. Thanking Cid, Squall got up and left, an uneasy feeling brewing in his stomach. He arrived back at his quarters, sat down on his bed, pushed the video in the machine and pressed play, only to be confronted by a face that Squall knew, and knew very well.

## Bad Blood

“Hello, Squall,” said the face from his past, now staring at him from his television.

“Seifer,” Squall whispered under his breath. The face may have changed somewhat— his hair was longer and he was sporting a full beard, but the sneer was still the same. That stare was still the same. That voice was still the same. That scar, almost identical to his own, was still the same. Squall did not have time to collect his thoughts before the recording started up again.

“I expect you’re surprised to see me, aren’t you? After all, when you defeated Ultimecia in compressed time, you pretty much thought I was dead, didn’t you?”

*I hadn’t really given it much thought*, Squall mused to himself, while trying to make out Seifer’s surroundings. They weren’t much— simply a room with a light, a bed and a picture Squall couldn’t quite make out on the bedside table with the lamp.

“Well I’m very much alive,” Seifer continued, “just on the off-chance that you’re bothered. By now, Squall, you should be sitting in a Garden which has had a vast chunk blown out of it.” Seifer stopped his pacing, which he had done all throughout the recording, and sat down on the edge of the bed and grinned. “That was me. Or, should I say, two of my followers. I believe you know them— two young students by the names of Wayne and Nicole. Very easily influenced people, or at least, they were when I convinced them to join me.”

Squall couldn’t believe it. *Suicide bombings?* It was almost too hard to comprehend— that Seifer could persuade two young students to take their own lives just to hurt him. He didn’t envy Cid the task of telling their parents.

“If you’re by any chance wondering what it is they’re joining me in,” Seifer continued his ramble, barely allowing Squall chance to think, “Well, let’s just say I’ve been keeping myself busy since Ultimecia’s defeat. I travelled around a bit, stayed with a few friends, if you can call them that, and eventually ended up in Deling City. Do you remember that place, Squall? Where you first humiliated me, four months ago? Well, while I was there, I had a revelation. I realised that I could directly credit all the bad things that had happened to me since to one person— you.”

*You brought this all on yourself, Seifer*, Squall thought.

“Oh, sure,” Seifer continued, “You had help, from the instructor, or should I say EX-instructor, the little messenger girl, that cowboy thing you’re so fond of. And let’s not forget everyone’s favourite chicken-wuss

either. But what hurt me the most, Squall, where you really stepped over the line, was that you had to bring HER into it.”

*Rinoa*, Squall thought. His girlfriend and Seifer’s ex.

“I saw you two at the graduation ball,” the increasingly demented Seifer continued, “the way you couldn’t take your eyes off of her. You make me sick. Is there something about everything that I have that you want, Squall? Even when we were kids, at the orphanage, I longed for Elle to spend time with me, to talk to me the way she talked to you, but no. You had to have her all to yourself. All yours, no one else’s. We enrolled at the same Garden, in the same classes, and you have to top me there as well. I take up the gunblade, and you decide that you will as well. My command of the mission, my entry into SeeD, you take it all away from me. All that I could understand– you simply wanted to be the best, and I was just another obstacle to be stepped on.”

*It wasn’t like that*, Squall thought.

“But then,” Seifer continued, “you have to take the one thing I cared about most. The one thing I loved most.”

Squall bristled– he wasn’t too keen on Rinoa being described as a “thing”. *Besides*, Squall thought, *you let her go. If you loved her that much, you’d have fought to keep her.*

Seifer continued his seemingly endless rant.

“You take her, and you feign love for her, just to get at me.”

Squall started to feel his blood boil. His fists clenched, his anger at hearing someone tell him what his feelings for Rinoa were.

“Well you know what, Squall? You’re pathetic.”

Squall could barely contain himself.

## Bad Blood

“Then what the f\*\*k do you call yourself, Seifer?” He muttered, just under his breath. Squall rarely cursed, so it took something major to do so. However, Seifer was oblivious to this outburst, and continued on, regardless.

“I think it’s about time I showed you how truly pathetic you are in my eyes. You know that little suicide bombing? Well that was just the start. There are over a hundred people I’ve recruited. I’ve fed them some bull about Garden being evil, done a little brainwashing, but that’s not important. What is important, Squall, is that they’re out there. And we’re going to hurt you in the same way that you hurt me.” At that point, Seifer got up and picked up the picture that had been in the background all along— a picture of himself and Rinoa on a paddleboat, both sporting big cheesy grins. He smirked as he looked at the picture.

“If I were you, Squall, which thank god I’m not, I’d never let her out of my sight— you never know when you’ll wake up one day, only to see her throat slit from ear to ear. Goodbye.” With that, Seifer started laughing, and by the time he’d got up and turned off the video camera, his laugh had become burned into Squall’s head. Calmly, but deliberately, Squall got up, ejected the video, and with an outburst of pure rage, hurled it through the window with all his strength. He was breathing heavily, still full of adrenaline from what he’d seen, when he turned and saw Rinoa standing at the entrance. She’d entered the room, and he was so caught up he hadn’t even noticed.

“Squall,” she started, that same caring tone on her voice that always managed to calm Squall down, no matter how angry he was.

“How much did you see?” He asked, slightly more calm than before but still close to exploding.

“Everything from after you swore at Seifer,” she replied. Squall hung his head. It wasn’t so much the fact that he’d had that outburst, more the fact that Rinoa had had to witness it. “Was he responsible for the bombings?” She enquired. Squall nodded his head. Rinoa frowned— it was not news she’d wanted to hear.

“What are we going to do now?” She asked. It was not what Squall had wanted to hear. As Garden commander, it was ultimately his decision who would be sent on missions, but this was different— it wasn’t like he was sending some veteran SeeDs on a simple peacekeeping mission. This was against someone who was as dangerous as any villain they’d encountered, and who knew them almost as well as they knew themselves. And someone who could turn Garden students against each other.

## Bad Blood

“I’m going to talk to Cid,” Squall responded, after a few uneasy seconds had passed. As he prepared to leave, he took Rinoa’s hand, and gazed at her, reassuringly.

“Don’t pay any attention to what Seifer said,” Squall said, trying to reassure Rinoa, “I’m not going to let him or his cronies within 100 miles of you.”

Rinoa looked deep into his eyes, before responding.

“I know,” she replied. They kissed each other briefly, before Squall backed out of the room, and walked off down the corridor.

Squall’s subsequent meeting with Cid was brief– they, along with Edea, agreed to call a meeting of all SeeDs later in the day, in the new auditorium. That left Squall with a task he’d been dreading all day. He walked down the stairs, then turned right and headed into the infirmary. He entered, finding Dr. Kadowaki seated at her desk, as usual.

“Can he see visitors?” Squall asked. Dr. Kadowaki, knowing exactly whom Squall meant, nodded, and led him into the side treatment room. *The same room I woke up in after that fight*, Squall mused, fingering the scar that he’d picked up from that fight, almost like it was a medal. Squall entered the room, and was immediately shocked at the state of his friend.

Zell was lying on the bed, awake, but his eyes clearly weren’t focusing. His normally eccentric hairstyle was being flattened by bandages covering his head, which also meant his tattoos were all but invisible. Just then, however, Squall noticed the remains of two hot dogs on a plate besides Zell’s bed, which made him smile. *Good old Zell*, he thought. Dr. Kadowaki leant over and gingerly whispered in Zell’s ear.

“Zell? Squall’s here to see you.”

“Ow!” Zell shouted. “Geez, doc, there’s no need to deafen me!”

Dr. Kadowaki stood back up and walked over to Squall.

## Bad Blood

“Isn’t there anything that could be done, like curative magic?” Squall asked. Dr. Kadowaki shook her head.

“We’ve used all the magic we could. Any more wouldn’t have any real effect,” she said.

Squall nodded. Magic was always a good stopgap measure, but when it came to major injuries, it was no match for bed rest. Dr. Kadowaki started to leave.

“Try not to over-excite him, OK?” Dr. Kadowaki asked, on her way out the door. Squall nodded, and the Doctor left the two friends alone. There was a brief pause before Squall broke the silence.

“I can’t leave you alone for two seconds without you getting into trouble, can I?” Squall joked.

“Bite me,” Zell replied. Squall allowed himself a brief grin. He’d wanted to lighten the mood before giving him the bad news. Knowing Zell as well as he did, he was sure he’d take it badly.

“Zell,” he began, “I have some news I’m sure you’re not going to want to hear.”

Zell gulped. He’d been waiting for this, and his leg started twitching nervously.

“Is it about the bastard who put me here?” Zell asked, his voice noticeably higher.

Squall nodded.

“Yeah. We’ve found out who it was.”

“Who was it?” Zell enquired. He didn’t want Squall to delay it any longer.

## Bad Blood

“Seifer,” Squall answered. He took a few paces backwards as Zell slowly stood up. If he himself had taken the news badly, he was sure that Zell, whom Seifer had made a point of tormenting all throughout his Garden career, would absolutely flip. Zell walked over to where his dinner plate was, and picked it up, studying it for a few brief moments, before smashing it against the wall.

“SON OF A BITCH!” he yelled, before turning his attention on the wall with his fists. Squall walked up behind him and grabbed Zell’s shoulders, restraining him.

“Zell!” Squall shouted, as softly as he could to avoid damaging Zell’s hearing, “Calm down! Punching holes in the wall isn’t going to do anyone any good!”

“Maybe not,” Zell replied, still struggling to break free of Squall’s restraint, “but it’ll make me feel better!”

Just then, Dr. Kadowaki returned with a hypodermic. Jabbing it into Zell’s arm, she turned to Squall.

“I thought I told you not to over-excite him!” she exclaimed.

“I couldn’t help it,” Squall replied, “He needed to know the truth. He’d have only been madder if I’d kept it from him.” Squall felt his friend’s struggle gradually diminish, and he set him back down on the bed.

“I think you should perhaps leave now,” Dr. Kadowaki advised. “Let him get his rest before you talk to him again.” Squall nodded at this— Dr. Kadowaki was never wrong when it came to the well being of the students.

“Let me know when he’s up to seeing visitors again, will you?” He asked Dr. Kadowaki. Satisfied at her nod, Squall walked out of the infirmary, glad he’d put that uneasy task behind him.

Squall entered the newly constructed auditorium, at the back of the sleeping quarters, where Cid had called the meeting of all SeeDs. He stepped up onto the stage, and took his seat to the right of Cid’s. As he scanned the faces of the SeeDs most of them pointing straight at him, and some of them as young as 15 years old, he got one, distinct, impression.

## Bad Blood

*They know*, he thought. He didn't know how, maybe a rumour got out somehow, but he was absolutely sure that they knew. Balamb Garden may have been big, but it was also fairly crowded, so rumours tended to spread quickly. Keeping his "business" face on, he quickly located Irvine and Selphie in the crowd both dressed in SeeD uniforms, and predictably, sitting together. He gave them a quick nod, before standing, as Quistis arrived on the stage. He had to ask her what had been bugging him from the moment he entered the auditorium.

"They know, don't they?" He asked.

"Squall," she started, "you know how rumours spread here. Maybe it's for the best— this way, they won't be so surprised when they find out." Squall nodded— Quistis always seemed to have a way of rationalising things. Quistis took her seat, 2 chairs down from Squall, but they were not seated long, as Cid and Edea entered the auditorium. As one, the SeeDs all rose, as Cid took his place behind the rostrum.

"Please be seated," his stern yet friendly voice came over the speakers. "Yesterday evening, a tragedy befell Balamb Garden. Two acts of terrorism, the likes of which has not been seen in a long time. The blast site was immediately investigated, but this morning, we received a videotape in the post."

A slight murmur went round the crowd. Squall looked up at the ceiling.

*Damn!* He thought. *How do these things get out?* His thoughts were abruptly curtailed by Cid continuing his address.

"The package was addressed to our Commander, Squall Leonheart. On that tape, the perpetrator of these acts owned up to his crimes." Cid gulped. The next few words were not going to be easy to say. "I believe many of you know his identity, as he was a former student at this Garden." Again, the murmur went around the crowd, and again, Squall silently cursed to himself. "His name is Seifer Almasy, the same man who opposed us during the Ultimecia incident." This time, the murmur was a lot bigger, almost as if the SeeDs had forgotten that they were at a formal gathering, but were in the cafeteria. Fortunately, Cid managed to quiet them.

"Silence please," the same stern yet friendly voice managed to bring the crowd back to silent order. "Now, to give you all your orders for the duration of this threat, our Commander, Squall Leonheart."

Squall stood up and took Cid's place at the rostrum. At the same time, the SeeDs all stood again. *Why do they do that?* Squall silently thought. It was a short-lived thought, however, as he had orders to dispense.

## Bad Blood

“Please be seated,” he began, and once again, the SeeDs were seated. If Cid had a hard task telling the SeeDs about Seifer, than Squall’s was infinitely harder. However, as he had told Cid beforehand, he didn’t want him to deliver all the bad news.

Squall continued his address.

“As you may or may not be aware, the bombings in the training facility were suicide bombings, carried out by two of Garden’s own students who had been brainwashed by Seifer.” If the news about Seifer being the ringleader had rattled them, then this sent them into outright hysteria.

“Garden students?” A voice in the crowd could clearly be heard asking.

“Who were they?” Another one enquired, seemingly to no one in particular.

“Quiet, please,” Squall ordered over the microphone. It may have taken longer than when Cid ordered it, but eventually, Squall got his silence. “As a result of this, Balamb Garden is officially under quarantine. Nobody is to be allowed in or out, with the exception of the SeeDs selected for the mission to take Seifer down. All incoming and outgoing mail will be screened for explosives, and anybody acting suspiciously will be instantly confined in the brig. One more thing– if I find that anyone has spread the fact that Garden students were behind the bombing beyond these four walls, they will be instantly dismissed from Garden. The students are rattled enough as it is, I don’t want this getting to them as well.”

Squall stepped down from the rostrum, and let Cid re–take his place.

“You have your orders,” Cid said, “now I expect you all to carry them out. An official statement regarding the quarantine order will be issued in two hours’ time to all students.” He stepped down, as all the SeeDs began to file out of the auditorium. Outside, Squall, Quistis and Xu (who had been sitting on the stage with them) called together Irvine, Selphie and Nida. All of them were noticeably shocked– Squall had to remind himself that they hadn’t heard of the suicide aspect to the bombings. Selphie in particular was looking a little pale– Squall had to remind himself that this wasn’t the first time Seifer had tried to destroy her home– Trabia Garden was another victim of his megalomania. Only Trabia hadn’t got off so lightly. Xu spoke up.

## Bad Blood

“Cid’s called a meeting, just the six of us in his office in one hour,” Xu said in her professional way. Although Squall and her didn’t know each other that well, they respected each other as SeeDs, and were always courteous whenever they passed each other in the corridors. Having received their instructions, the SeeDs all went their separate ways, changing and eating before the meeting. Squall had no such luxury, however. Cid had requested his presence beforehand to discuss tactics. Collecting a small briefcase from his locker, Squall immediately reported to Cid’s office, where the headmaster was already seated and waiting.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting, sir,” Squall said.

“No, no,” Cid responded, “that’s fine, I just wanted to talk to you alone before the others arrived. Please, have a seat.” His tone of voice had significantly altered from the auditorium– losing the stern yet friendly tone and adopting a more caring tone, sort of like that father Squall never had.

*Or the father who never came for me,* Squall mused, having thought the same thing.

“It’s about the mission,” Cid continued, “more specifically, your squad. I feel, and I’m sure you’ll agree, that it would be in her best interests if Rinoa remained here at the Garden.” Squall nodded, deep in thought. It had been a subject foremost in Squall’s mind– on one hand, he didn’t want to leave Rinoa, but on the other hand, he couldn’t stand the thought of her being placed in danger. This confirmation of Rinoa’s safety from Cid, however, had convinced him that she should stay.

“I agree,” Squall confirmed.

“Do you want me to tell her?” Cid asked. Squall shook his head.

“I’d be best coming from me. I don’t think she’ll take it too well, so it had better be me who breaks the news.” Cid nodded, in agreement. With that out of the way, Squall and Cid sat down and started studying the plans Squall had brought, before the clock in Cid’s office chimed, and Xu, Quistis, Nida, Irvine and Selphie filed in, signalling the start of the meeting. Cid immediately called the meeting to order.

“I have called you six here,” he began, “because we need to put an end to the Seifer threat quickly, and finally. If he can turn Garden students against each other he needs to be eliminated.” The six of them nodded in agreement– no one wanted to kill Seifer, but he hadn’t exactly left them with a lot of choice. Unfortunately, there was one small detail, which Irvine, typically, was the one to bring up.

## Bad Blood

“Umm,” the longhaired sniper began, “how are we meant to take out Seifer if we don’t even know where he is?” Cid nodded– it was a question he had been expecting.

“In his video,” Cid replied, “Seifer mentioned that on his travels, he had stayed with some “so-called” friends.”

“That would be Fujin and Raijin,” Quistis correctly guessed, getting a nod of approval from Cid.

“Your mission,” Cid began again, “is to take the Ragnarok to FH. Your team will consist of Squall as team leader, as well as Quistis, Irvine and Selphie. Nida will pilot the Ragnarok– you may be required to take off in an emergency. Xu, in their absence, you will be in command of the Garden. Don’t be afraid to ask for help.” Xu nodded– it may have been a big responsibility, but she felt she was up to it. Cid continued on with their orders. “Upon arrival, you are to make contact with Fujin and Raijin, and determine Seifer’s location by any means possible. When you locate him, you are to immediately travel to his location and eliminate him by any means necessary. I will not sugarcoat this for you– this is a mission that you must not fail on. The security of Garden depends on it. You leave at 0700. Dismissed.” They all got up to leave, but Cid had something else to say.

“Oh, one more thing–“ he continued. “You may be forced to fight Garden students who have been brainwashed by Seifer. Should that occurrence arise, do not be afraid to use deadly force– they won’t be afraid to.” They all nodded– it was something none of them had wanted to consider, but they’d all accepted the consequences when they became SeeDs. As they all filed out, Squall reflected on what had been one of the worst days of his life to date– and it was only going to get worse.

He reached into his pocket, and pulled out his key card. Swiping it in the door lock, he entered, to find Rinoa already packing for the both of them. *This isn’t going to be easy*, he thought. He knew how insanely stubborn Rinoa could be at times, but that was just one of the reasons he fell in love with her. That didn’t make his task any easier, though.

“So,” she asked, “when are we leaving?” Squall walked over, and closed the suitcase.

“What’s up?” Rinoa asked again. Squall took a deep breath– *Best get it over and done with*, he thought.

## Bad Blood

“You’re not coming,” he said. Rinoa’s expression changed from one of eager anticipation to one of angry confusion.

“What?” she asked, with more than a hint of anger in her voice. Squall sighed– this was going to be harder than he thought.

“Cid and I have spoken,” Squall said, “and we decided that it would be safer for you if you remained here.” Rinoa’s expression was now a lot less confused– but was a lot angrier.

“I can’t believe this!” She shouted. “How could you decide this without even discussing it with me?” Squall hung his head– he knew how much Rinoa hated having decisions made for her– her father had done it her whole life, and she had wound up resenting him. *Please, Squall thought, don’t hate me for this.*

“It’s a dangerous mission,” Squall began, “and–“ but before he could continue, Rinoa cut him off again.

“If it’s such a dangerous mission, then you need your best fighters with you. Like it or not, Squall, I am one of the best fighters here,” Rinoa interrupted. She was getting really hot at Squall now, and Squall was only about to make things worse.

“He threatened your life directly,” Squall began. “Don’t you think you’d be better off staying here?”

“Dammit!” Rinoa continued, “I won’t have my actions dictated to me! Surely you know that about me by now!”

Squall sighed– Rinoa’s stubbornness knew no boundaries.

“Rinoa,” he began, “part of being a SeeD is learning to take orders.” Rinoa looked at her feet for a moment, before saying the one thing Squall thought he’d never hear her say.

“Then maybe I don’t wanna be a SeeD any more.” Rinoa said it, with a certain air of finality in her voice.

“Rinoa,” Squall countered, “you don’t mean that.” Rinoa bristled.

“First you’re telling me what to do,” she shouted, “and now you’re telling me what to think? What next, Squall? Do you want to put a collar around my neck and chain me up so I can’t move?”

“You’re getting this all out of proportion,” Squall said.

“No,” Rinoa countered. “I’m seeing things exactly as they are. Tomorrow morning, I’m going to hand in my resignation to Cid. I don’t know what I’ll do after that, maybe I’ll go back to Timber, or something.”

“Rinoa...” Squall began, but he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“I think you should leave now, Squall.” Rinoa said. Squall tried to respond, but Rinoa wasn’t to be swayed.

“Dammit!” She shouted, throwing his suitcase and his gunblade case at him. “Leave!” Squall nodded, compliantly. Rinoa had made up her mind, and there was nothing he could do about it. He picked up his stuff, and stood outside, in the doorway.

“I—I’m going to go now, Rinoa.” He said, unsure of himself for possibly the first time ever.

“Good,” she replied, sitting on the bed, not looking at him. Squall decided to try his luck just one more time.

“I hope you’ll find it in you somewhere not to slam the do—“ but before he could finish his sentence, Rinoa got up off the bed and slammed the door in his face. Sighing, Squall admitted defeat. She’d rejected him, and this rejection hurt bad. Worse than his mother and father leaving him, worse than Ellone leaving him at the orphanage. At least he knew now that they weren’t his fault. This was different. *If only*, Squall thought. *If only I’d worded it differently. If only I hadn’t been so short with her. If only...* Lost in his thoughts, he dropped his bags outside the door, and slumped into a sitting position, eyes closed, head leant back against the door.

## Bad Blood

Rinoa stared at the door, on the other side of which stood the man she'd fallen deeply in love with. Except she'd thrown him out of their room in a fit of rage. *Well it was his fault*, she thought to herself. She sat back down on the edge of the bed, trying to make sense of everything that had just happened. *He shouldn't try to live my life for me!* She was adamant— Squall should have let her go on the mission. Dangerous it may be, but she should have been allowed to make that decision for herself. However, as she thought that thought, a tear suddenly welled up in her eyes, and fell onto the floor. Closely followed by another, and another, until she had broken down entirely. Suddenly, her thoughts were no longer as self-righteous as they had been. *What have I done?* She thought to herself. *I've just yelled at the one man I love more than life itself.* She curled up into a foetal position on the bed, weeping heavily. She forced herself to calm down. *Calm yourself, woman*, she thought. *Maybe he's right— Seifer is only trying to use you to get to him. Best you stay here.* Rinoa allowed herself a little smile, before thinking to herself: *And tomorrow morning, you can always make it up to Squall.* However, that thought only caused her to break down again. *No I can't*, she thought, *He's going away on a mission tomorrow, and he may not come back alive.* She cried herself to sleep that night.

Irvine was walking down the hallway, hand in hand with Rebecca, whom he had met just a few hours ago at the all-SeeD meeting. They'd been out in the quad, and he'd offered to walk her home. They'd just arrived outside her door.

"I had a lovely time tonight," the young woman said. Irvine smiled, coolly. *Here we go*, he thought to himself.

"Me too," he said, stroking her cheek with his palm. "Maybe we could hook up again and have some other lovely times together?" He asked. *How can she refuse me?* He thought. She smiled, and asked—

"Don't you have a mission, tomorrow morning?" *Now's the time, Irvine*, the sniper thought. *Hit her with the charm.*

"Hey, baby," he said, as coolly as he possibly could, "Don't you know the hero always comes back alive?" He leaned in to kiss her, but she backed off.

"Goodnight, Irvine," she said, still smiling, entering her quarters and shutting the door in Irvine's face. Irvine simply chuckled to himself.

"She can't resist me for long," he reassured himself, before walking down the hall towards his quarters. Along the way, however, he encountered Squall, still slumped on the floor outside his quarters.

## Bad Blood

“Squall?” Irvine asked. “What happened? D’you lock yourself out or something?”

Squall opened his eyes, and cast an uncaring glance at Irvine.

“Go away,” he said, “I’m not in the mood.” Irvine took a step back— he wasn’t exactly the most perceptive of people, but he could tell that something was SERIOUSLY wrong here.

“C’mon, Squall,” he said, in a friendly voice, “I thought we were friends.”

