

CHOICES

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Pairing: Squall/Irvine

Spoilers: post!Ultimacia

Warnings: Slash

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Summary: Squall finally chooses for himself and leaves Garden behind. Someone finally understands and follows.

It was over, we all recovered, there was a magnificent party, and then he was gone. All he left behind was a note, one copy for each of us.

Someone once told me that it's your choices who make you who you are, far more than your actions alone. What does that mean, you ask? I love you Rinoa, but I'm not in love with you. I love all of you. Hell, I may even love my father, who knows.

But there's only one person I'm in love with, and frankly, I haven't got the words to just say it. I think you've seen more of the real me than anyone, and understand the pressures we can face in life. I've never been good with words. I don't think I ever will be, at least not to speak them. Rinoa, I hope you understand. I never meant to hurt you.

It's all about choices, and this time I'm making the choice for me. I don't belong at Garden anymore. I did what I needed to do, what was required of me. I've given everything I had and I just need to go now, and choose myself for once. Build something out of the ruins of what happened.

Whatever. . . .
Squall

Quistis was voted in as the new Headmaster, while Xu was bumped up to Commander. Nida became the Garden Master and finally stepped into the limelight a little, poor guy. I kicked around for a while, charming the ladies, spending time with my soul-sister, but I was bored.

Rinoa had understood, once everything was said and done. She was in love with love, with an enigma, a challenge. In short, she grew up, but then I think we all did. I don't think anyone was surprised when she returned to Deling to try and patch things up with her father and to be with her old friends. That's not to say she doesn't visit often, but she seems happy, and that's all that matters.

Things pretty much went back to normal, sort of. Selphie and Zell headed off to Trabia to rebuild. The two of them combined is enough to make anyone go off sugar, but you can't fault them for it. It would be like kicking a puppy. They check in often too, and that makes everyone smile.

There are still new students and missions, though things have understandably settled down. People still get into squabbles and fight over territory—it's human nature after all. Seifer came back. Those of us remaining showed him Squall's letter. He laughed, but it wasn't unkind. We have a pretty good idea what he went through during that time, especially after listening to Rinoa speak of her time under the influence.

So we protected him, and gave him the chance he deserved. He isn't much for that type of treatment, but we could tell he was grateful, despite acting very much the same as the old days. He's a good instructor though and I've caught him and Quistis a few times walking together, so I suspect something is up there.

I was bored. There aren't many people here who lean toward guns. I'm lonely too. It's been months, almost a year, and I'd just been kicking around, charming the ladies, with nothing better to do. I kept thinking about Squall's letter and what he had to say about choices. I couldn't help but think there was a message hidden there. Something that, when you tilted your head just the right way, would suddenly scream out who and what he meant.

I was bored, so I said my goodbyes and headed to Esthar. I knew Laguna would put me up for a while. If nothing else, I could tell him about Squall. Nobody else had really made the effort, possibly out of respect for the reaction storm that hit when Squall found out and his refusal to even stay in the room when it was inadvertently mentioned.

I wasn't worried though. Laguna had made a choice, and he'd ended up sacrificing what he didn't even know about for what he did. You can't blame him, not really. So okay, he struck people as a bumbling fool, who cares? He was brash and impulsive but loyal to a fault. If he wasn't very well coordinated in every day life, or tripped over his own words at times, is that any reason to not like him? He's a tiger in battle and he handles Esthar like a born leader, even if part of that is sheer charm and charisma.

I'd been there for around a month or so when it finally hit me, what he'd been hinting at. There were so many choices he hadn't been able to make; they were made for him. This time he'd chosen to walk away, knowing how it might end up, but leaving someone else the choice to find him, if they'd only understand, and if it was their choice too. And now I did, as I remembered sitting in the tower, waiting for a moment I desperately didn't want to face, and how he'd understood, and talked me through it, even though really he didn't know why I froze, not then.

