

# Squall's Experience: Privately Unmasked

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*I'm Squall. I have been instructed to dicate a battle we had in the bowels of Garden against a group of Dragons. Its full of pain and danger which I'm sure thrills some of you. I couldn't care less. -/\_-*

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**Chapter 1 - Squall's Experience: Privately Unmasked**

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# 1 - Squall's Experience: Privately Unmasked

Squall's Experience:  
Privately Unmasked

My name is Squall Leonhart. I can't tell you who gave it to me. I don't remember anymore. Sometimes that bothers me, but I don't let it show. My emotions are my own; they belong to no one else. For years, I thought that I needed no one else...I find it amusing that I ended up proving myself wrong.

Of course, amusement doesn't mean smiling.

I suppose that writing such an account would require a reader to witness my thoughts. The essence of writing is for the author to speak with their heart and mind. If that is truly the case, then welcome to mine. It is a no man's land that no one has seen before.

The narrated occasion began with me, ice-blue eyes, brown-gray hair, in the training center. I was facing off against a T-Rexsaur. He was big, and ugly, but was no match for me. I don't like to boast but I knew I could handle it. It wasn't that I was egotistical; it was just something I knew. I had the experience levels. This battle was casual, like breathing. A T-Rexsaur is a giant lizard. They are nearly twenty feet tall with brown or black scales. This one was a veteran. He had scars all over him and one of his eyes had been put out. He turned his good one to me and bared his teeth. I rose up my gun blade, its sharpened edge facing the beast. My hand was on the handle, and my finger was on the trigger. I was in no hurry to make the first move. He would attack eventually, and when he did, I'd react, but until then it didn't matter much to me.

The creature found me to be a threat, and rightly so, since I came intending to kill him, and charged with a bellow-some roar, saliva wagging from his gaping maw like strings of sticky sweat or spider's threads. It made me a little disgusted, but all my face did was scrunch to narrow my eyes. My blade swung up over my head, and I ran to meet him, his pounding feet shook the ground and I was sure he was rippling water somewhere. My arm muscles stretched as I ran with the weapon held up over my head, balancing its weight stretched and clenched my sides and stomach, but as I said, I had the experience. The black soles of my boots left the ground, I sailed up towards the creature's face, its teeth ready to snap me in half. It approached steadily and swiftly, but the moment lasted so long that it felt like I was hanging in mid air. But, when he was close enough, my blade swung down. It took the use of my entire body to give it the needed force, but it sliced, my hand clenching and a bullet flying down the length of the sword. The bullet caught the animal between the eyes. The blade forced a gash diagonal across the wound and through his upper jaw. It made a horrible grating sound as it scraped bone. I landed, the blood streaking my weapon like it had been splatter-painted on. The T-Rexsaur was not down yet. It thrashed and flailed, pain undoubtedly jarring its tiny mind. He shook, blood flying to the ground, then shot his good eye to me again, it was as red as the rivers of blood cascading down on either side of it. I braced myself again, ready and willing to accept his rage.

Cast a spell? Why?

Summon a GF? I didn't need help; I was fine on my own.

The T-Rexsaur charged again, blood running in his drool and his steps hasty. He turned and smacked me with the broadside of his tail. Experience is nothing compared to brute force. I flew aside and tumbled to a stop. My leg was twisted, and my black leather coat was torn, the pale skin underneath it was ripped open. My mind was telling me 'There's pain! There's pain!' But any idiot would know that he was in pain, it was the dedicated that didn't care. I didn't care. I reached for my gun blade again as

the T-Rexsaur turned to approach. He would go down, they all did. My injuries were not entirely ignorable. I prepared for the final blow.

The creature was making the same mistake, rushing straight at me from a distance and allowing me to get lined up. I was on one knee, the handle of the gun blade in both of my hands. The T-Rexsaur came closer. It bent down to take a bite off of me, my head would have fit neatly between its jaws, along with the rest of my torso, but I was a step ahead. My eyes were fixed on his chest, it was waiting for the seer of my blade, and that was what it received. The metal sunk in up to the handle and I could feel the warm flow of the creature's blood as it oozed over my black-leather gloves. The handle slipped from my fingers as the creature reared and crashed to the ground on its side. It was dead, and I was unmoved. Just like breathing.

I got up and shook off my hands. Unconsciously, I put one to the wound on my arm and limped over to the carcass as it lay there. It took one hard yank to remove my gun blade. Was I really so cold to be unmoved by death? Even of a monster? If I was, then that was my convenience. If I wasn't, I ruled to forget about it and save myself the complications. I moved from the scene, dragging my crimson blade behind me. The creature's eyes, both good and bad, were bugging and frozen. The streak I'd cut in its face reminded me of someone. It reminded me of myself.

There is a book called The Red Badge of Courage. I don't know who wrote it, I never read it. But in the book, a man gets injured in battle and is honored for it. His blood is called, fittingly, the "Red Badge of Courage". I disagree with this mindset, at least when it comes to my own scar. The slash across my face bled plenty when I got it, but it is nothing that I'm proud of. It's a sign of defeat, and its painted right between my eyes.

Just perfect.

AS I moved out of the training center, I was met by Rinoa. Rinoa considers herself my girlfriend. I don't like to admit it, but since I am exposing my heart and mind, here I will say that I have feelings for her. Whether it is love or not, I can't tell you. I've never felt love, at least as much as I can remember. A lost memory is sometimes a depressing and frustrating thing.

"Squall!?" She caught sight of me, those big brown pooling eyes stricken with concern at the sight.

"Squall! Oh my gosh!" She dashed over and examined my arm and blood splattered white shirt. "What happened?"

I didn't answer. Wasn't it obvious to her what had happened? But I'm not one to insult. If she wanted to be all ignorant then that's her decision. It is no concern of mine.

"Squall! How could you get yourself beat up like this!? Haven't you heard the announcement? We'll be going into battle soon!" She put her hands on my shoulders and backed up. "Stay there." From a couple feet back, she summoned up all of her mental energy and focused it on me. Her light blue duster moved in an invisible wind, she was charging up a spell. Spells are not what you think. They aren't mystical incantations and whatnot, they are simply a person using their mind to control the elements. She was going to heal me. I would have insisted that I didn't need it, but experience taught me that she wouldn't leave me alone until she got her way.. The black haired girl before me thrust out her hand.

"Curaga!"

The spell sent swirls of blue around me and healed up my wounds. I shouldered my gun blade, my strength returned. It, like my shirt, was still bloody, but what on me wasn't? "What was that you said about an announcement?"

She frowned at the mess I was, but answered my question. "Xu's announced that there is an energy drainage down in the Garden's converter. We are going to check it out."

"Why are we being sent on an investigation? I'm a SeeD, not a technician." I was never the polite, understanding type. I mean, I'm polite enough, but not cordial. This statement was said in a perturbed state, even though I really had nothing to be perturbed about.

“You’ve been down there!” Rinoa cried. “You know about all the gross, creepy things that live down below. We’re going to be in for a lot of fighting.” She put her hands on her hips. “And we don’t even know why there is a power drainage, maybe it’s some monster chewing on the cables. The point is that we are ready to head down and you were the only one missing. Now that I’ve found you, we can get going so let’s go!” She grabbed my hand and drug me from the training center and out into the heart of the Garden. She was at a run, therefore I was at a run, my gun blade fell from my shoulder and bounced around behind me. It was a good weapon, but I didn’t care much whether it got scraped or not.

I’m beginning to see that I don’t care much about anything

Just as well...the less a person cares, the less they get involved and the less likely they’ll get hurt when things go wrong.

If I freaked out every time my gun blade got scratched, I’d be emotionally exhausted, which is something I rarely am. I don’t enjoy the experience.

We all were supposed to meet up in the front by the directory. “We All” refers to the rest of my ‘crew’ as it were. Quistis Trepe was the only one there. Apparently the announcement I had missed had been issued a while ago and everybody had split up to search for me. Quistis was in charge of the lobby. She was tall for a girl, only a couple inches shorter than me, with blue eyes and blondish hair, I guess. She was older by nearly a year. I don’t know what she thought she was to me, a girlfriend, an older sister, whatever. Once, again I found myself letting it drop. Whatever she wanted to be to me, that was her problem. For me, she will always be the ex-instructor who once taught class.

Quistis stepped up. “Where have you been!?!” I didn’t answer; Rinoa did that for me.

“I found him in the training center.” She said. “He was beating up a T-Rexsaur.”

“Raise your levels on your own time.” Quistis shot. “But now we’ve got to go.”

I shrugged. “Whatever”

Quistis picked up a walkie-talkie and spoke into it. “Alright, everyone, come in, we’ve found him.”

In response, the leftover people from our troop rushed in. There were only three left of it, Zell, Selphie, and Irvine. Selphie dashed in from the library to the right of us. She was the smallest and had on a yellow mini-dress with flooped-up brown hair for lack of a better term. She stopped with us. “Wow, Squall, you’re really gross looking.” She observed. “Where’ve ya been? Fightin’ stuff?” Finally, someone with eyes! I cast her a look. I’m not sure of the expression, but she had no definite reaction, so I suppose I was indifferent as usual. The girl turned to the other two. “So where’s everybody else?” “They’re coming.” Quistis assured.