“What part of go away don’t you understand, Irvine?” Squall asked, hoping that Irvine would take the hint. His hopes were soon to be dashed, however.

“So you’re planning,” Irvine began, “to sit out here all night, sleep in your doorway and be rough as hell the morning before our big battle?”

Squall looked down— Irvine had a point. However, he didn’t want him and his incessant cheeriness plaguing him all night— in the worst—case scenario, he might start telling Squall about his date.

“I—I’ll grab a couple of hours in the Ragnarok on the way over to FH,” Squall said, not entirely confidently. Unfortunately, Irvine was buying none of it.

“If you ain’t gonna move,” Irvine said, firmly, “then I’m just gonna drag you along by your ankles.” It wasn’t exactly how Irvine had planned to spend the evening, but Squall was a friend, albeit a male one, and it was his duty to help him out however he possibly could.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Squall said, challenging Irvine’s ankle—dragging threat.

“Try me,” Irvine said. Reluctantly, Squall got up, grabbed his cases and followed Irvine to his quarters.

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“Ya know,” Irvine started, “if you just locked yourself out I know a few ways to break in.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Squall replied. They arrived at Irvine’s quarters, a simple single room most SeeDs had, five minutes later. Immediately as he entered, Irvine removed his trench coat and boots, and, putting them away neatly, sprung backwards and landed on his bed, instantly assuming a lying position, his hands behind his head. Squall wondered to himself how many times he’d had to practice that before he’d mastered keeping his hat on. Dumping his cases after his brief thoughtful interlude, Squall sat on Irvine’s battered old sofa. *I can’t imagine he makes out with many girls on this thing*, Squall thought to himself. Before he could muster up and more thoughts, however, Irvine interrupted him.

“So,” he began, leaning his head to look at Squall, “what happened, like?”

Squall hung his head. He’d have to tell him sooner or later, so Squall decided it might as well be sooner.

“Me and Rinoa,” he began, “We had a bit of a bust-up. A major bust-up, if you must know.”

“Ouch,” Irvine grimaced. He’d been there before— countless times, in fact. “What was it about?” Squall hung his head again— he’d never been big on eye contact.

“She’s mad I won’t let her come on the mission,” Squall replied. “You know how stubborn she can be.” Irvine nodded— he hadn’t forgotten her, well, persuasive methods to get him to return to the desert prison after Squall and co. had been captured following the abortive attempt on sorceress Edea’s life. In fact, he probably still had a few bruises from where she kept kicking him...

“She’ll calm down,” Irvine confidently predicted, “She loves you, man.” Squall nodded. *But when? He thought. I go away for god knows how long tomorrow, it’s possible I may not return alive. Oh god, Rinoa...*

Almost reading his mind, Irvine chimed in again.

“If you’re worried about leaving her after you’ve had a bust-up,” he advised, “then simply go down there before we leave tomorrow morning. She’ll hear you out. I’m sure of it.” For once, Squall deigned to look up, and, seeing the grin on Irvine’s face, nodded.

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“Alrighty then!” Irvine shouted. He took off his hat, throwing it at his hat-stand (and missing by several feet), and climbing under his covers. “You should get some sleep, man,” he continued, “we got a big day ahead of us tomorrow!” Squall nodded, as he took off his boots and jacket and dumped them on the floor.

“There are some sheets in the cupboard,” Irvine said, “but for god’s sake, Squall, be careful with the couch. You have no idea how many good nights I’ve had on it. And I want to have plenty more, if you get what I mean!”

Fetching the sheets and a pillow from Irvine’s cupboard (and wondering why anyone would ever need as many guns as Irvine had), Squall laid down on the sofa and uttered one, simple sentiment–

“Get it repaired, then.” Looking at the couch, Irvine realised that Squall had a point– it was a bit tatty.

“Yeah,” he started, “maybe you’re right. It is a bit worn. Anyway, ‘night Squall.” He turned out the light.

“Goodnight, Irvine,” Squall responded. As he drifted off to sleep, Squall’s thoughts were elsewhere– with a certain raven-haired young woman, lying in his bed in his quarters just down the corridor, but currently out of reach. However, strangely, his last thought before he drifted off to sleep was not of Rinoa, but of his father, Laguna.

*Why did you have to leave me?* Thought Squall, as he eventually nodded off.

Squall woke up the following morning, and looked at the clock on Irvine’s table–

“06:29”, it read. Squall had overslept– he’d wanted to be up at 6 AM to say goodbye to Rinoa. Quickly dressing, but quietly so as not to wake his impromptu housemate, he rushed out of the room and down the hallway to his and Rinoa’s quarters. Upon arrival, however, he was amazed to find the door slightly ajar– Rinoa was notorious for her love of lie-ins, and was rarely up before 7 AM. Peering in, Squall was greeted by a disturbing sight– on his bed lay a pool of blood, and in the middle of it lay Angelo, Rinoa’s faithful canine companion, her throat cut. Swallowing a sensation of nausea, Squall called out for his girlfriend.

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“Rinoa!” he shouted. “Where are you?” He searched in the bathroom and the kitchen, but there was no sign of her. Upon his return to the bedroom, he noticed something he hadn’t before— a message, scrawled from Angelo’s lifeblood.

“Her next,” it simply read. Squall immediately knew what it meant.

“Seifer,” he said, unsheathing the gunblade he carried on his back. Somehow, Seifer had penetrated Garden’s security and taken Rinoa hostage, and Squall had to fight to get her back. Wandering through the hallways in a semi-conscious state, he turned a corner, only to see Seifer holding his gunblade to Rinoa’s throat. Rinoa was struggling, but Seifer was far too strong for her.

“Are you ready to suffer?” Seifer asked, with an evil smile on his face. However, Rinoa kicked behind her, catching Seifer where it hurt. As he was doubled over, Rinoa ran into Squall’s arms, and they fell into a deep embrace.

“I love you so much,” Squall whispered in Rinoa’s ear.

“I love you too,” she whispered back. Just then, however, Squall felt a sharp stabbing sensation in his chest, and he stumbled backwards. When he looked up, almost as if it were in slow-motion, he saw Rinoa falling to her knees, with Seifer standing behind her, his gunblade thrust through her back and out through her chest. Squall was in shock, unable to speak, unable to move. Seifer removed the gunblade, and laughing, vanished into thin air. Squall ran forward and caught Rinoa as she fell to the ground.

“Rinoa,” he wailed, unable to control the tears that were tumbling out of his eyes, “please, this can’t be happening!” He felt Rinoa’s body go limp as she breathed her last, and Squall was unable to contain himself any longer. He emitted a primal scream, straight from his heart.

“RINOA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” He yelled. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Squall felt himself shake, almost as if someone had grabbed him and forcibly rocked him from side to side. Suddenly, Squall felt himself fade, as if he were falling asleep.

*No, Squall thought, not falling asleep, waking up...*

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Squall opened his eyes, and saw Irvine's concerned face, shaking him, trying to get an answer.

"Squall?" Irvine asked, concerned for his friend. "You alright, buddy?" Squall looked around— he was still in bed, or at least, on Irvine's couch. He sat up on his elbows.

"Yeah," Squall said, putting his friend's mind at rest. "I'm fine. What time is it?"

"6:15," Irvine responded. "We have to be at the parking lot in 45 minutes."

"I thought I told you to wake me at 6?" Squall enquired, still a bit fuzzyheaded from what had happened.

"I tried," Irvine answered from the bathroom, where he was preparing to take a shower, "but you were out cold." Squall sat up on the couch. 45 minutes... that was enough time to go and make up with Rinoa, and still make it to the parking lot. However, Irvine's telephone went off just as Squall was completing that thought.

"Get that for me, will you?" Irvine shouted from the shower.

"Sure," Squall shouted back. He picked up the receiver. "Hello?" He answered.

"Squall?" Came the familiar voice of Selphie from the other end of the line. "What are you doing there? Where's Irvy?"

"Uh, Selphie," Squall replied, trying to choose his words correctly. "It's a long story. Rinoa kicked me out, and—"

"Rinoa did WHAT!?" Selphie exclaimed from the other end of the line.

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“I’ll explain when we’re all aboard the Ragnarok,” Squall replied. “Why are you ringing up at this time in the morning, anyway?”

“Well,” Selphie started, “I arrived at Cid’s office nice and early, to see if he needed anything doing, and while I was there, he asked me—“

“Can I have the short version please, Selphie?” Squall asked. He was in a rush, and didn’t need Selphie talking his ear off.

“Cid wants us all to depart at 6:30,” Selphie’s somewhat subdued voice came over the phone.

“Duly noted,” Squall said. “Anything else?”

“Nope!” She perkily answered.

“OK then,” Squall replied, “see you aboard the Ragnarok.”

“OK!” Selphie exclaimed. “Bye–bye!” Then the line went dead. Irvine emerged from the shower, and started blow–drying his hair.

“Who was that?” He asked, over the roar of the drier.

“Selphie,” Squall answered. “Cid’s brought our departure time forward to 6:30.”

“6:30?” Irvine answered, slightly panicking, “how am I meant to get my hair dry in that time?”

“Maybe if you had less of it it might help,” Squall quickly retorted.

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“Ha ha, very funny,” Irvine sarcastically replied. Squall didn’t really pay much attention— his plans to call in on Rinoa were pretty much scuppered. He’d have to leave a message on their answer phone. If he left it now, she’d get it when she woke up, which wouldn’t be for at least another hour.

Rinoa was lying awake in bed when her telephone suddenly rang. Choosing to ignore it, she rolled over. Ever since her fight with Squall, he’d been the only thing she could think of. The answer phone kicked in, and she heard hers and Squall’s less-than-serious message start up. Rinoa’s eyes started to well up again— just the sound of his voice made her upset.

“Hi!” The two lovers’ voices sounded in unison. Then it was Squall alone speaking. “This is Squall—“

Then it was Rinoa's voice alone. “—And Rinoa’s—”

Eventually, the voices were in unison again. “—Answering machine, we’re not in right now but if you want to leave a message, we’ll get back to you as soon as possible.” Then came the familiar *beep* that went before every message. However, the voice that followed was the same as one of the voices that preceded the beep.

“Rinoa,” Squall’s voice started over the answering machine. *He rang me!* Rinoa thought. *He’s forgiven me!* She rushed to get out of bed, but in the tossing and turning that she’d done throughout the night, her foot had become caught in the bedclothes, and she hit the ground with a soft and unceremonious *thud*. Still, Squall’s voice continued.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for what happened last night. I’m leaving in about ten minutes, and I didn’t want to go without saying that, well,”

*Hold on, Squall; I’m almost there,* Rinoa thought to herself as she tried to free her foot from her sheets. Squall continued, oblivious to Rinoa’s struggle.

“I love you, Rinoa, with all my heart, and I didn’t want the last words I said to you to be angry ones. I truly, deeply adore you from the bottom of my heart, and I will return to you so I can tell you in person, again, and again, as many times as you want. I hope that when you get this message you’ll be in a mood to listen to what I have to say. Goodbye, Angel.” Rinoa freed herself and picked up the receiver, only to hear a dialling tone. Once again, the tears started to flow from Rinoa, who believed she could have heard the last words her lover would ever say to her. She replayed the message, again and again, but not finding it any easier to listen to.

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Squall didn't remember much of the trip from Balamb Garden to the Ragnarok— his mind was elsewhere. In fact, he was much like Squall of old, answering any queries with a “whatever” or his personal favourite, nothing at all. However, he was in command, and when they arrived at their destination after a bumpy ride (due to all the escaped monsters that had yet to be recaptured), he immediately took command, even if he was still somewhat less than talkative.

“OK, everyone, get aboard,” he half-heartedly said. “Nida, once you get up to the bridge, take us to FH.” Nida nodded as the all embarked. Irvine, however, had more to say.

“Man,” he said to Squall, “I think we need a little chat.” Irvine, being the only other member of the “gang” in on the Rinoa situation, felt obliged to help out in any way possible. Knowing Squall as he did, however, he was sure it wasn't going to be easy.

“I'm not in the mood,” Squall said quietly, avoiding Irvine's gaze and confirming his suspicions.

“We're gonna talk,” Irvine said, verbally putting his foot down.

“Which one of us is in charge here?” Squall immediately shot back. Irvine, however, had been expecting this.

“I'm not sure,” he retorted, “‘cause you sure as hell aren't acting like a leader right now.” Squall hung his head even further— *I walked into that one*, he thought to himself.

“Observation lounge,” he said to Irvine. Once they were seated and the Ragnarok was safely airborne, Irvine began.

“It's all well and good thinking about her,” he said, trying not to sound too preachy, “but right now, man, you've got other things to worry about.” Squall nodded.

“I can't help it,” Squall replied, “sometimes I just don't feel like talking much.”

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“Well let me tell ya something,” Irvine continued, “I’m not the only one who’s noticed. They haven’t said anything, but Sefie and Quis were definitely looking confused by your mood.”

“They’ve seen me like this before,” Squall retorted, “It’ll be no big deal.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” the cowboy continued, swinging his legs up on the chair in front of his, “they can be pretty perceptive. Rinoa will still be there when you get back. It’s no use getting worried about it.”

Squall nodded, and was about to reply, when Selphie entered the room. Immediately she went over to Irvine and kicked his legs off the chair.

“Hey!” She started, jokily, “Someone’ll have to sit there, you know!” Irvine simply grinned at her.

“What?” He asked, cheekily. Selphie simply laughed and went over to where Squall sat.

“Squall?” She asked. Squall took a deep breath, and then acted on what Irvine had said. *Damn, Squall thought, I’m taking a lot of his help lately.*

“Yeah, Selphie,” Squall started, back to his less sulky self. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re nearly at FH,” she said, as business-like as she could manage, “do you want us to junction now?”

“Yeah,” Squall nodded. They’d brought along a selection of GF’s and high-level magic for the inevitable fight against Seifer, but had opted not to junction them until the very last minute, still wanting to cling on to as many memories of the past as they can. “Let’s go up to the bridge,” he said. Irvine got up as well, and they made their way to the bridge. When they arrived, they sorted out who junctioned what. Squall selected Eden and Ifrit and opted for attacking magic, while Selphie chose Alexander, Shiva and healing magic. Quistis junctioned Diablos, Siren and was elected item bearer, while Irvine simply junctioned Bahamut and Doomtrain, and was given all the spare magic, the consensus being he could fill in if anyone was taken down. Once they’d all settled on their junction, Squall ordered Nida to land in FH, and they all disembarked, looking for Fujin and Raijin, the somewhat peculiar former cronies of the man they were really after. They did not have to look far for them.

“IDIOT!” The familiar voice of Fujin resounded across the bay, where she was standing at the end of a pier over a prostrate Raijin, and, unsurprisingly, was kicking him at the same time.

“Oh come on,” Raijin’s equally familiar voiced whined as he tried to retrieve something from the water, “it was over 8 feet long, ya know?” Suddenly, Raijin’s arms were no longer in the water, as Fujin had hauled him up onto his feet.

“What now?” He demanded, drying his arms.

“COMPANY,” Fujin said, simply. Raijin turned his head to look at whatever it was had grabbed Fujin’s attention, and immediately saw it— a group of people he recognised very well. *They’ve got some nerve*, he thought to himself.

“What do YOU want?” Raijin asked Squall, folding his arms and putting on the biggest frown he could muster. He was trying to give Squall the impression that he wasn’t welcome. Unfortunately, Squall wasn’t in a mood to play mind games.

“We’re looking for Seifer,” he said, bluntly.

“NERVE,” Fujin exclaimed, threateningly.

“Maybe he don’t want to be found,” Raijin said, equally threateningly. Squall sighed— this was going to be harder than he first thought.

“We need to find him, guys,” he started again. This time, however, Raijin decided he’d heard enough already.

“After what you did to him,” he began, angrily, “you think he wants to be found?” Selphie took some exception to this— she stepped forward, getting in Raijin’s face.

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“Hey!” She shouted. “What do you mean, what WE did to HIM?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, little girl,” he replied, condescendingly.

“RAGE!” Fujin shouted, drawing her weapon as Raijin produced his quarterstaff. Upon this, Selphie drew her shinobou, closely followed by Irvine and his gun and Squall with his gunblade. Quistis sighed, and pulled out her whip, cracking it between the two opposing sides. *Someone’s got to make them see sense, she thought, and it may as well be me.* The two parties stepped back, while Quistis explained what was going on. When she was finished, Raijin and Fujin were in a state of shock.

“Bomb... the Garden?” Raijin said, confused, before continuing, adamantly, “No! He’d never do that!” He drew his quarterstaff again, but Fujin grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“POSSIBLE,” she said, quietly for her. Raijin’s head fell– he knew Seifer was disturbed the last time they’d met, and that he was capable of many things. But having two students suicide bomb the Garden?

“When was it?” He asked the SeeDs.

“Two days ago,” came the reply, from Squall this time. “Seifer sent a videotape of himself– he said he was trying to hurt me personally.”

Raijin and Fujin both nodded at this last bit.

“CONFIRMED,” Fujin said.

“It’s true,” Raijin said, “last time he was here, ‘bout two months ago, he was real angry, ya know? Said you took everything away from him. Also said something about “Payback”.” Squall nodded– this was exactly what he had expected.

“Where is he now?” Squall asked. However, Fujin and Raijin both shook their heads.

“UNKNOWN,” Fujin said.

“Like she says,” Raijin continued, “we got no idea. One night, he just packed up and left, ya know? Didn’t even leave a note. Weren’t there any clues on the tape?” Squall shook his head.

“He was in a room with a bed, a light, and—” Squall paused, remembering the picture of Seifer and Rinoa on the paddleboat. “A few other things,” Squall finished.

“Well, I’m stumped,” Raijin confessed. “Sorry I couldn’t be any more help, guys.”

“ME TOO,” Fujin said. Squall waved his hand, dismissively.

“That’s OK,” he said, “we didn’t really expect him to leave a forwarding address— he didn’t exactly speak highly of you two in the video.”

“EXPECTED,” Fujin said, sadly. Raijin nodded, equally upset.

“It’s true, ya know?” He said. “He was cold with us when he stayed here. I don’t think he ever really forgave us for leaving him on the Pandora thing.”

“I understand,” Squall half-lied. He’d never really understood why the three of them (Seifer, Fujin and Raijin) hung out together in the first place— and he had more pressing matters to attend to now. “Well, then,” Squall started, “we’d better be going. We’ve been told to take Seifer out, and that’s what we’re gonna do.” Fujin and Raijin bristled— obviously they still thought highly of Seifer, but accepted that what must be done, must be done.

“OK,” Raijin said, “see you guys.”

“GOODBYE,” Fujin said also. Squall and his group said their goodbyes, leaving Fujin and Raijin alone on the pier.

“I can’t believe it, man!” Raijin started. “Seifer, a terrorist?”

“TRUE,” Fujin confirmed, before proceeding to kick him in the shins and throw him back onto the pier.

“Hey!” Raijin shouted. “What was that for?”

“ROD!” Fujin shouted, reminding him of the fishing rod that lay underwater beneath him. Raijin nodded glumly, and resumed his search.

About half a mile out from the pier, a lone figure stood on a speedboat, observing the meeting with a pair of binoculars in his hands. He lowered his binoculars, letting the whole world see all of his bearded, scarred face for a brief instant, before resuming his spying.

*So, Seifer thought to himself, chucking, they’ve taken the bait.* He’d deliberately mentioned Fujin and Raijin in the video he’d sent to Squall, in the hopes that they would be his first port of call, but he never for one second actually believed he’d be so stupid as to come all the way out there in the Ragnarok, then leave it unguarded. As the two groups spoke on the pier, Seifer was arranging for a little surprise to be placed just outside the hatch of the spaceship.

*It’s just a shame,* he continued thinking to himself, *that he didn’t bring HER along. That would have been interesting. Not to mention amusing.* Still, if there was one lesson Seifer learned from the Ultimecia incident, it was never to underestimate the intelligence of his enemies.

Nida wasn’t paying much attention to the surrounding area whilst standing guard at the Ragnarok. If he had been, he would have seen a hooded figure drop a few metallic-looking stones on the path leading up to the ship’s hatch.

“Well,” Irvine started, a little frustrated, “that was certainly worth coming out here for.” Squall cast a glance behind him, a sort-of non-verbal “shut up”, directed towards Irvine. It wasn’t that he disagreed with the cowboy— it was just that he wished he’d put it differently. He was about to respond verbally when all of a

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sudden, he heard a very loud noise and found himself unable to stand.

“Stun grenades!” Quistis shouted, as the others helped her retrieve Squall, who had been standing closest to the blast. They only got a few feet before the next two went off, directly behind them. Selphie, Irvine and Quistis were immediately knocked unconscious by these last two, while Squall was still very fuzzyheaded from the first.

*This was a professional hit*, he thought to himself, as he tried to shake the cobwebs, *but who?* He slowly staggered to his feet, only to see a familiar scarred, bearded face in a familiar white coat walk towards him. He was about to draw his gunblade when Seifer pushed a button on a remote he was holding, detonating the fourth, and last, stun grenade directly in front of Squall.

*Damn!* Squall thought, as he blacked out. *Rinoa...*

Nida came barrelling out of the Ragnarok as fast as he could, aiming to take Seifer by surprise and from behind, but Seifer had foreseen it— he simply hooked his gunblade under his arm, amused as Nida, unable to stop, simply ran gut—first into the blade. Nida gasped and staggered backwards, collapsing. The wound had not been deep, but it was enough to take Nida off his feet. As he lay prone on the ramp leading to the hatch, he watched, in fear, as Seifer stood over him, letting the tip of his gunblade gently come to rest on Nida’s throat. Nida gulped slowly— he didn’t want a reflex action to cost him his life. However, Seifer had a surprise for him.

“I don’t know you,” Seifer said, shaking his head and raising his gunblade, “and I doubt Squall knows you particularly well either. He doesn’t make friends easily.” Seifer reared back, and then punched Nida on top the head as hard as he could. Nida was immediately knocked out cold. As he flexed his fingers after his knockout blow, Seifer turned to the 4 unconscious men and women behind him.

“These four, however,” he started, sinisterly, “I know very well indeed.” He summoned forth four more hooded figures, and smiled as they picked up one SeeD each.

“Excellent additions to my mausoleum,” he remarked evilly to himself, as he followed his acolytes back to his boat. “This was even easier than I had expected.” He was smiling all the way, as the boat left FH and headed west, towards Galbaldia desert, and the former prison he had made his home...

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Rinoa was studying when the telephone call came. She decided not to follow through with her threat to quit the Garden, and felt she owed it to Squall to study, to show him that she really did want to be a SeeD. Leaning across her desk, she answered the phone.

“Hello?” She answered. She was somewhat surprised to hear Cid’s subdued voice on the other end of the line.

“Rinoa,” he started, obviously about to break some bad news, “could you please report to the infirmary. I have some bad news for you.” She instantly knew what it meant. *Squall...* she silently thought, as she answered her headmaster.

“Y–yes,” she said, fighting back the tears that had become part of her daily routine since Squall had left, “I–I’ll be right there.” She hung up, and immediately ran down to the infirmary, where she arrived just in time to see a young man being stretchered in. She immediately recognised him as Nida– the pilot assigned to Squall’s mission. Locating Cid, she went up to him.

“Squall?” She asked, catching Cid by surprise. Cid put on his serious face, and answered her query.

“Rinoa, there’d no easy way to say this,” he began. Rinoa gasped, putting her hand to her mouth. *Surely he can’t be–!*

“He’s been captured by Seifer,” he continued. Rinoa let her expression soften– while it was still very, very bad, it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Cid continued on. “Along with Selphie, Irvine and Quistis, they were captured and taken somewhere. I don’t know where yet, I’ll have to wait until Nida’s conscious.” Rinoa nodded, then slowly, but surely, the tears came. While he wasn’t exactly the most sympathetic of people, Cid just couldn’t ignore her, and gave her a brief, re–assuring hug.

“We’ll find them,” he said, reassuringly, “there’s got to be a way.” Suddenly, something clicked inside Rinoa’s head– all her fuzzy thoughts slowly turned into one, lucid idea. Wiping away the tears, she looked up at Cid.

“There is a way,” she said, full of the same confidence she’d begun to thought she was losing. “I need the Ragnarok.”

