

1

H^{EADS.}

Edgar's hand closed over the coin. "Congratulations," he said. His voice was steady; it was almost as if he'd been expecting it.

"I –" Sabin tried.

"I know what you want." Edgar's eyes met Sabin's. "We've talked about this. Don't –" and at last, his voice cracked – "make this any harder."

Sabin stared back at the inexact replica of his own face. Not too long ago, Edgar had gone through a phase of pestering the maids about which twin they considered more handsome, and they had always refused to answer.

"How soon do you want me to go?"

“It’s not – *I* don’t –” Edgar broke off and sighed. “You should go as soon as you can. Or they’ll try and change our minds. Do it before they enact a law saying you can’t.” He let out a bitter laugh.

“That’ll be your job from now on,” said Sabin.

Edgar’s face paled.

“I’m sorry,” Sabin murmured.

“*Don’t*,” said Edgar. “Look – how soon do you think you can get away? It’s not – you know I’m not trying to get rid of you. It’s just, if we really want to make this work – do you think you could get some things packed today? Then you could leave tomorrow morning and it’d still be hours until the council meeting.” His uncharacteristic lack of eloquence betrayed the part he had left unspoken: both of them knew that if anyone else in the castle became aware of Sabin’s intention to leave, mechanisms would immediately be put in place to stop him.

Sabin thought guiltily of the knapsack in his bedroom. “I’ve packed already. I – you know the kinds of things I was saying a few days ago. I was desperate to get away.”

“You’re ready to go,” said Edgar tonelessly.

“Yes.”

Edgar moved closer to him, his voice dropping to an urgent whisper. “René. Go. Before they work out a way of keeping both of us here. Take your freedom. And mine.”

Sabin could feel tears gathering at the back of his eyes. He had always been the crier – Edgar somehow knew how to keep his emotions under wraps. Sabin had always envied that. “I wish it could be both of us,” he managed to say, before the tears overcame him and the image of his brother before him became blurred.

They reached for each other and embraced.

“Get away from Figaro,” Edgar said into Sabin’s ear. “Go somewhere nobody recognises you. Learn a trade. Bed a few girls for me.” His voice was quick with excitement.

“Roni –”

“*Use our freedom,*” said Edgar in fierce intensity. Sabin felt the gentle strike of a fist against his back as his brother uttered each word.

Edgar stretched up and pressed a kiss to Sabin’s forehead, then withdrew from the embrace and stood at arm’s length. His eyes were dry, but his hands shook. He moved them behind his back.

Sabin wiped his face with his sleeve, nodded, and left the room.



A number of the side gates were usually unguarded, or were allocated to the charge of a guard who had to cover several exits at once, with the inevitable consequence that the quieter

ones were neglected. It would be difficult to leave the castle without being spotted, but if he made it out quickly and hid in one of the desert caves, he might be able to lie low until the guards lost interest in looking for him. Hopefully he would be able to get away fast enough to prevent them from realising who he was, which he assumed ought to help.

Sabin slipped through the gate and pulled up the hood of his cloak. There was an uncomfortable heat outside, as always, and the desert wind threatened to blow the hood straight down again. He secured it with one hand and attempted to hold on to the strap of his knapsack with the other as it began to slip from his shoulder.

“Hey!”

The shout came from the castle behind him: one of the guards had spotted the escapee. Sabin gripped his hood and ignored the impulse to look towards where the sound had come from. As long as he managed to keep the hood on and not show his face, they would be none the wiser as to who he was.

“You there!”

That was a different voice – had two of them seen him? He’d thought one might, but two was unfortunate. The sand was getting blown into his eyes, so he pulled the hood down as far as he could and continued.

Suddenly, something crashed into the ground beside him, fast and heavy. The noise made Sabin yelp, and threw him off balance; the strap of his bag began to fall down his arm, and

he grabbed at it, his heart racing: that was unmistakably an arrow, sticking out of the sand inches from where he stood. The guards were shooting at him – they must have thought him a thief who had sneaked into the castle and tried to sneak back out, his bag full of plundered treasures –

He broke into a run: he had to get as far from the castle as he could, as soon as he could. Running against the strong wind felt barely faster than walking, though, and it was even harder to hold his hood in place; not a few moments later, he lost his grip on it entirely and it flapped free, uncovering his head and the long blond hair that was one of the most famous features of the twin princes.

He pulled the hood back over his head as quickly as he could manage, but the damage was done. The shouts had grown in number – additional guards must have been alerted – and he could hear that they had changed:

“Your Highness!”

“Prince Sabin!”

As he realised that the guards had identified him, even somehow worked out exactly which brother they were pursuing, something slammed against his foot, and he stumbled.

Slipping his hands under the straps of his sandal and clutching the foot to try and stem the sudden flow of blood, he grimaced in pain and confusion. A second arrow. They recognised him now, and yet they were still shooting at him – they would harm their own prince? Sabin was hardly one to use

his position to his advantage – that came more naturally to his brother – but he had thought it would mean something. They clearly weren't aiming to incapacitate him entirely, shooting at his feet like that: the intention was obviously to leave him with a serious but treatable wound that would render him unable to advance so that he could be brought back to the castle without resisting. But even that: was that how their own staff would treat him or his brother, now that their father was gone and the kingdom was the responsibility of two teenagers? Imprison them in the castle, even if they had to maim them to do it?

A new voice rose over the sounds of the guards: one that still carried the high pitch of youth.

“Lower your weapons! I command you –” the voice paused, and then added somewhat uncertainly, “as your king!”

Father, Sabin thought in a moment of delirium; and then, Edgar. The commotion had died down, so he stole a glance behind him. Sure enough, it was his brother, somehow looking royal at seventeen, his hair blowing behind him in the wind, his arms spread imperiously, the image of a monarch addressing his people.

“Return to your stations,” Edgar continued, and Sabin could hear a slight tremor in his voice.