Irvine Kinneas ran up next from the direction of the Quad. He was a tall, cowboy looking man with long brown hair and blue eyes. He stopped next to me. He was taller, it sometimes made me feel like I was smaller than I was when I stood next to him, or any tall person, but it was a stupid concern. Height has nothing to do with ability, although the mental impression sometimes affects performance. Irvine stopped. “Alrighty! Who’s with who?”

“Wait up, Zell’s not here yet.” Quistis bade

Irvine put his hands on his hips. “He’d better get here quick! I’ve been, like, psyched since we got called. I wanna get the job done before it wears off.”

“Here he comes!” Selphie pointed. Zell ran in from the cafeteria with a hot-dog in his mouth. Typical. He swallowed it down when he arrived.

“Yo!”

“Zell!” Quistis cried. “Why are you eating before we go into battle? You’re going to regret that when we start running.”

“No sweat, Quistis, I can handle it.” He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm. “It was your fault for tellin’ me to search the food.”

Quistis rolled her eyes, then looked to me. “Alright, Squall, we are all assembled. What do we do next?”

I had no idea. I didn't really know what we were doing in the first place, but I'm the "fearless leader" so it was my job to lead. "The first step is to break into teams." Some people might think that I have some daring strategy for this, but I've done it so much that I've given up thinking about strategies. I picked the first two people I saw. "Rinoa and Selphie are with me. Quistis, Irvine, and Zell are together." The others nodded. "We'll head down to the converter and see what's wrong. Then come back here. I want it fast and I want it simple. Many of you have not been down in the mechanics of Garden before. It's a maze of ladders, bridges, and monsters. I don't want anyone getting hurt. This is going to be a clean job. Understood?"

They all were very professional; I was the head of the whole Garden, after all. "Yes sir!"

"Let's move." The group broke apart. Rinoa was behind me, and Selphie behind her. I could see Quistis taking the lead of her troop. We moved down a couple halls and staircases and reached the bowls of Balamb Garden. It is not important the way we took, but it did bring back memories of not very long ago. When I got down there, nothing had changed. It was still a tangled mesh of places to turn and ladders to climb, with the constant sounds of the Garden's mechanics echoing off the metal walks and rails. There were also a thousand nooks and crannies where monsters would make their homes. If we disturbed them, they would attack without question. I imagine that there is little to do but fight down there, nothing green, and you had to eat your neighbor to survive.

Its not all that different from humans except cannibalism has become immoral.

We took a different path than the last time I was there. I'd been to the stasis converter before but never the power converter, still the sound of it never let you forget that it was there. The mechanism made a clanking and steaming sound alone with a constant throbbing. Since I was finding my way by sound, this pulsing was nearly driving me mad. My whole head was throbbing and it seemed that even my heartbeat was in sequence with it. The three of us on my team tramped down a passage that was suspended high above the twisting pipes and walkways. I stopped a second to listen. I heard the girls' footsteps behind me stop and the steps of Quistis's team behind them. There was something wrong.

Rinoa leaned around out of line. "Squall?"

I put up a hand to silence her. I had been so tuned into the sound of the converter that I noticed right away when another sound had entered. The sound I heard now was the clanging of heavy feet. Four of them, getting closer, and the raking of claws as they were drug along the crosshatched metal of the floor. Whatever it was, it was big, and it was on one of the suspended walkways. I was guessing that it wasn't this one; we would have felt the platform shaking like the ground under the T-Rexsaur. I whispered back. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Selphie chirped from the back. "All I hear is that engine working."

"Yeah, Squall, I don't hear anything either." Rinoa said.

I turned briefly. "Quistis!"

The instructor came running up. Irvine and Zell came with her. "What is it?"

"Do you hear anything?" I asked. I felt like I was being melodramatic, but at that point, I didn't know if I was going insane or what. Quistis, Irvine and Zell cocked an ear and listened for a sound.

Irvine was in back, and caught it. "Clomp. Clomp. Clomp. Clomp." He vocalized. Rinoa and Selphie

looked back to him.

I looked too. "So you hear it?"

He nodded. "It's something heavy, walking, but it's not here. Not right here at least. It's somewhere else; further up maybe." Perhaps it was because he was a sharpshooter, but his eyes scanned and locked onto something. He pointed. "Over there!"

The point was directed over my head and I whirled around to see what he had. I apparently wasn't quite as sharp as him; all I saw was the walkway extending in front. It broke into two separate walkways, neither visible beyond the fork because of two large boilers obstructing the view, and one line of consecutive boilers blocking all sight beyond that. There was a second walkway suspended a little off to the side and nearly ten feet up. It extended in much the same direction, past the fork and over the line of boilers. A ladder extended down from it. Then I noticed it was trembling. The ladder was shaking with every clomp. The creature, whatever it was, had to be up there. "I see it. The ladder." I directed everyone. "It's moving because something heavy is walking around on that bridge."

"Whew!" Selphie sighed, leaning on her knees, "that's a relief! It will be easy to avoid it when it's up there!"

"Let's go punch him up anyway!" Zell cried.

"No." I insisted. "I meant it when I said quick and clean. We have better things to do than wander around down here."

"Hold on," Quistis bade. "That walkway is in the direction of the power converter. Perhaps this monster has something to do with the drainage." I rolled my eyes. I know what she was hinting at, she was saying that we should engage in battle 'just to be sure'. My command of speed was failing, but I wasn't going to let all efficiency die. I issued my next instruction. "Alright, for the sake of questionable doubt; Selphie, Rinoa and I will check it out. The rest of you continue down this path with Quistis in command. We'll stay in touch via remote. Copy?"

"Copy." They all assured. I took one of Quistis's walkie-talkies and the two groups broke apart again. The two girls and I headed for the upper level. I was first, naturally, and grasping the wrongs of the shaking ladder was unnerving. I got one foot on the railing and hoisted myself up as best I could. My boots slipped a little, but I made it.

Rinoa squealed. "Squall!? Be careful!"

Was it just because I noticed here the most or was she really that worried about me all the time? The rest of my trip up the ladder was uneventful I stood at the top and waited for the other two. I saw below as Quistis lead Irvine and Zell of down the path. I could feel the floor underneath me trembling like the ladder. The railing to the walkway shook in my hands. I stared down the straight suspension. There was what seemed to be an illuminated fog clouding the space ahead. It began just about where the walkway below broke apart. We seemed to be close to the ceiling on this upper platform, and the bridge was tall enough to pass over the line of boilers below. I stared intently into the cream colored fog. Whatever we were to be fighting, it was down there.

Rinoa was making her way to the top of the ladder as I checked my junctions. I had Blizzaga junctioned to my HP, and sleep to status defense. There were others places, but scrolling through my mental junctioning, I could only recall a couple. I knew that I did have Shiva junctioned though. And also Leviathan. I judged that Selphie had Siren and Rinoa had the Brothers. Even though I try to remain in control, my group trades GFs around so much, sometimes its hard to keep track of who has who. But now, Selphie had joined Rinoa and I and it was time to go into battle.

I gave no word, but took off running. The other two obediently took off behind me. Quistis bleeped in on the walkie-talkie. "Squall!?! Do you see anything?"

"We haven't run across anything yet." I told her.

"We've reached the fork, which way do we go?" She asked.

"This is why you are leader." I explained to her with a point of terseness. "I'm busy, you decide."

"Right." She said. "Over."

I clipped the remote to my belt in the back. Rinoa, Selphie and I dashed over the lower team's heads. They turned down the left fork and moved away from us. They disappeared as we crossed over the line of boilers and into the heavy fog. The heavy stomping up ahead smothered the pulsing and clanking of the garden's mechanics. It was very close. I braced myself for the possibility that we would run into it at any moment. The clomping, the raking, the smoke and the smell of brimstone; In the midst of the monster's commotion and the throbbing of the power converter I could nearly hear the puffing of the creature's breath. Any second its ugly head would appear. The fright I received, however, came from Quistis as she shouted over the walkie-talkie.

"Ahhhh! Squall!!!"

I came to a stop, Rinoa bumping into me. I reached back to whip out my remote. "Quistis!? What is it?"

"#quall!!!" The thick fog around us was interfering with the signal and causing her voice to come through scratchy and unclear. Even now, I noticed that I couldn't see more than six feet in front or behind me, and the landscape, or whatever below was nothing but a salmon-orange blanket.

I pressured Quistis anxiously. MY team was supposed to be the ones in danger, not hers. "Quistis! What's going on!?!"

"##Squa##!" She cried, I could make out maybe half of what she was saying. "###, w###, #Zell! WATCH OUT! #####! Squa##! #####DRAGONS##!!!" As I was listening, less and less of the words were distinguishable until the ex-instructor was completely static-ed out.

Rinoa leaned forward. "Did she say 'dragons'!?"

About then, it all made sense, four legs, scraping claws, the smell. We were dealing with a dragon. Ruby Dragons are most common at this time in history, and we'd fought them before. They were tough, and I was sure that Quistis and company were having problems. Rinoa looked worried. One look at Selphie

told me she was worried, too. I tried to remain calm. The three on the other end of the walkie-talkies were professionals. I tried to convince myself that they could take care of themselves. I put the remote away, ignored any uncertainty and turned my attention back to the task at hand. Now that I knew what we were dealing with, it was easier to prepare myself and my team for a fight. I turned to the other two. "Let's keep going."

"But they sounded like they were in trouble!" Selphie insisted.

"They're armed and have GFs." I reminded her. "We have our own dragon to deal with."

"Our own – " Rinoa asked. "You mean there's one here!? Right now?"

