

LOCKE had always liked Narshe. It seemed the obvious place to return to when all the unpleasantness was over. Anywhere else, he and Celes would have received endless praise after what they'd been part of: he wouldn't have minded it, but he knew it would have made her uncomfortable. So they settled in Narshe, where the townspeople's former distrust of Locke balanced out with his new status as one of the world's saviours, and created an atmosphere of bewildered indifference.

There were friends there too, if one was prepared to overlook the fact that they weren't human. In fact, Locke and Celes ran into Mog not a week after they'd settled in their new place.

"Mr Locke, kupo!" he greeted them. "Lady Celes! Wonderful to see you both! You should pay a visit to our cave, kupo!"

"Why do you get to be a lady and I'm only a mister?" Locke complained when he had gone on his way.

"Because he's extremely perceptive," she replied with a smirk.

He wrinkled his nose at her defiantly and they continued their walk.

Celes was busy the next day with some kind of administrative matter that Locke couldn't even begin to force himself to focus on, so he headed into the caves on his own rather than find himself at a loose end.

He made for Mog, whom he found in conversation with a group of other moogles. It was strange, he thought, that

they could carry out entire conversations using only the word “kupo” – along with, admittedly, the occasional “kupopo”.

Mog acted as translator as Locke introduced himself to the rest of the tribe. While they spoke, he couldn’t help thinking more about the moogles’ language. They weren’t like animals, who communicated mostly non-verbally: everything he said was rendered as a “kupo” of some kind. Sometimes a single “kupo” stood for a whole sentence; sometimes there were a number of them. What gave each one its meaning, he decided, had to be the specific way the word was said: some were long and drawn-out, while others were very clipped. And then there was the pitch: some kuPO and some KUPO and some KUPOPO.

He tried varying the way he introduced himself to each moogle to see whether there was any logic behind it. When he said “I’m a treasure hunter,” Mog translated the sentence, unsurprisingly, as “kupo”. When he tried “I’m the world’s most renowned treasure hunter,” he got “kupopo”, which just about made sense. But when he greeted them with “I’m the world’s most renowned treasure hunter, and my girlfriend and I just helped save everyone from an incredibly dangerous madman, you’re welcome,” Mog went back to “kupo”, so he was back to square one.

After meeting the entire clan, he found himself alone with Mog again, and said, “So, your language. How does it work?”

“Work, kupo?” said the moogle, flapping his stubby wings

as he looked up at him.

“Well ...” Locke tried to explain. “In human language, we have different words, and they mean different things. But in your language, you just have one word.”

Mog seemed not to understand.

He tried a different technique. “What would it mean if I said ... kupo?”

Mog looked offended briefly, and then answered. “It would mean something like ‘I need to replace my outside light fitting,’ kupo. But with a very thick accent. Very difficult to understand, kupo.”

“Oh,” said Locke, trying not to be too put out by the criticism. “How about kupo?” He varied the pitch a bit.

“Watch out, there are three bears coming down from the mountain.”

“Kupopo?”

“My goodness, have you heard the news from Tzen?”

“Kupo?” He tried to make this one as similar as possible to the first time he’d said it.

“Please leave your equipment in the designated waiting area.’ Why are you asking, kupo?”

“I’m just interested,” said Locke truthfully. “Maybe I could come back tomorrow and talk to you again?”

“I’d be happy to see a friend any day, Mr Locke, kupo,” said Mog.

The next morning, he got up early, pilfered a mostly blank notebook and a pencil from Celes' collection, and prepared to visit the cave again. As he got dressed – it was quite a job for someone who was now definitely the world's most famous treasure hunter to maintain his image – Celes stirred in bed and looked up at him.

“Where are you going so early?” she mumbled sleepily.

He grinned at her in the mirror as he adjusted his earrings. “I'm going to see the moogles again,” he said. “I want to learn about their language. There seems to be no rhyme or reason as to whether they say ‘kupo’ or ‘kupopo’, but I think it might have something to do with the length of the sound, or maybe the –” A glimpse of her reflection revealed that she had gone back to sleep, so he dropped a quick kiss onto her cheek and hurried out.