“But, Your Hi- Your Majesty,” one of the guards argued. “Your Majesty’s brother is fleeing the castle, Sire –”

“You have no proof of who that man is,” Edgar interrupted.

“Listen to me. Return to your stations at once. None of you will mention this incident to anyone.” He hesitated, and then added, “Am I understood?”

The guards mumbled in assent, and gradually dispersed, until only Edgar was left, leaning on the parapet.

“Are you injured?” he called out.

Edgar was still speaking with the same impersonal, majestic voice, and Sabin realised that he was still pretending that it wasn’t his brother, alone and wounded, down in the desert. Perhaps it was in case some of the guards were still close enough to overhear; perhaps it was for another reason. Sabin wasn’t quite close enough to discern his facial expression.

“I’ll recover,” he called back, mimicking Edgar’s detached tone.

“Wait there,” said Edgar, and he disappeared inside. Sabin waited, although he wished he could keep moving; the desert heat was making his head hurt, as it often did on occasions where he ventured outside the castle. His foot was still worryingly painful too, but he’d have to cope with it and walk on, as there was certainly no alternative. Still, he obeyed his brother and sat there, still squeezing his foot, watching the blood flow from the wound and form a sticky mess on his hands.

Edgar returned shortly afterwards, holding something small and white that stood out against the dark castle stone. “Here,” he said, and he threw the item down to Sabin with

impressively precise aim. Sabin watched as it rolled the final inches towards him: it was a length of bandage, secured as a tight cylinder.

“Sorry I can’t be of more help,” said Edgar. He was probably trying to convey some deeper meaning with that, but Sabin had never been good with that kind of thing.

“Thank you,” said Sabin. Edgar looked like he was about to retreat, so he hastily added, “You ought to watch out for your staff ... Your Majesty.”

Edgar flinched at the honorific, but he nodded brusquely, and disappeared inside the castle.

Sabin wondered fleetingly whether Edgar was about to return again, but it seemed not to be the case, so he carefully bandaged his foot, did his best to rub the dried blood off his hands, and pulled himself up. Standing caused a fresh wave of pain, but he gritted his teeth and began to make the journey south, leaving the castle further and further behind, with sand and tears stinging his eyes.



Some time later, Sabin arrived in South Figaro. He’d had a few run-ins with monsters in the desert; they weren’t terribly strong, but he wasn’t used to fighting, beyond his unfortunate habit of punching things when he got angry. His foot had slowed him down, too, so he lacked the agility of youth that

he might have been able to rely on otherwise. He'd grappled with the monsters as best he could and eventually dispatched them, but not without sustaining a few further injuries, including a particularly nasty cut on his forehead: he'd have been in much worse shape by this point if not for Edgar's bandages. It was an uncomfortable reminder of the fact that he'd forgotten to pack such a fundamental item himself; it made him wonder what else he'd inevitably overlooked. He'd brought a good amount of gil, and some clothes, and a little food for the first morning, but he hadn't stopped and thought about what other less obvious items he might need – he'd been too caught up in the urgency of getting away from the castle. Sabin wasn't a thinker; that was Edgar's job.

He made his way to the inn: night hadn't quite fallen, but he doubted he could manage much other than sleeping by this point. The innkeeper looked bored and tired, but his eyes widened when he saw Sabin.

"Your Highness!"

The title stung, so soon after Sabin had left the castle: it made him think of his brother on the parapet and the wretched guards, and tears began to well up in his eyes again. He said the first thing he could think of to quell them. "You're mistaken. I'm no prince."

The innkeeper looked sceptical, and rightly so: only two young men in the entire kingdom had long blond hair like that, and the bandage around Sabin's forehead only covered up so

much of it. He didn't press the point, though, and asked, "Is it a room you're after, sir? One hundred gil a night."

"Please," said Sabin, and he dug into his bag for the hundred gil.

The innkeeper took it, his eyes lingering on Sabin's bloodied hands. "First on the left, sir. And here –" he reached under the counter, and handed Sabin a potion. "Take this before you go to sleep. It'll help with the – er –" he gestured towards Sabin's head, and his hands, and the rest of him, at a loss for words.

Sabin murmured his thanks, and headed towards the room, now fully certain that the innkeeper was aware of his identity: he wouldn't give out free potions to all and sundry. It was further confirmed when Sabin opened the door to his room: it was a good size, and tastefully decorated. Not the kind of place one would expect from a small-town inn: a double bed, a spacious closet, even an en-suite – and didn't most travellers have to share dormitories? This room must have been the one they reserved for visiting dignitaries and those with more money than they knew what to do with. And he'd been given the space for a hundred gil a night, just when he'd been trying to sever his connections with the castle.

He had a terrible urge to punch something – the table by the bed, the door, the wall, anything – and got as far as raising his arm, but a twinge of pain from a wound at his elbow caught him off-guard, and he lay down on the bed instead, tears prick-

ing at his eyes for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

Remembering the potion, he uncapped the bottle and forced its contents down his throat as quickly as he could. As he put the empty bottle aside, he suddenly recalled the circumstances of his father's death, and a feeling of alarm nagged at him: perhaps he shouldn't have been so quick to drink something given to him by a stranger. If the rumours were true, and somebody had been out to get his father, he and Edgar were surely in danger too.

Before too long, though, the familiar potion-numbness settled over him, and he knew the liquid was the usual mere painkiller.

A few years back, Edgar and Sabin had developed a potion habit. They'd each experimented with taking one every day before their lessons, and it had made the dullness of learning more bearable, the pleasant numb feeling distancing them from the boring details of Figaro's history that they were expected to memorise. While they waited during the changeover between tutors, they would slap at each other, giggling at the strange feeling, the usual sting obscured by the protection of the potion even as their forearms gradually turned red. After a while, the effect seemed to lessen, and so they'd started upping the quantity to two potions each morning, and coasted through their lessons with their minds somewhere in the vicinity of the castle roof.