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“Where will you be taking it?” Cid asked. Although had been partly responsible for retrieving the spaceship, he wasn’t too keen to turn it over to anyone without a good reason.

“Esthar,” Rinoa answered. She’d had a brilliant plan, but she’d need some help...

Squall awoke to find himself feeling sick, and chained to a wall, staring at a very large mirror. *I know this place*, he thought, *I definitely remember it from somewhere, but where?* Just then, Seifer’s grinning, bearded face came looming into view.

“Good,” he said, almost neutrally, “you’re awake. I admit, after four stun grenades and a shot of tranquilliser, I was beginning to think you wouldn’t wake up at all.” *Tranquillisers— that explains why I’m nauseous. But where am I?*

“Do you remember this place, Squall?” Seifer asked, genuinely curious. Just then, Squall’s memories of the last time he was there came flooding back— the torture, the thousands and thousands of volts Seifer sent cascading through his body until he eventually passed out from the pain. Squall remembered it well.

“This,” Squall answered, his voice nearly breaking, “is the prison in Galbaldia desert, where you tortured me.” Seifer smiled.

“You DO remember it, then,” Seifer replied. “I’m glad. Us three are going to get re-acquainted.” Seifer walked over to the control panel. “Hmm,” he continued. I see your heartbeat’s increased. What’s the matter? Afraid I’ll do something, perhaps? Like this?” As he uttered the word “this”, Seifer pushed a button on his control panel. Squall yelled and writhed as approximately 7000 volts were sent shooting through his body for nearly ten seconds. When he had got his breath back, Squall spoke.

“W—what do you want fro me?” Squall asked, still gasping for air.

“Tch, tch, you’re breaking easily, Squall,” Seifer said, mockingly, pushing the same button again, this time for only 5 seconds. “What I want from you,” he continued, “is to suffer. You made my life a misery, Squall. You had to take everything I ever had, ever wanted. Well now it’s my turn, Squall. I will hurt you, I will humiliate you, and in the end, Squall, I will bury you.” This time, he leaned back, concentrating, and unleashed a firaga spell on Squall, burning his skin. Squall, however, was defiant.

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“Get bent,” he said through gritted teeth, before spitting in Seifer’s face. Seifer quivered with rage, before noticing that his chest was level with Squall’s private area. Smiling, he looked Squall in the eye.

“Big mistake,” he said, before winding up and punching Squall hard in the aforementioned area. Squall emitted a dull moan, his eyes watering, before he couldn’t control himself any longer, and he threw up all over the floor. And all he could hear was Seifer laughing at him...

Irvine was the first of the others to come round. Taking stock of his surroundings, he quickly woke up Quistis and Selphie, who were sprawled on the floor next to him.

“Ugh,” Selphie said, still a little groggy and nauseous, “what happened?” Irvine simply shook his head, also feeling under the weather. Quistis woke up, and immediately sussed out where she was.

“Oh, no,” she whispered, quietly.

“What is it?” Irvine asked.

“This is the D–District prison in Galbaldia. It’s where we were all held after we failed to assassinate Edea.” Selphie, too, recognised her confines.

“Oh, NO!” She shouted. “I thought this place was destroyed?”

“No,” Quistis replied, “only abandoned. Seifer must have made it his home.” Irvine was the first to ask the question none of them wanted to hear.

“Uh, where’s Squall?” The others looked around, but there was no sign of him.

“He’s probably being tortured right now,” Selphie said, glumly. She stood up, but immediately bent double, retching. “Ugh,” she continued, “what did they do to us? Hey Irvy, you don’t happen to have an Esuna spell on you, do you?”

“It won’t work,” said Quistis, still seated. “Seifer will have put the magic barrier back up.” Irvine decided to try anyway, but nothing happened.

“Told you,” Quistis said. Irvine decided to sit Selphie down while he worked out how to open the door. Before he got anywhere, however, the door opened by itself.

“Hey,” Irvine started, thinking he’d opened the door and turning to face the girls, “am I good or am–“ He didn’t get the opportunity to finish showing off, however, as he was knocked to the ground by one of Seifer’s cloaked followers, wielding a club. Two more entered and restrained Quistis and Selphie, while a semi-conscious Irvine was dragged away by the first cloak. Upon his exit, the other two knocked Selphie and Quistis down with karate chops to the back of the neck, before themselves departing. Selphie did not stay down long.

“Irvy!” She shouted, banging on the door. “You bring him back right now, you big bullies, or I’ll– I’ll–“ She slumped down, realising she could do nothing to help her friend. All Quistis could offer her was a weak smile.

“Maybe they’re going to free him,” Quistis said, not entirely full of confidence. “After all, Seifer did say it was Squall alone that he wanted.” Selphie wasn’t convinced.

“They’re gonna torture him...” she wailed.

Squall awoke after passing out from Seifer’s torture to find himself strapped to a chair, in a different room. While he was still in pain, it wasn’t as serious as it had been. He looked up, to see Seifer standing above him, still grinning that same grin he had done all throughout the torture session. Behind Seifer, through a window, was the torture rack Squall was previously attached to.

“Where am I now?” Squall asked, still pained.

“Oh,” Seifer said, smugly, “I decided that you needed a break from all the torture, so I’m going to let you have a little sit down.”

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“Am I supposed to be grateful?” Squall shot back.

“You should be,” Seifer retorted, angrily. “However, without you in my contraption, I’d get bored too easily.” He clicked his fingers, and Squall was shocked to see Irvine get dragged into the room, and stripped of his hat and coat, before being attached to the mechanism Squall was just attached to.

“Irvine!” Squall shouted, out of reflex more than anything else.

“He can’t hear you,” Seifer informed Squall, “this is bullet-proof glass. And it’s one way only, so you can see him, but all he sees is his own reflection.” Squall had wondered why Seifer had installed a mirror in the torture chamber— now he knew.

“Let him go, Seifer,” Squall demanded.

“And why would I want to do that?” Seifer asked as he oversaw Irvine being strapped to the machine, and the electrodes implanted in his neck.

“He’s not the one you want,” Squall answered.

“True,” Seifer started, “but unfortunately, he is one of your friends. Would watching him suffer make you suffer?” Squall looked down— he’d made a habit of not caring before, why wouldn’t Seifer believe him if he said he didn’t care about Irvine?

“Not really,” Squall answered, before jolting as a thousand volts seared through his body.

“Whoops,” Seifer answered, “that was a mistake. Did I forget to mention you’re attached to a lie detector? Lie, and you fry. I’ll ask you again. Would watching the cowboy suffer make you suffer?” Squall was determined.

“No.” Again, Squall writhed in pain as the electricity surged through him.

“Each time you lie,” Seifer said, matter-of-factly, “the surge only gets longer.” Squall, however, didn’t care.

“No,” he began, only to feel a longer surge pass through him, “No,” –even longer– “NO!” The last surge lasted a full ten seconds. Squall was close to unconsciousness by the end of it all. Noticing this, Seifer cast a curaga spell on Squall, re-vitalising him.

“I thought you were meant to be torturing me,” Squall said of the spell, mocking Seifer.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Seifer retorted, “I am. Only I don’t want you knocking yourself out before the next event. And to make sure of it–“ Seifer pushed a button on his remote– “The lie detector is now de-activated. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a guest to attend to.” He left the room by a side door, then seconds later, entered the torture chamber, where he addressed Squall through the mirror.

“You’re going to love this, Squall,” he said, mockingly. He walked over to Irvine, and punched him hard in the gut, forcing him to wake up, and vomit. Irvine slowly regained consciousness, and immediately recognised the man who hit him.

“Oh,” he said, trying to sound tough, “it’s you.”

“The traitor of Galbaldia Garden,” Seifer began. “The cowboy. The one all the girls adore. My prisoner. Nice irony, eh?” Irvine was quick to retort.

“Get bent,” he said, defiantly. Seifer just shook his head, then hit Irvine again, this time, in the face. Irvine felt and heard a loud *CRACK* as Seifer’s fist connected with his nose, and blood started dripping from it. *Damn*, Irvine thought, *that ain’t gonna look pretty*.

“Fun though this is,” Seifer went on, “it isn’t really the reason I called you here. Tell me, Irvine, what are Squall’s weaknesses?”

Back behind the mirror, Squall was silently praying. *Please, Irvine*, he thought, *just tell him what he wants to know and save yourself*. He hung his head at Irvine’s reply.

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“Up yours.” Irvine writhed in pain as he felt several thousand volts of pure electricity flow through his joints, his bones and his skin. He inwardly screamed, and outwardly grimaced. Seifer walked up, and yanked a patch of his hair clean out of his head, causing Irvine to grimace some more.

“Tell me what I need to know,” Seifer threatened, before his eyes lit up with an idea. “If you don’t, I’ll just have to get it out of one of the girls. And believe me, I will. One way or another.” Irvine was quick to respond.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me,” Seifer warned. Irvine stayed button-lipped.

“OK, then,” Seifer told Irvine, “have it your way.” He motioned to push the button, then changed his mind, and summoned three cloaked guards to take Irvine down from the machine. Irvine was incredulous.

“No,” he started, “Wait! Put me back! The girls don’t know anything! Spare them!”

“How do I know for sure they don’t know anything,” Seifer retorted, “if I don’t ask them myself?” He motioned to the guards to take Irvine back to the cell. Irvine struggled and shouted all the way, but his struggles were cut short when Seifer instructed the cloaked guards to beat him up, ending Irvine’s resistance. He was dragged off, as Seifer left via the side door, and re-entered Squall’s antechamber.

“See what you’ve done?” He asked Squall. “In under fifteen minutes, one of the girls will be strapped to that device, and you will be powerless to do anything. How does it feel, Squall?”

“They have nothing to do with it,” Squall replied, “none of them. Let them go.”

“They stand by you all the way,” Seifer retorted, “if they choose not to stand by you, then I’ll let them go, no questions asked. But do you honestly think they’ll choose to abandon you?” Squall looked down, knowing the awful truth— they’d never abandon him, no matter how much he willed them to.

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“Not going to answer?” Seifer asked. “That’s alright, I think we both know what the answer is. Let’s just leave it unsaid, shall we?” He said, as he exited the room.

“Where are you going?” Squall asked his departing nemesis.

“Well,” Seifer answered through the magic mirror, “I have to know which of them to pick, don’t I?”

Irvine was thrown back into his cell, and landed hard on his side. Immediately, Selphie ran over to him, close to tears.

“Oh, Irvy!” She shouted, shocked by her best friend’s appearance. Quistis also came over to help him.

“They’re coming, for you,” Irvine said to them, still in immense pain from his torture and beating at the hands of the guards. “Betray Squall,” he advised.

“WHAT?” Selphie and Quistis both shouted in unison.

“Betray him,” Irvine responded. “That way, they won’t torture you.”

“We can’t do that!” Selphie shouted. Just then, however, the cell door opened again, and before they could react, three cloaked guards, acting under haste spells, restrained them in their iron-like grips. The SeeDs struggled, but to no avail. Seifer, flanked by two cloaked guards, entered the room, smiling.

“Ah, if it isn’t my favourite instructor. And the messenger girl. How are you enjoying being my guests?” He asked, condescendingly.

“We’re gonna get you, you big bully!” Selphie shouted, angrily.

“Sefie!” Irvine whispered across to the young brunette. “Don’t!”

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“It’s too late, cowboy,” Seifer said upon hearing Irvine’s warning, “She’s just selected herself as my next room-mate.” He made a hand gesture towards the guards, who dragged Selphie off, kicking and screaming, while the others put Irvine and Quistis down with the same karate chops they’d used previously. Due to a combination of the karate chop and pain from the torture, Irvine blacked out as he hit the floor, thinking despairingly about the fate of his friend...

Squall looked up as Seifer re-entered the torture chamber, walking directly to the side door. He entered, smiling at Squall.

“We’ve got a new playmate,” Seifer said, cheerfully.

“I don’t care who it is, just let them go,” Squall replied. He was getting fed up of Seifer’s smug attitude, his smug voice, and his smug beard. However, he felt himself compelled to ask.

“What’s with that thing anyway?” Squall found himself thinking out loud.

“What,” Seifer replied, stroking his fuzz, “this? I just got tired of shaving. That’s something they make you do, and I chose not to do it.”

“How individual,” Squall replied sarcastically, before his demeanour changed as he saw a struggling Selphie get bolted to the torture rack. “No!” He shouted, shocked that Seifer would do such a thing. “How can you do this?”

“If she has any common sense, I won’t have to. Care to place a bet on whether she’ll see the light and betray you?” Seifer asked, jokingly. He was coming to enjoy watching Squall squirm, not that he didn’t expect to, of course. Squall, however, wasn’t enjoying it one bit.

“Screw you,” he replied. Seifer looked up at where Selphie was now firmly attached to the rack, and smiled.

“Don’t put ideas in my head, Squall,” he responded. “And never forget– sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never harm me.” Seifer smiled again, recalling a fond childhood memory. “It’s just a

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shame chicken-wuss couldn't make it- I'd have just loved the chance to torture him. Well," Seifer said, looking up, "it appears I have things to attend to. Until later, Squall." He left the room, laughing all the way, only to re-appear on the other side of the mirror a few seconds later, still laughing.

"Well, well," he started, still in that same cheery voice that drove Squall quietly insane, "little messenger girl. I hope you're well."

"Let me go!" Selphie shouted, struggling in the restraints that were designed for someone much taller than her.

"First things first," Seifer said, "do you, or do you not, follow Squall?"

"What?" Selphie asked, before remembering Irvine's words- *Betray Squall...* Gulping, she answered.

"Of course I follow him."

"Are you sure about this?" Seifer asked, genuinely concerned. *It's almost as if he doesn't want to do this,* Squall thought to himself from his vantage point behind the mirror. "Do you stand by him, through thick and thin?" He asked, seeking confirmation. Selphie was more than happy to oblige.

"Through thick... and thin," she confirmed.

"That's all I needed to know," Seifer said, turning his back on Selphie for a brief instant to smile and wink at Squall, behind the mirror. Squall felt his blood boil. *I'm gonna kill you, Seifer,* he thought. The torturer walked over to his control panel.

"You see," he started, "the thing about electric shock therapy is that it depends on the mass of the subject- these things were designed to kill, and for Squall and that cowboy thing, I had to use the lowest settings. However, they both weigh over 160 pounds each, whereas you, my dear, weigh barely 90. It'd knock you out cold in an instant." Having finished his explanation, he walked back up to Selphie. "Looks like I'll have to find another way then, doesn't it?" He remarked with a grin, before cocking his head back and unleashing a powerful poison spell on Selphie. Instantly, she felt the poison start to churn up her insides, her temperature jumped several degrees and she started sweating uncontrollably. Then, she threw up all over the front of her

dress.

“W–why?” She asked, shivering uncontrollably.

“Now that that’s done,” Seifer said, ignoring her, and also producing a hypodermic, which he flicked at, “shall we begin? I want to know Squall’s weaknesses. In my hand, I have a truth serum. I promise you, the combination of it and the poison spell will leave you feeling so under the weather you’ll beg for me to activate the electrodes and put you out of your misery.” Selphie looked at the needle– she’d never been fond of them, but she suddenly remembered her many years of training. *You’re a SeeD, Selphie!* She thought to herself. *What would Squall do in this situation?* She thought to herself a little more before answering.

“I’ll never tell!” Even when in she was in pain, Selphie’s spunk impressed Squall. Unfortunately, Seifer didn’t care too much for it– he pushed the needle into her arm, and depressed the plunger. Instantly, Selphie’s pupils dilated, and her face almost went green. Her tongue hung out, lolling around, and her limbs all went limp.

“That’s better. Now, can you hear me, messenger girl?” Seifer asked. Selphie instantly replied.

“Yes,” she said, in a robotic, monotone voice, almost as if the spirit had been sucked out of her. Squall was quivering with rage at this point– he’d seen interrogation victims before, but Selphie hadn’t done anything to him! Why pick on her? *If you’re going to pick on someone, Squall thought, at least be a man and pick on me!* Seifer continued his questions, oblivious to what Squall was thinking.

“What,” he asked, pacing around, “in your opinion, is Squall’s greatest weakness?” Selphie answered him diligently.

“His love for Rinoa,” she said, again in a robotic sense. Seifer nodded, satisfied with the answer but not 100% happy.

“Clarify,” he ordered the young woman. Again, she was only too willing to answer him.

“He loves her, she loves him. If something happened to one, the other would be devastated.”

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“I thought as much,” Seifer replied, again casting a sideways wink at Squall. “Is there anything else? Any other potential weaknesses I should be aware of?” Selphie answered him after a brief pause.

“His father,” she said. *No!* Squall thought, leaning his head back and grimacing. Besides him, Selphie was the only other person to know about his parentage— now all that was about to change. Seifer suddenly assumed a truly curious expression on his face, while Squall’s was one of pure anger.

“His father, you say?” Seifer asked, while casting a surprised look in Squall’s direction. “What’s his name, messenger girl?” With each following word that Selphie said, Seifer’s smile just got wider, and wider, and wider.

“President,” she began, “Laguna Loire of Esthar.” Seifer had seen reports about Laguna on the television— he figured that although he’d masterminded the plot to defeat Ultimecia in compressed time, he wouldn’t come into play in Seifer’s plot for revenge against Squall. *That is*, he thought, *until now...*

“Take her down,” he ordered, as two cloaked guards dutifully obeyed. “Take her back to the cell. I’ve got an assassination to plot,” he said, laughing in Squall’s direction. Squall leaned his head back and yelled Seifer’s name, his frustration at his helplessness reaching and passing boiling point.

Meanwhile, aboard the Ragnarok, Zell, at the pilot’s seat, was getting annoyed.

“Are we nearly there yet?” Rinoa asked for what must have been the hundredth time.

“Geez, Rinoa,” Zell snapped, angrily, “I’ve told you already! We’ll be there in fifteen minutes! Get some sleep or something!” Zell’s head was pounding— a combination of his head injury and Rinoa’s constant queries. However, Zell could see he’d upset her, so he tried to make amends.

“Aw, Geez, Rinoa,” he started sympathetically, “I’m sorry, I’m just still on edge, that’s all.” Rinoa looked up, and smiled at him.

“That’s OK,” she said, “I’m just a little anxious, that’s all. It’s fine, honestly!” Zell nodded slowly, then asked a question of his own.

“The time might fly a bit quicker if you told me what your plan was.” He’d been itching to know ever since she dragged him out of his quarters and forced him to pilot the Ragnarok for her. Rinoa, who been keeping quiet about her plan so far, decided to tell him.

“We’re gonna find Ellone,” she started, “and have her put me into Squall’s mind. That way, I’ll know where Seifer’s taken him.” Zell mulled the plan over for a while, then gave it his approval.

“Yeah,” he said, “that should work. But what if Squall’s–“

“He isn’t dead, Zell.” Rinoa answered, defiantly.

“Yeah, but Seifer may–“

“HE ISN’T DEAD, ZELL.” Rinoa answered, even more defiantly. Zell opted not to question her this time. “If he was, I’d know. And don’t ask me how I’d know, I just would.” Zell nodded again, then his stomach growled– Rinoa’s, well, persuasive methods had meant he’d missed lunch, and he was famished. *I wonder if they have hot dogs in Esthar*, he thought to himself. A few more minutes passed, before they both saw the familiar sight of Esthar air station.

“Better get on the radio, Rinn,” Zell said, using what had become the common shortening of Rinoa’s name. Rinoa nodded, and activated the transmitter.

“Esthar air station,” Rinoa began, “this is Ragnarok requesting permission to land, over.” The radio crackled before they got a response.

“Ragnarok,” the voice began, “you are not listed on our arrivals sheet. Please state your intentions for visiting Esthar. Over.” *Oops*, Rinoa thought, *I should have got Cid to call ahead for us...* However, it wasn’t the first time she’d had to talk her way out of a situation. She’d led a resistance group in the heart of Galbaldia, for crying out loud! She could handle a simple air traffic controller. Unfortunately, Zell didn’t want to wait, and took the initiative on her behalf.

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“We’re here to see Ellone!” The young SeeD said into the radio, forcefully. *Oh, Zell...* Rinoa thought, angrily. He may well have blown their chances of getting into Esthar. She wondered if they had any parachutes...

“Identify yourself please. Over,” the radio said again. Quickly, Rinoa clamped her hand over Zell’s mouth, and making herself heard over his muffled but loud grumblings, answered the radio.

“We’re high-ranking SeeDs from Balamb Garden,” she answered. “Contact Headmaster Cid if you don’t believe us. Over.” She removed her hand from Zell’s mouth.

“What’re you talking about?” He asked. “You’re not a SeeD!”

“I’m the next best thing,” Rinoa answered. However, before Zell could argue back, the radio crackled into life again.

“Permission to land granted, Ragnarok,” the radio said as Rinoa shot an “I told you so” smile at Zell. “Enjoy your stay in Esthar. Over and out.” Rinoa sat back down as Zell expertly landed the Ragnarok on an unoccupied landing space. They disembarked, to be greeted by the familiar faces of Ward and Kiros. Kiros addressed them.

“Where’s Squall?” He asked. “Is he not with you?”

“That’s why we’re here,” Rinoa responded. “We need to see Ellone, urgently.” Kiros nodded– he’d had no reason to mistrust the SeeDs before, so he ushered them onto the monorail. Once they were on, he saw Ward staring, silently, at Zell. Kiros interjected.

“Ward says,” he started, “that he’d have like some tattoos like that when he was your age.” Ward smiled, his message conveyed accurately by Kiros, as always, and sat up straight. Eventually, they arrived at the presidential palace, where Ward and Kiros showed them up to Ellone’s room.

“We’ll have to leave you now, I’m afraid,” Kiros said, “You never know when Laguna’s going to need us next.” Rinoa and Zell waved as Ward and Kiros walked off down the corridor. When they were gone, Rinoa knocked on the door. Ellone’s familiar voice came from inside.

“Who is it?” She asked. Rinoa didn’t hesitate to answer.

“It’s Rinoa,” she said, before noticing Zell gesturing beside her. “And Zell,” she continued. “We need your help.”

“Just a second,” Ellone answered, before opening the door to them. She looked around, then asked– “Where’s Squally?” Rinoa looked down, briefly.

“That’s why we’re here. We need your help.” Ellone could sense the concern in Rinoa’s voice.

“Come in…” she said. Rinoa and Zell entered, and sat down on her couch. Rinoa spoke up.

“Squall’s been captured,” she said. Ellone gasped– although she knew that Squall worked for a military organisation, and the likelihood of him being hurt was high; to actually hear the words was a shock to her. However, she was at a loss to work out how she could help.

“Then how can I help?” Ellone asked, thinking out loud.

“We need to know where he is,” Rinoa answered. “We were wondering, uh,” she stuttered as she tried to find the words. Zell decided the words for her.

“She wants you to put her mind in Squall’s body, so she can figure out where he is,” he said. Ellone sighed– it wasn’t going to be easy, explaining to them the limits of her powers.

“It’s not that simple,” she explained, “I can only access memories that have been there for some time. I won’t be able to take you to any recent ones.” Rinoa waved her hand dismissively.

“That’s OK,” Rinoa said, wanting to get on with it. “Just put me in the most recent you can.”

“You’re sure about this?” Ellone asked Rinoa.

“Short of a worldwide search,” Rinoa answered, “you’re our only hope of finding him.” Ellone sighed, and nodded.

“OK then,” she said. From her correspondence with Squall (they wrote to each other at least once a fortnight), she knew how much he loved her– it seems her love for him was equally as strong. “Lie down,” she instructed Rinoa. Rinoa did so, and closed her eyes.

“How recent will the memories be?” She asked Ellone, while Zell moved off the couch to make room for Rinoa.

“At least a day old,” Ellone answered. “Are you ready?” Rinoa nodded. “Good,” Ellone continued. “You may feel some disorientation,” she said as she leaned back, and shut her eyes. Immediately, for Rinoa, the room started spinning, and she quickly passed out.