She was a little slow, but she wasn't stupid. I nodded my confirmation and told them to "check your junctions." I already had mine checked, so I plotted out what we would have to do to face this dragon. It seemed very storybook, running off to face a beast like this, but this was reality, no more literary references.

Selphie perked up once she'd finished. "Siren and me are ready for battle, sir!"

Rinoa nodded, her raven hair falling over her face. "Ifrit and I are ready, too."

Ifrit, huh? Well, that just goes to show you that I can't keep track of fifty million things at once like everyone thinks I can. With Ifrit we were better prepared, of course, that meant that Quistis, Zell and Irvine were less prepared than I thought.

Is it because I am the leader that I find myself worrying about the others? Was I worrying? Hmm...

Enough contemplating. I didn't have the energy to spare on trivial thought. I began cautiously forward. The other two were still behind me in single file. They drew their weapons. I held my gun blade at the ready. If the smell alone meant anything, we were getting close. My eyes were watering; the scent of sulfur was so strong. The mist was turning amber around us, and the shaking beneath our feet was violent. It seemed to take forever.

We must have been really close to the converter; the pulsing of the machine rattled my diaphragm; when we saw a dark shape lumber through the shroud. I paused. Selphie and Rinoa gazed up in awe as our opponent became outline in front of us. It was larger than a ruby dragon, more than fifteen feet high as far as I could tell. The details were not in range of our limited sight, but I could see it throw back its head, mounted on a long neck and spread out its wings. It had a wingspan four times as long as it was high, I guessed, and they were impressive. With a roar, the beast began to flap and created a whirlwind to blow the smoke out from between us.

I had to cover my eyes as the toxic cloud blew into my face and when I could see again, I found the way clear, and a new breed of dragon I had never read about standing with its teeth bared. Resembling a ruby, this monster of a monster shone like silver, the edges of its scales changing hue like mother of pearl. Rinoa gasped. Selphie shrank back, the creature puffed orange smoke from its nostrils.

"Wh-What is that?" Rinoa stammered.



“That’s what we’re here to take care of.” I resolved. I turned over my shoulder to them, the urgency of battle shifting into gear. “You know the drill. Battle formation! Fan out!” I took my place at the center, Rinoa standing off to the right and Selphie to the left. The latter had her nunchaku strained.

“Is that a Silver Dragon?” she asked. I didn’t answer.

“It looks pretty silver to me!” Rinoa added. Neither of them knew there were such things as silver dragons before this unless they were experts or something, and they weren’t. Rinoa strained her blaster edge. “What are silver dragons weak to?”

“What are ruby dragons weak to?” Selphie asked.

They both looked to me for answers, but for the life of me, I couldn’t recall dragon weaknesses or past battles or anything. I was completely distracted by the way it was looking at me, its blood-red eyes peering hungrily and its long teeth grinning. “Try what you can.” I said finally. I took the first turn. With the battle in the training center still fresh in my mind, I raised up my gun blade and charged the monster. I was aiming to slice down on its head, but that long neck eased it out of the way and my blade bit hard metal. I saw a great clawed foot stomp down to my left, then snapped my head around to see where the creature’s teeth were. They were long and sharp and being licked by a forked tongue. One slate like horn stretched down from its nose as a puff of sulfuric haze framed its eyes. I felt like the evening special.

The ATB counter still running, I grabbed up my gun blade and hurried back to my spot. I heard a hiss and felt the dragon’s hot breath bathe my back. Rinoa stepped up for her first turn.

She was a magic person, and had chosen a spell. Like when she healed me, mental energy swirled around her. She condensed it into fire and cast it with her right hand. “Fira!” a spark and a blaze erupted at the heart of the creature, but the scales did a good job of protecting its flesh from burns. I rapidly attempted to format a strategy.

Selphie took a turn. She too had a spell. She pulled up and focused her energy, then cast it on the dragon. “Bio!” Green blobs appeared and poisoned the creature. At least she’d found a way to get passed the scales.

The poison was slowly eating off the creature’s hit points, but it wasn’t enough to defeat him. I decided to call in the reinforcements. I began summoning Shiva.

Shiva was my best GF. She was the first one I had ever junctioned and had stuck with me on all my adventures. No one ever got Shiva away from me. To summon the ice goddess, I had to call to her with my mind. I separated myself consciously from the battle. “Shiva...I summon you...”

She was not hard to find. We were very compatible and her voice answered mine immediately. “Squall...I am here, and I answer your call.”

“You have helped me many times.” I said. I began to feel cold, like being outside on a winter day. It was a frosty feeling.

“I am always willing to aid you, Squall.” She said, her voice was not nearly as cold as her touch, and I felt the prick of her icy fingers on my cheek. I kept my eyes on the battle, but in my mind’s eyes, the GF

was wrapping her arms around me from behind. It was ice down my back. "I am here. Now call me out!" Rinoa was stepping forward for a turn, but I interrupted her, Shiva's voice filling my head and her stinging fingers pricking my skin. I tensed every muscle and channeled her out with a cry of "Diamond Dust!" The deal with GFs is that they do not exist on the same plane as we do. By junctioning a GF, you become a doorway for them to enter our world. While they are attacking, the door must remain open so that they may get back. I kept every muscle tight in my 'cast' pose while she attacked. In turn, since her attack was so powerful, Rinoa, Selphie and I passed out of our plane to avoid being injured.; The three of us vanished into middle-plane-ness and let Shiva do her thing. Ice swirled around the space, clinging to the bars and floor of the walkway. Shiva gathered it all up in her hands and shot a beam at the dragon, inflicting damage, and I felt Shiva's energy seep back through me into the elemental realm.

I felt her icy fingers trace my jaw line as she vanished. "I await your next need....Squall."

The Silver Dragon flinched at the great damage my GF had inflicted. Selphie, Rinoa and I returned to the walkway. I took a second to shake off my energy high. Channeling GFs takes all you've got, and I had to recharge. Plus I had shivers up and down my spine. I could never get over how cold she felt.

Rinoa stepped up. "So you don't like ice, Mr. Dragon?" She implied. "Then take this!" She charged up another spell. "Blizzaga!" This was the strongest of the ice spells and worked like a mini-Shiva attack with the exception of the GF. The dragon wasn't nearly as injured by her as he had been by me. It lumbered forward and bit down at Rinoa with its stalk-mounted head. She balled up and narrowly missed being snapped in half. "SQUALL!?"

I don't like to sound all dramatic and everything, but Rinoa meant something to me. She meant a lot. I answered her call with no hesitation. It caused me to break formation and attack at half power. Against ATB rules, definitely, but I wasn't able to do much anyway. The monster's scales deflected the blows of my gun blade and I wasn't at a point where I could cast spells yet. Thankfully, Selphie was ready.

Did I say thankfully? It makes it sound like I needed help.

Selphie had one handy card up her sleeve. She ran through her 'cast' ritual and launched Ultima on the monster. Although a spell, Ultima hits with a very powerful physical force. The dragon tumbled from Rinoa and was hit in the square of the chest with the spell. It was thrown backwards, its wing caught between the railing and the walkway. It let out a yeowl and toppled over the banister, breaking its wing and plummeting down. I dropped my gun blade and dashed over the railing. There I saw the dragon disappear amongst the salmon mist. There was no sound of impact.

Rinoa was trembling on the floor, and I took a moment to make sure she was alright. Selphie was hopping about in victory. I cast one pale eye toward her, but that was where my interest ended. Rinoa turned her large born eyes to mine, then flung her arms around my neck. "Oh Squall!" I sat there in silence, my arm around her back and my other on her head. She was being pathetic, the dragon attacked her once and she was completely broken, but what could I do? I was in love.

Was I in love? Or did I say that just to sound like a writer? How come this narration is turning into a dissection of myself?

Selphie hopped up and down and shook the icicles off the guardrails. "I beat it! I beat it! Hurray for me!"

She started to spin around. “Hey guys! We rock! WE saved Garden!” The clouds were re-gathering without the dragon there to blow them away. Selphie started coughing and stopped her cheer. “{Cough, Cough} Now let’s get out of here. I can hardly breathe.”

“We haven’t saved Garden yet, Selphie.” I informed her. Rinoa took her face out of my shoulder. I could see her arm was bleeding. The dragon must have nipped her when she blocked its blow.

Her eyes were still teary, but now she was scared for another reason. “Quistis Zell and Irvine! They were fighting a dragon too!”

“One dragon couldn’t possibly make all of this smog.” I said, pointedly. “We have a lot more to do down here. I suggest you both replenish your health and magic. We need to follow this path until we find the source of all these dragons.”

“Okay, if you say so Squall.” Selphie chirped.

I helped Rinoa get to her feet, then walked over and retrieved my gun blade. She dug in her pockets for a potion to pour on her arm. When she spoke, she sounded more determined. “All these strange dragons cannot just have appeared. There must be something like a hole in the ship or another doorway of some kind. Or perhaps this is a terrorist action!”

I stood by, testing my blade. I looked up at her when she paused. Even at this short distance, there was a veil of smoke clouding her.

“No, honestly, someone could have planted eggs or something in Garden and when they hatched, that’s when we started having problems.” Rinoa explained.

“That’s probably exactly what happened!” Selphie agreed. “It’s all those lousy Galbadians!” She looked over to the girl in blue. “No offense, Rinoa.”