It had ended when Sabin had been caught sneaking into

the medicine store. They took turns smuggling the potions out, but it was he who was eventually intercepted. He could still picture Edgar saying “of course you’d be the one to get caught”; he could still remember the irritation on his brother’s face. That had been before Sabin’s final growth spurt, when Edgar was still taller than him.

Then the staff had realised just how many potions the princes had stolen over the past months, and their father had given them a lecture on the dangers of drugs, which had shocked them both: they’d never quite realised what they were doing. They’d had to go off the potions completely after that, and their heads had ached for a week or two; they’d lounged about in their quarters complaining, pressing ice to their foreheads, until they felt better and their lessons resumed. Sabin had recovered first, and he’d had a few days of waiting while Edgar continued to lie in his bed moaning about the injustice of the situation and demanding fresh ice from the servants.

It all seemed so long ago; they’d grown up since then. They’d had to.

The effect of the potion was making the pain recede; even the throbbing in his head from a few hours of intermittent crying had gone away. He felt calm, at last, and he slept.

2

THE potion had granted Sabin a restful sleep, but when he awoke, he found himself still aching. Most of his injuries had begun to heal, although his foot still buzzed with pain, ugly and swollen. He limped into the en-suite, uncovered his wounds, and took a bath, watching as the water removed the remaining smudges of dried blood from his skin and gashes narrowed to thin red lines.

Once he was bathed, he applied new bandages to the wounds that needed them and threw away his torn and bloodstained clothes from the night before. He dressed, ate the tuna sandwich he'd tossed into his knapsack the day before, and left the room without further delay, determined to

get on the first boat out of Figaro that morning.

The innkeeper hailed him as he passed. "Would you like anything before you leave, sir? Tea, coffee, the paper?"

"No need," Sabin replied tersely. He knew the man wouldn't be as accommodating to regular travellers, although at least he wasn't insisting on addressing Sabin as Your Highness. He continued out of the inn and hobbled down to the port, ignoring the reactions he received from passersby: alarm that the prince was walking among them, followed by the polite deference that they customarily showed to members of the royal household, and then by curiosity and, he presumed, feigned concern once they noticed his wounds and gait. After a while, he raised the hood on his cloak, and that seemed to stave off some of the attention, although he still couldn't fool anyone who happened to catch a glimpse of his face.

The daily ferry to Nikeah was about to depart; Sabin struggled up the ladder onto the ship. "One way, please," he muttered to the ferryman, hoping to be inconspicuous.

"I can't allow that, Your Highness," the ferryman replied, looking almost insulted that Sabin might have asked.

He tried his defence from the previous night. "I'm not –"

"Prince Sabin," the man interrupted. "With all the respect due to Your Highness, I sincerely regret that I cannot transport you without an entourage. There are several, er, unsavoury characters who use this route regularly, and Your Highness

would be in great danger. I simply cannot have that on my conscience.”

Both the news and the careful, detached way in which it was delivered angered Sabin, and he found himself jerking a fist instinctively towards the railing that surrounded the deck. He took a deep breath and gathered himself.

“Then –” he didn’t like pulling rank – “I *order* you to let me on this ferry. Give me whatever protection you deem necessary. I need to get to Nikeah.”

“I don’t have the manpower to protect you,” the ferryman protested. At least he was speaking more plainly now, perhaps in reaction to Sabin’s desperation. “And I have the right to refuse your orders.” A tone of defiance had come into his voice. “You’re not king yet. To be frank, Your Highness, my conscience hardly comes into it. I have much more concern for my own safety than for yours, and the royal staff would string me up if they heard anything happened to the prince on my watch.”

There was possibly logic behind it, but the blow of his continued refusal blotted out any rational response that Sabin might otherwise have made. He grasped the railing and gritted his teeth, willing himself not to cry in front of a stranger.

“Come back with some of your staff, and I might take you,” suggested the ferryman.

Sabin turned before the man saw the tears springing to his

eyes, and limped back to dry land. Bringing anyone from the royal staff was entirely out of the question, of course, but he'd be back the next day and as many days after that as it would take to get on that ferry.

He desperately wanted to hit something, hard, but then he remembered that there was a chocobo stable in town, and headed there once he decided he'd calmed down enough to be capable of holding a conversation without bursting into tears again.

A girl of about his own age was manning the stable that day; Edgar could have charmed her to do whatever he wanted, but Sabin had never had much interest in that kind of thing. Even if he'd wanted to try, he suspected that being red-eyed and festooned with injuries might not have worked in his favour.

He wasn't sure how this worked – the castle had its own stock of birds – so he approached her and asked, “Can I hire a chocobo?”

“I'm sorry, Your Highness,” she said, and he didn't even bother trying to deceive her. “They're all out today. If you come back early tomorrow, we may have some.”

It seemed that there was no way to get out of the kingdom. Sabin mumbled his thanks to the girl before the tears could come back – it seemed like anything set him off at the moment – and hobbled around the back of the stable, away from the passing townspeople. He needed to be by himself, some-

where he could punch something into oblivion without having to worry about the kind of reactions it might cause. Eventually, he came to a wooded area, and squared up to a tree in the absence of a more suitable punchbag.

The rough bark of the tree trunk dug into his hands and scratched his knuckles raw, but he carried on throwing his fists into it, again and again, occasionally pausing to catch his breath and wipe the sweat and tears from his face before hurling himself at the tree again.

It was during one of these brief breaks that he heard rustling in the further trees. Not the sound of an animal – it was too clumsy – and it couldn't have been a monster so close to the town.

“Who's there?” he called.

There was no reply; the rustling grew quieter and eventually receded into silence. Sabin lost interest and turned back to the tree.