This time, he decided to listen to what the moogles said to him instead of trying to produce their sounds himself. Mog translated again, and Locke tried his best to write down the moogle phrases and their translations in his notebook, attempting to devise his own system for writing the different pitches and length of each “ku” and “po”. It was difficult – writing was hard for him anyway, as he'd only learnt a few years earlier when Edgar had taught him. But he eventually came up with a system of symbols to indicate the features of the sounds, and attached the appropriate ones to each “kupo” he wrote down.

He went back to the caves most days for a long time. Af-

ter a while, he began to take a timer and a tuning fork that had ended up in his possession years ago somehow – well, he must have nicked it from somebody, but he couldn't recall why. That helped him gain a more accurate impression of the types of sounds the moogles were making. Eventually, he started asking them, through the long-suffering Mog, how they said certain words in their language, and wrote their answers down too.

After a series of visits, he'd filled Celes' notebook and had to start another one. She, meanwhile, was still knee-deep in paperwork due to her new position, which Locke still failed to understand but had something to do, in the vaguest possible terms, with international borders and taxation. At around the time he began using the new notebook, she cut off all her hair into a short bob, which Locke thought was incredibly cute. She told him that sitting across the table gazing at her for hours while she did her work was "creepy", though, so he continued to spend most of his time in the caves.

By the time Celes' hair was almost hip-length again, Locke had made enough progress to consider trying to speak to the moogles in their language without having to assume he'd get the same results as the first time he did it. On the day he tried, Mog was absent – he'd recently taken to excusing himself when he saw Locke coming – so Locke made for an unsuspecting younger member of the group and crouched down to get into its line of sight.

Once the moogle had turned a wary eye on him, he checked his notebook one last time, and carefully announced, “Kupo.”

“Kupo,” the moogle replied, looking a little shocked. So far, so good.

“Kupo,” said Locke, encouraged.

“Kupo?”

“Oh, hang on. Er ... kupo?”

“Kupopo!”

Locke pumped a fist into the air, exhilarated by his success. It was his first proper conversation using moogle language. The moogles seemed to have noticed that something unusual had happened too, as a small crowd of them gathered around him and began talking excitedly – too quickly for him to decipher, though, so he gestured his excuses and headed back to the house.

When he got there, Celes had a surprise for him.

“There’s a certain book about import regulations I need to get hold of,” she explained, “and the only copy on this continent is in the Figaro Castle library. I just heard back from the librarian about going to see it next week –”

So they went to visit their friends at the castle. They took a pair of chocobos – Locke was keen on the idea of sharing, but they had the money for two and most of the Narshe birds couldn’t take the weight of two people. Edgar entertained them splendidly on the evening they arrived, but was occupied with royal business the next morning, so Locke joined

Celes in the library and sat next to her fidgeting until she had had enough of him.

“Why don’t you find a book to read?” she suggested, brow furrowed as she studied a page of figures. “There’s got to be one thing here that’ll interest you.”

Locke still wasn’t used to reading and it tended to make his head hurt, but he decided there might be a book about the moogles’ language and asked the librarian to show him to the section of the library where one might be found.

“Ah, you’ll be after the linguistics section,” said the librarian, and escorted him there.

Most of the books dealt only with human language, but he eventually came upon one entitled *The Tongues of Beasts*, and flipped through to the section on moogles. There was just a short entry: *The moogles’ language consists of one word, which can be rendered in our alphabet as kupo. No human has succeeded in deciphering their tongue, although some moogles have been able to adopt ours. See also: Yeti.*

Locke checked the publication date: the book turned out not to be particularly old. How did one report an error in a book? He located the librarian and asked. “This says nobody can understand moogles,” he explained, “but I can.”

The librarian looked sceptical. “How so?”

Locke retrieved his notebook, which he’d brought with him in case he got the chance to meet any of the local moogle population in the Figaro caves, and showed him. “I’ve

been visiting them for months,” he supplied, as the librarian carefully perused his notes.