“That’s alright.” She uncorked and poured a potion on her forearm. Then there was an echoing shriek. We all paused. The sound was recognizable, it reminded us of the dragon we’d just slain, only this one was different. It was terribly loud and sounded big. It just sounded like the dragon making it was massive. The thick, heavy clouds all around us did a good job of absorbing any sound, even most of the throbbing and pulsing emitted by the converter. In order to have a voice carry so far, the creature shrieking had to have been really loud, or really close. We could hear no sign of life afterwards.

Selphie leaned on the un-iced section of the railing. “I’m worried about Quistis and them. How are we going to find them in all of this smoke?”

“If they are still alive to be found.” I said.

“That’s horrible, Squall! Don’t even think like that!” Rinoa scolded.

I wasn’t trying to be pessimistic, the truth was, I was feeling sick about them, myself. I wasn’t trying to sound uncaring. I wasn’t trying not to sound uncaring. I was trying to be efficient. “Come on, whatever is going to happen, it won’t wait for us to find it. Something is draining Garden’s energy, and there is

something definitely wrong around here.”

Sprinting, again, we made our way down the walkway, trying not to slip on the wet metal. I felt the brimstone-scented fumes eating away at my lungs. It seemed to be thicker the further into it we went. It also seemed that we were closer to the power converter. The pulsing was making my head vibrate. I was alone; I couldn't see my companions running behind me; I couldn't hear their footfalls because of the dankness. All there was the heavy cloud pulsing with the sound of the converter and bending my body to its rhythm. Suddenly, I was brought back by what I identified as the muffled sound of Selphie's voice.

“Squaww!”

“Squall, stop.” Rinoa relayed. I did. All I could see of Rinoa when I turned around was a black shape. I could barely see my hand when I looked down and I say my feet like I was looking through muddy water. I moved around to get closer to Selphie and to see what her problem was.

I saw her black shape leaned over. I didn't make out her actual body until I would reach out and grab her. I didn't do that, but I got down on one knee so that I could see into her face. She was heaving pretty bad, leaning with one hand on her knee and the other on the railing. I tried to get a look at her eyes, but she had them shut so I had to ask her, “what's wrong?”

“I – {gasp} – can't breathe.” She wheezed.

“Selphie!? Are you alright?” Rinoa asked. Selphie shook her head. She tried to cough, but she didn't have the air for it and croaked. Tears were on her cheeks. Rinoa looked to me. “Squall, what's wrong with her?”

“She's having trouble breathing the smog.” I said, simply. “We can't run anymore.”

“I don't like this at all.” Rinoa said. “We don't know where we are, we can't see where we're going, we don't know where the dragons are, and we can't take five steps without something bad happening.”

“We can't go back.” I said, obviously. “We've made it through one dragon, and the thicker the cloud, the closer we are getting to the others, assuming that there are more.”

“Selphie can't go on like this.” Rinoa pointed out. “My lungs hurt too. We should go back.”

“I'll carry Selphie and we'll go slow.” I said. “We have to find out why Garden's had a loss of power.”

“I still don't like it.” Rinoa insisted.

I had to pick Selphie up in my arms. I was a little uncomfortable with it, and would rather, for my sake, had her on my back, but I thought that it'd be better for her not to be laying on her chest. She put her brown head on my shoulder, flattening her up-turned hair. I had Rinoa break formation and we trudged along together. My 'girlfriend' kept looking up at me. In the back of my mind, I wondered whether she was feeling awkward because I was carrying Selphie and not her. If she was, she was wasting her time. I didn't care about Selphie. I mean, I did care....did I care? I thought I didn't care about much of anything. Well, whatever, no matter how I felt about Rinoa or Selphie or whoever, I couldn't make her

walk anymore, and I definitely couldn't leave her there.

I'm detached, not unfeeling.

AS we moved on, I began seeing shapes. I could have sworn I'd seen something dark move by. It made me think of blimps in the sky or whales underwater. Very big, and moving slow, but they would appear or disappear within minutes. Sometimes accompanied by a blast of air that churned the smoke. I turned the blimps and whales back into dragons. I found myself thinking about how long they had been down here. They had transformed the belly of Balamb Garden into Dragon Paradise. It was foul, it was humid, and it was toxic. But no matter how incredible it was, it still didn't explain why we were experiencing a power drain.

My mind had nearly drowned out the clanking and the pulsing of the converter with the shrieks and shapes of dragons all around, but then I saw it come into view. The converter was a huge column of wires and energy cells wrapped up in a metal webbing. I couldn't see all of that through the smog, but I saw the black shape of the gargantuan cylinder ease its way into view. The walkway we were on ran right next to it. I figured it was a service way or something at one time. But now we would see what the problem was. If we could see anything at all.

I headed over to the railing once we'd reached the machine. This shape was blacker than black in the mist because of its size and made the air unbearably hot around it. I put Selphie down and stood near the railing. Rinoa looked up. "What is this?"

"The power converter." I had to yell over the clanking and the other power converter sounds that had become so commonplace. I leaned over the railing and reached out to the metal web. The humidity was dripping off of it, and I could feel the heat of it through my gloves. Was it supposed to give off this much heat? Perhaps that was why we were having this problem.

Rinoa was feeling anxious. She sat on the walkway next to Selphie and kept looking frantically around. She called out. "There's something wrong. I think there's something here!"

I knew there was something there, the place was swarming with dragons. But, her jumpiness was not unfounded. I could swear that the heat was sending waves over me. But I was preoccupied, searching the wall of the converter for a panel or something where I could check the stasis. I did not find one.

"SQUALL!!!"

I spun around to find Rinoa, even paler than normal and staring at the converter over my head. Turning to look; I saw two huge lamps. They were eye-shaped lamps, and glowed with an inner luminance. Elongated and pointed, my common sense told me that these were dragon eyes, but the last dragon we fought hadn't had glowing eyes and for this to be of the same type, its head would have to be four times the size of the last one. I stood and stared at it.

Selphie gasped at the creature from where she sat, her breathing problems forgotten along with breathing altogether. She watched as I did as the huge pair of eyes moved about on what I could only suppose was a huge long neck attached to an immense dragon. The brunette saw the creature's many limbs moving in the haze. She saw a shape as thick as a tree trunk swing down from above. "Look out!"

The shape, I'm guessing the tail, slammed into the walkway crumpling the banisters and detaching the floor panels. It wasn't even a second before I found the ground give way underneath me. Gravity kicked in, pulling me down into a vast, churning, flesh-hewn cauldron. I heard Rinoa and Selphie cry out, but they were quickly drowned by the thickness of the air and the rushing of the wind. My mortal human nature was positively petrified. I had no idea how high I had been, or how far down I would fall before I would die. And the clouds were so dark and thick...

'I am unafraid of death. I am unafraid of death. I am unafraid of death. I am unafraid of death...'

I couldn't shake it. I was scared for my life. My scraggly brown hair was flying up off my head and the thick, heavy chain was slapping my Griever pendant against my forehead. I could see the dark shape of the converter racing upward beside me. My eyes were stinging with the brimstone. I swore I could still see those eyes above me. That's when I noticed that I could make out some of the webbing on the column to my right. The cloud was thinning out. White light could be seen underneath me. Hope and fear were alive and well in me.

Breaking out of the cloud, I was hit with a blast of clean, cold air. It seemed like I was falling faster now and far below I could see the hard metal floor that was to be my landing. It was something I was not looking forward to. Then I got an idea. I regained my composure and called up control of some surrounding matter. Blue swirls of magic spiraled out from around me. I focused in and out through my hand calling. "TORNADO!!!"

I cast a wind spell. This would still hurt, but hopefully not as much as a direct landing. I figured, I could have used Aero and caused less damage, but with Tornado, I could catch the other two in it as well, and I had to save them. Saving only myself was petty. And besides, I can accept that they were as scared of hitting the ground as I was.

The wind spell changed my trajectory from straight decent to maddened swirling and I tumbled about in a funnel cloud. The upward swell of the spell slowed me down and brought the two others to tumble around me. They were crying out, but I was busy trying to determine which way was up. As we closed in on the ground, the tornado found a footing and stopped us nearly completely before turning us around and slamming us down.

After a mind-numbing freefall to certain doom, I was safe on solid ground with my face smashed against a cold metal platform. While I was laid out flat like an insect on a windshield, I heard sound all around me. From way above I could hear the satisfied shrieking of our murderer. From behind me, there was the steady hiss and clank of the power converter. And nearby I could hear the screams of another dragon, a smaller one, and gunshots.

Gunshots? The others!

My entire body ached, but I shoved myself up to see. Quistis, Zell and Irvine were nowhere in sight, but the noises of their battle were still heard. They sounded like they were coming through the wall. Ahead I saw a huge steel-plated door. They were probably through there. I got to my hands and knees. My chest hurt. I took out my gun blade from where it was strapped to my leg and used it to shove myself to my feet. I thought for a second how lucky I was not to have lost it. I was lucky to be alive at all.

I looked up. The nasty cloud of smoke looked like a brownish-yellow thunderhead and would move about as the wings of dragons dragged through it. I wondered how thick it was, and why its existence had not been evident in the halls of the Garden itself. The power converter was glowing yellow and casting dim light over our residence. Rinoa was laid out on her side not far from me. I headed over. I had to check on her, I had to make sure she was okay. It was my duty.

It wasn't because I loved her....of course not.

I kneeled down, a knife stab in my side locked up my spine and made me freeze. I waited a second for it to dull before continuing a little more cautiously. She had her eyes closed, her dark hair over her face, but she was alive. She was whimpering.