After a few more bouts, he drew back and decided that was enough. He felt – not better exactly, but something like himself. His hands stung awfully and ran with blood, and his foot was still acutely painful, especially after having been standing up for so long. He acquiesced and sat on the ground, retrieving the length of bandage from his bag and using some more of it to tend to his knuckles. He probably should have done it earlier, but it had taken him this long to become able to think straight.

He estimated it was early evening by this point; he'd been at the tree for hours, and was getting hungry. Next morning, he would go back to the port first thing and argue his case again, and if that didn't work, he'd return to the chocobo stable, where the girl had seemed more amenable to his request. The other option, if neither of those worked out, was leaving Figaro on foot, which would be dangerous: the monsters in the desert had got him bad enough, and they were supposed to be the weaker ones. He'd never been trained in how to fight effectively: princes were thought not to need to know about such visceral matters. And his foot would make walking long distances impossible at the moment. It was the ferries or the chocobos, then.

Sabin limped back towards the part of town where the shops were and bought a light dinner in one of the less crowded ones, trying to ignore the familiar looks and Your Highnesses that he received from the shopkeeper. Inwardly, he cursed his face and hair – particularly the latter – for making him so recognisable. Then, his eyes alighted on the rack of razors behind the counter, and he realised that one of those things could be easily changed.

He returned to the inn; the innkeeper was still behind his desk. “Another night, Your Highness, er, sir?” the man enquired. “The same room's still available.”

“What's the usual price?”

The innkeeper's face was impassive. “One hundred gil, sir.”

Sabin was emboldened by his session at the tree and irritated by his increasing hunger, so he stepped closer to the desk. “Bullshit,” he countered, stumbling a little over the unfamiliar word: he and Edgar hadn’t been allowed to swear at the castle – it was considered unbecoming of future kings. “That room’s worth more than a hundred. Don’t try to give me some kind of royal discount. I want to pay the same as anyone.”

“One hundred gil, sir,” he repeated placidly.

Sabin scowled, and handed over two hundred. “Keep the change,” he muttered.

Surprisingly, the innkeeper made no protest, taking the gil and casting an eye over Sabin’s new injuries. “Another potion for tonight, sir?”

Sabin shook his head. It would have helped him sleep, but he didn’t want to become a potion addict again; that would add to his problems. He’d have to get used to the pain instead.

On returning to the room, he sat on the bed to eat dinner – it was a far cry from the banquet hall at the castle – and then headed into the en-suite with his other purchase.

He uncovered the wound on his forehead carefully and set to work, holding chunks of hair in one hand and hacking at them with the razor. He suspected it wasn’t quite the right tool for the job, and the bandages on his hands got in the way, but he persevered until his hair was cropped close and uneven. Then he took the razor and shaved his head properly, letting the last fragments of hair fall into the sink in front of him.

If he'd been at the castle, he might have shaved his face as well, but now he considered growing a beard to further disguise himself, although he wasn't even sure he could. At some point during the previous year, when they were sixteen, Edgar had conceived the notion that a beard would make him look majestic, and had renounced shaving in the hope of obtaining one. "It'll be as long as my hair," he'd told Sabin in earnest excitement. After a few weeks, tired of the patches of uneven blond fluff around his chin and the stifled laughs from their staff each time he passed any of them, Edgar had given up and begun to shave again. Sabin had continued shaving as normal throughout; he'd thought Edgar's idea was silly, although he never let him know. It was always best to indulge his brother when he came up with one of his schemes. Not long afterwards, Edgar had begun experimenting with wearing different kinds of ribbons in his hair instead.

Sabin looked at himself in the mirror. His head seemed very small all of a sudden. From that perspective, he could almost pretend that this was the reflection of a complete stranger, but as soon as he let his gaze drift over his facial features, the illusion was ruined. His own reflection reminded him, as always, of Edgar, but now with all the features that constituted a kingly countenance in the case of his brother somehow assembled instead into the face of a lonely and desperate young man. For the first time since much earlier in the day, he began to cry again, letting out huge heaving sobs this time, great big

ugly shudders that he would have been mortified by if anyone else was there with him, even Edgar, mirror of his soul.

He slammed a fist against the rim of the sink in desperation, and the hard ceramic sent a jolt of pain through his arm. The shock of it stopped his sobbing abruptly, and he retreated to bed, tears still flowing in silence. His hands and foot hurt, and he missed Edgar, unbearably so. He wished he'd accepted the innkeeper's potion for the sake of quieting his mind, but he couldn't face limping back to the desk and losing even more of his dignity, not when he was wet-eyed and newly, impulsively bald. So he lay in the dark and wept until he fell asleep.

3

WITHOUT the pleasant fuzz of a potion, Sabin slept badly, and as light began to sneak through the window, he decided to take the opportunity to go out and try both the ferry and the chocobo stable before they grew busy. As he got up, he noticed a little dried blood on his pillow, and recalled that he'd forgotten to rebandage his head before going to bed; the wound must have opened during the night.

He made his way to the bathroom and saw to his injuries, trying to ignore the shameful reflection of his bald head in the mirror, before making his way out.

The innkeeper wasn't at his desk yet. Somebody, however, had dropped in to deliver a few copies of the morning paper,

and Sabin couldn't help noticing the drawing on the front page: profiles of himself and his brother, facing each other, Edgar's head positioned slightly above Sabin's as if he were still taller. Reluctantly, he unfolded the newspaper, and read the article.

Sabin Renounces Title, Flees Castle

The Figaro Reporter has been made aware of a dramatic turn of events in the saga of the royal succession. It is understood that two nights ago, Prince Sabin unexpectedly gave up his royal title and left the kingdom in the sole care of his brother. On the same night, he departed from the castle. Prince Edgar delivered the news to the royal council the following morning, after which it was communicated to the Figaro Reporter by a castle spokesperson.