Rinoa awoke to find herself in a strange body in a strange place– she quickly reminded herself that it was Squall’s body. Involuntarily, she looked around, and saw Seifer’s bearded face grinning evilly at her. *No*, she reminded herself, *at Squall...*

“Do you remember this place, Squall?” She heard Seifer ask. Rinoa suddenly found herself lost in Squall’s memories of torture, of humiliation at the hands of Seifer, memories he had not let her know about. *Oh, Squall*, she thought to herself, *why didn’t you tell me?*

Rinoa suddenly found herself speaking through Squall’s mouth. “This– is the prison in Galbaldia desert, where you tortured me.” Squall’s voice was close to breaking under the memories. Seifer continued his rant, but Rinoa wasn’t paying attention. She had the information she needed– Galbaldia desert! The prison where they were all held! Suddenly, she found herself writhing in pain, as Seifer sent electricity cascading through her– *No*, she again forced herself to remember– *Squall’s body*. There were a few seconds, then she felt Squall’s body burn under a firaga spell. She herself had fallen victim a few of them before and they were not nice, but this one hurt more than usual– because she wasn’t actually the victim of it, but her lover was. A few more seconds passed, until she saw Seifer grinning evilly again, then experienced an unusual pain– like her whole body was being crushed. Squall’s body was in the process of vomiting when Rinoa felt herself fade out of it, and found herself waking up back in her own body, in Ellone’s lounge. She slowly stood up, feeling a little nauseous, and looked over to where Zell was sat.

“Well?” He asked, impatiently. “Did you find out where they were?” Rinoa nodded.

“It’s bad,” she answered, going over and tending to Ellone, who was a little weary after sending Rinoa into Squall’s body.

“I’m fine,” Ellone said. Zell stood up, repeating his last question.

“WELL?” He asked, impatiently, “Where are they?” Rinoa hung her head– it was not news she had wanted to hear.

“They’re being kept,” she started, “in the D–District prison in Galbaldia desert. You remember the place, don’t you?” Zell nodded– he remembered being the one who’d had to bust all the others out.

“Then what are we waiting for?” He asked, gesturing for Rinoa to hurry up.

“Right!” Rinoa replied, enthusiastically. Before going, however, she turned and addressed Ellone.

“Thank you,” she simply said, a more than humble tone to her voice. Ellone shook her head.

“You should go– he needs you,” she said to her two younger friends. Rinoa shook Ellone’s hand, and then they briefly hugged each other.

“Always be there for him,” Ellone whispered in Rinoa’s ear.

“I will,” Rinoa whispered back.

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“Geez!” Zell shouted. “Enough already! Squall needs our help!” Rinoa decided to appease her impatient friend this time, and left. Ellone waved to them as they walked out the door. *Please, Hyne, she thought, let them get there on time...*

Back in the torture chamber, Squall was once again attached to the rack, and was close to giving out. Seifer had had him up there for nearly six hours, and he was weary, bruised, battered and bloody, not to mention singed from all the electric shocks he’d received. And yet Seifer still wanted more. Squall watched as Seifer picked up Quistis’ chain whip, the weapon she put to good use during the Ultimecia incident.

“This is a remarkable weapon,” Seifer commented. Squall chose not to respond— every time he responded, Seifer only tortured him more.

“Of course,” he continued, “I’m not as good as the instructor is with it, but I think I can guess how it works.” He demonstrated this by cracking the whip across Squall’s face. Squall winced as a line of red pain traced its way from his hairline to his chin, going over his left eyelid in the process. Had his eyes not been shut, Seifer would have taken his left eyeball clean out. Seifer swung it a second time, slashing open Squall’s shirt, and his chest at the same time. Squall hung his head in a combination of pain, despair, and shame at what he was about to do— *I can’t take this any more*, he thought, a beaten man.

“I—“ he began, wearily.

“You what, Squall?” Seifer asked him. *Finally!* Seifer thought. *I’ve beaten him!*

“I—“ Squall repeated, but before he could continue, a siren went off. Seifer rushed over to his control console.

“NO!” He shouted...

In the cells, Irvine was holding Selphie in his muscular arms, as she slept off the effects of the poison and the truth serum. He was mad at Seifer— mad that he could do something like that to someone who’d never done anything to him, and mad that he didn’t even show any remorse for it. However, they had a plan, and it was about to be implemented.

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“Psst!” Quistis shouted from her look-out spot near the door, “now’s the time!” Quistis hadn’t got away without some questioning at the hands of Seifer herself, only he had given up when he realised she didn’t possess any information which was new to him. She had been returned to the cell, a bit roughed up, but in generally better condition than either Irvine or Selphie were. As Quistis stood ready, holding her “whip”, which was in fact just Irvine’s shirt ripped up (he had been none too happy about it, mind) and tied together at the ends, Irvine himself set Selphie down and gently woke her up.

“Hey, Sefie,” he said, gently, as the petite girl slowly came to.

“Irvy?” She asked, still hung over from the effects of the poison/truth serum. “What happened to your shirt?” Irvine smiled— she was going to be all right, he just knew it. He handed her the homemade Shinobou he and Quistis had fashioned from a strut of the sole bed they had, and tied the two broken pieces together with the leftovers from Irvine’s shirt.

“This is a yucky weapon,” she complained, standing upright, and trying it to see how it works. “Although,” she admitted, “it’s not THAT bad...” Quistis suddenly beckoned her over to the left-hand side of the door, while Quistis herself stood on the right-hand side. Selphie immediately knew what they were planning, and nodded at Quistis to let her know. Quistis nodded back, and suddenly, the door opened. There were three cloaked guards, who were staring straight at the shirtless Irvine, confused.

“Hi,” Irvine said to the guards, who simply looked at each other before simultaneously shrugging. Before they could act, however, two of them were knocked out cold, one by Quistis’ shirt whip cracking of the back of his neck, one by Selphie bringing her bed strut shinobou crashing down on the guard’s head. The third one, seeing all this, charged straight at Irvine. Irvine managed to sidestep the guard, and used his own momentum against him, sending him crashing into a wall. The guard was knocked cold immediately. The SeeDs quickly changed into the guards’ uniforms, and escaped out the door.

In the torture chamber, Seifer was livid.

“The Ragnarok!” He shouted. “How did they find me?” Squall smiled, and started to chuckle— he didn’t care how they found them, he was just glad that they did.

“You’re screwed now, Seifer,” Squall laughed in Seifer’s face. Seifer boiled over with rage, and once again, punched Squall hard in his package. Squall vomited, again, but didn’t care— soon enough, he’d be free of this nightmare. And, as if to make the moment even better, Quistis, Irvine and Selphie all came bounding through the door, taking Seifer completely by surprise and knocking him out cold. They were subdued, however, by the state of their friend, who was hanging on the wall.

## Bad Blood

“What took you all so long?” Squall asked, as wearily as when he nearly asked Seifer to— *No*, Squall thought to himself, *don't think about it, man*. Relieved to find he was, for the best part, alright, they helped Squall off the wall, and when Selphie had figured out how to disable the magic barrier, treated him with several Esuna and Curaga spells. Squall, although bloodied and still very, very sore from the torture, got his second wind from the magic, and was quickly on his feet, returning the weapons Seifer had stolen to their rightful owners. Selphie in particular was glad to have her weapon back, discarding her bed strut shinobou with a disgusted look on her face. As they were all about to leave, Irvine raised a point no one else had noticed.

“Wait a minute,” he started, “what about him?” He was referring, of course, to Seifer, who, despite the fact that he was hit hard, was already starting to stir. Squall answered his question.

“I know just the thing...” he said, grabbing Seifer under an arm and motioning for Irvine to do the same.

Seifer awoke a few minutes later to find himself in an unfamiliar position— *Where am I?* He thought, to punctuate the point. He didn't stay confused for long, however. *I'm attached to the torture rack*, he realised, *and I'm not in pain. That means Squall and the others didn't stick around to torture me*. He shook his head, smirking.

“Wimps,” he said out loud, before saying something towards his wrist. “Attention, all servants of the Almay empire,” he commanded, sounding official, “the prisoners are loose. Initiate maximum security measures.”

The SeeDs were about to exit the building when they heard the announcement.

“Damn!” Squall shouted. “We gotta hurry!” They ran to the door where they exited last time, only to find it sealed. Squall tried to activate a control panel slightly further back from the door, only to be stunned when a door slid down from the roof, separating him from Irvine, Selphie and Quistis, who were as stunned as he was. Squall heard footsteps descending the stairs, and saw Seifer, gunblade in hand, discard a remote over the side of the stairs.

“You're coming with me,” he said, angrily. Squall, struggling to keep his cool, simply drew his gunblade.

“I don't think so,” he replied.

## Bad Blood

“So, Seifer said, “it’s gotta be like this, huh? Fine. Then just bring it!” He lunged at Squall with his gunblade, but Squall was too quick, deflecting his blow and attempting to land one of his own, only for Seifer to evade it. The two combatants backed off for a brief while.

“You’ve improved,” Squall said of his nemesis. Seifer smirked.

“I’ve had plenty of time to practice. And don’t think I know what you’re doing!” Seifer shouted as he lunged toward Squall, distracting him from what he was attempting to do, which was summoning GF Eden. Having to concentrate on evading Seifer’s blows instead, Squall’s summon got interrupted and cancelled. Squall tried again, but every time he tried to summon a GF, or even use magic, Seifer was there to cut him off. *I’ll just have to wait for the right opportunity*, Squall thought to himself. Seven minutes passed, neither combatant managing to break the deadlock in what was one of the most breathtaking displays of gunblade mastery ever, when one combatant finally managed to make a breakthrough. Just as he was about to attack Squall with a high swing, aimed for the head, he altered his posture and kicked Squall’s legs out from beneath him. Instantly as he did this, Seifer summoned forth a magic spell that knocked a recovering Squall back off his vertical base. Squall immediately recognised the spell as Demi, the gravity spell that sapped a fighter’s strength by the force of gravity. However, what he hadn’t accounted for was that Seifer had cast triple on himself before descending the stairs, meaning that the spell hit Squall again, and again. With over half of his strength sapped, Squall knew that he was fighting a losing battle, but he was in no mood to give up. Unfortunately, a combination of fatigue from the magic and the torture, and his opponent’s ruthlessness eventually caught up with Squall.

Seifer swung his gunblade from left to right across Squall’s chest, but Squall was only able to parry it just beyond him, allowing Seifer the chance to counter-attack. Squall saw Seifer swing back with his gunblade, and then yelled in pure agony as he felt the metal penetrate the flesh of his left thigh. He looked down and saw Seifer’s gunblade embedded deep within the inside right of the front of his thigh, blood oozing out unstopably. Then he looked at Seifer’s evil, grinning face, as he deliberately pulled the trigger on the weapon. Squall screamed again as the bullet entered his thigh, causing more blood to spurt out and more pain to shoot up his leg. Seifer pulled the trigger a second time, and this time, Squall was pushed backwards off the blade, moaning in pain all the way. He hit the floor twisting, and watched his gunblade slide out of his hand, just beyond his arm’s reach. He tried to grab it, only to feel Seifer’s boot stamp down hard on his wrist, breaking it. Squall whimpered again, falling into shock from the pain and the blood loss, which was rapidly becoming life threatening. He felt Seifer’s boot stamp down on the side of his head, and Seifer say his final words to him before he lost consciousness.

“I had wanted to spare you, torture you some more,” he had said, “but it looks like that’ll have to change. Goodbye Squall.” Squall dimly felt Seifer place his gunblade on the back of his neck, lining up his decapitating strike, before it all went dark.

## Bad Blood

*Rinoa...* Squall thought as he faded out, *I'm sorry.*

Squall awoke to find himself standing in a field, full of long, green grass. He was uninjured. Even his facial scar, his trademark, had disappeared.

“What’s happening?” He asked, directing his query at no one in particular. His voice had a strange metallic echo to it...

“Squall?” He heard a female voice call. *It can't be...* he thought. *You're dead. But then again,* he glumly remembered, *so am I...* He turned round to see the face of the woman he hadn't seen since he was a baby.

“Mother?” He asked the dark-haired woman, who bore a striking resemblance to Squall himself.

“Squall,” Raine answered, slowly walking forward and embracing her son, as he did the same thing to her.

“What’s happening?” He asked Raine, tears of emotion uncontrollably falling from his eyes.

“This is not your time,” she answered cryptically, “but I must tell you these things. Listen carefully, Squall,” she said in a motherly tone, “and heed them. Be true to Rinoa. Never make her angry. You are to her as Laguna was to me.”

“OK,” Squall said, breaking down completely.

“Talk to your father,” Raine continued. “He loves you, and if you ask him never to leave you, then he never will. And Squall,” she said, releasing her son and staring at him in his tear-streaked face, “make time for your friends. They’re good people who care deeply for you— they’ll stand by you through thick and thin. You owe it to them to do the same.” Squall nodded.

“I will, mother,” he said. “I love you...” he wailed. Raine embraced her son once more.

## Bad Blood

“I love you too, Squall,” she said. “You’re a strong, handsome, brave young man who people can’t help but adore. Don’t blame Seifer– even he’ll come round in the end.” Strangely, when Raine mentioned Seifer’s name, Squall felt no rage or spite, but instead, felt pity.

“This is *your* destiny,” she said, as Squall faded out again.

“Mother?” He asked towards the fading image of his mum. “MOTHER!” Squall suddenly felt an arc of electricity pass through his body, and passed out. He awoke to find himself lying shirtless on a table, with needles and tubes in him, and two small burn marks on his chest.

“We’ve got a pulse!” He heard a familiar voice shout. *Dr. Kadowaki?* He thought, weakly. Slowly, he turned his head, to see a sight he’d been longing for for days– Rinoa’s smiling face, staring straight at his. She had obviously been crying, and quite heavily so. Squall, who was all but bereft of energy, flashed a brief smile back.

“Hey...” he croaked, knowing how he must look, but trying to show Rinoa just how much he loved her.

“Squall...” she said to him, still crying, but this time, they were tears of happiness. However, Dr. Kadowaki put her arms around Rinoa and gently escorted her out of the room. Squall tried to raise his right arm to wave at her, but it was still in agony from where Seifer had stamped on it.

“I’ll be back later, Squall! I love you!” She shouted as the good doctor escorted her out of the room. Squall was barely able to mouth “I love you” back at her before losing consciousness again.

Squall awoke some time later to find himself in the side room of the infirmary. It was mid-afternoon, and the sun was shining through the window. Squall was slightly stronger now, so he turned his head, and, seeing Dr. Kadowaki, addressed her.

“How long was I out?” He asked her, making her jump slightly.

“Oh, you’re awake!” She was somewhat surprised– she hadn’t expected him to regain consciousness until the following day. “You should get back to sleep– you need your rest.”

“How long?” Squall re-iterated. He was in no mood for rest. Dr. Kadowaki relented, and answered his question.

“Eight hours. You were brought in here at 7 AM, and it’s 3 now.” Squall slowly shook his head.

“I mean before that,” he said, “after I lost consciousness at the prison.” Dr. Kadowaki smiled.

“Only a few hours,” she re-assured him. “You were brought straight here on the Ragnarok. We nearly lost you.”

“Thanks for bringing me back,” Squall said, gratefully. “I want to see Rinoa,” he said again, this time more forcefully. The doctor shook her head.

“You’re still weak,” she said, “too much excitement might send you into another coma. I’ll let you see her tomorrow morning. What you need to concentrate on is resting, and getting better.” Squall then asked the question she hadn’t wanted to hear.

“How bad are my injuries?” Dr. Kadowaki sighed— she had some bad news, and she felt it best to wait until her patient was a little stronger.

“Tomorrow, Squall,” she replied. Squall was not happy at this answer.

“I need to know, doctor,” he said, forcefully, “if I’m to get better.” Dr. Kadowaki sat down with a dour expression on her face. *Even if it’s bad news, Squall thought, I still need to know.*

“Most of the surface injuries were easily treatable with magic and medicine,” she began, “but your wrist and your leg were different matters. If you don’t push it, and stick to the exercises and magic program I give you, your wrist should be fully healed in four weeks.” Squall sighed with relief— for a broken wrist, four weeks was not a bad recovery time.

## Bad Blood

“And my leg?” He asked. Dr. Kadowaki started speaking, only with a very serious tone.

“That’s a different story, I’m afraid. The blade punctured one of your quadriceps muscles, and the bullets nearly tore it to shreds. Had he done any more damage, it was likely we’d have had to amputate.” Squall was shocked at this news, but he didn’t let it show. Taking a big gulp, he asked the question he really didn’t want to know the answer to.

“How long?”

“Well,” Dr. Kadowaki answered him, “with the right program of exer—“

“How long, doctor?” Squall asked, more forcefully this time. Dr. Kadowaki sighed.

“At least fourteen weeks, Squall,” she said, quietly. Squall closed his eyes, unable to believe what he’d just heard. Fourteen weeks. That was over three months. He’d be off his feet, unable to train, barely able to walk, for over three months. Dr. Kadowaki stood up, and left him in peace, but not before some parting advice.

“You should get some sleep, Squall,” she said before closing the door on him. However, Squall couldn’t sleep. He kept thinking the same thing, over and over again. *Three months... three months...* Squall fell asleep that night, wondering how he was possibly going to survive for three months doing nothing but re-habilitating.

Squall again found himself standing in a grassy field, bereft of his scars and injuries. He knew immediately what it meant.

“Mother?” He asked, expectantly. What he got, however, was different from anything he could possibly have expected.

“Hello, Squall,” he heard the familiar voice of his father call from behind him. Squall turned round, and sure enough, there stood Laguna Loire— the president of Esthar, and his father.

## Bad Blood

“What are you doing here?” Squall asked, defensively. Laguna simply smiled.

“I hear you’ve got some free time ahead of you, Squall,” he smirked.

“It won’t all be free time,” Squall corrected his old man, “I’ll have to re-habilitate, I’ll have work to catch up on, and—“ Laguna waved his hand, stopping Squall in his tracks.

“Recently,” he started, “a very clever and beautiful woman gave you some advice. I suggest you act on it. Hell,” he continued, laughing, “It’s not like you don’t have the time!” Squall nodded, remembering what his mother had told him when he was, for a brief moment, dead.

“OK,” Squall said, “I will.” Laguna smiled.

“Trust me, you won’t regret it,” he said, backing off. “Oh, and don’t forget to call me!”

“I won’t!” Squall shouted after his fading father.

Squall woke up in his hospital bed, smiling. It was probably the most pleasant dream he’d had in a while. Opening his eyes, he was alarmed to find a pair of hands cutting off his vision.

“Guess who,” the familiar voice of his lover came from behind him. Squall’s smile widened. Reaching over with his left hand, he took one of Rinoa’s hands and gently kissed it.

“Hi,” he said simply, turning over, before Rinoa leaned in and kissed him on the lips. He let her hand go, and she sat down at his bedside.

“How are you doing?” She asked him, still grinning slightly.

## Bad Blood

“Well,” Squall answered, joking but trying (badly) to sound serious, “I feel like my right hand’s in a vice, I’ve got a bite bug in my thigh, but with you here, I couldn’t feel better.” Rinoa giggled slightly– to say that Squall wasn’t usually one to crack jokes was one of the biggest exaggerations of all time. Squall continued.

“Any news on when I can get out of here?” Rinoa smiled again– *Good news!* Squall thought to himself.

“The doc says,” she continued, “that if we treat you with magic once every four hours, you can be discharged this evening.” Squall smiled, and laughed a bit himself.

“I really, really,” he said, “cannot wait to get back to our home.” Rinoa stopped smiling for a minute, and then started a more serious conversation.

“Squall, about what we said to each other the night before you left...” Squall cut her off with a wave.

“Forget it,” he said, dismissively. “We all say things we don’t mean at times. If I upset you, then I apologise.” Rinoa was dumbfounded.

“No,” she said, “It was my fault. If I wasn’t so stubborn I–“ Squall cut her off again.

“It’s OK,” he continued, smiling lightly, “I’m willing to put it behind us if you are.” Rinoa smiled again.

“OK,” she started, “who are you, and what have you done with the real Squall?” Squall laughed again.

“I am the real Squall,” he said, “I just haven’t acted like it until now.” He then realised that he had something to ask Rinoa. He sobered up his expression.

“On a more serious note, though,” he asked, “how did I get out of the prison?” Rinoa also sobered up.

“We found you just as you were about to be–“ she hesitated, but Squall knew exactly what she meant.

“Go on,” He said, reassuringly.

“Me and Zell broke in from the top floor and caught Seifer unawares. We freed Quis, Selphie and Irvine, but what with trying to save you and Seifer’s magic, we weren’t able to finish him off.” Squall nodded.

“Was anyone else hurt?” he asked, quietly. He was relieved when Rinoa shook her head.

“No,” she said, “there were too many of us. He did manage to catch Quis in the arm with his gunblade, but it was only a flesh wound, easily treated.”

“Is she alright?” He asked, still concerned.

“You can’t even tell where he hit her,” she answered. Squall breathed a sigh of relief. Rinoa’s expression went dour again, though.

“But,” she said, glumly, “Selphie’s been a little depressed lately. I’m not sure why. She said she’ll only talk to you about it.” Squall nodded– he had an idea why that was.

“Hasn’t Irvine been able to cheer her up?” Usually, when Selphie had been a little glum, Irvine was always on hand to cheer her up. Unfortunately, Rinoa shook her head.

“She says it’s something she’d only feel comfortable talking to you about.” She said, before saying with a mischievous grin, “It’s not something I should be jealous about, is it?” Squall chuckled.

“With Selphie? Everyone’s younger sister?” He shook his head. “There’s only one girl for me, and that’s you.” Rinoa smiled, and kissed him again.

“I have to be going,” she said, “you know how Quis gets when you’re late for classes.” Squall raised an eyebrow.

“So you’re not quitting the Garden after all, then?” Rinoa smiled.

“Never in a million years.” She kissed him again. “I love you, Squall.”

“I love you too, Rinoa,” he said back. Rinoa waved coyly as she left, and Squall waved back (with his left hand, of course), grinning. *Three months*, he thought, *this isn’t going to be so bad after all...* Suddenly, Squall remembered something Edea had said to him a few months earlier, shortly after the end of the Ultimecia incident. Summoning over Dr. Kadowaki, he asked her for a telephone...

Selphie hadn’t got much sleep the previous night– then again, she very rarely does. Usually she bedded down at around 1 AM, only to be up again at 5:30, bright and breezy as always. Many people often wondered where she got her energy from– and, honestly, so did Selphie herself. On this night, however, something was deeply troubling her. Clutching her favourite teddy bear (she may have been nearly 18, but she couldn’t bear to be parted from him for too long), she lay awake all night, thinking one thing over and over again... *I’ve let Squall down... I’ve let Squall down...* She’d been the only one who Squall had told about his parentage, and she blabbed all to Seifer. Sure, she’d been drugged at the time, and it was the first and only time she’d been tortured, but that was no consolation to her. She had the following day off, as all of the SeeDs from the mission did (they’d de-briefed the previous day), and she lay in bed until 10 AM, at which point she heard a knocking on her door. She sat upright.

“Come in,” she said, still a little down. It was Irvine– her best friend, and the man she secretly had a crush on. *At least I hope it’s secret...* Selphie thought to herself. Selphie and Irvine’s relationship had been spectacularly hard to define– while it was clear that Squall and Rinoa were lovers, no one could make up their mind about Selphie or Irvine. People often joked, Rinoa in particular, that they would make a lovely couple, but Selphie and Irvine would just deny it, Selphie coming up with a jokey statement like “with him? He’ll only ask me when every other girl in Garden’s turned him down!” While Irvine would say, “Man, she’s like my sister!” However, deep down, Selphie really wanted to be with Irvine the same way Rinoa was with Squall... What she didn’t know was that Irvine felt about her in exactly the same way. *Maybe he’s come here to tell me*, Selphie secretly hoped. Irvine plonked himself down in her sofa, which was in considerably better condition than his, and swung his feet up on her bed.

“If you’re here to try to cheer me up again,” she started, “then I really don’t feel like it, Irvy.” Irvine simply smiled, and sat down on the bed next to her. He took off his hat and plonked it on her head.

“Hey,” he said, playfully, “who said anything about trying?” He grinned at her, hoping to elicit a smile, but to no avail– she was still as glum as when he’d tried to cheer her up the previous night. *Come on, Sefie*, he thought, *just one smile. You don’t know how much this is hurting me, seeing you depressed...* What he was

about to say would not improve matters.

“Ya know,” he started, trying to lighten the mood, “I was just talking to Squall in the infirmary, and he said he really wanted to talk to you.” Selphie couldn’t contain herself, and started crying. She buried her face in Irvine’s shoulder.