I moved some of the hair aside. "Rinoa?"

Her brown eyes came open, pooling even more with fearful tears. She looked up to me, her eyes watering up more with one look. She moved her left arm up from the side she wasn't laying on and touched the back of her hand to my left temple. When she took it away, I noticed that there was blood. I reached up and found that I was bleeding from my eyebrow. I wiped my face on the leather of my sleeve and turned back to her.

"Are you okay, Rinoa?" She didn't answer. "Rinoa!"

I had the nasty, clawing feeling called dread tug at me. Had I killed her? I didn't have to had brought her alone. She was so small. I could have brought Irvine or Zell or even Quistis! Someone stronger. Someone not Rinoa. I could have gone alone for crying out loud! She didn't have to come. If I'd killed her, I'd... I'd...

Ugg! I don't care about anything! I don't care about anyone! I don't care! I don't care! I don't care! I don't care! I don't care! I don't CARE!

For a second...enlightenment... I was tearing myself in two. Who said I didn't care? Perhaps I DID care. Why else would I be so upset about Rinoa? Why else am I happy to see her, or Selphie, Quistis, Irvine, or Zell? Why do I consider them my responsibility anyhow? What was I? An unfeeling lump of flesh that would let all those near to it die without lifting a finger in opposition? My inner heart and mind were lying bleeding on the floor! I felt my scar twist and wrinkle on my face. My sign of defeat was letting me know it was there as disbelief took control of my features.

Then I realized that I was looking into Rinoa's eyes again and my moment of crisis passed. She was amazed at me. I wiped my new expression from my face.

"Squall? Are you okay?"

I swallowed hard and regained my composure. From the outside, I tried to make it seem like nothing had happened. "I'm fine, Rinoa."

"I'm sorry." She said.

I was confused. "Why?"

"I made you take off your mask..."

"Squall! Rinoa!" Selphie limped up from behind. Rinoa laid her head back on the floor. Selphie plopped herself down and began rubbing a swollen ankle. "Are you okay? I think I've sprained my ankle, but I'm fine. My lungs still hurt." She paused and took a look at me. "Oh my gosh! What happened!?" I creased my brow and bent my scar. Was I so obvious? I was under the impression that I was generally good at hiding my emotion. Had I been caught in the middle of my breakdown? I diverted my gaze, but she reached out.

"You're bleeding like crazy! Did you hit your head?"

Oh, so that was all it was. I put my hand back to my face and covered the cut. "Yeah..."

Her bright green eyes moved from me to the girl on the floor. "Oh my gosh! Rinoa! Are you okay!?"

Rinoa brought herself around and looked up. "I'm okay, Selphie, I – I've hurt my arm."

"Why don't you try to get up." Selphie suggested. "We can see how bad you are."

"I don't want to." She said.

"Don't be a baby." Selphie urged. She got Rinoa up to a sitting position and took a look at her arm. "Yeah, you've broken it or dislocated it or something. I can't fix that with a cure. What should we do, Squall?"

I was shaken out of a bemuddled mental crisis shockwave and fell snugly back into the leader mode. I got up from my knee, my ribs stinging again. I searched my mind for what to do. The answer was simple. "We can't do anything about it down here. Take off your blue thing, Rinoa, and make yourself a sling. Help her with that, Selphie. The other three are not far away from us..."

"Really? How do you know?" Selphie asked, looking excited.

"I heard them fighting through the wall." I said. I looked over at the door. "This is pretty far from where they would have been when Quistis contacted us." I thought aloud. "They must be on the run."

"Or maybe they're winning!" Selphie smiled, always optimistic. "Let's go and help them!"

"We are not in adequate shape for another battle." I stated. "Plus we haven't even reached the controls of the converter. We need to do that first."

"But - !" Selphie protested again. It took me back to perhaps half an hour beforehand when we were having the same conversation before jogging off into untold peril. The situation may have changed, but my opinion had not, even though I was glad to find that they were still alive.

"They are professionals, Selphie, remember that." I repeated. I glanced to the converter a little ways away. "I'm going to have a look around." I looked down to Rinoa who now had her light blue duster tied around over her shoulder. That duster defined her, and without it she didn't look nearly as happy, quiet, and innocents as usual. There was a knitted pattern of two white feathered wings on the back of it that



now was folded and crumpled across her front. She'd taken off her wings... I wondered if there was some symbolism in that.

Brushing aside my philosophic ideas, I headed off toward the power converter, my shadow black in the yellowish glaze. Stepping toward the mechanism was like walking into a bonfire. I covered my face futilely and had to force my way through the bubble of fiery air. I found a railing and willed myself to it, dropping my arms to grab a hold. The banister bordered the lip of the platform where I was, and stood three or four feet from the wall of the converter. The skin on my face was burning and my body inside all my leather was like a bag of sweat. The metal around me was glowing yellow, either from the heat or the light emitted from the converter. I leaned over and looked down. The lower level below the platform where I stood was completely incased in metal with the exception of that four-foot strip of open air I was looking into. Underneath was like the inside of an oven. I could see the air boiling up through the gap and a breeze like fire hit me full in the face. My eyes, ears, and neck got the brunt and burned with new fire. I pulled back and buried my face in my arm. Wherever the status monitor was, I hoped it wasn't down there. My eyes were stinging as I retreated back to Rinoa and Selphie. I thought casually about loading Shiva to cool myself off.

"Nothing?" Selphie asked as I approached.

I shook my head. "Not up close to it. But I'm going to check the parameter."

"Okay." Selphie agreed.

Rinoa nodded, looking defeated. I didn't want her to be like that, but I had priorities. Rinoa belonged in a better mood, one where she could laugh and smile and scold me for being so drab and emotionless. I must be a really lousy boyfriend. I don't do anything for her. But I'll change that. I'll hurry up and get this job over with so that I could take her back up into Garden and get her fixed so that she can put her wings back on again. I headed past them, my chest still aching from my landing. I went first to the big steel doors where

I'd heard the gunshots. It was eerily quiet, now. My gut clenched, but I reassured myself of my own advice. I had a job to do, the other three could look after themselves. I moved to the panels on either side of the door. There were several promising meters, gauges and screens, but they all were for the boilers that towered above me. I found the switch to open the door and was tempted to pull it, but figured that if Quistis and her team were fighting a dragon, the last thing I needed was for it to come in there and attack Selphie and Rinoa. I looked along the wall to the right. There were a couple stairs leading up to a raised platform. I headed over, away from my other two companions and the door. My aching ribs reminding me that they were there, I mounted the stairs and found 'power converter central'. The platform was totally devoted to the status of the power converter. It was convenient that all this equipment was in the same place, if only it had been easier to find. I didn't want to waste any time and rushed to the main console at the center of the banister overlooking the throbbing converter.

As I looked over the controls, I wondered again why they hadn't sent a technician to do this job instead of me. Without the faintest idea what I was doing, I jabbed at the touch screen and maneuvered to a status page. It took me what seemed like forever to figure out how to scroll up and down but I soon found the history of the power converter's actions over the past month or so. There were figures for energy intake and output set in columns with dates and times. It seemed uniform enough, nothing hugely out of the ordinary, and I moved down the list finding little variation in the numbers until the last couple entries at the bottom. About three weeks ago, the output values began to fall exponentially. The

input figures remained the same until this week when they began to rise. The latest reading, taken this morning showed that input was going up while output maintained it's downward plunge. I figured that what I really needed was a technical readout of the different mechanics inside the converter so that I could tell the real experts what, exactly, was malfunctioning. This console wasn't going to give it to me, so I meandered around checking out the other bulkheads and meters. There was one titled "Current" that appealed to me. There was a screen labeled "current processing" with a line chart that was jumping about erratically. There was one thing obvious; the input was generally going up and the output was generally going down.

Although, fascinating as this was, I wasn't learning anything new. I figured that they had noticed the power loss a little while ago and had increased the input energy to gain a higher output. When the output kept falling even through they were putting more in, they called us to check it out. I need to find out where the problem was. I wandered to another bulkhead and moved along the stations until I found a holographic cross-section of the converter. Inside apparently was, along with several power cells for storing the two types of power, there were also a set of heavy turbines. They were probably the clanking sounds. It made sense, since this was a power converter. The lower cells were for input, where electrical energy is entered. The electric energy moves into the turbines and is translated to energy that the Garden can use, which is stored in the cells on top. Cables take the energy from the top cells out to the different areas of Garden. I looked over at the machine. I identified the Input Cells as the reason this area was lit yellow and burning hot. The rapid increase in electricity had probably caused them to overheat. The clanking mechanics were working overtime to process the backed up reserves, and the dragons probably had something to do with the energy reduction, since they were hanging around the output cells. The question was how they were affecting it. Perhaps they'd caused a leak up top or something, or their toxic breath had shorted out some kind of coup link or something. I messed with the buttons and scrolled through some menus to find a map of the connected consoles. Apart from the main hub where I was, there was an Input station connected to the converter down in that burning cavity I'd gotten a taste of a minute ago, and an Output station up top on the opposite side. If we'd have kept going around, we might have run into it, or perhaps it was a level higher. There were several service locations to get in and repair specific parts of the whole.