Sabin is currently believed to be staying in South Figaro, where he has been sighted by a number of witnesses. Mireille Larrat, assistant manager of the chocobo stable, claimed to have spoken to the former prince, and told us he seemed to be "in a state of distress".

The royal council gave us the following statement: "This is a difficult time for the royal family, and both princes are grieving the sad death of their father. We entreat the public to treat Sabin with sympathy at this time, and we urge him to return to the castle when he feels able to do so."

The king-in-waiting, Prince Edgar, was unavailable for comment.

Tears welled in Sabin's eyes again, and he rubbed them

away impatiently. At least the council seemed to be respecting his decision to remove himself from the succession: that was clear from their statement's reference to just "Sabin" and the designation of Edgar as "the king-in-waiting". But they were clearly keen for him to go back to the castle: he was to have his freedom in name only. And what the stable girl had said was just embarrassing. Everyone would think him a coward, running away because he couldn't deal with his father's death – but it wasn't just that. He was taking the freedom that had been denied to him and his brother for so long.

A tear dripped onto the newspaper, and he hastily folded it up again and left the inn.

Shaving his head didn't seem to have prevented Sabin being recognised by the townspeople, who continued to stare at him openly as he walked the streets, their expressions now shifting quickly from surprise to pity: clearly they had read the paper. He tried not to meet anyone's eyes. At one point, an older woman actually asked if she could help him, and he glared at her with such reproach – more than he intended – that she stepped back immediately and quickly disappeared into an alley.

After buying breakfast in the quietest shop he could find, he limped to the port again and attempted to board the morning ferry.

The ferryman smirked as Sabin struggled to climb onto the ship. "I wondered if I'd see you again this morning," he said

once Sabin had made it onto the deck, no longer using the respectful tone he had employed the day before: he too must have learnt about Sabin's abandonment of his royal status. "Although I regret to inform you that I have been issued an order not to take you on my boat."

"An order?" Sabin echoed, his heart sinking. "From where?"

"The royal council," the man answered, with a smirk. He produced a small piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Sabin.

All transportation companies operating in South Figaro are hereby commanded to refuse passage to the former prince, Sabin, lately of Figaro Castle. Effective immediately and until further notice, as of – and there was the day's date, and the royal seal.

Tears clouded Sabin's eyes again, and he thrust the note back at the ferryman. "That's – no, that's bullshit." He'd used that word more in the past two days than previously in his entire life, and he felt like he was going to be using it a lot more in the near future. "You can't – they can't –"

"I'm very sorry," said the ferryman. It was an obvious lie.

Sabin turned and disembarked from the ship, not pausing to wipe away the tears that had begun to stream down his face in earnest. He headed straight to the chocobo stable and made for the girl. She flushed when she recognised him, no doubt recalling what she'd said to the *Figaro Reporter*, and probably embarrassed by the state of the man who had come before her;

or both of those things, and something else, judging by the way she stood between Sabin and the occupied chocobo pens as if she was trying to shield the birds from view.

“You’ve had that order from the council,” he concluded, trying to ignore the sobs that punctuated his speech.

She didn’t deny it. “I’m sorry,” she said. “If they found out I’d helped you leave, I’d be done for. You know what it’s like.”

Her tone conveyed genuine apology, and he couldn’t be angry with her, so he stood there and cried while she watched him with a concerned expression. He felt awful. Then he remembered the trees not far from the stable, and decided it would be best to go and punch the hell out of one of those again.

“Y- er, Sabin,” said the girl, as he turned to leave. Her face turned red again as he met her gaze. “Will you see a doctor?”

He stared at her dumbly.

“I – I just think, if you’re not going back to the castle – you’re limping really badly ... I’m just worried it’ll get worse, if you don’t see anyone.”

Sabin wiped his eyes and nodded. She was right: his other wounds were healing, but his foot remained as painful, and he’d have been struggling to walk at all if he wasn’t spurred on by pure desperation. “I’ll go today,” he assured her.

First, though, he had to get back to those trees, because he felt like his head might explode otherwise.



After a few rounds at the tree, his head felt much clearer, and he suddenly realised there was a way of stopping the council's order. As king, even king-in-waiting, Edgar would surely have power that trumped theirs, and Sabin knew he would be displeased to find his brother's movements restricted like this. If he could get a letter to Edgar into the midday post, his brother would receive it by the afternoon and Sabin might even get a reply the next day. He hobbled back into town and entered the post office.

After buying the necessary items, he sat down at the little table that people used to package their deliveries and used the pencil stub that had been left there to compose the letter.

Roni,

I'm safe. I don't know if you've heard the order the rotten council have put out to stop me going anywhere. Your authority ought to outrank theirs.

I hope you're safe. I miss you.

S. R.

He'd never been much of a letter-writer – yet another skill where Edgar had always outshone him – and it was difficult to control the pencil with his bandaged hand, so he left it at that.

When they were young, around eight or nine, Edgar had been sent away to some kind of educational programme for children interested in engineering. There had been a lot of fuss

about it because of the additional security arrangements that would have to be made for the young prince, and the fact that the event took place in Vector, and nobody had quite been sure at the time of exactly how friendly Figaro ought to appear to be towards the Gestahlian Empire. But Edgar had gone, with a squad of servants and bodyguards and a written contract specifying exactly what would happen in the event of harm to his person, and for the six weeks that he was there, he'd exchanged letters with Sabin. Even at that age, Edgar's writing had had a kind of charming eloquence. *Dear René, the other children here are dreadfully dull, but the machines are fantastic. Did you know there's one you can put a whole bag of nuts into, and it'll take the shell off every one in under a minute? It's about as tall as I am. I thought that might make you laugh. Write soon and tell me about how boring your lessons are. Does Dr Caionferas still wear that awful coat that I teased him about? I miss you. Lots of love, Roni.*

Edgar had been invited back the following year for a longer follow-up programme, but the risk was too great, and by that time, reports were starting to emerge of the kind of activities the Empire was involved in. When their father had sent the letter turning down Edgar's place, Edgar had refused to speak to him or any of the staff for an entire week, and Sabin had had to act as go-between.