“He hates me, doesn’t he?” She asked, sorrowfully. Irvine puts his arms around her to comfort her.

“No, of course he doesn’t!” He said, reassuringly. “How could anyone hate you? You’re the most popular person in this Garden!”

“Seifer hates me,” she retorted.

“Seifer’s a weirdo,” Irvine said, “he doesn’t count. Look,” he said, drying her tears with his gloved hand, “you were under torture. We all were. Hey, even Squall himself couldn’t have held out forever.” Selphie smiled, and nodded. “Squall said he urgently needed to see you.”

“I’d best not keep him waiting, then!” Selphie tried to put on her normally constant happy face, but deep down, she dreaded Squall’s reaction.

Squall was jotting down a few things, and keying instructions into a calculator when Selphie walked in. In her paranoid state, she thought *Uh—oh, is he calculating my punishment?*

“Hi!” Squall greeted her from his bed, unusually chirpily, Selphie thought. “Sit down, I’ve got something I need to tell you.” Selphie sat down nervously, still fearing the worst. She decided to take the initiative, and spoke first.

“S—Squall,” she said, hesitantly.

“What is it, Selphie?” Squall asked, unsure why she was being so defensive. Selphie gulped, and started talking.

“When we were in the prison, S–Seifer told me that he told you that I–I told him, about you, a–and S–Sir Lag–“ Squall waved a hand and shushed her.

“It’s alright, Selphie.” Selphie obviously didn’t hear him that well, as she carried on regardless.

“I just wanted to say that I know you must be mad at me, and if you want to–“ Squall decided to be a bit more forceful this time.

“Selphie?” He said, cutting Selphie off and making her jump, “I said it’s alright. You were under duress. I wouldn’t have expected anyone to stay quiet.” Selphie allowed herself a brief smile.

“R–Really?” She asked. Squall nodded.

“I saw the whole thing,” he said. As Selphie was about to ask him how, Squall pre–empted her. “Seifer had me sat behind a one–way mirror, forced me to watch everyone else being tortured. His idea of a sick joke. I saw what he put you through, and, as Zell would say, it sucked!” Selphie chuckled briefly at this.

“But if you didn’t want to talk to me about that,” she asked, “what did you want me for?” Squall sat up on his elbows, showing Selphie his notepad.

“You remember Matron telling us she had plans for the old orphanage, right?” Selphie nodded as Squall continued talking. “Well it seems that she’s almost finished renovating it, and she’s turned it into a small beach chalet, complete with pool, that she’s planning to rent out.” Selphie started smiling.

“Then where do I come into it?” She asked, genuinely curious.

“It turns out the builders have finished,” Squall said, “and Matron wants six people to stay there for a few days to test everything. As luck would have it, me, you, Rinoa, Irvine, Zell and Quistis all have the next five days off, and we’ve been asked to be her guinea–pigs.” Selphie couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

## Bad Blood

“Five days for free in a beach chalet?” She asked, giddy with excitement. Squall nodded, and she giggled, even more excited.

“I’ve got a shopping list here of everything we need. I’ve asked Cid, and he’s allowed you and Rinoa to use the Ragnarok to fly to Esthar and pick up everything on this list. You’ll have to be quick, however, we leave in 24 hours.” Almost bouncing off the ceiling with excitement, Selphie grabbed the list off Squall.

“Yes sir!” She shouted, before hugging him and kissing him on the cheek. “Thank you so much!” She said.

“It’s nothing,” he replied. “Now you’d better get going or you’ll be late!” Selphie giggled again, staring at the list, before skipping out of the room, singing “we’re gonna have a beach party” over and over. Squall lied back down on his bed and smiled. *The difference a few moments of giving can make*, he thought to himself. The old him would have fobbed her off to Irvine to deal with, and when that didn’t work, he’d only have fobbed her off again. *I’m becoming too much like my old man*, he thought to himself. *But is that really a bad thing? Just so long as I don’t start getting leg cramp*. He rolled over, forgetting his injury, and grimaced as a bolt of pain shot up his left leg. He couldn’t help but chuckle to himself. *Oh, no*, he thought to himself, *here we go...*

A few hours later, a very excited Selphie bounded out of the Ragnarok, followed by a more sedate but still enthusiastic Rinoa, and Zell. Zell had invited himself along at the last minute, claiming he was going to get “a few extra things Squall wanted”. This was actually the truth, but not the whole truth. Fortunately, Selphie and Rinoa suspected nothing, thinking that he just wanted another tattoo or something.

“I’ll see you girls later, then,” he said, boarding the nearest shuttle tube into the central business district of Esthar. Selphie and Rinoa giggled and looked at each other.

“Yeah...” Selphie said, giggling

“...Much later!” Rinoa finished for her. Zell just looked confused.

“Right then,” he said, completely missing the joke that had the two girls in stitches. His shuttle tube left, while Selphie and Rinoa waited for theirs, which was headed in the opposite direction.

## Bad Blood

“Aren’t we going shopping?” Selphie asked, impatiently. Rinoa simply smiled at her, before responding.

“There’s someone I have to see first,” she said. “I’ll catch you up.”

“OK!” Selphie shouted, running off to catch the next shuttle tube car into town, while Rinoa waited for her. Meanwhile, walking through the Esthar shopping mall, Zell was feeling somewhat nervous. *Man*, he thought to himself, *what do I know about jewellery?* Squall had asked him personally to buy some kind of ring for him to give to Rinoa at the beach party. Zell had protested, asking why he didn’t just ask him to make a copy of an existing ring for him, but Squall said he wanted it to be unique. So, there Zell was, wandering round the shopping mall, feeling like a complete idiot (not to mention having people stare at his tattoos), and to make matters worse, he was starting to get hungry...

For the second time in three days, Rinoa walked up to Ellone’s door, and knocked. Ellone answered the door, getting a pleasant surprise.

“Rinoa!” She said, with a smile. Rinoa smiled back.

“Hi, Ellone.”

“What are you doing back so soon?” She asked, slightly less enthusiastically. *Is it bad news?* She asked herself, before inviting Rinoa in. Rinoa entered, and sat down on a sofa. Almost reading Ellone’s mind, Rinoa started talking.

“We rescued Squall,” she said, eliciting a sigh of relief from Ellone.

“Is he OK?” She asked Rinoa.

“He’s got a few bad injuries,” Rinoa said, prompting a gasp from Ellone, “but he’s going to make a full recovery.” Ellone smiled, again out of relief for the man she considered her brother.

“I just thought you might like to know,” Rinoa said, standing up. Ellone smiled, and showed Rinoa out.

## Bad Blood

“Thanks, that was very considerate of you,” Ellone said, “I’ll be sure to let his father know too.” Rinoa stopped, believing that her hearing had just played a trick on her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, confused, “could you repeat that, please?” Ellone looked a little confused herself.

“I said,” she repeated deliberately, pointing at the ceiling, “I’ll be sure to let his fa—“ suddenly, Ellone realised what had happened. “You mean Squall hasn’t told you yet?”

Suddenly, Rinoa was defensive.

“Told me what?” She asked Ellone.

“About him,” Ellone started, “and Unc—“ she paused, before shaking her head. “It’s probably best you hear it from Squall himself.” Rinoa nodded, still not believing what she’d heard.

“Don’t worry,” Rinoa said, “I *will* hear it from Squall.” There was a brief pause, before Rinoa continued. “I have to meet my friend in town, so I’d better go now.”

“OK,” Ellone said, showing her out. “See you soon.” The mood was much more subdued now.

“Bye,” Rinoa said, leaving. Once she was outside, the shuttle tube ride to the shopping centre for her was dominated by one thought— *why did he keep it from me?* She thought it over and over again. Perhaps he didn’t want to tell anyone? Perhaps he was ashamed of his father? She’d pretty much worked out that his father was Laguna, despite the fact that father and son were as different as chalk and cheese. *At least*, Rinoa thought, *the old Squall was...* She arrived in the shopping centre, and quickly locating Selphie, who was struggling with about twelve different bags, rushed to help her out.

“Careful now!” Rinoa said, trying to put a jokey face on, “you don’t want to drop those!” Selphie laughed, then watched in horror as all the bags she was holding suddenly fell to the floor, spilling their contents everywhere.

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“Oh, no,” she said, with mock despair, “I can’t believe how clumsy I am at times!”

“What have you got in here?” Rinoa asked as she helped Selphie with the bags. “Did Squall ask you to buy a whole new house?” Selphie giggled again, and nearly lost control of the bags. Fortunately, Zell had watched what was going on and ran over to catch the bags before they spilled on the floor.

“Hey,” he started, “you want to be careful with those!” Zell then paused as he saw Rinoa and Selphie staring at each other again, the same way they had done at the shuttle tube station.

“Zell,” Rinoa asked, turning to face him, “have you finished your shopping yet?”

“Yeah,” he said, unsure of what the girls were planning, “it was only a few odds and ends.”

“Where is it?” Selphie asked.

“In my pocket.”

“Zell,” Rinoa asked again, after exchanging a nod with Selphie, “could you do us a REALLY big favour?”

And so it came to pass that for the next few hours while Selphie and Rinoa visited (often RE-visited) practically every shop in town, Zell was lumbered with the role of “bag boy”, walking around with all their bags on, in and under his arms. Eventually, six hours after they had arrived in Esthar, Rinoa and Selphie walked back to the Ragnarok thoroughly exhausted, and slumped in the passenger’s seats in the cockpit. Zell stumbled in a few moments later, and after dumping the bags in the hold, slumped in the passenger seat next to the girls, who simply stared at him.

“What?” He asked.

“This ship isn’t going to fly itself, Zell,” Rinoa helpfully informed him.

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“Aw MAN!” Zell said, getting up and starting the Ragnarok’s engine. Steadily, they climbed into the air, heading back to Balamb. Rinoa then decided to ask Selphie something she knew she wasn’t going to like the answer to.

“Selph,” she started, “you went with Squall to Esthar, just before the Garden was bombed, didn’t you?”

“Sure did!” Selphie answered, shifting from a slumped position to kneeling on her chair. “Although we didn’t stay long, of course.” Rinoa sat up, and assumed a serious expression, which made Selphie a little concerned.

“Rinn,” she asked, “what’s the matter?” Rinoa started fiddling with her fingers, distracted by what she was going to ask.

“On the way back,” she started, “did Squall... tell you anything?”

“You mean about him and Sir Laguna?” Selphie asked, excitedly. “I know! Isn’t it cool?” Rinoa maintained her serious expression. “Wait a minute,” Selphie continued, “Squall... he did tell you, didn’t he?” Rinoa simply looked at her friend, and sighed.

“Why didn’t he tell me, Selph?” She asked, worried for her relationship. “Doesn’t he trust me?”

“Of course he does, silly!” Selphie said, quasi-reassuringly. “I’m sure that what with the bombings, the mission and all that, he just couldn’t find the time.” Rinoa thought back to the morning after the bombings—he *had* tried to tell her after breakfast, but got called away. Why hadn’t he told her afterwards? Then she remembered. *Seifer...* she thought to herself. *Why must he always come between us?* She thought back to when he had thrown her to sorceress Adel—how he had claimed he was doing it because it was the wish of Ultimecia. Could it really have been because he wanted to hurt her and Squall’s relationship? Rinoa quickly put the thought of her mind and turned back to Selphie.

“Yeah,” she said, trying to sound convinced, “I’m sure that’s what it is.”

“Well,” Selphie said, once again excited, “it’s not like you won’t have tons of opportunities to ask him this week!” Rinoa smiled and allowed herself a little laugh—somehow, Selphie had managed to put a smile on her face, as she always seemed to do.

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Meanwhile, back at the desert prison, Seifer was pacing around the control room, talking to himself. It had been nearly two days since his opportunity to kill Squall had been denied by Zell and Rinoa, and he was mentally in a bad state.

“Ten more seconds...” he thought to himself. “Just ten more seconds and his head would have been mine. TEN SECONDS!” He brought his fist crashing down on the control panel, causing various lights to flicker as he mashed the controls, wildly. “And why’d it have to be HER?” He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, there before him stood Squall, gunblade in hand, taunting Seifer.

“You’ll never be able to beat me,” Squall said. Seifer picked up his gunblade and dived at his nemesis, only for him to vanish, and re-appear behind him. Seifer crashed to the floor in a heap.

“Come on!” The phantom Squall shouted. “Is that the best you can do?” Seifer picked up his gunblade and dived again, this time, emitting an animal-like growl as he did so. Again, Squall vanished, and again, Seifer was left floundering on the floor.

“You’re pathetic,” Squall said, kneeling down beside the fallen Seifer, “you’re really pathetic, you know that? All this time, you try to beat me. I can’t be beaten.”

“I—I tortured you,” Seifer said, defiantly, “You were going to give up!” Squall merely shook his head and laughed in Seifer’s face.

“Don’t you get it, loser?” The phantom Squall said again, “I have friends. I have back up. They’ll always be there for me. You’ve spent your whole life turning away everyone who’s ever tried to get close to you. And why? To be a sorceress’ knight? Don’t make me laugh!” Seifer stood up, and wildly started swinging at his imaginary adversary. Again and again, he failed to hit him, as again and again, Squall kept vanishing. Then, Seifer heard the voice from behind him that he once longed to hear.

“You’re right,” came the voice of Rinoa from behind him. He turned round to face her— she was wearing her usual blue dress, only she had Squall’s jacket on over it. She continued talking.

“I don’t know what I ever saw in him in the first place. You’re more of a man than he’ll ever be, Squall.” She walked over to Squall, and kissed him passionately. When they were done, they turned to Seifer and laughed

## Bad Blood

at him. Laughed... and laughed... and laughed until they were hoarse. Seifer sank to his knees, quivering in rage, and emotional pain. Then, one by one, all the other people he'd sided against came towards him. First, Selphie, the messenger girl he'd taken so much pleasure from poisoning.

"You're just a pathetic low-life," she said, spitting in his face. Seifer shook his head, close to tears. Then came Quistis.

"I always knew he'd amount to the nothing that he is," she said, slapping him in the face. All of them laughed as he slumped to the ground, crying.

"Chicken-wuss," he heard the voice of Zell say. By then, Seifer had broken down completely. And when he heard the voice of Irvine say, "Look at him, no-one likes him! It's no wonder he was an orphan- his parents died of shame!" Seifer had pretty much given up hope.

"You want to put that gunblade of yours to good use?" Squall asked Seifer rhetorically, leaning down beside him, "then put it in the ground, blade upward, and fall on it. Go on. It's not like anyone would miss you." Seifer started to nod, but he then saw Squall spasm, as if caught by electricity. He looked up, and saw Ultimecia standing behind Squall, projecting some kind of energy into his body.

"Go on," Ultimecia said, "kill him." Seifer, with his second wind, stood up, and picked up his gunblade. He pierced the helpless Squall with it, and the instant he saw the blood run down the blade, he felt like a new man. Rejuvenated, he pulled the trigger on the gunblade, and every time he saw Squall's body twitch as the bullet entered him, he felt more and more ecstatic, until he was almost orgasmic in his delight. He pushed Squall's lifeless corpse off the gunblade and watched it sink to the floor, before vanishing. Seifer looked at Ultimecia, confused.

"That was only a test," Ultimecia revealed to Seifer. "The real Squall is still out there. You must end his life. The time for torture has past. Kill Squall, my Knight." Ultimecia walked over to Seifer and stroked his beard. Seifer felt good to be alive.

"I will," he said, "and I promise you, it will be slow and painful." He watched as Ultimecia vanished, and the scene returned to that of the control room, empty, as it had been before Squall's arrival.

"Kill him..." Ultimecia's voice came into Seifer's head once again. Seifer nodded. He would kill Squall, or die trying.

Ultimecia had come into Seifer's life a few months earlier— after the whole incident involving her and compressed time had passed, he'd decided not to return to Balamb Garden. He had wanted to go back, but was unsure whether he'd be accepted there. Realising that just words weren't going to heal wounds, he'd packed up, and started travelling around the world. He'd visited Shumi Village, stayed briefly in Esthar, and eventually ended up in Fisherman's Horizon, where he was surprised to find his old friends, Fujin and Raijin. They'd left him when they were all aboard the Lunatic Pandora, but he didn't mind— he was amazed they'd followed him that far. He stayed with them for a couple of weeks, having fun fishing, until one day, he saw Balamb Garden float past. He watched it with longing— he still wanted to be accepted there, no matter how unlikely it was that they'd forgive him. Then, he saw the face that turned his mind— Squall, leaning over the second floor balcony. Suddenly, something inside him went wild. *Squall...* he thought. He'd seen television reports hailing Squall as the conquering hero, the leader of the SeeDs who'd beaten the sorceress. He hadn't minded that too much— after all, it was true. But what wound him up was seeing him in the flesh, looking down on him as if he was some kind of god. *How dare he!* Seifer had thought. *How dare he look down on me as if I'm some kind of lowly peasant!* He hadn't known where those feelings had come from, but they wouldn't go away. That night, he'd dreamt about Squall, about him standing on that balcony, laughing on him. He hadn't been physically laughing, but Seifer knew that was what Squall was doing, deep inside. Laughing at the man he'd squashed like a bug, then discarded. Before he could be consumed by rage, however, Ultimecia came to him, and gave him a new meaning of life.

“Take back what was taken from you...” she said. He was unsure what she'd meant, but then it hit him. All his life, Squall had taken what he'd had. Everything he had, Squall desired, and got. Hell, even Fujin and Raijin, his so-called “best friends” had been corrupted by Squall. *Well*, thought Seifer, *that's all going to change*. The following morning, he went up to Fujin and Raijin, and launched his blistering verbal attack on Squall, also indicting the two of them in his speech. He'd ended his rant with the word “payback”, then stomped up to the room he was renting. Overnight, he left. He hadn't expected the two of them to actually believe what he said about “Mr. Perfect” Squall Leonheart, so he didn't bother to leave them an explanatory note or anything. He returned to the D-district prison in Galbaldia, and climbed up to the control room. There, memories came flooding back— his torture of Squall, watching him writhe in agony— it was too much to resist. He started abducting people off the street, and brainwashing them to serve him. He'd called his army “servants of the Almay Empire”, but in truth he wanted no power— all he wanted was revenge. He found himself in a position to carry out his threat when, on an undercover visit to Balamb, he'd abducted two students of Balamb Garden, which had apparently opted to root itself back in the ground, outside Balamb, where it used to be. He captured the students and brainwashed them, and when the time was right, secretly contacted them, telling them to destroy the Garden's training centre. He'd received intelligence that Squall was out on a mission, so that would be the perfect time. Along with a little message he'd videotaped for Squall, the bait was set. And Squall had gobbled it up beautifully. Unfortunately, he hadn't counted on Squall's friends. Even when he'd isolated him, his friends were somehow able to come to the rescue and save Squall. Still, at least he'd managed to torture Squall, almost to the point where he'd broken. But, Ultimecia had spoken.

“Kill Squall...” she'd said. And that was what he was going to do. If he had to go through Squall's friends, even HER, then he would. He went to his study and sat down at his desk, formulating a new plan of action.

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Meanwhile, the Ragnarok set down just outside Edea's newly renovated beach house, and six friends, dressed for a party, departed the spaceship, waved off by their pilot.

"Man," Nida said, "I wish I was going with you. But hey, someone's gotta keep an eye on the Garden while you're gone. Have fun!" Nida waved at them one last time before taking back off in the Ragnarok, and they waved back at him. Squall, who was in a wheelchair, was suddenly pestered by two of the six.

"Come on, Squall!" Selphie shouted, grabbing his arm and bouncing up and down.

"Yeah," a very excited Irvine, who was walking backwards in front of him, and therefore staring him straight in the face, said, "give us the keys!" Squall simply sighed, smiled, and handed the keys over as Selphie and Irvine cheered. Selphie grabbed the keys, jumped on Irvine's back, and he gave her a piggyback the remaining 300 yards to the door. They made it there quickly, and opened the door. Eventually, the others arrived, and were amazed by what they saw.

"WOW!" Zell shouted, upon seeing the finished work. The others felt much the same way—far from being the ruined old husk of a house it was a few months previously, it was a real home, rebuilt, painted, everything. The builders had even added a third bedroom, and the whole place was sparkling and clean. Selphie and Irvine came bounding back out, throwing a beach ball at the remaining four.

"Last one on the beach is making dinner!" Selphie shouted, excitedly. At that, Zell, Rinoa and Quistis dropped everything they were carrying, and ran outside (with Rinoa pushing Squall's wheelchair). Eventually, they were all outside on the beach. It was a bright, sunny day and the ocean was warm. Zell and Quistis wasted no time in stripping down to their swimming costumes and dived right in, while Selphie and Irvine amused themselves with the beach ball. Rinoa unpacked two towels from underneath Squall's wheelchair and spread them on the sand, before stripping down to her bikini and laying on one, in an attempt to get a tan.

"Squall," she said, already relaxed on her towel, "pass me the sun tan lotion, will you?" Squall reached underneath his chair and produced the bottle, before carefully sliding off his chair onto the towel adjacent to Rinoa.

"I can do better than that," he said, squirting some on Rinoa's back and gently rubbing it in. Rinoa undid her bikini top to make Squall's task a little easier.

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“This was a lovely idea,” she said, twitching a little bit as Squall started applying the cold lotion to her legs. Squall simply shrugged.

“I figured everyone could do with a break. Edea told me a few months ago about her plans for the old orphanage, and as luck would have it, the builders have just finished.” He started rubbing the lotion onto the soles of her feet.

“Ah!” She shouted, laughing as Squall started tickling her feet. “Stop it!” Squall smiled.

“Sorry,” he said, “I couldn’t resist that.” He took his shirt off and started rubbing some lotion on his chest. When he had finished, he simply lay there, enjoying the sun.

Meanwhile, once they had grown tired of the beach ball, Selphie and Irvine found the pool that Squall had mentioned to her earlier.

“I don’t get it,” Irvine, who for this holiday had shunned the cowboy look for a more laid-back look (he even had a Hawaiian shirt), “why can’t we just swim in the ocean?”

“Because, silly,” Selphie replied, leading him by the hand, “the ocean doesn’t have a diving board!” She took off her top and her shorts to reveal the new bikini she’d brought in Esthar, then ran right up to the diving board and dived right in. When she surfaced, her hair had lost some of its lift and was hanging down slightly. Irvine was so caught up staring at her beauty that he didn’t hear her egging him on. Eventually, she splashed him with some water, getting his attention.

“Well?” She asked, impatiently, “Are you coming in or not?” Irvine’s attention returned, and he smiled.

“Wait right there,” he said, before running off to get changed into his swimming shorts. Unlike Zell and the girls, he’d forgotten to plan ahead. He eventually emerged, and stood on the diving board, ready to jump in.

“Are you ready, Sefie?” He asked. “Watch this!” He took a big headlong dive off the board and made a huge splash in the water, but when he resurfaced, his demeanour had changed.

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“Oh no!” He shouted. “I can’t believe this!” Selphie was laughing her head off– she’d seen the whole problem. Irvine’s shorts had come off when he’d jumped into the pool. Before he could retrieve them, however, Selphie swam over, grabbed them, and jumped out of the pool, running back towards the beach. Irvine climbed out, and with one hand preserving his modesty, ran after her.

“Gimme my shorts back!” He shouted, sprinting across the beach after her, and making Squall, Rinoa, Zell and Quistis fall about in hysterics.

“You gotta catch me first!” Selphie had replied. Eventually, she climbed over a pile of rocks, but slipped, landing backside first on the sand. Irvine caught her and restrained both her arms, until she agreed to drop his shorts. He quickly retrieved them and put them back on.

“Are you alright?” He asked her, helping her up after her fall. She dusted the sand off her backside and replied.

“Yeh, I’m OK.” She looked up into his eyes, and he looked down into hers. They moved their heads closer, and were about to kiss, when Zell’s voice interrupted the moment.

“YO! You two!” He shouted over the rocks, unable to see the romantic scene unfolding, “Dinner’s ready!” Zell had promised them that he’d prepare one of his famous barbecues, and he hadn’t let them down. The smell of chicken, burgers and hotdogs hung heavily in the air. The food, naturally, was delicious, and by the time they’d all finished eating, they were too tired to do anything else but lay on the beach and watch the sunset while Zell polished off the leftovers (of which there had been quite a few). They talked, laughed and even dragged the beach ball out for a final appearance of the night, before eventually going inside and settling down to bed. It was kind of an unwritten fact that Squall and Rinoa would get the Kramers’ old room, while Selphie and Quistis shared another room, and Irvine and Zell gave the new room a test–run. Squall, however, was having difficulty sleeping, as Rinoa was becoming well aware of.