Pressure, sure. How he'd held up, through all of it, and had the courage to walk away. How out of everyone, I was the only one who remembered. The question was . . . where was he? Not Winhill. I couldn't see him staying there, not when they knew us, and not with the memories it contained. Not with the Shumi, where his father was almost legend. So I asked Laguna about his thoughts on the matter. I'd never asked before. Up until now, I never thought it was my place to find out if Squall had come here first.

Turns out he had, long enough to tell Laguna he'd think about things, that that was all he could promise. Laguna didn't have a clue though, and I spent long hours with my copy of the letter, reading it, swearing at it, and generally acting like a fool behind closed doors. It was there somewhere, I just wasn't seeing it clearly, no more than I had before. So I spent more time thinking back over the things we'd done and the places we'd gone. And then I asked Laguna for a small ship. Trains wouldn't take me where I wanted to go.

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Luckily the ship was easy to handle and had more than enough room for my belongings. There was even a place to sleep if you looked hard enough. It took me a while though to reach my destination and once I was there I found myself uncharacteristically nervous and uncertain. Was I reading things right?

I knocked my hat back a little and made sure my gun was loaded, my magic was stocked and a few odd potions were available, then disembarked outside the ruins we'd visited so long ago. They didn't look much different, truth be told, but I could see some subtle changes. Someone had been here at least. There was nothing to do but check it out, so I did, carefully making my way forward in the gathering dusk.

When I saw him I stopped breathing, standing there, chopping wood of all things, dressed only in leather pants and boots, his bare torso gleaming with sweat. The slight tensing of his muscles let me know he'd heard me approach, but I waited for him to acknowledge me. So I watched, and drank in the sight of him. He'd changed. No longer so pale, for one. He'd let his hair grow out as well and it was currently pulled back in a tail much like mine.

I'm not sure how long I stood there watching him work, but he finally secured the axe and loaded a carrier that he hefted easily. His head turned toward me and his free hand gestured slightly before he turned and headed further into the ruins. I followed, striding casually, though my insides were in an uproar, and let him lead me into his home.

I leaned my gun against the wall and tipped off my hat, hanging it on a rack by the door which looked completely out of place. I wasn't sure where to look to be honest, but my eyes kept coming back to him. He dropped the carrier next to the fireplace and lowered himself onto the couch resting in front of it. Then he spoke, just one word, and music to my ears despite the roughness of disuse.

"Irvine."

So much feeling from one little word. I'd been so damned blind. I slipped out of my duster and hung that up as well, then walked toward him, wanting to rest my hand on his hair, but settling for sitting on the couch with a little distance between us, angling myself to lean against the arm so I could face him.

"Squall."

I wasn't Rinoa or Quistis, babbling away about nothing or making futile attempts to make him talk. A few minutes of silence passed, until I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Squall, I'd like to stay. Do you want me to?"

He looked over at me and said in a monotone, "Whatever. . . ." His face was expressionless, but his eyes said so much more.

I let the barest smile curve my mouth and nodded. "Got anything to eat?"

He waved a hand back over his shoulder and I followed the gesture with my eyes before looking back at his face.

"Hungry?"

He shrugged a shoulder carelessly in response, and this time my smile was a little more pronounced. So I stood up and headed for the kitchen area of the room and rummaged through his supplies. As I started to put together a meal he stood up and disappeared through another door. I could hear the sound of running water as I worked and by the time I'd placed everything on the table he was back, wearing black jeans and nothing else.

I sat down and loaded a plate for myself, hiding a smile when he sat down across from me and did the same. We ate in silence, but that was fine. He said so much more without ever opening his mouth to speak. His eyes were eloquent on their own, and his gestures, though apathetic to most eyes, were almost the same. The hour and the food were making me sleepy and I could see the fatigue in his bearing, the slight glassiness in his eyes.

He gathered everything up and dumped it in the sink without ceremony then shot me a look before heading off through that door. I followed. What else could I do? The bedroom was cozy, the stone walls softened by tapestries, perhaps a gift from his father. He looked up at me with half-lidded eyes then stripped off his jeans and slipped under the covers of his bed, onto his side, and closed his eyes.