Sabin hesitated about what to write on the envelope, but eventually put *Prince Edgar, Figaro Castle*. That ought to be

clear enough. He marked it “confidential”, stuck on the stamp while trying to avoid looking at the image of his father’s face, and left it for collection.

It turned out that the doctor’s surgery was just opposite the post office: a small building with various jars and instruments displayed in the window, and a sign that read *Dr H Goret, Physician*. He grimaced, thinking of the stable girl. She’d seemed genuinely concerned about him, but he didn’t want to go anywhere that might mean reports would be written about him and potentially sent back to the castle. He stood there, hesitating, until he realised that the pain in his foot was making him grind his teeth together, and capitulated.

Dr Goret didn’t look that surprised to see him. He cast his eyes over Sabin’s various bandages and half-healed injuries, raised his eyebrows, and asked, “Um – are you just here for a general check-over, or is there something specific I can help you with?”

“It’s my foot,” Sabin told him, and he sat down, gingerly pulling off his sandal to let the doctor unwrap the bandage and examine the wound.

Goret looked at for a while, and eventually, in a carefully calm tone, remarked “You’ve been shot.” He prodded at the wound, and Sabin clamped his teeth together to stop himself crying out. “It’s beginning to get infected,” the doctor added.

He continued to poke around the wound, and amid the pain Sabin managed to ask, “Is there something I can take for it?”

Goret looked up in surprise as if he'd forgotten the rest of Sabin was there. "Yes," he said, and he retrieved a tube of ointment from a cabinet. "You can use this twice a day until it heals. I'll put some on for you now." He paused. "This may sting."

Sabin couldn't help moaning in discomfort as the doctor liberally applied the ointment to his foot. In the end, he shoved the fingers of one shaking hand into his mouth and bit down in an attempt to force the involuntary sounds to stop.

Goret covered the wound with a fresh bandage, and returned to his cabinet. "If you insist on walking," he said, "you should use a stick." He retrieved one from the cabinet and handed it to Sabin. "And carry some potions with you for the pain." He sat down and fixed his gaze on Sabin's face. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Nothing," Sabin replied. "How much do I owe you?"

The doctor cast his eyes over Sabin's bandaged hands, and asked again, "Are you sure there's nothing else?"

"I'm sure."

He stood up and walked to the window. "You know," he remarked casually, "nothing you tell me will get back to the castle."

Sabin almost laughed. "You're not expecting me to believe that," he said.

"I certainly am. Medical confidentiality. I took an oath when I entered this profession." He sounded affronted that

Sabin might have thought otherwise.

“These are just ...” Sabin shook his head. “The rest will heal. I was just worried about the foot.”

“Hmm,” said Goret thoughtfully. “But how do you feel ... otherwise? You may be aware that I’m a doctor of the mind as well as the body.”

“I’m fine,” said Sabin tightly. Like everyone else in South Figaro, the doctor had clearly read the morning paper and learnt about his “state of distress” from the stable girl.

Goret looked him in the eye. “I doubt that. Your father died only last week. You’ve left your home and your brother, apparently without giving anyone prior warning. You’re grieving. You’ve clearly,” he nodded towards Sabin’s foot, “gone through an ordeal if you ended up getting shot. And the rumour in town is that you go about for half the day breaking down in tears if anybody so much as talks to you.”

Sabin couldn’t do much to disprove the last part, as he found himself crying again, openly, right there in front of the doctor. The bluntness with which he’d delivered the account of the last few days was a shock, but it was true: Sabin’s father was dead, he’d probably never see Edgar again, and his brother was stuck in that castle with a horde of loathsome characters who’d shoot him too if he dared go against them.

Goret waited while Sabin sobbed, his hands pressed to his face, the bandages over his knuckles growing damp from the tears. Eventually, he raised his head and looked back at the

doctor. "I don't want to talk about it," he pleaded.

"And I won't force you to," said Goret calmly. "But if you ever feel that you need to speak to someone, anything you tell me will be treated with the strictest confidence."

Sabin nodded and wiped his eyes. He doubted he'd be back, but he appreciated the concern, even if it was merely professional. "How much for the ointment?" he asked again.

"Twenty gil, normally, but –"

He handed over fifty, struggled out of his chair, and left.

The stick helped with walking a little, but it made Sabin feel like a weak old man and seemed to draw even more attention to him. He ducked into a quieter street to avoid the stares, and made his way back into the trees.



After a few hours of throwing punches, Sabin picked up some dinner at the shop and hobbled back to the inn, having reconciled himself to booking a third night at the place.

"Evening," said the innkeeper as he walked in.

Sabin approached the desk. "I need that room again tonight," he said.

"It's already reserved for you. You paid for it yesterday."

He shook his head impatiently. "That wasn't – fine. You know what, I'm not going to argue with you. But I have the

gil, so maybe you'll think about charging me the going rate if I'm unfortunate enough to have to use your services again."

The innkeeper smiled mirthlessly. "One hundred gil is the going rate, sir. You may also be interested to know that we offer a special discount: if you're planning to stay for seven nights and book all seven together in advance of the first night, the seventh is free –"

"I'm not intending to stay for seven nights," Sabin interrupted angrily.

"You're going back to the castle?"

"No. I'm getting out of this damned kingdom as soon as I can."

The innkeeper eyed his stick. "And you'll be leaving on foot, sir?"

"Go to hell," said Sabin, and he limped down the corridor to his room.

4

IT was morning again. Sabin awoke with the vague remnants of an unpleasant dream about his father and brother still in his mind, got up, and applied the ointment to his foot. He'd learnt the previous night that it was slightly more bearable when he did it himself, which was a relief. The sting still made him clench his teeth together tightly and grip the bed with his free hand, but he was getting used to it.