I found no explanation of the presence of the dragons and no definite answer to the problem. Suddenly, from somewhere above and behind me, I heard a terrible screech and the roar of a dragon. The boiler above my head began to shake and I got a very bad feeling. Yellow sparks began to shoot out of it. In a second, the huge vat of boiling water exploded above my head. My eyes wide, I reacted and made a mad dash for the stairs, a waterfall of scalding, steaming hydraulic fluid threatening to crush me. Among the water was the shape of a dragon, breaking through with the broken pieces of the burst boiler. I dove down the stairs, tumbling and skidding, hurting myself horribly. The water hit the platform I had been on and smashed it in. I looked up to see a huge dragon carcass slip through the hole. The scalding water melted the glass and wires on the bulkheads along the back. I watched as metal twisted and gave way with the heat of the water. Steam filtered up through the hole in the floor and I guess most of the water was sloshing around in the cavity below. The metal in front of me as I lay painfully on the ground was bowing down as the heat of the rushing water softened it on its way down. I shoved myself to my knees, my ribs stabbing. If they weren't broken before, I was sure they were broken now. Rinoa and Selphie screamed. I heard another screech and then the pounding of heavy dragon feet. They were coming toward us. There was another sound. A crash. Selphie Rinoa and I were completely silent, listening to the events happening through the wall. We heard more gunshots, then a rumbling and another dragon screech trailing away. There was another explosion from a boiler down a hundred feet away. Another

dragon body came through with it and crumpled the floor at that end. More hot water poured into the chamber below us, steam billowing up through the holes. There was another clank, then silence as the echo dissolved into the throbbing of the converter. Then the doors opened.

Quistis, Irvine and Zell rushed in at full speed. Zell skidded to a stop near the side. Irvine and Quistis turned back. "Zell!"

Zell found the switch. Irvine trudged forward uneasily, his left leg bloody from the knee down. "Close it! Close it!"

There was a deafening screech from the other side of the door. Rinoa and Selphie gasped. Zell fumbled and flipped the door switch. The heavy steel panel slid down. Rinoa screamed. Quistis's blue eyes were wide. "Zell! Get out of the way!"

Zell jumped and hit the dirt as the door slammed shut and we heard a huge crash as apparently the dragon collided with the other side. The dragon screech stopped. The three of them sighed. Zell let his head fall on his arms, bites torn out of his jacket. A stream of his blood stained his right arm from his torn sleeve and shoulder. Quistis put her head in her hands, her blondish hair frayed and her eyes showing the exhaustion in her mind. Irvine collapsed backward and laid himself flat onto his back, his eyes closed. Selphie shoved herself up. "Quistis! Irvine! Zell! Are you guys okay!?" She limped over.

Quistis looked like she had a headache. Irvine shoved himself up on his elbows. "We're alive. I never thought we'd run into you guys."

Zell got back to his feet and walked over, holding his shoulder. "You shoulda been there! It was freakin' awesome! Scary, painful, hopeless, but totally awesome!"

"How many dragons?" I asked, coming to myself.

"Not too many for us to handle!" Zell boasted, but he got a twinge of pain when he tried to strike a victory pose and sank back down into defeat. "Three. All at once. We each tried to take one. Quistis did best; she kept using magic. I can kick some butt, but these things are like tanks. Mine bit me in the shoulder and it hurts like crud!"

"Oh my gosh!" Selphie exclaimed. She was sitting next to Irvine, who was trying to look cool despite the puddle of blood growing from his lower leg. "How'd you get rid of them?"

"We finally got together and concentrated on one at a time." Irvine replied. "Zell and I got the first one's attention while Quistis charged Quetzalcoatl. It seemed to absorb electricity, though, it must have had, like, status lightning through the roof. Zell got him with the brothers and threw him into the boiler thing, which Quetzalcoatl exploded. We had to run from that. The second one, it was up to me to get with Diablos, but he got me bad in the leg while I was loading. Diablos was knocked out really fast. I think the dragon was using some kinda magic attack or ultimate attack or something, 'cause I got the end of it. Zell pulled the same thing with the brothers and blew that one through the other boiler. After that, everybody was low on everything and we shot to the door and just made it through in time."

"You guys took on three at once?!?" Selphie cried. "that's amazing! You guys rock!"

I was thinking of something else, I was staring at Quistis and her razzled look. The silver dragon had absorbed her GF's lightning energy. If the dragons were power eaters, then that would explain why they were hanging around the converter. Perhaps they were why were having a power-loss. But still that didn't explain why the dragons were there in the first place. Possible theories were running through my head, but were interrupted by Rinoa. She had been sitting by herself exactly where I'd left her. Now she was staring up the converter toward the cloud in a fit of terror. What got my attention were her whimpers.

"Sq – Squall – Squall – "

I looked over, then followed the tilt of her head up to the cloud break. There I was stopped cold as a gigantic silver dragon with glowing, backlit eyes climbed down from above. It emerged from the canopy on huge, clawed feet and slinked down the wire grating towards us, stretching and bending it under its immense weight. AS its shoulders appeared, a huge pair of wings unfolded from its back. It breathed a great puff of coral smoke from its nostrils.

One by one, everyone looked up and gasped. The large forked tongue flicked between its long pointed teeth. Energy was crackling in its mouth. Irvine threw himself up of the ground. Quistis reaching into her pockets and pulled out a couple super potions. She tossed them to her party members and cast Esuna on herself to fix her exhaustion. Zell uncorked and dumped the vile on his shoulder. Irvine threw his head back and drank his down. I switched back into leader mode. "Alright, Zell and Irvine with me. Quistis, Selhpie, Rinoa sit out. If one of us falls, Quistis jumps in, then Selphie, then Rinoa if we have to."

"Squall!!!!" Rinoa cried, still not having moved from the spot. I was kicking her out of battle because her arm was broken, but now she was in the way of the fight. I ran over and picked her up.

"Zell! Irvine! Get ready!" The other two men fanned out to the wing positions, leaving space for me in the middle. I stood with Rinoa, turning to look see where the foe was. It was right on top of us, its claws digging deep into the converter, energy sparking from the penetration. It eyed me with its twelve-foot lance-like teeth bared. I headed back slowly, not wanting to make any wrong moved and tempt injury. The great oaken tail whipped back and forth high above us. I handed Rinoa off to the other girls, and jumped into my spot. The dragon took another step down and nearly joined us on the platform. I started us off. "Blizzaga!" Concentrating on the spell, I channeled ice matter out and took a small chunk of HP off the dragon. It flinched, but rebounded with a tornado attack from its massive wings. We braced ourselves, but the funnel cloud picked us up. We swirled around and were slammed back down, just as before. We got back up and Zell took at turn. He began loading a GF. The Brothers if my memory served me. Then Irvine stepped up. The potion had stopped his bleeding, but he limped as he struck his 'cast' pose.

"Triple!"

With this spell, he increased his magic power so that he could cast triple the magic. He must have assigned himself to status duty. Really, it made sense, considering his only GF was knocked out and his gun didn't do much good against the scales.

Zell jumped forward shouting "Brotherly Love!" Just like with Shiva, we all passed into middle verse to avoid injury. This time I was just a spectator and Zell was the one being used as a doorway. I glanced to

him, his teeth were gritted and his brow was furrowed, his limbs shaking. In front of us, the brothers attacked. Sacred and Minnotaur, two ox-men gods of earth, appeared under a gigantic slab of dislodged ground. The giant dragon was taken up with it as it was cast into the air. An acrobatic finale had the older brother toss the younger brother into the air. Sacred flew, meeting the clump of earth as it came back down. He smashed it into bits. The two GFs retreated back through Zell and we re-emerged into a world that looked exactly the way it had been before. The dragon was back on the converter shuddering from the attack, and the metal was unbroken before us. The eyes of the dragon were dampened, but, digging its claws into the converter, it recharged itself and its eyes as well as its hit points returned.

Zell took a start. "No way! It's rechargeable!?"

"It makes sense." Quistis said. "The other dragon acquired Quetzalcoatl's energy. This dragon is probably the mother of the other ones."

"You mean the other ones were just babies?" Selphie cried in astonishment.

"How do you know?" Rinoa asked.

"Weren't any of you paying attention in my class?" She asked. "Dragons hatch from eggs. I don't know about the ones you three fought, but ours had a spike on their noses... They still had their egg-teeth."

"Great... If those were the babies, then this Momma's gonna be really hard." Zell shook his head.

Irvine stepped up with more spells. "Triple Reflect!" A reflective barrier opened in front of me, one in front of Zell and one in front of Irvine. I thought about charging Leviathan, the water GF. I figured; if it acquired electricity, it might be shorted out by a tsunami. ON the other hand, we might all fry when the platform got wet and the electricity from the power converter was channeled through it. No, it was too big of a risk. I called on Shiva again. "Shiva..."

"Squall... I have been waiting."

The dragon stomped down heavily onto the metal-grated floor. Its gait was so wide that the great clawed foot was nearly ten yards away. Its neck bowed out. I broke y connection with Shiva for a second. "Back up!" The three of us ran out so that we were away from its head, which was arching slightly on the great snakelike neck as thick as the elevator shaft. It took another heavy step, denting the planks of the floor. It raised up its head and blew a huge stream of sulfuric cloud at us. I covered my face, the acid in the dragon's breath stinging my skin. I called on Shiva again.

I didn't even have to search; she was waiting for me. The minute I'd turned my mind to look for her, I heard her icy voice in my head. "Squall? Is everything alright?"

"I'm fine, Shiva, I need you." I replied.