So I drew off my shirt and tossed it on the bench at the foot of the bed and followed it with my pants. My boots were placed next to it on the floor. Then I slipped in behind him and curled the length of my body against his, my warm breath puffing against his neck. He trembled slightly then relaxed back against me. He was nervous, he was happy, and I wasn't about to do anything that might make him bolt from my arms. So I closed my eyes and just held him until we both fell asleep.

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I woke up slowly, warm and cozy in a real bed, not remembering for a moment where I was. When I opened my eyes he was sitting on a chair nearby, looking at me with that shuttered expression, but his eyes were gleaming. I gave him a slow smile, which I hastily covered when it turned to a yawn, then sat up and stretched. His eyes were amused, despite the blankness of his face.

"Squall, is it all right if I bring my things in?" I asked quietly.

He shrugged one shoulder again, paused a moment, then stood up. He left the room, casting an opaque look at me over his shoulder before disappearing through the door. I pulled myself out of the bed and pulled on my clothes from the day before, struggling a little as always with the boots, then sauntered out easily, giving him a slight nod as I picked up my gun and left his home for the ship.

It didn't take long to carry things back and I left them in a heap in his bedroom, not sure what to do with them for now. The clothes came off again, tossed in a basket in the bathroom adjoining the bedroom, and I stood under the shower for some time, enjoying the slick feeling of soap and the water running down my skin. When I came back out to the main living area there was a meal on the table, so I sat down and started to load my plate.

"It took me a long time to figure things out," I said in a conversational tone. "Too long, really."

"Whatever. . . ."

I glanced up to see the amusement again along with the barest hint of a smile quirking one corner of his mouth. I ducked my head and began to eat. I knew what he meant. Saying I was sorry was unnecessary, he knew I was apologizing in my own fashion.

"How are they."

His voice startled me into looking up again, the fork halfway to my mouth.

"Fine, if appearances are anything to go by. Zell and Selphie in Trabia, rebuilding, Quistis and Seifer at Balamb, and Rinoa back in Deling. They all seem happy enough."

He nodded and went back to eating in a desultory fashion, then spoke again.

"What about him."

I arched an eyebrow at him, then shrugged.

"The same. He thinks a bit more now before he speaks though."

A few more minutes passed as we ate slowly in companionable silence.

"Did he ask."

"No, but I could tell he wanted to. He knows it's your choice."

He nodded at that. I was a little surprised really, he was being quite talkative . . . for him. When I finished I started in on the dishes, nodding a thanks when he handed over his plate. He disappeared into the bedroom for a while, then joined me on the couch, laying down so his head was in my lap. I brushed my fingers across his forehead, then back across his hair.

He shifted, turning his head and pulling free the thong he used to tie it back, and dropped it on the floor. If that wasn't an invitation I'd eat my hat, so I began combing my fingers through his long hair in slow, soothing movements, over and over, gently pulling it away from his face. He smiled slightly and rolled onto his side, facing the back of the couch.

"Feels nice," he mumbled, so softly I had to strain to hear it.

We stayed like that for a long time. It's not like we had anywhere we needed to be. I just kept playing with his hair, teasing the nape of his neck, and stroking his forehead.

"Should I?" he mumbled, a little louder this time.

"Should you. . . ." I replied softly, never ceasing my gentle movements.

"See him." He sighed softly.

"Only if you want to, Squall."

I rubbed my thumb along his jawline briefly before going back to my former actions.

"Glad you came."

I chuckled. "Hopefully not too late."

He shook his head slightly.

I was pleased actually. Not only was he a veritable chatterbox—for him—he had initiated physical contact with me. Sometimes I really wondered about the day Rinoa had been taken to be sealed. Why he hesitated. We hadn't exactly been gentle with him, pushing him into action. He was just thinking of a friend he wanted to help, against her professed choice. We'd been assuming there was so much more involved. We'd done him a grave disservice.