“Squall, darling,” she asked tiredly, “what’s up? It’s 1 AM.” She’d been trying to get some sleep, but Squall was tossing and turning like nobody’s business. He turned again, to face her.

“It’s nothing,” he lied. Rinoa was not impressed.

“Squall,” she said, with a slightly stern tone of voice, “don’t give me that.” Squall turned away from Rinoa for a brief moment. “Is it about your father?” She asked. Squall had finally come clean to all of them about him

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and Laguna on board the Ragnarok en route to the chalet. His friends were shocked, but had taken it well enough. However, Rinoa's curiosity was not satisfied.

"It's not that," Squall confessed. Rinoa was suddenly hit by an unpleasant thought.

"It's Seifer, isn't it?" She asked. Squall cringed as he heard Seifer's name— he'd been desperately trying not to think of him, but slowly, he'd managed to work his way into Squall's conscious.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

"It helps to talk," Rinoa said, trying to coax Squall out of the figurative shell he'd built around himself. Squall sighed— it wasn't going to be easy to persuade her to take 'no' for an answer.

"It's not something I'm proud of," Squall admitted, "not something I want to admit to." Rinoa could detect a very serious tone in Squall's voice— this was something he felt very strongly about. Nonetheless, she hated him keeping secrets from her.

"Whatever it is," she started, "you can tell me. I won't be shocked, or offended. I promise." Squall sighed, and turned round to face her.

"Maybe it will help to talk," he said, before averting his gaze from Rinoa. *He's ashamed*, Rinoa immediately figures out. *Whatever it is, he's ashamed to tell me*. She'd got to know Squall a lot in the past few months, and one of the things she worked out quickly was that he had no regrets. He was very rarely ashamed of his past actions, and when he was, it had to have been a whopper of an action for him to bottle it up. Squall began talking.

"When Seifer was torturing me, what he was doing to me was unimaginable. He hit me, cut me, used weapons and magic against me, even poisoned me to make me vomit so he could humiliate me." Rinoa nodded, trying to hide the concern on her face— she'd known Squall was tortured, she didn't really want to hear the details. Squall then averted his gaze entirely from her. "In the end, Rinoa, I'd had enough. If you and Zell hadn't come in the Ragnarok... I'd have given up. I'd have let Seifer win. I just couldn't take any more." Squall's eyes started to well up at this point, and Rinoa held him tightly. *I've never seen him so vulnerable!* She thought to herself. Usually he was the one immediately pushing his emotions aside and helping her, not the other way round. Squall couldn't contain himself any more, and he started crying. "I just didn't know what else to do..." he wailed. Rinoa looked at him in the face, astonished by seeing the tears running down his normally

expressionless features, and put his mind at rest.

“It’s OK, Squall,” she started. “No–one’s perfect. No one’s invincible. Not even you. We’d all have broken some time.” She looked at Squall again, and could tell that he was far from convinced. She tried a different approach. “Exactly how long was Seifer torturing you before you lost the plot?” She put it that way, hoping that it might make Squall feel a little better.

“I don’t know,” he answered, still sobbing. “He had a clock in the torture room, near the start, it said half past six, you came at around twelve... five hours, maybe.” Rinoa gasped– she’d had no idea it was that long.

“Five hours?” She said, still shocked. “I don’t think anyone could have held out that long with a madman like Seifer torturing them.” Squall was still unconvinced.

“It’s not enough, Rinoa,” he said, still sobbing away, “It’s the fact that he beat me. He broke me. He’s breaking me right now!” Rinoa grabbed him and held him tight again.

“Ssh,” she said, soothingly, “You can’t let yourself fall to his level. He wants revenge on you. He wants to hurt you. If you keep thinking like this, you’ll only end up like him– bitter and twisted. And I won’t let that happen.” Squall nodded– she was right, as always.

“I love you, Rinoa,” he said, quietly into her ear.

“I love you too, Squall,” she said back into his ear. They fell asleep holding each other. Squall had no nightmares that night.

Meanwhile, Irvine was lying awake with worries of his own. One thought was rolling through his head over and over again. *Do I really love Sefie? Do I really love Sefie?* After they nearly kissed behind the rocks on the beach, he’d been unable to get her out of his mind. Usually, he tended to concentrate on all the beautiful women he’d ever seen all at the same time, but for some reason, Selphie had displaced them all. She’d been his best friend for as long as he could remember– even when they were taken away from the orphanage and given to separate foster families, and placed in separate Gardens, he always thought of her, but not in the way he’d thought about all the other women in his life. Sure, he’d tried to hit on her, shortly after they’d met, but he was sure she’d remembered him from the orphanage. Yes, he was older, much taller, and he was sporting a trenchcoat and hat, but he was amazed she hadn’t recognised him. When he’d spilled the beans to everyone at Trabia Garden, however, then Selphie started to remember him. They’d hung around with each other more,

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shared more laughs and smiles than they'd ever done when they were at the orphanage. Now, however, with his memories of the orphanage fading due to the GF's, his feelings towards Selphie were unclear. He'd initially only wanted friendship– and yet she seemed to grow more beautiful with every passing day. Could it be that he and Selphie were to be like Squall and Rinoa– deeply in love and joined at the hip? Could he give up his bachelor life, a new girl every week, and be with Selphie alone? Did he really love her that much? He decided to get up and make himself a drink. Maybe that would help him clear his mind and get to sleep. He climbed out of bed quietly, so as not to disturb a fast asleep (and snoring– that helped) Zell, and tiptoed into the kitchen. He was more than shocked and surprised to see Selphie there, making herself a drink. She turned round, and gasped out of shock when she saw Irvine there.

“Irvy!” She shouted, unusually flustered. “What are you doing here?” She looked at him– he was wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts, showing off his muscular body to the full. *He's so cute...* Selphie caught herself thinking.

“Well,” Irvine responded, “I'd like to get myself a drink, if that's OK with you.” He was flustered himself– Selphie's presence made sure of that. He couldn't take her eyes off her– she was wearing that short white nightie she always wore to bed, the one that showed off her slim body and her legs to the full. *She's so cute...* Irvine caught himself thinking.

“S–sure,” Selphie replied, turning back to the sideboard where the kettle was. She didn't see Irvine start to walk towards her. “What would you like?” She asked as she reached into the cupboard for the teabags. Irvine reached in at the same time, and their hands touched. Their eyes locked on to each other's, and they leaned in towards each other...

Meanwhile, for the umpteenth time, Quistis's belly rumbled. *Oh*, she thought to herself, *damn Zell and his cooking! Why do I always eat too much on holiday?* Being a consummate professional, Quistis always maintained a strict regime of diet and exercise, but that had a tendency to go straight out of the window whenever she was on holiday. She decided to get up and get herself some indigestion tablets, hoping that they might settle her stomach down a little. She slowly climbed out of bed and walked down the hallway to the bathroom, which was where the medicine was kept. *That's strange*, she thought to herself as she left the bedroom, *Selphie's up too...* Thinking nothing of it, she continued down towards the toilet when she heard a strange noise coming from the kitchen. Opening the door and peeking in, she was most surprised to see Irvine and Selphie, with their arms wrapped around each other, passionately kissing. Her surprise, however, was nothing compared to that of either Irvine or Selphie, who immediately stopped kissing, and turned to face Quistis.

“Quis! Hi!” Selphie said, even more flustered than when Irvine had walked in.

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“Quistis! Fancy seeing you here,” Irvine said, simultaneously with Selphie. Both were wearing cheesy grins, in a futile attempt to disguise what they were just doing. Quistis, who was used to catching students of hers in compromising positions, simply smiled, shook her head and left.

“Do you think she suspects anything?” Irvine asked, somewhat naively. Selphie smiled at him.

“How could she NOT suspect anything?” She replied. Irvine nodded– it wasn’t the first time he’d been caught red-handed by a tutor, but still, he was on vacation, and besides, Quistis wasn’t so much a tutor as a friend. She’d understand, even if he did have to explain to her why she’d never get a turn with him...

“Where were we again?” He asked his new love with a smile. They embraced again, and continued where they’d left off...

The following morning at breakfast, and despite the fact that Quistis obviously knew, Irvine and Selphie were wondering how to inform the rest of their friends about their being together, having barely come to terms with it themselves. Fortunately, they could rely on Zell to provide the opportunity for them. He’d noticed that they were grinning at each other, and didn’t like not knowing what was going on.

“What’s up with you two this morning?” He asked, while making himself some breakfast. He would have made it for everyone, but Squall and Rinoa weren’t up yet, and Quistis had passed for some reason...

“Well, erm,” Selphie started, between giggles.

“Yeah, you see,” Irvine also tried to say, but was cut off by giggles too. Quistis rolled her eyes before spilling the beans on Irvine and Selphie’s behalf.

“They’re an item,” she said, with mock indifference in her voice, before starting to laugh a bit herself.

“SERIOUSLY?” Zell asked, not sure he’d heard right. Selphie jumped up out of her chair and into Irvine’s lap, surprising him with a long, deep kiss.

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“Seriously,” Selphie replied, while still wrapped around Irvine.

“Damn,” Zell said out loud, “looks like Nida won the bet then.” Irvine and Selphie looked at each other, not sure what Zell meant.

“What do you mean, won the bet?” Irvine asked Zell.

“Me, Nida, Rinoa and a couple of others had a bet on how long it’d take for you two to hook up,” Zell replied. “Nida won.” Before Selphie or Irvine could react further, Squall and Rinoa walked in (or “hobbled” in in Squall’s case), and both saw Selphie firmly wrapped around her new love.

“Let me guess,” Squall started, “the chair’s broken.” Squall had never been known for having a sharp wit, but it had certainly surfaced in recent days.

“No, silly!” Selphie had replied, before looking in Irvine’s eyes. “You are looking at Garden’s new cutest couple.” Irvine shrugged, smiling smugly.

“Sorry, guys,” he said. They kissed again.

“Aw, man,” Rinoa started, “that means—“ Zell cut her off.

“Nida won the bet. Yes, we know,” he finished while Squall and Rinoa sat down at the table. “So,” he said, turning to face Squall. “What’re the plans for today? Beach, beach and more beach?”

“That just about sums it up,” Squall answered. “That is, of course,” he said, turning to face the still embracing Irvine and Selphie, “if some people can let each other go.”

“Aww,” Rinoa said, “I think it’s kinda cute. Remember what we were like when we started dating?” She asked, climbing onto Squall’s one good knee.

## Bad Blood

“You haven’t made it easy to forget,” he answered, and the two of them started passionately kissing as well. Quistis simply looked over at Zell, who nodded at her, and they headed out onto the beach and into the ocean. It was a full half–four before any of the other four joined them, and even then, it was Rinoa and Squall. Irvine and Selphie didn’t emerge until mid–afternoon...

Later that evening, while Irvine and the girls were relaxing on the beach, topping up their tans, Squall was inside, talking secretly to Zell.

“Did you get it?” Squall asked his friend.

“Yeh,” Zell replied, “and you won’t believe the hassle I had to go through!” Squall laughed a little at this. “What’s so damn funny?” Zell asked.

“The girls had you running errands for them, then?” Squall asked, jokily.

“Man,” Zell replied, “they were like wild animals!” Squall nodded– he’d once invited himself along on a shopping trip to Balamb with Rinoa and Selphie, and had barely made it back conscious. Since then, he decided to leave the girls to their own devices, but not before having a little fun with Zell...

“Let’s see it then,” Squall asked. Zell showed him the ring– it was nothing too extravagant, just a slender gold band with a single diamond set on it. On the inside bore the inscription “Rinoa. Forever yours. Squall.” Squall gave it his nod of approval.

“Thanks, man,” he said, slapping Zell on the shoulder.

“No sweat,” Zell replied, “only next time, don’t send me shopping with those two. I’d rather face Omega weapon again than have to deal with that!” Squall smiled.

“Don’t worry, I–“ He was interrupted by a cough at the door– Selphie had come inside to get some drinks, and was watching at the doorway. Squall quickly whipped his hands, and the ring, behind his back.

## Bad Blood

“Selphie!” Zell shouted, guiltily, “Hi!” Squall also waved, with a guilty smile on his face.

“Err... hi,” she said, unsure of what exactly she’d interrupted. “I came to get some drinks...” Zell immediately jumped into action.

“Don’t– don’t worry,” he shouted, far too loud even for him, “I’ll bring them out to you!” Selphie grinned, then turned and left.

“Woo–hoo! Thanks!” She said, before returning to her sunbathing.

“Do you think she suspected anything?” Zell asked Squall, whispering.

“Probably,” Squall answered, “with you shouting loud enough for the whole world to hear.”

“Aw, come on man!” Zell shouted, before a stare from Squall cut him off.

“OK, sorry man,” Zell conceded.

Outside, Selphie took Rinoa to one side and had a quiet talk with her.

“You’ll never guess what I just saw!” Selphie said, trying desperately not to literally bounce with excitement.

“What, what?” Rinoa asked, Selphie’s excitement noticeably rubbing off on her. Selphie whispered something in Rinoa’s ear.

“Seriously!?” Rinoa asked, incredulously. Selphie nodded, still giddy with the excitement.

“Isn’t it great?” Selphie asked.

“Yeah!” Rinoa responded, now as excited as Selphie. *Wow!* She thought. Squall had brought her presents before, but nothing as expensive or fancy as a ring. “Do you reckon I should tell him I know?” Selphie shook her head.

“Are you kidding?” She asked, grinning. “Of course not!” Rinoa grinned back— her holiday was getting better and better...

Later that night, when they were all in bed, it was Rinoa’s turn not to sleep. It may have been slightly immature of her, but she wanted her present now, and was determined to get it. *I wonder what it’s like...* she thought, as she rolled over and felt herself roll on something hard. *Oops,* she thought, *that’s not good...* Squall, who had been asleep, woke up and clutched his broken wrist, which Rinoa had just rolled over.

“Aah!” He cried in pain.

“Oops, sorry,” Rinoa said.

“That’s OK,” Squall replied, wearily, “you just get to sleep, Angel.” Squall was really tired, and just wanted some rest. Rinoa, on the other hand, was still very much awake. She decided she’d have a little fun.

“Squall,” she asked, “How much do you love me?” Squall opened his eyes and rolled back over.

“You know how much I love you, Angel,” Squall replied, sleepily.

“Tell me again,” she asked, snuggling herself up to Squall and wrapping her arms around him.

“OK,” Squall said, up for Rinoa’s little game but mainly trying to get her to sleep so he could, “I love you from beneath the bottom of my heart, with more than all of my soul, and will do for longer than eternity.” Rinoa smiled— she’d been satisfied. *Now,* she thought, *the finishing touch...*

“Prove it,” she said, jokily. Squall stared down at her, one thought on his mind. *She knows...* he thought to himself. *Selphie must have told her. Damn!* He quickly thought of a way of stalling Rinoa.

“Tell you what,” he said, thinking on his feet, “meet me at sunrise tomorrow, on the outcropping at the end of the beach. I’ll prove it then.” Rinoa smiled— she could wait until sunrise.

“OK,” she said, “sunrise it is.” For the second night in a row, they fell asleep in each other’s arms.

The next morning, Squall was awake early, and already at the aforementioned outcropping ten whole minutes before sunrise, ring in hand. He’d wanted to save it for the last day of the holiday, but now as good a time as any. For possibly the first time he could ever remember, he was nervous. He heard Rinoa’s soft voice from behind him. The sun was coming up. *It’s now or never*, Squall thought.

“Squall?” Rinoa asked. Squall took a deep breath, and turned round to face her. It took a while, with his being on crutches, but he got there eventually.

“Rinoa,” he started, “last night, you asked me how much I love you. I gave you a short answer, now I want to give you the long answer.” Rinoa nodded, smiling.

“Ever since I met you,” he continued to ad lib, “there’s been something about you I’ve not been able to resist. It’s not just your amazing beauty or your personality. It’s something different. Something... intangible. I know we have our whole lives ahead of us, but I want to spend my life with you.” He dropped his crutch, and pulled out the ring, just as the sun broke over the horizon. “Rinoa Heartilly, will you marry me?” His voice was quivering— he’d fought in loads of battles, but was never as nervous as he was right then. *What if she says no?* He thought. *Will I be able to cope with that?* Fortunately for Squall, Rinoa did not say no. Unfortunately, she didn’t say yes, either.

“Squall,” Rinoa said, in shock. *It was an engagement ring!* She thought. *Selphie said nothing about that!* Squall had totally blindsided her with his proposal. She started to feel a little light-headed. “I need to lie down,” Rinoa said, backing off. “Let me think about it.” Squall was sort of expecting an answer like this, so he wasn’t too shocked.

## Bad Blood

“Take all the time you need, Angel,” he said, as Rinoa scurried back into the chalet. Squall then realised he had no means of picking his crutch back up. *Damn*, he thought, *my father’s legacy comes back to haunt me once again*. He swiftly pocketed the ring and bent at the hip, just about managing to retrieve his crutch a few tries later. He hobbled back into the chalet, and was about to re-enter his room when he remembered Rinoa was most likely in there, mulling over her decision. *I’d best give her some time*, he thought, as he hobbled into the lounge area and put the television on. However, Rinoa was not in their room, but had gone to seek advice from Selphie and Quistis.

“Wow! Congratulations!” And unusually excitable Quistis had shouted. Selphie was also hyper, even for her.

“He proposed! Wow!” She shouted, giving Rinoa a congratulatory hug. “Show us the ring!” Rinoa shook her head, and sat down on the bed.

“I haven’t said yes yet,” she said.

“What? Why not?” Quistis asked.

“Yeah, what’s the matter?” Selphie asked as well. Rinoa shook her head.

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully, “I want to be with Squall, but this is just a little fast. Do I really want to settle down with him?”

“That’s a question only you can answer,” Quistis replied.

“Yeah!” Selphie exclaimed. “Do you love Squall or not?” She asked.

“Of course I do,” Rinoa answered.

“Do you, have you, or will you love anyone more than him?” Selphie asked, continuing the interrogation. Rinoa thought back to the summer she’d spent with Seifer the previous year. Sure, it had been fun, and she’d liked him a lot, but she didn’t have that feeling with him that she did with Squall. “Something... intangible”

was the way Squall had put it. Rinoa felt exactly the same way.

“No,” Rinoa answered with full confidence. “Squall’s the love of my life.”

“Are you sure?” Quistis asked. Rinoa nodded— she was sure. She knew she’d never get that intangible feeling anywhere else.

“Why do you love him?” Selphie asked. Rinoa had to think long and hard about this one. *Loads of reasons...* she thought, but couldn’t come up with a single one. Sure, Squall was attractive, in a rugged kind of way; sure, he was brave and heroic, and he was absolutely devoted to her, she was sure of that. She couldn’t think of one solid reason, until she remembered Squall saying something, which brought it all back to her. “Rinoa...” he’d said, “even if the whole world ends up hating you, I’ll be your knight.” Rinoa remembered that, and was instantly sure that no matter what, no matter who came between them, Squall would always be hers. How could she put that feeling into words? She decided, in the end, to borrow one of Squall’s phrases.

“It’s something... intangible,” Rinoa replied. Selphie then hit her with the question that sealed her answer to Squall.

“In thirty years’ time,” she asked, “where do you see yourself?” Rinoa sighed— there was only one answer she could give.

“With Squall,” she said. “And I don’t see us being apart at all during those thirty years.”

“Then give me a reason why you two shouldn’t get married,” Quistis said. Rinoa sighed— aside from the obvious one, she couldn’t think of any. She tried the obvious one anyway.

“We’re too young,” she said, massively unsure of herself. Quistis got up and sat next to Rinoa, putting a comforting arm around her.

“Rinn,” she said, “I can see how you look whenever you see Squall. Your pupils dilate, your breathing increases, you go weak at the knees. In my book, that’s true love. It doesn’t matter whether you’re seventeen or seventy.” Rinoa nodded— as always, Quistis was right.

“So?” Selphie asked. “What are you gonna say to Squall?”

“There’s only one thing I can say,” Rinoa answered. She got up and prepared to leave, but before doing so, gave both Quistis and Selphie thank-you hugs.

“Thank you so much,” Rinoa said. “You don’t know how much this meant to me.” She then left to find Squall, expecting him to be in their room. She was surprised to find him lying on the couch in the lounge area, half-watching TV.

“Anything good on?” Rinoa asked, startling Squall.

“N-no,” Squall stuttered, struggling to his feet, “just a repeat.” There was an awkward pause, before Rinoa spoke again.

“Would you like your answer now?” She asked.

“Y-yes,” Squall replied, nervously. His heart sank as he saw Rinoa lower his head. *Why did I ask her?* He thought to himself. *Why did I throw away the single best thing that ever happened to me?* He was about to get the shock of his life.

“Yes,” Rinoa answered, looking into Squall’s eyes. Squall couldn’t believe his ears.

“Y-yes?” Squall asked.

“Yes,” Rinoa said, with a grin on her face. “I will marry you.” Squall’s expression turned into one of pure delight as he rushed forward, as fast as he could, anyway, and gave Rinoa the biggest hug he could muster.

“I love you so much...” he said, squeezing her tight, as tears of pure joy fell from his eyes.

## Bad Blood

“I love you too,” Rinoa said, laughing, as she tried to squirm out of Squall’s bear-like hug. Squall released his hug, remembering something.

“Oh!” He shouted. “I almost forgot...” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring, slipping it on Rinoa’s finger. “This makes it official, my fiancée.” Rinoa stared at the ring– it was nothing too extravagant, but it was the giving of the ring that mattered most, not the actual ring itself. She then looked at Squall’s face, and realised that she’d never seen him so happy. She smiled, and then they gave each other a long, easy kiss.

At breakfast that morning, they made the announcement. Everyone was excited for them, wanting to know when the wedding was going to be, only to be told it won’t be for a few months (to allow Squall’s leg time to heal). No one was really disappointed– it gave them all (particularly Selphie, who had appointed herself wedding planner almost immediately) more time to plan the big day.

The next few days at the beach proved to be a perfect holiday for the six of them– forgetting their worries, forgetting their wounds, forgetting Seifer. None of them wanted to go home, but when Nida came in the Ragnarok to pick them up, they knew that duty called. After they’d dropped Zell, Selphie, Irvine and Quistis off at the Garden, however, Squall ordered Nida to head to Esthar.

“Why are we heading to Esthar?” A healthily tanned Rinoa asked. Squall had his business face on, which worried Rinoa slightly.

“There’s something I have to do, Angel,” he replied.

“What?” She asked, speaking softly. Squall turned and faced Rinoa, smiling.

“Formally introduce my father to my fiancée,” he answered. Rinoa smiled– although she’d met Laguna before, it would be the first time she’d met him with him as Squall’s father, and her as Squall’s romantic interest.

Squall, however, had an ulterior motive– unlike the others, he hadn’t been able to push Seifer further than the back of his mind, where he always lingered, like a bad smell. He had recalled, over and over again, Seifer telling him he was going to assassinate Laguna– and Squall had no intention of letting him.

## Bad Blood

The Ragnarok landed at Esthar air station for what must have been the umpteenth time in the past few days, and after waving goodbye to Nida, Squall and Rinoa were greeted by the familiar faces of Ward and Kiros.

“Squall!” Kiros said, enthusiastically. “It’s good to see you again.” He reached up to shake Squall’s hand, only to see his cast. He then noted his crutches. Ward leaned in towards the group.

“Ward says,” Kiros started, “what the hell happened to you? And frankly, I’d like to know too.”

“Long story,” Squall said. “I’ll tell you once we’re on the shuttle car.” They boarded, and Squall related the story of his torture at the hands of Seifer (a censored version, seeing as Rinoa was also there). He then told Ward and Kiros of his ulterior motive.

“During the torture,” Squall started, “Seifer told me he was planning on assassinating Laguna.” Kiros cut him off before he could go on.

“It won’t happen,” Kiros stated. “We won’t let him within 100 miles of Laguna.”