Eventually, the man handed the notebook back to him. “Mr Cole, I do believe this has the makings of a groundbreaking research project. The book is right: nobody’s been able to decipher the way moogles speak before, but it looks like you might have cracked it. What do you say to sending some of this to the linguistics faculty at Vector?”

“Vector?” Locke echoed, confused. The place had been destroyed, which the librarian surely knew, unless spending so much time under the desert had maybe had ill effects on his brain. Did a year of slow asphyxiation do that to a person? It seemed quite likely, he reasoned –

The librarian spoke again, and Locke forced himself to pay attention. “Vector University. It’s not in the city, so it survived all that business. They were sponsored by the Empire, but they’re trying to broaden their research specialisms now, and I’m sure they’d be extremely interested to see some of this. Can I send a few pages?”

Locke didn’t want to part with any of his notes, so the two of them agreed to copy a sample onto his work onto some fresh paper and the librarian sent that.

Time passed, they returned to Narshe, and Locke resumed his visits to the moogles. Soon enough, he could understand nearly all of what they said, and was able to participate in about half of their conversations without difficulty. Mog, relieved



by the fact that he no longer needed to act as translator, had stopped finding excuses to absent himself and instead bragged to the other moogles about being the one who had introduced them to this man, not only the world's most competent treasure hunter, an actual saviour of humankind, and very handsome, but also the only person who'd taken the trouble to learn how to communicate with them.

Locke had almost forgotten about the letter that was sent to Vector University by the time he received a reply. Celes came upon it first, hidden in her usual daily pile of business correspondence, and handed it to him with a frown. "Who's writing to you from the southern continent?" she asked, having noticed the postmark.

He explained, and opened the letter.

*Dear Mr Cole,*

*It was with interest that I received the correspondence from Dr Almaraz, librarian of Figaro Castle, pertaining to your discoveries in the field of bestial linguistics. While I cannot entirely confidently assess the merit of your work based on the small sample you kindly shared with me, I am satisfied that your research shows extraordinary promise. We are hoping to endow a chair in the field as part of the university's current expansion plan, and I would like to take this opportunity cordially to invite you to attend our interview process, which will be held next month. Please do not allow me to push you unduly, Mr Cole, but I suspect that this work represents a breakthrough in our discipline, and would*

*be delighted by the opportunity to discuss the matter with you further.*

*With all best wishes,*

*Dr Herrio Zaufestra*

*Professor of Syntax*

*Head of Linguistics Faculty, Vector University*

Celes, who had been standing behind Locke helping him with some of the more difficult words as he read the letter aloud, leant into his back and wrapped her arms around his waist. “That’s marvellous,” she murmured into his neck. “Good for you. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” said Locke. “It’d be great to talk to an expert about my stuff, but I’m not sure about this whole interview process thing. Can you honestly see me as an academic?”

He turned to face her, and she kissed him briefly. “You’d make an adorable academic,” she assured him. “Why not give it a shot?”

So they made their way to the southern continent and to the university on the edge of where Vector used to be. Celes gave Locke a quick good-luck kiss and headed to the university library – she’d decided to use the trip to take advantage of the rare volumes they held covering the historical minutiae of the Gestahlian Empire’s taxation system. He, with a head still fuzzy after having taken various tablets to prepare himself for the previous night’s ferry journey, followed the signs to the linguistics faculty and made himself known.

Soon enough, Professor Zaufestra himself emerged and shook Locke's hand enthusiastically. "Delighted to meet you in person," he said. "I'm so pleased you accepted our invitation." He gave Locke a brief tour of the faculty before escorting him to his own office, where they discussed Locke's work on the moogles. Locke had brought his small bundle of notebooks with his notes on the creatures' language, and Zaufestra inspected them eagerly, muttering things like "yes, the prosodic features of these utterances are quite remarkable" and "I do believe this is an example of topic-fronting". Locke just about managed to work out what Zaufestra meant based on the samples he was examining, and provided more information on his discoveries, which the professor found all the more interesting.

"Well," the older man concluded after a long discussion, "I hope you won't think me too forward if I offer you a position."

"Wasn't there supposed to be an interview?" Locke asked.