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We lived like that for several weeks, mostly in silence, but that was all right. Reading, chopping more wood, taking the occasional trek to gather food. He'd occasionally ask me questions out of the blue, usually about Laguna. I told him my own thoughts, not that he ever gave any back. I never offered anything unless he prompted it, but made it clear that I was more than willing to cooperate when he was in the mood.

I've been dreaming a lot lately, waking up covered in sweat, my erection pressed against him as he sleeps. Sometimes I think I've heard his breathing hitch when it happens, but he wears his mask well, usually, and it's hard to tell in the dark with the sounds of the nighttime world breaking in. I won't do anything though. He hasn't given me any indications that he really knows, or that he wants to do more than cuddle.

I think he's seriously considering going to see his father. What else could I think with all the questions he's shot at me about the man. His choice, though I hope if he does I get to tag along. I can't quite decide if he'd be his usually sullen self, communicating in ways that Laguna just may not be able to see, or fiery and raging, lashing out at what happened. Or maybe . . . he'd try?

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I'm dreaming again. I know it, I know it's not real, but it feels so sweet that I don't want to let it go. I don't want to lose the feeling of him pressed against me, feasting on my neck or my mouth. But it wavers and starts the gradual fade to black, making me ache with frustration. I know for sure it's gone when I hear the sounds of night filtering in through the window. I try to just fall asleep again, but movement makes me gasp softly as Squall shifts, pressing back against me.

A few minutes later he turns in my arms and buries his face in my neck, sending shivers up and down my spine as his warm breath caresses my skin. His arms are curled up against my chest and one knee pushes between my legs to tangle us together. I don't know how, but I managed to fall asleep again, but only after I'd distinctly felt his lips press against my neck in an unmistakable kiss.

When I woke that morning he was nowhere to be seen, but that wasn't unusual. Of course, last night had been unusual. I was torn between haring off to find him and just acting normally. I got up and showered, dried off, dressed, and headed toward the kitchen for something to eat.

I ate, my mind elsewhere, somewhere off in the clouds I couldn't see, washed up, even chose a book. I was stretched out along the couch, braced against one arm, one leg out straight while the other drooped over the side, my foot flat on the floor. I have no idea what the book was about, I wasn't really reading it, but the pictures were sort of interesting.

My mind really must have been out to lunch because I never even heard his approach, never even noticed what he was doing until he was laying between my legs, lips pressed to my neck, and one hand snaking back to let loose my hair. The book dropped unceremoniously to the floor from my nerveless fingers. His tongue was making lazy trails punctuated by bites that didn't quite break the skin.

I heard him huskily whisper, "Irvine," against my neck before he sunk in his teeth, and my eyes drifted closed for a moment. Was I dreaming, or was this real? Did I give a damn? I wrapped my arms around him and began sliding them downward over the scar-laced flesh with a low moan. I reached his leather-clad ass and spread my fingers wide and squeezed before pulling up, letting my nails skim across the small of his back.

My hips arched upward and I groaned out his name, wanting to grind against him, but he felt . . . ephemeral, like a fast-fading dream. Oh shit. I opened my eyes to see him standing by the fireplace, eyes alight with amusement, and something else. He was standing in that trademark pose he'd used for years, one hip jutting out and his weight all on one leg, one hand casually resting there. I bit my lip and breathed in deeply. I knew I was flushed.

"Interesting dream?" he asked with one brow arched heavenward.

Damn the man. So much heat, wrapped within a facade of cold indifference, only leaking out through his stormy eyes, and sometimes, just sometimes, the corner of his mouth.

"How could it not be," I replied airily and waved my hand.

"Do tell," he drawled, almost like a purr. So much for me going soft anytime soon, not with those eyes raking over me and that voice lingering in my ear. I decided to give him back some of his own.

"Whatever. . . ." Then I smirked at him and swiftly stood, walking over to him and leaning in close. I flicked my tongue over his lips and skipped backward, winked, and strode away, outside, and up to the Guardian Force chamber.

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I spent a couple of hours up there examining the walls, trying to decipher the graven lines and images. I wondered just how old this place really was. I heard him approach, barely making a sound, and stayed relaxed, using a fingertip to trace the depiction in front of me as though I was totally immersed in its mystery.