“See that you don’t,” Squall said, “he’s a very dangerous man.” Before too long, the shuttle car arrived at the presidential palace, and the four of them disembarked, entering the palace. Ward and Kiros escorted the newly engaged couple up to Laguna’s door, before waiting outside.

“Go on in,” Kiros said, opening the door for them. Squall and Rinoa entered. Laguna was standing at the window, his back to the door. He turned round to face his son.

“Squall!” He shouted, waking over and putting his hands on Squall’s shoulders. “I see you’ve been in the wars a little bit,” he said, with a grin on his face.

“Hello,” Squall started, “...father.” Laguna grinned even further– he’d worried that Squall might disown him. Usually, it was fathers that disowned their offspring, but Laguna’s luck had never been all that good.

## Bad Blood

“What brings you back to Esthar?” Laguna asked, barely noticing Rinoa, who stepped up to Squall’s side and hooked her arm around his.

“Father,” Squall started, before Laguna cut him off with a wave.

“Call me ‘Dad’”, he said. Squall sighed, and then smiled.

“Dad,” Squall said with a slight grin, “I believe you’ve met Rinoa Heartilly, during the Ultimecia incident?”

“Ah, yes,” Laguna said with a cheeky grin on his face. “Is she your bit on the side, son?” Squall’s face adopted a cheeky grin of it’s own.

“Kind of,” he answered. “She’s my fiancée.” Laguna’s jaw dropped.

“Your fi—“ he said, not quite believing what he’d heard. Squall and Rinoa exchanged smiles, and nodded. “Wo—ow!” Laguna shouted, hugging both of them. “That’s incredible! Well done! When’s the wedding going to be?” Rinoa decided she’d kept quiet long enough, and answered for the both of them.

“Not until Squall’s better,” she answered, before pausing. “We were thinking...” she paused, not knowing how to finish the sentence.

“What?” Laguna asked. Squall finished Rinoa’s sentence for her.

“We were thinking of having the wedding at Winhill, if that’s alright with you. The same place you and, uh, mum got married.” Laguna smiled, fighting back tears.

“That’d be perfect,” he answered.

“Will you be coming?” Rinoa asked. Laguna laughed.

“Are you kidding?” He asked, rhetorically. “Wild chocobos couldn’t keep me away! Hell, I’ll even make the sandwiches if you want!”

“Thanks,” Squall asked, “it’d mean a lot to us.” Laguna waved, dismissively.

“Least I could do,” he said. “I wasn’t there for the first years of your life. I wanted to be, but fate kept us apart. I’ll be damned if anything keeps me from watching my boy get married.” Squall and Rinoa both smiled– it was turning into a fairytale, and they didn’t want it to end.

“Well,” Squall said, hesitantly, “I have to be back at the Garden pretty soon. You know how things get.”

“Sure do,” Laguna said. He walked up to the young couple and shook their hands. “It’s been nice seeing you. Be sure to call me.”

“To tell you when the wedding is?” Squall asked. Laguna shook his head.

“Just to talk,” he answered. “It’d be nice to hear from you once in a while.” Squall nodded.

“OK,” he said. “I’ll call. See you soon, Dad.” Laguna and his son shared a brief familial hug.

“Goodbye,” Rinoa started, “soon-to-be Dad!” Laguna smiled, and winked at Rinoa, who smiled and blushed.

“Goodbye,” he said, “soon-to-be daughter!” He waved at the two of them as, arm in arm, they backed out of the office. With a smile on his face, Laguna sat down in his chair. *I’ve got a good feeling about those two*, he thought to himself. He swung his legs up on the desk, and watched in horror as he tipped the chair backwards and fell over with an unceremonious thump. Ward and Kiros immediately rushed in to see what was happening, but upon seeing Laguna on the floor, simply creased up laughing.

“Guys!” Laguna shouted from the floor. “This is not funny! Aren’t you gonna help me up?”

Squall arrived back at the Garden with a new sense of optimism about it. It had been less than a fortnight since the bombings, but already the Garden was virtually back to normal. Most of the monsters from the monster arena had been re-captured, the monster arena itself was close to being re-opened, and after Squall relayed some of the information Seifer had bragged to him during his torture, in particular, his only brainwashing two Garden students, normal service was close to being resumed. However, Seifer still hung around at the back of his mind, refusing to go away. A few weeks passed, Squall's leg was healing fine, and Selphie had planned his and Rinoa's wedding down to almost the finest detail. However, one morning, they hit a slight snag, when Squall asked something he should really have known not to. It was around 8:30, and Squall was getting ready for yet another wedding planning meeting with Selphie and Quistis. He was putting on his jacket when the unfortunate words slipped out.

“So,” he said, innocently enough, “will we be inviting your father to the wedding?” He immediately smacked his head with his hand— Rinoa and her father had not had the best of relationships, and while Squall had found time for Laguna, Rinoa had yet to forgive her father. She came storming out of the bathroom, where she had finished getting ready, and marched straight past Squall, a face like thunder.

“You should know better than to ask me that,” she whispered angrily as she passed her fiancé.

“Angel,” Squall said apologetically, “I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking.” Rinoa stared at Squall, still with anger on her face, but could see that he was genuinely sorry. She allowed herself a little smile.

“That's OK,” she said, as Squall gave her a hug. “It's something I have to think about, though,” she conceded. She may not have liked the man, but he was still her father and still had a right to know about the wedding.

“After the meeting,” Squall said, commandingly.

“Yes sir!” Rinoa replied, jokily, before giving him a kiss. Upon their return from the meeting (which had done nothing but decide on one song that they would have played), they sat down, and quickly decided that the only way was to go to Deling City and meet with her father. Unfortunately, persuading Cid to let them have the day off AND to let them use the Ragnarok for more personal use would prove to be a bit more tricky, but still, they gave it their best shot.

“I beg your pardon?” Cid asked, upon hearing Squall's request.

## Bad Blood

“We would like the use of the Ragnarok for one day, for personal use,” Rinoa re-iterated. She, along with Squall, could see that Cid was in no mood to let his prized possession be used as little more than an intercontinental taxi.

“Out of the question,” Cid stated. “The Ragnarok is only for personal use when it is infeasible for the journey to be made any other way. The time off you may have, both of you, but if you are to go to Deling City then you’ll go by train, same as everyone else.”

“But sir—!” Squall tried to plead. Cid cut him off with a wave.

“I will not risk the Ragnarok when it may be needed elsewhere. You six,” Cid said, referring to Squall, Rinoa et al, “have taken far too many liberties with what is essentially Garden property. Yes, you did salvage it and for that I am eternally grateful, but that doesn’t mean you can use it willy-nilly. Request denied. End of discussion.” Squall, while he didn’t like it, still had to take orders from Cid, so he simply nodded his head.

“Yes sir,” he said, disappointedly. Rinoa was going to argue further, but Squall put a hand on her shoulder and managed to dissuade her.

“Yes, sir,” she said, reluctantly, before they both left. Rinoa muttered something under her breath as she left, which she hoped Cid didn’t hear. Fortunately, he didn’t.

Later on, in the cafeteria, Squall and Rinoa were letting Zell and Quistis know what Cid’s decision was, and what they thought of it.

“Man,” Zell started, “that sucks.” Squall, Quistis and Rinoa nodded in agreement.

“Well,” Squall said, resignedly, “what are you gonna do? He’s the boss. We’ll just have to take the train.”

“When are you leaving?” Quistis asked.

## Bad Blood

“Four days,” Rinoa answered. “That’s the soonest we could get any time off. I– we felt it was best to get this over and done with as soon as possible.”

“You’ve not seen your old man since we beat the sorceress, huh?” Zell asked. Rinoa shook her head, before giggling.

“I’m dying to know what he’ll say when I tell him I’m getting married.” She laughed a bit more. “It’ll come as a shock to him, that’s for sure.” The others nodded. “Well,” Rinoa said, changing the subject, “where are Irvine and Selphie? Didn’t they say they’d meet us here?”

“Forget it,” Quistis said, “ever since they started seeing each other they’ve forgotten the meaning of on time.” As if on cue, Irvine and Selphie came through the doors, hand in hand as usual, and sat down at the table.

“Glad you could make it,” Quistis said, sarcastically.

“Sorry, sorry,” Irvine said, almost bursting with excitement. Selphie was the same way.

“What’s with you two today?” Zell asked. Irvine and Selphie looked at each other, barely able to contain their excitement.

“Do you want to tell them or shall I?” Irvine asked his nearly red-faced girlfriend.

“I wanna do it! I wanna do it!” Selphie replied between giggles.

“Tell us what?” Squall asked impatiently. Irvine smiled at Selphie, who managed to contain herself long enough to speak.

“We’re gonna get married too!” Selphie said, climbing on Irvine’s lap and giving him a big hug. The other four were shocked, but happy for them.

“Awesome!” Zell shouted, enthusiastically.

“Wow! Well done!” Was Rinoa’s response. Irvine shrugged and was soon back to his normal self, the excitement over for now.

“Well,” he started, “it means I won’t be able to go out with every girl in the Garden after all, but I’ve learnt something– a diamond’s worth a million pebbles. No offence,” he said, referring to Rinoa and Quistis, before turning back to his fiancée and giving her a kiss.

“Wow man,” Zell said, “that was deep. Where’d you read it?”

“Hey,” Irvine retorted, “I made that up myself! Well, most of it, anyway.”

“Have you set a date yet?” Rinoa enquired. Selphie and Irvine shook their heads.

“We’ve only just got engaged,” he said. “We don’t wanna rush things.”

“You’ve only been together a month and already you’re engaged,” Squall retorted. “You don’t call that rushing?”

“Let’s just say,” Selphie replied, “that we wanna enjoy the moment!” She kissed Irvine again. Squall got up and shook Irvine’s hand. Rinoa gave Selphie, who had separated herself from her fiancé, a congratulatory hug.

“Anyway, well done, man,” Squall said, shaking the cowboy’s hand, “even if you are overshadowing us a little.” He grinned to let Irvine know he was kidding.

“Well done,” Rinoa said, hugging Selphie, before starting to leave with her fiancé.

## Bad Blood

“Well,” Squall said, waving goodbye to the others, “we gotta go. We’ve got train tickets to book.” He and Rinoa said their goodbyes and departed, leaving Quistis, Zell, Irvine and an extremely excited Selphie alone at the table. Eventually, Selphie couldn’t contain herself any longer.

“We’re gonna get married!” She shouted, jumping back in Irvine’s lap.

Four days later, Squall and Rinoa departed Balamb station at night for the overnight journey to Deling City. Squall was glad for a break— as if planning his wedding wasn’t enough, Selphie had insisted on planning hers and Irvine’s at the exact same time and including Squall at every step along the way. Irvine had selected Squall to be his best man (even though Squall hasn’t returned the favour, instead opting for Zell), and between running the Garden, arranging two separate weddings, rehabilitating his leg and maintaining a relationship with his father, Squall was exhausted. It was true that he rarely needed more than five hours’ sleep a night, but every night when he went to bed, he made sure to get his money’s worth. This increased need for rest annoyed Rinoa (and her libido) somewhat, so Squall had opted for an overnight train— that way, even with Rinoa’s, well, appetite, he would still get at least 6 hours’ sleep.

“Squall...” Rinoa’s soft, kitten-like voice came from beside him. *Oh man*, Squall thought, *I thought she’d finally fallen asleep...* he could feel her hands start to slowly caress his shoulders. It was 3:30, and they would arrive in less than five hours. Squall decided to chicken out, and pretended to be asleep. He faked an unconvincing snore. Rinoa simply smiled, and reached in front of Squall, pinching his nose.

“Hey!” Squall said, involuntarily. “I’m trying to sleep!”

“Just one more,” Rinoa said, almost pleading him. While he may have enjoyed, erm, having Rinoa’s company, Squall was really tired and wasn’t really, well, up to it.

“Angel,” he started, wearily, “I’m really, really tired. We’ve already done it four times tonight.”

“I know,” Rinoa said, “but just one more, please?” She put an emphasis on the word ‘please’ that Squall found it impossible to resist her. He sighed, then rolled over, put his arms around her, and started to kiss her...

Ten minutes later, and Rinoa was lightly dozing, a definite smile on her face. Squall, on the other hand, was out like a light, and was dreaming.

## Bad Blood

Squall stood in the grassy field, once again bereft of all scars.

“Mum? Dad?” He intuitively shouted out. He turned round, only to see Laguna there, bloodied and beaten.

“Dad!” Squall shouted, rushing to where his stricken father was crouching.

“I–I’m sorry, son,” Laguna said, obviously dying, “I–I couldn’t protect her... forgive me...” Squall looked down, tears filling his eyes, as his father died in his arms.

“DAAAAAADDD!!!” Squall shouted, grief–stricken. “NNNNNNNNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!” Squall woke up in a panic, sitting bolt upright, drenched in sweat. This fact had not gone unnoticed by Rinoa.

“Squall,” she said, lying him back down on the bed, “what’s up? Was it a nightmare?” Squall wiped the sweat from his face with the bed sheet.

“Obviously,” he replied. “I need access to a phone.”

“We’re almost at Deling City station,” Rinoa responded. “What happened in your dream?” Squall shuddered, before answering.

“My father died,” he responded, quietly. Rinoa took his head in her hands and looked him in the eye.

“It was all a dream, Squall,” she said, sternly, “when you ring Laguna at the station, you’ll see that it was nothing to get so worried about.” Squall nodded. They arrived at the station about forty minutes later, during which time Squall and Rinoa had got dressed and ready to depart. Squall immediately rushed over to the nearest payphone, and dialled Laguna’s private line. The phone rang for five rings, Squall getting more anxious with each passing ring, before eventually, it was answered.

“Hello?” Squall heard the familiar voice of his father say.

## Bad Blood

“Dad?” Squall asked.

“Squall!” Laguna shouted enthusiastically, over the phone. A little too enthusiastically, it turns out, as Squall held the receiver away from his ear for a little while.

“Oops,” Laguna said of his little outburst, “sorry, son.”

“That’s OK,” Squall replied.

“So,” Laguna said, “why’d you ring me? You don’t normally call at this hour.”

“I just wanted to see whether you were alright or not,” Squall replied.

“Of course I am,” Laguna replied, “why wouldn’t I be?” Squall shook his head— *of course he was going to be alright*, he thought, *it was just a silly dream*.

“No reason,” he said, “I just had a bad dream, that’s all.” He could hear Laguna laughing on the other end of the phone, and Squall felt his cheeks go slightly red.

“Squall,” Laguna guffawed, “you can’t ring me every time you have a nightmare! Although, I admit, it is nice to hear from you.”

“OK,” Squall conceded, “I know. It was just a bit disturbing, that’s all. Anyway, I’ve got things to do, I just wanted to ring and say hi.”

“I understand,” Laguna said. “Ring me again soon!”

“Will do. Bye.”

“Bye, son.” Squall hung up the receiver, and walked back over to where his fiancée was waiting for him.

“Well?” Rinoa asked. Squall simply shrugged.

“You were right,” he started, “he’s fine.” Squall acted as if he was convinced, but deep inside, he still felt as if something was wrong...

The meeting with General Caraway went better than either Squall or Rinoa could have expected. It turned out that he followed the news, and had been in contact with Cid for a while regarding the deployment of SeeDs in Galbaldia (something that Squall, as Garden commander, should have been aware of, but Caraway had been insistent about talking to Cid and Cid alone). He was thus aware of Squall’s rise to glory, the fact that Rinoa was a lapsed sorceress, and their relationship. This revelation came as a surprise to Rinoa, and they spent over an hour and a half discussing the wedding, General Caraway’s invitation, and even his agreeing to walk Rinoa down the aisle. All in all, the meeting went well for Rinoa and her father, proving, at least in Rinoa’s mind, that time does indeed heal all wounds. Squall, on the other hand, remained even more silent than usual during the meeting, barely taking anything in, and often having to be prompted by Rinoa whenever General Caraway asked him a question. Fortunately, Squall managed to bluff his way through the meeting well enough (he’d had plenty of practice sessions during interminable Garden meetings with Cid, Xu and Quistis), but when they left, he was still mentally elsewhere. He and Rinoa were walking hand-in-hand down the main street of Deling City, towards the train station, when Squall suddenly became aware of Rinoa talking to him.

“Squall?” Rinoa asked for what must have been the fifth time. She waved her hand in front of his eyes and he broke whatever trance it was he was in.

“Hmm?” He replied, blinking and turning to look at Rinoa. “What’s up, Angel?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” she replied, concerned. “You haven’t said five words since we left Dad’s house.” Squall shook his head, as if trying to clear his thoughts.

“I know,” he said, “I just can’t get that dream out of my head. I’ve been trying, but I just haven’t been able to shake the image of Laguna dying in my arms. I know it sounds silly, but I’m sure something bad has happened.”

## Bad Blood

“Squall,” Rinoa said, commandingly, “listen to me. Noth–“ but before she could finish her sentence, her words were drowned out by the sound of the Ragnarok passing overhead. Squall gulped– he knew it meant trouble, and as there was none in Deling City, the Ragnarok had to be there for one reason only– to collect him and deliver him the news. Squall looked at Rinoa, and as one, they ran (in Squall’s case, quickly hobbled as his leg had yet to fully heal) off to where the Ragnarok had been hastily parked. Selphie was already at the entrance hatch and running towards Squall and Rinoa by the time they arrived at the ship.

“SQUALL!!” Selphie shouted at the top of her voice. “You gotta come quickly!!” Squall grabbed Selphie by the shoulders and managed to calm her down.

“What’s up?” He asked, maintaining a calm exterior but secretly panicking on the inside. “What happened?”

“You gotta come to Esthar,” Selphie said, regaining her breath, “Seifer’s attacked.” Squall looked at Rinoa, and they both had the same expression on their face– extreme concern. Squall bolted onto the Ragnarok and quickly flung himself in the pilot’s seat. It had been some time since he’d flown it last, but he was more than up to the task. Selphie was going to object, but Rinoa managed to give her a glance that seemed to say ‘let him do this’. Selphie nodded, and sat down in the passenger seat while Squall took them to Esthar as fast as the Ragnarok could manage. When they arrived, Squall grabbed the radio mike and called the air station.

“Esthar air station, this is Ragnarok requesting permission to land, over,” Squall said in one breath. Instead of the usual air traffic controller, however, Squall was greeted by the instantly recognisable voice of Kiros.

“Squall?” Kiros asked, over the radio.

“Kiros?” Squall asked back. “What happened? Over.”

“Land first,” Kiros instructed, “I’ll explain all once we’re en route to the hospital. Over and out.” Squall cast a glance back to where Rinoa was sitting– it had to be extremely bad for Kiros to greet them personally over the radio, and the hospital statement only made Squall more anxious. Rinoa’s face displayed an equal amount of anxiety. Squall landed the Ragnarok, and the three of them exited the ship.

“Wait here and guard the ship,” Squall said to Selphie.

## Bad Blood

“But I wanna go too!” Selphie said, full of the same anxiety that had gripped Squall and Rinoa.

“Wait here,” Squall said, more firmly. Selphie nodded and retreated back into the Ragnarok. Squall and Rinoa waved her off, and then turned round to see Ward and Kiros running towards them, exhausted.

“Sq–Squall,” Kiros said, panting, “this way.” He led them to the nearest shuttle car, which they boarded, before being taken off to Esthar hospital. The shuttle tube was obviously wasting no time, as the four of them had to cling onto their seats to prevent themselves from being flung against the back wall of the car. Squall would have asked Kiros what was going on, but he doubted he could make himself heard over the din the engine of the shuttle tube was making. Eventually, they arrived at the hospital, where, much to Squall’s relief, a very upset-looking Laguna was waiting for them. Squall hopped off the car and gave his father a brief hug.

“Dad,” he said, letting his father go, “what happened?” Laguna had to fight back tears as he told his son the bad news.

“Squall,” he said, his voice quivering, “it’s Elle. I couldn’t protect her. I’m sorry.” Squall’s mind turned from one of anxiety to one of rage– Seifer had tried to kill Ellone, just to get to him. Together, Laguna, Squall, Ward, Kiros and Rinoa rushed inside, to where Ellone was lying on her side, badly wounded, in an intensive care bed. She was unconscious, and she was very pale.

“Sis...” Squall muttered, under his breath, as Rinoa put her arms around him for comfort.

“Squall,” Laguna said, quietly, “we found this at the scene.” He handed him a package, containing a videotape. “It was addressed to you,” Laguna finished. Squall took the package and immediately felt his blood start to boil. *Seifer...* Squall thought, in a cold rage.

“There’s a VCR in the other room you can use,” Laguna informed Squall. Squall nodded, and entered the room, followed by Rinoa. Squall was not too happy about this.

“I don’t want you to have to see this, Rinoa,” Squall said, barely able to contain his rage.

“Too bad,” Rinoa said, staring at him. “Ellone’s my friend too. I want to see why he did this.” Squall nodded– she had a point. He pushed the video into the machine and pressed play. He was greeted by Seifer’s smiling,

bearded face, just as he had been the day after the Garden bombings.

“Hello, Squall,” Seifer said, smugly. “I expect you’re wondering why I chose Ellone as my latest target, aren’t you?” Seifer didn’t even show the slightest hint of remorse– he was laughing, loving every second of it. Squall was quivering with rage. “Well,” Seifer went on, “it’s quite simple. I know how close you are to her, how much she means. How much you hogged her at the orphanage. Well, it’s time I showed you how much she means to me– as bait. Do you want me, Squall? Come and get me. I’ll be waiting for you near the sorceress memorial. Apt, don’t you think? And come alone. We have unfinished business. Goodbye.” Seifer clicked off the camcorder, laughing, leaving Squall and Rinoa alone in the room. Squall could contain himself no longer. He leapt up, ejected the videotape, and repeatedly smashed it with his gunblade. Rinoa desperately tried to calm him down.

“Squall!” She shouted, on the verge of tears, “Calm down! Please!” She couldn’t bear to see Squall angry. He had a dark side, same as everyone else, but he was a dangerous man when provoked. Too dangerous. Someone had to calm him down. That someone was Rinoa. Squall turned around and faced his fiancée, wild-eyed.

“He’s gone too far, Rinoa,” Squall said, a hint of madness on his voice. “He’s gonna pay. I swear it.”

“Squall,” Rinoa said, futilely trying to calm him down, “Please, think about what you’re saying...” unfortunately, this only served to fuel Squall’s rage.

“Think about what I’m doing!?” Squall asked, incredulous. “What’s there to think about, Rinoa? He bombs the Garden. He murders innocents. He wounds me. He threatens your life. He tries to murder Elle. Am I supposed to let this slide? NO!!” Rinoa jumped slightly as Squall yelled at her. This was as angry as she’d ever seen him, and she was legitimately scared.

“The line has to be drawn somewhere,” Squall continued, “and I am gonna draw it HERE! This far, and no further! Make no mistake, Rinoa, I am gonna make that bastard pay for what he’s done.” He was so caught up in his rage he didn’t even realise Rinoa was crying.

“Squall, please,” she tried to dissuade him, but he couldn’t hear her. He marched out of the room, without even saying goodbye to the one he loved. Rinoa slumped back down onto the chair where she had sat to watch the video, and wept uncontrollably.

## Bad Blood

Laguna was highly surprised to see Squall marching down the hallway, gunblade in hand, faster than his injury should have normally allowed him to. *Uh-oh*, Laguna thought, *this ain't good*. Leaving Ward and Kiros to look over Ellone, he took off after Squall.

“Squall!” He shouted after his son. “Wait!” Even though he was injured, Squall was almost thirty years younger than Laguna, and Laguna, with his knees, had a hard time keeping up. Fortunately, Squall heard his father, and turned round.

“I have business to attend to,” Squall said, coldly.

“Seifer can wait,” Laguna said. “Ellone needs her brother here when she wakes up.”

“I won't be long...” Squall replied, resuming his march towards the exit.

“Squall!” His father shouted. “He's not worth it! We'll capture him, I promise! You're hurt, you shouldn't do this!” Unfortunately, Laguna's words were lost on Squall. He walked straight out of the building, and headed towards the sorceress memorial, to the southeast of the city. Laguna wandered back inside the hospital, only to hear crying from the room where he had sent Squall to watch the videotape. Venturing inside, he saw Rinoa, weeping.

“Hey,” he said, “what's up, girl?” Rinoa managed to stifle her tears long enough to answer her soon-to-be father-in-law.