He changed his bandages in the en-suite, and left the room once again.

"Letter for you," the innkeeper said, handing it to him.

Sabin didn't feel like the man deserved thanks after his remarks of the previous night, so he took the letter wordlessly,

taking care to cover the stamp with his hand, and sat down to read it. The familiar writing on the envelope read *Sabin, lately Prince of Figaro Castle, currently of South Figaro*. He wasn't surprised that the postman had known where to find him from such a vague address; the inn was where all travellers stayed, and Sabin's current presence there was probably South Figaro's worst-kept secret.

He pulled out the letter. The handwriting was a little less precise than usual, as if Edgar had been in an awful hurry to write it.

Dearest René,

About my authority, it's a difficult one. Nobody is entirely clear about what the status of king-in-waiting actually entails, and the council are understandably reticent to confirm whether I outrank them. The coronation won't be for at least a month, and after that I will of course have the power to defy the council, or at least to replace them if they disagree with me. Be assured that in the meantime I am giving as much attention as I can to the matter, despite being constantly reminded that there are a hundred more pressing issues to attend to – I haven't quite managed to keep on top of everything over the last few days, having not felt entirely myself for reasons that are as boring as they are manifold.

I'm so glad you are safe. I am staying alert and I miss you terribly. Don't think about coming back for one instant.

All my love, E. R.

PS. I'm sure you're aware that the king's mail (incoming and

outgoing) is strictly monitored. I will sneak this out of the castle personally, but I doubt this will be possible once the crown is on my head.

Sabin closed his eyes as they stung with tears once again. He'd gone nearly a full twenty-four hours without crying, since the doctor – but the sight of his brother's handwriting, and the familiar scent that lingered on the letter, and Edgar's words most of all were more than enough to put a stop to that. He missed his beloved brother dreadfully, and his heart ached for him, king before his time, sequestered in that castle full of hateful two-faced noblemen and their spineless lackeys. Now that their father was gone, Edgar was the only good person in the entire place.

Sabin could tell from the letter that Edgar was stressed and tired and probably making himself ill – he would be having almost as miserable a time as Sabin himself was, stuck doing the job that both of them had always known they would hate. But at least he could do it. Sabin would have been a reluctant and useless king, but Edgar would be a reluctant and decent one.

The tears began to slide down his face as he reread the first part of the letter. As tactfully as Edgar had phrased it, it certainly sounded like he wouldn't be able to overturn the council's order until he was crowned, so Sabin was going to be stuck in South Figaro for another whole month. He hated the rotten place and the way all the townspeople looked at him like he

was a charity case. He hated having to admit defeat and come back to the inn every night like a prisoner. It was a miserable, stifled existence, as bad as the one he'd escaped from in the castle.

He clutched the letter to his chest and wept.

When his tears were spent, he numbly considered what to do next. Really, there was only one thing to do in this town that would allow him to avoid the prying eyes of the townspeople and give himself a chance at feeling a little less terrible.

He left the inn and made for the trees again.

The girl from the chocobo stable crossed his path, and he tried to avoid meeting her eye, but she stopped right in front of him and said, "Sabin."

He nodded warily.

"You went to the doctor," she said, glancing at his stick.

"That's right."

"Did he ... help you?"

"He gave me some ointment."

"Oh."

It suddenly occurred to Sabin that the girl may have hoped he would take advantage of the doctor's other services; when he'd seen her yesterday after finding out about the council's order, he'd been utterly disconsolate. Eventually, he said, "He asked me about ... the other things."

"Did you talk to him?"

He shook his head. "I can't. Not yet."

She nodded slowly, and then spoke again. “Look ... I’m sorry I said that about you to the paper. They just ... they’d seen you in the stable, and I thought it would maybe help you if I let people know you were in trouble – I didn’t know about the rest of it.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.” It didn’t, really.

“Well, if you ever want to talk to someone,” she continued hesitantly, “as a – a friend, you can come by the stable.” She was looking at the ground. “We can’t give you a bird, but I’m here if you need anything else.”

He was crying again. There was something about her simple kindness that got to him, the fact that someone who was little more than a stranger seemed genuinely concerned for his wellbeing – not because of professional obligations, like the doctor, but because she seemed to actually care about him. He wasn’t sure what he’d done to deserve it.

“I’ll, um, get back to work,” she added, looking abashed at seeing his tears once more.

“Thank you,” he muttered as she retreated.

He watched her walk into the distance. A young man and a young woman of about the same age: Edgar would have been able to tell him if there were romantic implications there. She’d seen him at his worst, so in all likelihood, anything that might have come between them was a lost cause. And Sabin wasn’t even sure if he was interested in girls at all; he’d surely never love anyone as much as he loved his brother.

Around five years ago, Edgar had suffered from an intense fever, and been confined to his bed for ten days, sweating and sleeping fitfully. On the third day, Sabin had climbed in beside him and held him tight, stroking his brother's hot, clammy skin and pressing kisses to his limp hair while Edgar tossed and turned and cried out in discomfort. The servants had rolled their eyes and told him he'd catch it. "I don't mind," he'd retorted. "He'd do the same for me." He spent all the time he could by Edgar's side that week, slipping back into the bed as soon as he was excused from lessons and meals.

Sabin stayed well, and before too long Edgar too was up again, pale and tired but otherwise almost his usual self, answering back to their tutors and asking for seconds at dinner and doing all the other things that Sabin loved about him.



The tree took a good beating that day. Its sharp bark dug into Sabin's fresh bandages and new blood ran down his fingers, but he ignored the injuries and continued throwing himself at it for hours, occasionally stopping to catch his breath before starting again with renewed vigour. He'd forgotten to pick up any breakfast after the torment of Edgar's letter and the encounter with the stable girl, and he felt weak and exhausted after so many bouts at the tree, but he'd keep going at it until night fell or until he passed out, whichever came first.