"Cowboy, lunch is ready."

I whipped around in mock startlement then leaned against the wall and gave him a lazy smile.

"Sure," I said then pushed off, gliding over to him to brush my lips against his before tripping down the stairs. The meal was wonderful, but I was a little worried. It must have showed.

"What is it."

I looked up, eyes wide. "I should visit the ship, make a call."

"Who."

His questions were almost always flat, like statements.

"Laguna. I figure since he loaned it to me, I should check in, let him know I'm all right."

I got an opaque look before he started eating again. He was fidgeting slightly when he said, "Whatever. . . ."

I shot him a glance through my lashes and casually said, "You can listen in if you want, I don't mind. He doesn't need to know you're there."

He shrugged a shoulder at me. After a few minutes he said, "Fine."

I thought about it for another few minutes before offering, "If he asks, what do you want me to tell him?"

He tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. "You found me, nothing else."

I nodded, though I doubt he could see it clearly. "Sure, we'll go when we're done eating."

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I eased into the seat, inhaling the scent of fine leather with a sigh, and opened a channel to Esthar's palace, requesting to speak with the President. Annoying perky music played as we waited, only to be cut off abruptly a few minutes later.

"Irvine?" came the breathless question. I could see Squall twitch out of the corner of my eye.

"Hey, man. It's been a while, so I thought I'd let you know I'm all right."

"I'm so glad to hear from you. The ship okay, and you?"

"Doing grand! She's a sweet baby and I'm right glad to have her with me. What about you and Kiros and Ward?"

"We're all fine. Just dealing with the usual—you know—Kiros keeping me out of trouble and Ward laughing all quiet at me like he does."

I noticed the corner of Squall's mouth curl up slightly. I think it was amusement.

"Glad to hear it." And I was.

"Have you. . . ."

"I have," I replied easily, knowing after a month with him what he was asking. "He's around here somewhere. He wandered off for a while." I wanted to answer the unspoken question before he got up his courage to ask, so I could set him at ease. It was deception, but what of it?

"I can't tell you how happy I am to know he's—he is all right, isn't he?"

"Squall is Squall," I said warmly, chuckling slightly as I saw Squall shift his weight into his usual pose.

"Does he know you're calling me?"

"Naw, don't be silly. I'm calling you because I wanted to. I enjoyed my stay with you, after all."

"Oh," he said, with disappointment evident. "He doesn't want. . . ."

"Now, Laguna, you know I can't answer questions like that. It's his choice, remember?" Why was Squall creeping out of the room?

"Laguna, if he decides he wants to, he will." And what was all that noise?

"I-I guess so. . . ." There was a pause, possibly because we both heard the sound of boots ringing on the deck plates. "What—" It was almost a whisper.

That's when Squall decided to enter the conversation. "Irvine," he said silkily, "who's your friend?"

Laguna wisely kept quiet, possibly from shock. If I didn't know better, I'd say Kiros was there with a hand clamped over his friend's mouth. I laughed soundlessly, then answered.

"You sure you want to know?"

"Yes. Answer me."

This time I laughed out loud, saying, "You sound like Fujin when you talk like that," and ducking the cuff he aimed at my head. "Heeey, no hitting! Talking to Laguna. He lent me the ship."

His eyes were sparkling and a small, but genuine smile was lurking, trying to break free.

"Father."

I know my heart stopped for a few timeless seconds. A loud thud came through the line with crystal clarity, and we heard Kiros take over with a loud sigh.

"He's all right, guys. He, uh. . . ." There was a pause. "He'll be fine," he said in a slightly strangled voice.

"Kiros, I'll get back with y'all later, okay? Take care of him for me."

"Right. Until later."

A light on the console flicked out as Kiros cut the connection. I leaned back in my seat and gazed at Squall. "Tricky little devil."

He smirked at me, then swooped in for a kiss, entreating entry with his tongue, and I let him, wanting to drown in the feeling and taste of his sweet mouth. I was breathless when he released me, my hands gripping the armrests hard enough to make my knuckles turn white.