“He's gone off,” Rinoa said, barely. Laguna sat down next to her and gave her a fatherly hug.

“I know, I know,” he said, “but don't worry. He'll calm down by the time he reaches the memorial.” Rinoa shook her head.

“You don't understand,” she said, still weeping. “He's vulnerable. He's been emotionally fragile ever since Seifer...” she couldn't bring herself to say the word ‘torture’, and quickly had to think up an alternative. “...Hurt him. He can't stand to see people taken away from him. Please, you have to stop him!” Laguna thought for a few seconds, before leaving Rinoa alone.

“Don’t worry,” he said, exiting the room, “he’ll not get out of Esthar.”

Seifer, meanwhile, was not at the sorceress memorial at all, but had gone to ground within the Esthar city limits. His thoughts were not on Squall or revenge, but on the woman he’d attacked. His mind was full of guilt, and penitence. *Why did I do that?* Seifer thought, grief-stricken. *She never did anything to me? What possessed me to do such a thing?* As if in answer to his question, Ultimecia appeared before him.

“Don’t concern yourself with that,” she said, trying to soothe him, “Squall is on his way. You have to kill him.” Seifer nodded, but he didn’t really believe Ultimecia.

“You doubt me?” She asked. “Think of all Squall has done to you. All he’s taken from you.” Seifer answered, saying out loud what was on his mind.

“He never hurt the ones I love...” He said. Ultimecia forced him to stare at her.

“Pitiful child,” she spat in his direction. “Mercy is for the weak. Only the ruthless will get what they truly want.” However, as Seifer was about to submit to Ultimecia’s will, a vision of Rinoa appeared before him.

“Rinny?” He asked, using the pet name he had given her all those months ago...

“I’m here, Seifer,” she answered him. “Don’t give in to Ultimecia. Let go.”

“NO!” Ultimecia commanded. “Squall is your enemy! You must kill him!” Rinoa stepped in front of Ultimecia.

“No, Seifer,” she said, softly, “Listen to me. Spare Squall. He is not your enemy.” Seifer nodded. Ultimecia started to walk towards him, but Rinoa cut her off with a vicious magic spell. Ultimecia shattered into a million pieces, and Rinoa put her hands on either side of Seifer’s face. “You’re free now,” she said. Seifer shook his head.

## Bad Blood

“No,” he said, thinking clearly for the first time since his descent into madness had started at FH, “there’s still something I have to do. Someone I have to apologise to.” Rinoa faded from his view, and where she stood, Seifer focused on a figure at the end of the alley he was in. The figure was wearing a fur-lined jacket and wielding the same weapon as him.

“Squall...” Seifer said, without even a hint of malice in his voice.

“Seifer,” Squall replied, angrily.

“I know you must hate me, but—” Seifer’s sentence was cut short as Squall charged at him, emitting a primal scream. Seifer barely brought his gunblade up to defend himself. If he hadn’t, Squall would have cut him cleanly in two, from his shoulder to his hip.

“I am going to kill you!” Squall shouted. Seifer looked at his former adversary’s eyes, and saw that they contained nothing but pure hatred. Seifer had pushed him too far— and he knew it. Squall slashed again, adrenaline pumping through his veins, making him forget his injuries, and this time just caught the tip of Seifer’s nose. Seifer yelped, more out surprise than pain, and leapt back. Squall paused for a minute.

“Why did you do it, Seifer?” He asked, still enraged. “Why do you have to hurt me? Why do you have to hurt the people I love?”

“Squall...” Seifer started, desperately trying to find the words, any words that would convey to Squall how much he was sorry. Nothing came, and Squall lost his patience and attacked again. The fight lasted for another five minutes, with Seifer not trying to land even a single attack. Eventually, however, Squall’s persistence paid off, and he slashed at Seifer, watching as his blade became firmly lodged in Seifer’s right shoulder. Seifer yelled in pain, dropping his weapon and slumping to the floor. Squall pulled the trigger, and Seifer yelled again and the bullet entered him, also forcing the blade clear. Squall stood over his fallen adversary, ready to impale him on the end of his weapon, when he heard a voice— a voice he thought he’d never hear again.

“Do it, Squall,” the unexpected voice of Ultimecia came from in front of him. He looked up— there she stood, in all her glory.

“Fight her, Squall,” Seifer whispered, barely conscious.

“Pay no attention to him, Squall,” Ultimecia continued, “feel the power flowing through your veins. Kill Seifer, Squall. Embrace the power. Let it fill you. Soak it up.” Squall lifted his gunblade higher, preparing to deliver the deathblow, but then, another image appeared before him.

“Mother?” Squall asked. Raine appeared before him, smiling.

“Don’t blame Seifer– even he’ll come round in the end,” she said, repeating the words she had said to him while he laid dead on the infirmary operating table. Squall started to smile, but Ultimecia appeared again, and shattered the image of his mother. Squall watched, speechless, as Raine broke into millions of tiny pieces, then looked up, only to see Ultimecia standing there, smiling.

“Now, Squall,” she commanded, “fulfil your destiny. Take Seifer’s life, and I will fill you with so much power that you will never care for anything ever again. You don’t like caring, do you, Squall?” Filled with the intoxicating feeling of Ultimecia’s power, Squall shook his head.

“Then kill him.” Seifer gulped as Squall thrust his blade downwards, but just as he was about to pierce Seifer’s skin, he heard a voice from behind him.

“Squall!” The soft, yet firm, voice of his fiancée shouted from behind him. “Don’t do it, Squall!”

“Ignore her!” Ultimecia snapped. “She is just an illusion. Pierce him! Impale him! Take his life!” Squall was torn– on one hand, Rinoa, on the other hand, Ultimecia. If he was of sound mind, there would have been no choice, but Squall’s mind was far from sound.

Rinoa watched, as Squall stood over Seifer’s fallen frame, ready to impale him with his gunblade. *What’s happened to him?* She thought to herself. Squall had never been vindictive, let alone vengeful. He was angry when he left the hospital, but he would never kill anyone, even Seifer, in cold blood. At the end of the alleyway, however, she saw a figure in the dust– *Ultimecia?* She thought. *No, that’s not possible. We killed her in compressed time.* However, Rinoa then sadly remembered that Ultimecia was a sorceress, with the power to mess with people’s minds. Specifically, the minds of anyone who had been close to a sorceress. *A sorceress like me...* Rinoa thought. She had only ever had two boyfriends– Squall and Seifer, and they were both at the end of the alley. Squall’s mind was infected with Ultimecia’s, well, programming, for want of a better word, but Seifer seemed to have beaten it. He was lying on the ground, but his mind was not full of malice, but of penitence. How could that have been? Rinoa had only one thought. *Ellone...* Seifer had attacked Ellone, and somehow, she’d broken the programming. Rinoa then stepped back for a second. Programming?

## Bad Blood

Ultimecia? Ellone? She was confused. A sorceress she may have been, but she still got headaches like anyone else. However, Squall needed her, and with Ellone in a coma, only she could help him beat Ultimecia's control.

"Squall," she said, starting towards him, "I'm real. Trust me. Believe in me, Squall." She could see Ultimecia clearly now— she was very much there, in her mind, in the minds of the two men. Rinoa knew she had to find some way of disposing of her for good.

"Ignore her, Squall," Ultimecia continued. "Better still, kill her. That way you'll know she's not real." In his crazed state, Squall turned round, and brandished his gunblade, ready to strike Rinoa. Rinoa gulped. *It's now or never...* She thought. She couldn't defeat someone who was not there— she had to help Squall beat her on his own, Like Seifer had done.

"Squall," she started, as he stood, ready to strike her down, "I love you." Nervously, she stepped forward, and gave Squall a long, easy kiss on the lips. Squall dropped his gunblade over the back of his head, where it clattered on the floor.

"A—Angel?" He asked. "What happened? Where am I?" He was clearing his mind of Ultimecia's influence— when he'd stepped into the alley, he'd only wanted to confront Seifer, but something had taken over— and he knew what it was. He turned around, and saw Ultimecia starting to fade away. She was screaming.

"Squall!" Seifer shouted. "Be strong!" Unfortunately, Ultimecia had one final nasty surprise for the three of them. As she vanished, energy started to well up around Squall and Seifer. The more she disappeared, the more energy there was. Rinoa went to try and break Squall free, only to be thrown back down the alleyway. Ultimecia shattered, producing a ray of light that nearly blinded Rinoa. Shielding her eyes, she saw Squall and Seifer get encompassed in the ray. When it was gone, Ultimecia was no more, but Squall and Seifer were both unconscious in the alley. She scurried over to where Squall had fallen.

"Squall?" She asked, hoping that he could hear her. Tears had started to well up in her eyes. She checked for a pulse— there was one, but it was very faint. She tried using magic on him, plugging curaga after curaga into him, but nothing worked. Eventually, she ran out of magic, and kneeled beside him, clutching his body, as she felt his pulse slowly fade away...

Squall was standing in a room, a room he knew well. His old dorm at the orphanage. He was standing back to back with someone he knew equally as well.

## Bad Blood

“Seifer,” Squall started, penitence in his voice. Seifer cut him off.

“Squall,” Seifer started, equally as penitent, “don’t. We’ve both screwed up, me more than you.”

“I guess we paid the price for our mistakes, huh,” Squall said, laughing a little. Seifer also gave in to a little chuckle.

“Yeah, you can say that again,” Seifer replied.

“What happened?” Squall asked. “All I remember is going to confront you, then—“

“I don’t know,” Seifer replied. “Ultimecia was controlling us.”

“How?” Squall asked.

“Maybe, after you killed her, she hitched a ride in our heads. I honestly have no clue. All that matters is that she’s gone now.”

“So are we,” Squall said, before pausing. “Did... you... really hate me?” He asked Seifer. Seifer laughed and shook his head.

“No,” he said, chuckling, “not really. Before Ultimecia took over I didn’t have a bad thought about you. Jealous at times, yes, but never hateful.”

“So you don’t mind,” Squall started, pausing mid-sentence, “about me and Rinoa?” Seifer smiled again.

“She made her choice. I could see how much she cares for you. What we had doesn’t even compare to what the two of you have.” Squall felt a tear enter his eye— he remembered he’d never see Rinoa again.

“Had,” he corrected, croaking. “I wish things could have been different. I wish we couldn’t have been enemies.”

“Tell you what,” Seifer said, regaining his usual sarcastic drone, “when we get reincarnated, I’ll look you up.” Squall smiled.

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

They were about to turn around and shake hands, when suddenly, the orphanage started to fade, and Squall and Seifer found themselves falling through darkness. They were both gripped by surges of electricity, and everything flashed white.

“Whe—where am I?” Squall said to himself. A white light surrounded him. “Is this heaven?” He asked no one in particular. “Mother?” Squall felt himself gripped by the electrical shock again, and a third time. He eventually blacked out, and felt himself fade into nothingness...

Instantaneously, Squall felt himself awaken in a bed. He was weak— so weak that he couldn’t even open his eyes, or breathe for himself, yet he was fully conscious and aware of his surroundings. He was dimly aware of voices around him, but they were unintelligible to him. He relaxed, expecting to fall asleep again, when he heard a voice he recognised well.

“When will he be conscious?” He heard the female voice ask. Squall instantly recognised it. *Rinoa*... he thought. Immediately, Squall’s spirits were lifted. By some miracle, he had survived, and was in the hospital in Esthar. This was confirmed by a voice that even a mere two months ago he wouldn’t have been glad to hear, but today, it was music to his ears.

“Come on, Rinoa,” he heard the calming voice of his father say, “let’s give him some space. They’ll let us know when he’s awake.” *Rinoa*... *Dad*... Squall’s mind was on those two people only.

“Just let me talk to him,” Rinoa managed to persuade the doctors. Squall, even with his eyes closed, knew that Rinoa was leaning over him. He could feel her breath on his forehead, could, well, sense her presence. His heart rate involuntarily increased, although it wasn’t by much so no one noticed except Squall.

“Squall,” Rinoa began to speak. “I don’t know if you can hear me, but if you can, I just want to say this.” She paused. “Don’t you ever do that to me again!” She laughed, but Squall could tell she was crying. *She must be pretty sick of watching me lie in a hospital bed*, he thought to himself.

“Seriously, though, Squall, my love,” Rinoa continued, with a more morbid tone to her voice, “I thought I’d lost you, again. I hate watching you like this.” Squall could feel the pain in her voice, and it hurt him too. “I love you, Squall,” she continued, “and I want to marry you as soon as you’re up. I don’t want to wait any longer, not knowing whether you’ll come back from these missions alive or dead.” She leaned down, and kissed him on the forehead. Slowly, but surely, Squall regained his strength, and managed to open his eyes. The sight that greeted him was of an ecstatic Rinoa.

“Squall!” She said, happily. “You heard!” Suddenly, Squall found his strength returning more and more. He mustered up enough strength to nod his head, although even that simple action exhausted him. He put his remaining strength into saying just four words.

“I love you Rinoa,” he half croaked half whispered, before falling back unconscious. It didn’t matter to Rinoa how he said the words, just that he said them at all. Rinoa smiled, and cried tears of joy, before Laguna finally put an arm round her shoulder and persuaded her to leave. Rinoa’s thought upon hearing Squall’s words was a simple one— *Everything’s gonna be fine!* No matter what was going to come between them, Rinoa knew that she and Squall would always have each other.

It was seven full days before Squall was up and about again, and even then, it was on crutches, as he’d aggravated his leg injury attacking Seifer. The doctors figured that Ultimecia’s influence had started to affect him when he watched the videotape of Seifer, making him ignore, and thus worsen, his leg injury.

On this particular day, he rose early, slowly climbing to the top of the hospital, to get a look at the sunrise. He backed into a wall, and let himself slump into a sitting position. The sun was peeking over the horizon, bringing with it a new day. *It’s going to be a beautiful day*, Squall thought. Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by someone standing above him.

“Anyone sitting there?” Seifer enquired. During his spell in hospital, Seifer had had plenty of time to reflect upon his actions. While it was true that he was under the direct influence of a sorceress, he was still repentant for what he’d done. And, in Seifer’s opinion, he’d done far too much. He knew he’d never be accepted back at Balamb Garden, he’d burned his bridges with Fujin and Raijin, and he couldn’t even stay in Esthar, due to what he’d done to Ellone. He truly was a man with nowhere to go.

## Bad Blood

“No, make yourself comfortable,” Squall answered. Seifer slowly lowered himself into a seated position— the shoulder injury he’d suffered was easily as bad as Squall’s leg injury, if not worse. He was absolutely certain he’d never wield a gunblade ever again.

“We get discharged today,” Seifer said, solemnly.

“Yeah,” Squall said, not wanting to look at his newfound friend, for fear of the guilt he might feel.

“Is the Ragnarok coming to pick you up?” Seifer asked.

“They’ll be here at about half past one,” Squall confirmed. “Selphie, typically, is throwing a ‘welcome back’ party, even though I’ve only been gone a week.” Seifer smiled. How he longed to be accepted as a part of that crowd. How he longed to be accepted as a part of any crowd. But it was not to be. “How about you?” Squall asked. “Where are you going?” Seifer’s answer astonished Squall.

“Prison,” Seifer answered, almost enthusiastically. “I’ve had a word with President Loire, and I’ve agreed to stand trial for my actions. Terrorism, brainwashing members of the public, grievous bodily harm— I’m looking at 15 years minimum.” Squall was incredulous.

“Seif,” he said, upset at the thought of Seifer rotting away in a prison cell, “that’s not right. You shouldn’t have to stand trial. You were brainwashed by the sorceress, for pity’s sake!” Seifer shook his head.

“It’s where I belong, Squall,” he responded. “But I’m not upset. I’ll have time to think in prison. Maybe I’ll write a book or two.” Suddenly, the sun burst over the horizon, bathing the two men in its warm, morning glow. Squall and Seifer smiled together.

“Be sure to send me a copy,” Squall said. “I’ll be sure to write you, every week.” Seifer laughed.

“Hell,” he said, chuckling, “there’s a book in that already!” Squall found himself laughing too— Seifer had a point.

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“Seriously, though, Seif,” Squall said, “I’ll have a word with my father, see if I can get you out for a couple of days.”

“Days?” Seifer asked. “What days?”

“Well,” Squall started, “my wedding, for one.” Seifer looked at Squall.

“You really want me there?” He asked. Squall nodded.

“I’d be offended if you said no.” Seifer reached over and shook Squall’s hand.

“You got yourself a wedding guest, then!” The two of them laughed some more, before they both decided they’d had enough fun, and stood up, walking side by side towards the door down into the hospital.

Seifer was sentenced to 18 years solitary confinement 6 days afterwards, although he was told he’d only have to serve 15 years. He didn’t mind in the slightest, and started writing his first book of many on his first day in prison. It went on to be a number one bestseller, partially due to the fact that Squall agreed to write the foreword.

Squall arrived back at Balamb Garden on the evening of his discharge from hospital. As expected, Selphie (and Irvine) threw him a huge party. Squall wasn’t really in the mood for the party, which was on a scale to match the one they’d thrown after defeating Ultimecia (for the first time, as it turned out), but he attended nonetheless, and found himself having a good time. He resumed his duties as Garden commander with new-found aplomb, and found himself enjoying every day more and more, no longer minding the fact that people looked up to him, and no longer minding the fact that he inspired people, for he realised that he was bringing out the best in them, and he liked it.

Squall and Rinoa were married at Winhill church a mere three months later. All their friends were there, including Seifer, who mainly kept hidden at the back. After the ceremony, however, Squall made a point to go up to him and talk to him.

“Seif,” Squall, still in his groom outfit, said. “Glad you could make it.” Seifer smiled– he certainly had changed from the man he fought three months ago. Although he was only 19, he looked at least 35. His hair

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was slightly greying, as was his beard (which he'd trimmed down to a goatee), and his face just looked, well, old. However, his voice was the same old Seifer.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," he answered. "Make sure to treat her right, OK?"

"Of course," Squall answered back.

"Good," Seifer said, "or I might have to break out of prison and come looking for you." Suddenly they heard a voice behind them.

"Squall!" Irvine, the self-appointed cameraman/official photographer shouted. "Come on!" Squall looked back at Seifer.

"Look's like I'd better be taking my leave," Seifer said, sadly.

"You won't stay for the reception?" Squall asked, hopefully.

"No," Seifer said, shaking his head, "there's just too much bad blood. The ceremony was enough for me. It was good seeing you again, man." He started back towards the van, where the Esthar soldier was waiting for him, but not before shaking Squall's hand.

"See you soon, Seif," Squall shouted after his receding friend.

"Sure!" Seifer shouted, stepping into the back of the prison truck. Squall waved as it trundled off down the road.

"SQUALL!" Irvine yelled from behind him. "What's keeping you?" Squall turned, and headed back towards his friends, and his new wife.

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Later, at the reception, it was Squall's turn to make his speech. Zell had made his, which was typically humorous, and General Caraway had made a speech, asking whether Squall was aware of what he was letting himself in for, which also generated a few laughs. Now, it was Squall's turn to speak.

"Thank you, everybody," he said, calming the ripple of applause which had swept through the small, yet packed, hall. "I'd like to thank everyone for coming, and Zell and General Caraway for their... well... speeches." A small ripple of laughter swept the room. "Seriously, though, I'd like to talk about one person who has made these past seven months into the best seven months of my life. My darling wife, Rinoa. Angel," he said, turning to face his bride, "I'm not sure whether or not you're aware the impact you had on my life. When I first met you, you were like a breath of fresh air in what was becoming a stale existence. Everything you did intrigued me, to the point where all I could think about was you. Then, you got hurt, and I didn't know what to do. It was then that, with my typical timing, my true feelings for you became clear for the first time. You are far more than part of my existence— you are my existence. I consider it an honour and a privilege to spend the rest of my life with you, Mrs. Leonheart." Squall reached down, and helped Rinoa up, and for what was nearly the millionth time, they kissed each other. This time, however, they both knew that their life was unalterably changed for the better.

Later, after the dances had started, Quistis was feeling slightly lonely. She'd seen Squall marry Rinoa, and soon Irvine and Selphie would be tying the knot. She looked down at her bridesmaid's dress. *Always the bridesmaid and never the bride*, she thought to herself. Just then, Zell came up to her. He stood there, scratching his head.

"Wanna dance?" He blurted out. Quistis looked up at him, unsure whether she heard right.

"Yeah, you know," Zell started, "I was reading this book Rinoa gave me about proper wedding behaviour, and the best man's always supposed to dance with the bridesmaid." Quistis smiled.

"I'd love to," she said, standing up.

"Awesome!" Zell said, enthusiastically. He led her onto the dance floor, and they danced with each other for the rest of the evening, smiling...

Meanwhile, Irvine was dancing with Selphie. They'd been engaged for three months, and hadn't regretted rushing into it. Irvine looked down at his fiancée, who was looking as beautiful as ever in her bridesmaid's dress, which just seemed to fit her like a glove. All his life, he'd been chasing woman after woman, never going with the same one twice, but deep down, all he wanted was one woman to be with him forever. He just hadn't realised it until now.

“Sefie?” he asked, causing his fiancée to look up at him.

“Yes, Irvy?” Selphie asked back.

“Have I ever told you how much I love you?” Selphie nodded.

“Yeah,” she said, “but you can say it again as many times as you want!” Irvine smiled.

“I love you with all my heart, Selphie Tilmitt.” They shared a brief kiss, before they resumed dancing. Selphie leaned her head into Irvine’s chest and smiled. She was looking forward to her life with the man she adored...

Whilst Irvine and Selphie were declaring their love for each other, the more mature members of the congregation, namely Cid, Edea, Laguna, Ward, Kiros and Ellone, were sitting, watching the young adults.

“This is a wonderful day,” Edea said, unable to properly convey her emotions over seeing the children she helped raise finally grow up and become adults. Laguna, sitting next to her, smiled.

“It sure is.” He’d gained a son, and now, a daughter-in-law. “I can’t wait for the grandkids to start rolling in!” Everyone chuckled– Laguna had a way of lightening almost any situation. Cid and Edea took the opportunity to take to the dance floor themselves, which prompted Ellone to stand up, and walk over to Laguna.

“Would you like to dance, Uncle Laguna?” Laguna smiled, and stood up.

“I’d love to.” Before he could go any further, however, his leg was hit by cramp, and he stopped, and sat back down. “Ow, ow ow ow ow ow,” he complained. Ellone did not look impressed.

“Well I never!” She said, incredulous at her adopted father’s bad timing.

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“Sorry,” Laguna said, “just give me a couple of minutes.” However, Ellone had had other plans, and within moments, had whisked Ward out on to the dance floor. As it turned out, Ward was one hell of a dancer, and Laguna and Kiros exchanged baffled looks, as they saw their usually taciturn friend have a good time on the dance floor.

In the shadows, General Caraway was sitting, observing the daughter he’d only just regained. *She’s now a young woman*, he thought to himself. He found the thought of her being married at the tender age of 18 almost impossible to accept, but ever since they’d made the effort to talk to each other again, he’d started understanding her more. He came to understand that he couldn’t wrap her in cotton wool, or expect her to obey his every command. She had found true love with Squall, the Garden commander, and while it was hard for him to accept, he understood that he must accept it nonetheless. *After all*, he thought, *better to have a married daughter than no daughter at all...* This way, he was even the father-in-law of one of the most powerful military men in the world– it may prove to be to his advantage...

Squall and Rinoa stood together on the balcony outside the reception room, overlooking Winhill’s town square. It was a clear night, and the stars were out. They exchanged no words on the balcony, only feelings, for words were not necessary. As Squall looked into his love’s eyes and they moved their heads together to kiss each other, Squall thought to himself one thing–

*Every day’s just going to get better and better.* As they kissed, fireworks went off in the town square, bathing the couple in light, and putting the finishing touches on the scene. *A beautiful day, with a beautiful woman,* Squall thought to himself as he kissed his wife again...

THE END.

Note– Squaresoft owns copyright on all the characters, even the ones I made up. Hope you liked it, if you want a sequel I may be amenable to the idea. Drop me a line at [hulla.mahulla@btopenworld.com](mailto:hulla.mahulla@btopenworld.com) and I’ll see what I can do.

PDF design by Shane Smith, of [ffplanet.co.uk](http://ffplanet.co.uk)

Neb

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