"I will always help you, Squall, I will always be with you." I loaded her and felt her ice-like finger pricks on the back of my neck. I sensed as she moved her hand along my jaw and over my mouth. Her energy was filling me. I could hear her voice in my ear. "If only you weren't human, Squall..." I closed my eyes.

“But that is beyond us. I will do all that I can for you.” Her voice was ringing in my head as my muscles clenched. “Call me out!”

“Diamond Dust!” I couldn’t contain her any longer. I stepped forward and released her. She came out and attacked, the same as before. I couldn’t really watch. I stayed focused. The dragon was blasted with iciness as cold as her touch. Then Shiva retreated back through me.

“I am still here...”

I shook her off. For a GF, she certainly got me jittery. When I loaded Leviathan, he wasn’t nearly as cold or as personal. The dragon before us shuddered and stepped up onto the converter again to leech some energy.

“Quick! Gent ‘im while ‘e’s still hurt!” Zell cried. He rushed forward and ran quickly through his cast pose. “Water!” A ball of liquid appeared and soaked the dragon with a mild attack. Ribbons of electricity sparked out of the punctured mesh wire and the dragon let out an ear-splitting shriek. Zell pumped his fist in victory, but wasn’t watching when a furious dragon turned its silvery head, its glowing eyes narrowing on him.

Selphie nearly screamed herself. “Zell! Look out!”

“Huh?” He turned and saw the lance-toothed mouth of the dragon flying at him.

All he could do was throw up his hands to protect his face. The lower jaw full of razors got him across the chest and threw him back toward us with a jerking motion, as if he had a bad taste. My fellow SeeD tumbled and skidded to a stop near his designated post. Whether he was dead or not, I couldn’t tell, but it was obvious that he could no longer fight. Irvine broke rank and headed over, crossing behind me. Rinoa hid her face and Selphie jumped up, only to have her sprained ankle force her back down. Quistis came over. “Irvine? What’s it look like?”

The cowboy moved Zell’s shoulder to see his front and let out a sigh. “Not too bad. His arms took the brunt of it. He’s beyond help, though, as far as our medicine is concerned.”

“Give him some Phoenix Down.” Quistis commanded. “And then hurry back. I’ll take Zell’s spot.”

He nodded and fumbled in his pockets for his items. I looked to Quistis who unbelted her whip and cracked it. I glanced back over to the other two, where Zell was waking up from the benefits of phoenix down. Irvine gave him a quick, reassuring smile, then moved him off the battlefield where Selphie promised to take care of him. I soon had Irvine on my left hand again.

How was I dealing with all of this? Zell was not Rinoa; he was a fighter. No matter how bad his injuries were, he could tough it out. I was little more than distracted by his misfortune and set on trying to figure out how to vanquish this dragon. The water spell he had tried had packed a mean punch, but the converter reacted dangerously even to that weak spell. The Silver dragon was back to full power. The whole re-charging thing was a real problem as well. No matter how hard we hit it, it would just drink up more of Garden’s energy to make up the difference. I got the idea that if we each would attack repeatedly with severe attacks, we could eat away at its hit points faster than it could recover them. Irvine had Diablos, who was knocked out. Quistis had Quetzalcotl, who would only energize the enemy,

and probably Carbuncle, who was a status GF, not an attacker. Basically, the only one we could really use was Shiva, and she wouldn't do much good since by the time I could load her, recover, and then reload her, the dragon would be back to full strength anyhow. My planning was interrupted by the "status man" who had taken his turn.

"Triple...Shell!"

I had a pink orb grow up around me and seal me inside. Similar spheres enveloped Irvine and Quistis. The visible affect of the spell vanished, but the shell was still there in function, cutting the damage we would receive from physical attacks in half. The dragon stepped back onto our platform, its claws sending out new trails of electricity as it stepped into a puddle. IT took a deep breath and blew another blast of acidic smoke at us.

Quistis waved aside the smog and coughed as she moved to take her turn. She went through her spell-casting routine, and ended with her arms in front of her. "Water!"

She must have taken the hint from Zell, and seen the weakness. The dragon was doused again and shuddered and shrieked as the high voltage it was attached to sent unstable energy into its body.

It was my turn. I decided to use a spell, too, since past attempts at close encounters had proved less-than favorable. The only thing I could reason was using another water attack. I would have loaded Shiva except that I still needed time to think and couldn't afford to spend my concentration on her. After casting my spell and watching the dragon shudder, I began again to run through possible strategies and 'next moves'. It didn't help that the others were waiting for my instructions as to the master plan.

Irvine stepped up again as the dragon retreated up the converter to plant its claws in the works. "Triple! Haste!"

The rest of the world seemed to slow down as I sped up. Haste increased our speed to double and allowed us to attack faster. Quistis jumped forward and cast another water spell. I decided that, in my accelerated condition, this would be a good time for me to put my gun blade to work. I moved in at a run to slice and shoot like I had the T-Rexsaur not too much earlier, but as I raised my weapon over my head, another painful stab in my side hindered me. I froze, my gun blade slipping out of my hand and my knees giving out, causing me to land heavily and painfully on the ground halfway to the slow-moving head of the foe. The dragon saw and moved in, but I was in 'haste' and he was not, so I shoved myself back up and drug my blade out of reach. The monster snapped at thin air. Quistis looked to me. "Squall? Are you alright?"

I didn't say anything, but got back into ready position, fuming a little at my failure. I supposed that now, I was tied to magic as well.

Irvine jumped forward, attacking with offensive magic this time. "Triple! Water!" Three standard water attacks hit the dragon in succession. It flinched and roared in response. Irvine's double and triple wore off.

The monster stretched out its wings, kicking up a high wind for another tornado attack. The three of us were scooped up off the metal floor and spun around.

The aerial attack slammed us back down, but I was still under reflect and was uninjured. Irvine was, too, but Quistis had not been active when he'd triple reflected and suffered the damage of the hit. She shoved herself back up from the ground. Irvine and my reflections were not enough to bounce the attack back, so the dragon waited with its wings out. Quistis re-readied her whip. "Squall? Any ideas?"

"Only one." I said. Leviathan was lurking at the top of my list of possibilities, but I couldn't subject my team members to that. I needed to find a way to hit the converter without having this platform get soaked. If the whole place was drenched, then the backed up power from the electric part of the converter would surely kill us all. Not even the inactive persons would be spared. Rinoa. As I puzzled about this to myself, my turn came. I took this opportunity to have a little experiment. I cast water and instead of hitting the dragon, aimed at the converter. When it hit, the unstable electricity crackled and burned on its surface, but the dragon also suffered. With its claws in the wiring any fluctuation of the lower containment cells would affect it. The dragon stomped back down onto the platform and I re-noticed the gap between the rail and the converter. I remembered that the monitor I had been reading before said that there was a containment control console down there. If I had Leviathan attack that, it would overload the converter and hopefully defeat the dragon while keeping all of the water below us in the lower cavity. It was perfect except for the huge plumes of steam coming from the boiling water and churning air in the oven. If I were to jump down there, I'd probably roast alive.

Our enemy took another step and lashed its tethered head at us. It took a bite out of Irvine, but his shell held off half the damage. He flinched and clutched his chest while the dragon flicked its forked tongue. The cowboy took his turn and cast reflect on Quistis. She wound up with another water spell. It was my turn. My reflect wore off. The dragon retreated up the column to recharge again. It was now or never. I thought hard on finding Leviathan. He was the sea serpent and the GF of water. He was harder to find than Shiva, and I called out to him, my mind echoing. "Leviathan...I summon you...I need your help."

I could sense him faintly. He was swimming about at the edge of my mind.

"Leviathan...god of water...I am summoning you..." I paused and swallowed a little harder than I had expected to. "For perhaps the last time...."

"The last?" His voice came at last. It was comparable to a young man's, but at the same time ageless. It wasn't all too deep, but still sounded cavernous, like he was speaking from no one place. His voice hung in my head and came from everywhere, as if adrift on the sea. "Why the lasssst?"

"I have something very important to do. I am going to take this mother dragon out all by myself, and it will probably cost me my life."

"Your life? How unselfish...If it is this important, then I will assissst you."

"Thank you. Stay with me, here I go." I looked both ways. Both of my team members had taken their turns. Now it was my turn again. I took off at a run. Every one else took a start as I left. They weren't expecting me to leave. I wasn't sure what was going through their heads. It wasn't like me to run away and retreat. It wasn't like me to sacrifice myself, either. For some reason, I was feeling compelled. I didn't glance back, but I could see all of them. I was a leader. It was my job to look after them and Garden. But, I was realizing then, I was a friend too, if not a very open one. I wasn't going to stand by



and let everyone else suffer if this was the only way to victory.  
I would have rathered it be me.

“I am impressed, Squall, this is unlike you.”

“Impressed?” I kept running, my feet pounding the metal as I dashed across the platform. “How is this unlike me.”

“Unselfish...” Leviathan answered. “You are typically so cold to other humans, now here you are, dying for the only ones that you could call a family, it is a very caring thing to do. Very thoughtful, and very unlike the Squall who has summoned me so many times.”

I was still hasted, and the dragon’s head turned slowly to follow my advancement. The gap was just ahead. I was rounding the foe on his right, so that I could make it to the target. I could hear Rinoa’s voice calling after me, slow and drawn out.

“Squaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaalllllllllllllllllllll!”

“I was selfish?” I asked myself, but Leviathan heard.