"Let's go get packed," he said like he was discussing the weather, then turned and stalked off gracefully, leaving me to gape.

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When Squall makes a decision, he wastes no time. He was already packed for a trip when I caught up with him and halfway through packing for me. Before I knew it he'd loaded me up, pushed me out the front door and sealed it behind us. Thank god the ship had auto-pilot or I'm not sure we'd have made the trip safely. Honestly, I was still in shock. He'd been asking about Laguna fairly often, sure, but this?

We took a hover-pad to the palace, which was nothing compared to the feelings I always had when riding the one that actually took us inside. That one was like flying in a surreal world, disconnected from reality. An aide met us, took one look at our faces and immediately led us off to a suite of rooms, no questions asked. Before he left us to settle in he murmured that he'd leave it up to us to announce our arrival.

So we unpacked. The whole time Squall had a strange look on his face, one I couldn't interpret. He was acting oddly, pacing the room, but I attributed it to nervousness and tried to shrug it off. I was staring out the window at the wonders of Esthar city when he pounced, dragging me back toward one of the bedrooms and pulling my clothes from me, leaving them to fall in a trail on the floor.

I made it easier. I started actively helping him. We both ended up on the bed, feasting on each other's naked forms. One of light and shadow, and one the golden tones of sun and warmth. Then he kissed me, and I lost track of everything except him, his breathing, the feel of his body and what his lips and tongue were doing to me. I won't describe it further. You don't need to know the details, and I'll remember them forever, indelibly etched into my mind.

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We must have slept, because my eyes were closed and the quality of light against my lids was different. I felt his lips on mine, a sweetly chaste kiss, before I felt him move away. I felt like grinning like a fool, but I opened my eyes instead and pulled myself up into a sitting position. He was smiling at me without reserve, offering a hand to help me to my feet, then leading me off to the bathing room to share a shower with me. Sweet heaven.

Then we dressed, though I would have preferred throwing him back onto the bed. He looked determined though and I was in such a good mood that I didn't protest when he wrapped his arm around my waist and led the way to the President's office. We arrived just as Kiros was stepping into the hall. He stopped dead, casting a quick glance back over his shoulder, then waved us in before he slinked away.

We stood in silence, watching Laguna mutter and groan over a stack of paperwork on his desk, irritably flipping his hair back every time it fell forward. I'd have thought by now he'd tie it back, but it never seemed to occur to him. Or perhaps, it was simply something he was used to doing, and he'd miss it otherwise. Squall cleared his throat, loudly, and Laguna's head shot up.

Man, if I were a hunter, Laguna would be the deer in the sights of my Exeter. It killed me to do so, but I held back my laughter at the look in his eyes. This was Squall's show, not mine.

"Father." His voice was even, not cold, not empty. Laguna just keep looking at Squall with eyes like saucers.

Squall turned to me and planted a kiss on my lips, then disengaged and turned back to walk toward his father, then around to stand behind him. Slowly he angled his body, using one hand to finger-comb the hair away from his father's face, who hadn't moved in the slightest. I wasn't sure he was even breathing. Squall placed a kiss on Laguna's cheek, stroked his hair again, then came back to me, slipped his arm around my waist, and pulled me out of the room.

"It's a start," he murmured cryptically as a loud thud sounded through the now open doors.

SQUALL'S POV FROM THE TIME HE LEAVES UNTIL IRVINE ARRIVES.

It was over, we all recovered, there was a magnificent party, and then I was gone. All I left behind was a note, one copy for each of them. It was the least I could do.

I left while everyone else was sleeping off the effects of the celebration, packing the few things I couldn't bear to part with into a duffle. That got slung over my shoulder with my gunblade case strapped to it. My weapon was in its sheath where it belonged. I stole out like a thief in the night, letting myself remember some of the fonder moments of the place as I stalked silently through the shadows and to the outside, then jogged down the road to Balamb and boarded a train.