It was during one of his brief pauses that he heard a sound among the trees not unlike the one he'd noticed two days earlier.

"Who's there?" he called, as he had before. He flinched at the sound of his own raised voice: the high, frightened tone of a young boy.

There was no answer. He cleared his throat, and forced the pitch of his voice lower as he added, "Show yourself!"

There was more rustling, and eventually, a tall, muscular youth, perhaps not much younger than Sabin himself, emerged from the trees, looking as if he would rather have been somewhere else.

Sabin kept his fists raised in defence. He had no idea what the boy wanted from him, but it occurred to him that being alone on the edge of town with eighty thousand gil in his bag, as someone of personal interest to the royal household, could make him a likely target for a number of dishonourable activities.

The boy glowered in the direction of the trees that he had come from, and then gestured carelessly towards Sabin's fists. "You're doing that wrong," he said in a bored tone, before approaching and stretching out his own hand. "Look. Curl your fingers in tighter, like this. And keep your thumb down. And you need to stop bending your wrist. Watch."

He stepped up to the tree and threw a punch of his own, then stood back and wiggled his fingers in annoyance. "And

there are better things to go for around here than *that*," he complained.

"Such as?" asked Sabin sharply.

The boy shrugged. "We've got stuff." He laughed. "You know, that's the first time I've heard you actually talk? You usually just stand there and cry and punch that tree. What's it ever done to you?" He scratched his head. "I thought maybe you *couldn't* talk."

"You've been watching me for a while, huh?" Sabin said.

"This is the third day in a row you've come here," the boy confirmed.

Sabin scowled. "What's your point? Looking for a story to sell to the paper?"

He looked confused by the suggestion. "Don't blame me, I wasn't the one who wanted to come out here and watch you every day. Your technique's appalling."

"So ..." Sabin thought to himself briefly, trying to work out exactly what was going on here – "There's someone else with you? Back there?" He glanced towards the group of trees that the stranger had appeared from.

The boy looked unenthusiastically in the same direction. "Dad!" he whined.

Sabin waited while a second person emerged from the undergrowth: a middle-aged man, muscled like his son, although it seemed to suit him better. He was smiling in a way that juxtaposed oddly with the boy's sullen expression.

“Ignore him,” he said to Sabin as he approached. “You’ve got spirit, son. This one’s all about rules and book-learning.” He cuffed his son on the shoulder playfully, and the boy bristled in annoyance. “I brought him out here to see what it means to be a real fighter. I keep telling him, you really have to feel it. Isn’t that right?” He turned back to the boy, who nodded glumly.

Still smiling, the man held out a hand for Sabin to shake. “You can call me Duncan. And this cheerful individual is my son, Vargas.”

Sabin wouldn’t normally have needed to introduce himself, but he hesitated: these two were just about the first people who’d spoken to him here without stumbling over an aborted “Your Highness”, and he wondered –

“My name’s –” he began.

Duncan cut him off with a laugh. “We know who you are.”

Trying not to reveal his embarrassment, Sabin accepted the handshake. Duncan frowned as his fingers came into contact with the bandage over Sabin’s knuckles, and his expression grew more serious. “Why do you come here, son?” he asked pensively.

Sabin shifted on the spot uneasily, and eventually replied, “I hit things when I’m angry.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Makes me feel better,” Sabin mumbled.

“Do you get angry a lot?”

"I do at the moment," Sabin said, more harshly than he intended.

"Right," said Duncan, looking appropriately contrite. He studied Sabin for a while before continuing. "You know, I know what that feels like. When crying and yelling doesn't cut it so you have to put your whole body into it, and you think if you bash yourself up enough that'll put it all to rights, like the pain on the inside gets overtaken by what's on the outside. Well, you can do it that way if you want. You can try ignoring it all and feeling sorry for yourself because of things that are your own damn fault. As if *this* –" he grabbed Sabin's hand – "is anything to do with what's in *there*." He lifted the hand and shoved it forwards until it rested against Sabin's chest.

Sabin stood there, too stunned to cry. Nobody had ever said anything like this to him before. Duncan was looking right into his eyes, his own blazing with determination.

"So what's the alternative?" Sabin asked wearily.

"Damn it, son, the first thing's to stop running away from it. Let yourself grieve. Get a damn sense of perspective. Because if you're out here whacking that thing for eight hours a day, you're going to kill yourself."

"What's it to you? Why do you care what happens to me?"

Duncan furrowed his brow. "OK, how can I put this so you get it into your head? It wasn't because you were a prince that people cared about you, it was because you were a person. And you're still a damn person."

The memory of the stable girl came to Sabin's mind unbidden, and then the image of Dr Goret, and then, inexplicably, Edgar's face –

And then he cried, and the sobs wracked his throat, and he raised his injured hands to his face and sank to his knees, and a strong pair of arms wrapped around him, and a low voice murmured, "That's it, son. Let it all out. I've got you. I'm here."

"What can I do?" Sabin choked. "What am I meant to do to fix it?"

Duncan made no reply, but rubbed Sabin's back slowly, holding him there as Sabin shuddered with grief and pain, until a different, younger voice spoke from above them.

"We're going to teach you to fight," said Vargas. "Me and Dad."

Sabin looked up, and through the blur of tears he could see the boy standing there, looking highly embarrassed.

"That's what you said, right, Dad?" Vargas went on hesitantly. "I don't mean it'll fix ... I just ... you're like us. You're a fighter."

Sabin covered his face again, and the tears kept streaming from his eyes, and his shoulders continued to heave as Duncan rubbed them with a careful hand.

He'd be alright. Time would pass, and the townspeople would forget that a former prince walked in their midst – soon enough, it would be as if he'd never been one at all.