“Never mind that. You’ve advanced. It is too bad that you are ending it when you are learning so much.” He said. “Still, valiant as you are, I admire you. And I am right behind you.”

Energized by his power and his words sinking the gravity of what I was about to do into my mind, I jumped onto the railing. The steam of the hydraulic water below, and the heat from the converter stung my eyes. The air below was rippling with the heat. My breath stuck in my throat. That was to be my grave. Unselfish, maybe it was about time, it was time for my life to flash before my eyes. Not many came. A lost memory is sometimes a frustrating thing, and while I couldn’t remember my mother or my father or sisters or brothers if I’d had any, my memories rested on my friends. My new family. Rinoa, Quistis, Selphie, Irvine, and Zell. I recalled how, although I never did the same for them, they would find me in a crowd, or ask how I was doing, or try to get me to laugh. I was really uncaring then, but with knowledge comes responsibility. I would never be able to repay them for all they’d done for me. I don’t know if the ‘me’ I had become would allow me to change at all. Maybe this was the best way to do it after all.

Slowly, tentatively, I let myself go. Dropping into the hellhole, I left the world of light and life behind. The heat and now the humidity were unbearable, but I quickly escaped from it. I passed into middle verse with a cry of “TSUNAMI!”

I fell with my muscles clenched and released Leviathan out through me. He emerged as a snake of pure water, but shed it, revealing his scales and spines. The serpent summoned up a huge wall of water, and then vanished as he cast it down to smash against the controls and walls of the overheated converter. The light of the cells began to flicker and change velocity in spurts of dark and extreme light. The control panel belched ribbons of static and exploded with violent force, shooting sparks and causing electrical energy to race uncontrollably through the wires. More explosions shot from the bulkheads behind me, the settled water from the boilers charging as frayed wires fell into their pools. Great streams of variable energy raced over the mesh-wire surface of the converter. The noise of crackling electricity and energy

filled my ears and mingled with the satisfyingly painful roars of the dragon above me. A great plume of fire shot out the side of the converter as one of the cells burst at the end. Another rain of sparks spat forth from the control panel. Leviathan retreated back through me to the safety of the realm of the GFs.

More than just sights and sounds, but the heat and pressure hit me like a cement truck. As soon as I was back in my own plane, the tremendous heat from the air and the fresh explosions started to eat away at my insides. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. My eyes clamped shut and I doubled over onto my hands and knees. The floor was searing hot and wet from the attack. The electricity was coursing through it and it burned through my body following my nerves and veins like tracks on a train. Under my clothes, my skin was baking. I could feel my insides begin to boil, my blood heating inside my tissues, all water evaporating from every scrap of flesh. It was agony. The likes of this pain is incommunicable, it is as if you are disintegrating slowly, your body being picked apart by a hot poker, while the air around you closed in and the air inside pushes out. I gasped and choked, my mouth, throat; all the way down to my stomach was dry, the acids inside evaporating and stinging the way up. It was slow and it was horrible. My mind was being jolted by volts upon volts of wild electricity.

But just at it's worst; I could feel something strange. It was cold as ice and started at my heart, cooling the blood that was being pumped super fast by my dehydrated organ. From there, like frost on a windowpane, it spread through me. It made me sick; this extreme cold in the midst of Hell; and it stung bitterly. I thought it was death, coming finally to take me after ages of suffering until I heard a voice.

"Squall!?! You would die without saying goodbye...?"

"SHIVA!?!!" My eyes sprung open, the heat nearly killing them, but I couldn't believe it. She was loading herself.

"Don't break your concentration, Squall. Relax and hold onto me." Her voice, as icy as it was, was music to my dampened ears. I closed my eyes and fell into her. Her coolness filled me, and permeated me. It was like a light blue bubble of frozen relief enveloped me and drove out the red heat of the hot coals. I could feel myself healing in it. I opened my eyes and watched as all around destruction reigned. The cells in the converter cracked and shot random explosions, twisting the metal casing. Above, there was another explosion from the Output monitor. I couldn't see, but more explosions were taking out the output cells. The dragon was overcharged by the fluctuations in power and was undoubtedly feeling the same pain as I had been. I watched as ribbons of electricity raced back and forth across the floor below me. Shiva was taking my hits, and loading slowly to protect me. It must be very difficult for a GF to load without help from a junction-er. She really cared, and I held to her with my mind. In seconds, there was another explosion as one of the largest cells combusted in the output cluster high above. A huge piece of metal crashed and dented the roof of my oven. Another, larger piece broke all the way through, bringing down more of the planks to my left. The mother dragon's roars were lost in the sounds as the converter was mutilated around me. In a moment, the lip of the gap was caved in as its body fell through to my level.

The long neck broken and its head flopped awkwardly. There was a great rumbling as the overheated power cells right in front of me swelled with light and free power. Shiva spoke again. "Hold on, Squall! It's going to self-destruct. If I survive this... live Squall! Live if I don't!" The light expanded and as if in slow motion, the converter went up. There was a mushroom cloud and the scattering of glass and metal as the cluster of power cells before me burst and released their energy. The cells above were triggered and exploded as well. The platform above my head was blown apart and forced backward. All the

equipment, bulkheads, the dragon's body; anything intact was smashed against the walls. The water sloshed and folded over as it ran up the wall and hit the ceiling of the cavity. I could see above me as the sulfuric cloud of dragon breath was blown back from the column. Glimpses of dragons tumbling over and over away from the epicenter were seen in the rippling canopy. The converter blasted upward through the roof and into the main floors of Garden. The cloud re-gathered and leaked through this new opening, the leftover dragon spawn undoubtedly going with it.

As quickly as it had begun, the explosion was over. Pieces of the converter, the walkways, the roof and the surrounding structures rained down, making crashing sounds in a strangely empty cavern. The charred husk of the converter stood towering above me. The absence of its light and sound made it seem like a dream. Shiva was gone. I fell backward onto the now peaceful metal ground, still aching, but alive. Above me, I heard the sweetest sound.

"Squall!?! SQUALL!?!!" It was Rinoa, and while her shrieking wasn't sweet to the naked ear, she was alive, and still worried about me. In a second, I saw her standing above me, looking down from the crumpled platform and holding her broken arm. We locked eyes; those great pooling brown eyes. They flashed in terror, but I blinked and raised one hand painfully off the ground. She had hope. "SQUALL!?!"

"Squall!?" Quistis appeared, and looked down at me. "Oh my gosh!"

"What's happened!?" Irvine appeared. He took a look and a step forward. I don't know if it was the sight, or the fact that a loose plank gave way underneath his foot, but it was followed by a "Yeow!" Selphie limped in and grabbed his arm when she saw. "Ahh! Is he okay."

"I'll check it out." The man said. He moved to climb down. Quistis followed. The two of them landed to my right and I breathed a sigh of private relief. They kneeled down by my head.

"Squall?"

I looked up, my throat still dry and my lungs still burning. Irvine got his arms under my back and leaned my up a little. I fought to be able to speak and give them my next orders. Our job wasn't done. We still had to be efficient. I closed my eyes.

Quistis took my hand. Irvine shook me a bit. "Hey, Squall? You dead? Come on!"

"Quistis – " I finally rasped. " – Run up – Organize SeeDs and students – Clean out the rest – of the dragons..."

She was startled, but tuned professional quickly and stood.

Irvine looked up. "Send down a bunch of paramedic people, too. And make sure they bring a ladder."

She nodded. "Right. Give me a leg up."

Irvine laid me back down. "You cool off, here. I'll be right back." He struggled to his feet on his bad leg and muttered under his breath. "Geez this floor is hot...what a trip!"

It took the infirm people a while to get down to us, and it took a while for us all to get back to full strength. Through practical and magic medicine, we all ended up fine. Even me and my burns inside and out. Shiva ended up okay, too. A god cannot die. She took a GF revival potion before she was back to herself. While we were all in disposed, the SeeDs and Garden students worked at cleaning out the dragons that were left. It took a lot longer for us to figure out how they got there than to get rid of them. Rinoa, creative as she was, got it at least partially right. No, there were no terrorist plots, but there was at one point a hole... When Garden was stationary, there was an underground puncture created by the mother dragon. Silver dragons are tunnelers, strangely enough, and she was looking for a high-energy place for her egg clutch to incubate and hatch without her. When we had changed Garden to travel mode, we had unknowingly trapped her inside. The mother dragon was not looking for a place to live, and when she'd eaten off all of the monsters she could, she turned to drawing energy from the power converter. That was the start of the power drain. Then, more recently, her eggs hatched and a whole brood of little dragons started sucking Garden's energy. That was when the numbers began to bottom out.

Now that the dragon problem was cleared out, the tech guys could go down and fix the damage we had inadvertently reaped on garden's insides. Needless to say, it took forever. There was barely anything left of the power converter and all of the status stations and pipes had exploded with the main equipment. We had to pull into Fisherman's Horizon for a lot of the repairs, when we got the backup energy running.

As for me and my epiphany...I'm taking it a bit at a time. Hanging out in FH gave me the chance to apply these newly discovered sides of myself and get to know my family better. I'm learning slowly I guess. It's hard. I can't bring myself to joke around and laugh and skip and frolic or whatever like they do. Maybe that's just not me. The point is that I'm awake to the concept now, and as I ease slowly into the idea of being more open to them and to myself, I have the time to find who I really am. I think I'm starting more with Rinoa. She'll be easiest I think. I mean, after all, she was the first one to unmask me, really...-\_-