Fisherman's Horizon was much the same as it had been the last time I'd seen it. I only stopped long enough to get some rest and grab some supplies before setting my feet on the path to Esthar. I remembered this journey too and how I'd felt at the time. I hoped she understood. She'd helped save me, and I'd helped her in return. But it wasn't what people wanted to think. I couldn't blame them, not really. What were they supposed to think on so little evidence?

Esthar, as always, was a wonder to behold. It was beautiful, fantastical, like a dream risen from the discarded ruins of the past. And my father . . . well, I just wasn't ready to deal with that yet. But I was willing to make use of his all too eager hospitality, for now, until I could make arrangements for my destination.

It was a unfair, I knew, and self-serving. His eyes spoke volumes—of regret, hope, pain and longing. I just wasn't ready to deal with it. Hell, I couldn't even tell Irvine how I felt. I'd left a damn note, hoping against hope that he'd figure it out eventually. Hoping that he wanted to. It hurt to leave them all behind, but I knew I had to. They'd push, like they always did. They'd try to make me talk, express my feelings, pour out my heart and expose my soul to the world.

Why didn't any of them see beyond the silence?

Shiva told me I was being a little silly, but that was normal for her. She was one thing I couldn't bear to leave behind. She was my mother, my sister, the little voice of reason in the back of my head. She never pitied me or smothered me in platitudes. She told it to me straight and never got offended when I snapped at her or sulked. For a being of ice, she was strangely compassionate though. I loved her.

Then again, she was a Guardian Force. They didn't see things quite the same way as mortals. She was also the one who suggested I keep this journal, in case she inadvertently suppressed any of my memories. Griever was usually silent, but I feel him back there, in a corner of my mind. He grumbled occasionally at the thoughts he overheard, but he let Shiva handle things, seeing as how he wasn't any more fond of speech than I was.

I managed to get a ship on loan, one that I could fly to my destination then send back to my father on auto-pilot. One that wouldn't reveal where I'd gone, as it would erase the course I'd plotted once it had landed back in Esthar. So I took it and went to the Centra Ruins and let it go, watching as it flew away, then began to make a home for myself.

Weeks passed by, slowly at first, then days blurred together as I transformed the ancient chambers and carved more from the solid rock. I lost myself in labor, building, foraging, hunting, until I was able to rest. I settled into a comfortable pattern of existence. Reading, for I made occasional forays into the world for things I could not make myself, gathering supplies, and most of all thinking.

Turning the moments of my life over and examining them from every angle. Dissecting how I felt about Laguna and what I thought he could mean to me. I knew I'd been unfair, but what do most wounded creatures do? They usually either crawl away to lick their wounds in private, trusting that they'll either die or that time will take care of the pain, or crawl into the arms of comfort.

It shouldn't be any surprise that I'd chosen the former. The full length mirror was a mistake though. I'd put it up in the bedroom. I truly don't know why. In the end I punched it in an unexpected fit of rage resulting from wandering through thoughts and memories of the past, breaking it into what looked like a million pieces.

Razor-edged shards littered the floor, some stained with my blood for I'd given up wearing gloves. I left them there for a long time, occasionally drifting toward them to stare at my shattered reflection. Rather like life, or Time Compression. Some things just can't be repaired, so you either move on or lay down and die. Maybe I was finally coming to terms with things. I must have done, because a few weeks later I cleared away the mess and buried the shards in a shallow grave, marked with a small cairn of stones.

Silly perhaps, but it felt like the right thing to do at the time.

I was splitting logs for firewood when I felt someone approach. I couldn't help tensing slightly, but I kept on with my task. It needed to be done; wood didn't chop itself. If the intruder meant me any harm, I was sure I'd be in pain shortly, possibly dead. So I kept on, using the rhythmic swings to calm the beating of my heart into relaxation. When I finished I landed the axe into the block, loaded the carrier I'd brought with me, and picked it up.

Then I finally allowed myself to look and turned my head to see him standing there with hungry eyes. I gestured, a slight movement of my free hand, then turned and headed home. Our home. Shiva was laughing infectiously in my mind, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, I smiled.