"Ah yes, that. To tell the truth, not one of the other applicants has shown an ounce of the intellectual prowess displayed in these notebooks. And we have to fill this position by the end of the week, you see, or we'll lose the endowment and the money will all end up going back to engineering again." He said engineering like it was a dirty word, and Locke tried to suppress his sudden smile at imagining Edgar's reaction.

"Let me show you where you'd be working," Zaufestra went on, and escorted Locke up a winding flight of stairs

to a much smaller, barer, practically windowless office. He invited Locke to sit on the single chair, and perched on the desk himself, not without some difficulty.

Zaufestra gave Locke the details on the position. “You’ll have ample research time,” he reassured him. “There’s a small amount of undergraduate teaching, but we don’t have many students enrolled at the moment – although if you can teach a course on beast languages, that might help attract a bigger crowd. You’ll have the usual administrative duties, of course. But we can fund some periods of study leave for you to continue your research in the field. Direct contact with research subjects is obviously paramount in your particular subdiscipline.”

“I don’t know,” said Locke, running his fingers over the wood grain of the desk. “I’m not sure I could do all that other stuff.” The concept of teaching was entirely foreign to him: having grown up an itinerant treasure hunter, son of another itinerant treasure hunter, he’d never even set foot in a school. And the administrative aspects sounded hellish as well, if his impression of Celes’ work was anything to go by.

“There’s training,” said the professor dismissively. “It’s the research that really matters, and yours is of excellent quality. If you work on it with us, you’ll be able to shape it into a doctoral thesis and further publications. Then there’ll be more research grants, and more opportunities for you to work with some of the other lesser-researched beast populations.”

He didn't know about the thesis, but finding out how other beasts communicated did sound appealing. What was there for him in Narshe, after all? It was nice enough there, but he hadn't exactly found a career like Celes. And she'd only ended up in Narshe because he had: she worked for an international organisation, so relocating ought not to be an issue.

That felt like enough thinking it through – it had never been his strong point – so he said, “I'll take it.”

He was informed he could start the following week, and made his way to the library in search of Celes, who seemed surprised but delighted by the news.

Over the next few days, she returned to Narshe – there were letters waiting for her, and she would have to begin the somewhat complicated process of informing all their senders of her upcoming move halfway across the world – while Locke tried to settle in the environs of the university. There weren't many homes for rent, but he found somewhere small that would do at least until Celes joined him. There was also a lack of the type of shops where he might have been able to buy the basics: Vector was long gone, and most of the surrounding area wasn't much more than a wasteland. Fortunately, Locke managed to swipe some university-branded crockery, which at least made it possible to eat.

It was an odd, lonely existence. Locke had lived on his own before, but now that he'd got used to sharing a place with Celes and telling her whatever nonsense came into his head all

the time, it was strange not to have her there with him. He contented himself with revising what he'd recently started to think of as his research: trying to puzzle out some of his earlier, more cryptic notes; looking out for areas where there remained work to be done; visiting the library with his newly acquired staff access pass and fumbling his way through the linguistics section trying to find references that could be useful for his work. The library staff took pity on this strange new young faculty member and began to alert him at the times of day when they thought he ought to take a break and have something to eat; he was grateful for the reminders. Even after starting his post, he didn't spend much time in his office – there wasn't much there. The library was much more useful.

When term was about to start, Locke found he had indeed been put down to teach two lecture series: beast linguistics and field methods. Professor Zaufestra assured the entire faculty at a very dull meeting that Locke was the expert on both, and he tried to pretend he'd been expecting the accolade, but it did come as a shock. He spent most of the next two weeks trying to work out how to shape the contents of his notebooks into something that would appeal to students, discovering partway through that a predecessor of his had taught a field methods course before, and that extensive notes for that course were available in a drawer in his own office: that was fairly helpful, although he'd wasted much of his time on devising an entirely different set of lectures that he now realised probably weren't

what Zaufestra had had in mind at all. Along with the preparations for his classes, he was supposed to collaborate with his colleagues on timetabling and student enrolment, but they soon realised he was useless in that regard and stopped bothering him about it. It was a relief not to have to take part, but it did have the curious side effect that all his classes were scheduled for very early in the morning.

Celes was finally able to join him at around the same time, and observed Locke's behaviours with increasing concern. He'd always been impulsive and forgetful, but now he would get up at the crack of dawn and head to the university apparently not remembering to have breakfast, or to put on his bandanna, which was particularly alarming.

"I'm worried about you," she told him one night after he came home from work, talked at her for ten minutes about moogles' laryngeal anatomy, and then went straight to bed.

He grinned at her, drumming his fingers on the mattress. "More than usual?"

"Yes. If you can believe it. Doesn't the university have some kind of support service?"

"Would it?" He yawned. "Dunno. No time to find out."

Celes made a point of finding out the next morning, and sent Locke off to work with written instructions on how to get to the place, hoping he would manage to keep hold of them. As it happened, he did misplace them for most of the day, but they emerged again in the late afternoon between the pages

of a book he was trying to read. He wasn't getting anywhere with the book and it was making his head hurt, so he decided to take Celes up on her recommendation: she was usually right, anyway.

He told the support service staff about his difficulties with reading and writing and concentrating, and answered their questions: did he find it hard to prioritise tasks? Was he often restless? Did he tend to speak out of turn? He'd certainly made a few enemies during staff meetings. After a long discussion and an eye test, he emerged from the meeting with an official memo to Zaufestra requesting to remove Locke from all administrative duties and scale back his teaching as much as possible, and a pair of glasses: it turned out that the headaches he got while reading were because of his eyes, not an innate allergy to books.

He took the memo to Zaufestra's office on the way back to his own. The professor read it, sighed dramatically, looked up at Locke, sighed again, and said, "This will be very inconvenient."

Locke shrugged.

"We'll postpone your beast linguistics course to next term," said Zaufestra. "Enrolment's shocking anyway. Maybe it'll get more when the phonetics course isn't running. Does that suit you?"

It suited him rather well; he was beginning to dare imagine that he might get some research time in the next three months.



Term started, and Locke found himself having to learn how to give lectures by virtue of being put into an auditorium with fifty blank faces staring at him. Fortunately, his youth and vivacity endeared him to the students, who found him a refreshing change from most of the faculty: old men who wore gowns and squeakily drew a lot of impenetrable diagrams on blackboards while reading their lectures from a piece of paper. Locke preferred a more improvisatory style, and encouraged his students to contribute their own ideas, a technique that was thought frighteningly modern by most of his colleagues. When it was discovered that their young lecturer was one of the heroes who had saved the world a few months earlier, the students became even more fond of him.

By the time Locke started teaching his beast linguistics course, so many students had enrolled that Zaufestra had to cajole a number of them into taking his own syntax module instead.

Locke was exempted from marking exams apart from questions on his own specialism, so he had most of the summer free for research. He'd already planned to visit the Veldt: there was a small moogole population there and he'd heard rumours that they used an unusual dialect. The findings, if significant, would form a chapter of his thesis, which had slowly begun to take shape over the year with a lot of assistance from various quarters. A visiting researcher was to use his office while he was away, so he cleared out his papers and the small number

of personal belongings: the frame containing an unflattering caricature of him and Celes drawn by an artist from Jidoor, the ossified moogles' wing that a well-meaning student had given him to use as a paperweight, and an assortment of small items of furniture that he'd managed to liberate from various lecture theatres. Finally, there was the drawing that had appeared on the front of all the newspapers a few days after they'd all defeated Kefka: all fourteen of them in various states of artistic licence. Umarmo resembled a very hairy man rather than a yeti, Edgar and Sabin had been drawn in a way that made them look nothing like each other, and the artist seemed to have confused Celes and Terra, having depicted Locke with both arms around the latter. Despite all that, it was still one of his most prized possessions.

"See you next term, prof!" called a passing student as he was leaving campus. Locke did his best to wave back, encumbered as he was by the box that contained his belongings. He'd told the students multiple times that he didn't even have his doctorate yet – he was far from being a "prof" – but they never quite seemed to understand.

It had been an odd year.