
Contents

Main story	3
Extra scene 1	61
Extra scene 2	63
Extra scene 3	91

Main story

Setzer

THERE was a gentle knock at the door, and Sabin entered. “How are you doing?” he enquired.

Dear, thoughtful Sabin. Nobody else had thought to ask after her; after all, this was Locke’s day. Not only his rediscovery by the Returners, but also the revival of his long-lost love, now safely quartered with him on the Falcon.

Celes looked up. “I just feel so guilty,” she admitted. “I should be happy for him – I am happy for him – but –”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t feel bad,” Sabin said.

She’d been the one who’d led the group into the cave: the moogles had got closer to Locke first, but she’d all but knocked it out of the way to reach him. He was bruised and dirty like he’d spent the past year in a war zone, but his eyes were bright with hope. Not because of her, though. It was the magicite.

She nodded. "I should have known – it was his life's quest. His whole reason for fighting." She remembered the island, and the bandanna, and shut her eyes.

Sabin's enormous arms wrapped around her. "Nobody imagined this would happen," he reminded her. "It's all totally messed up. He ought to have thought about you before he –"

"It's not his fault," she interrupted firmly.

"I – fine. But that doesn't mean you can't be sad about it. Your feelings are important too."

She'd spent a few fleeting seconds alone with Locke after Rachel had been revived, the first and last such moments since the Floating Continent over a year ago. Thank you, he'd said. You've been so supportive. He'd embraced her lightly, like a friend, and he'd been even more restless than usual, grinning distractedly while she'd tried to appear enthusiastic.

"I just hope we can still be friends," she confessed to Sabin. Her voice felt small and pitiful as she said it: like it came from a child, not one of the most feared military commanders of the age.

He gave her a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sure you can. We all will be, after this is done. Most people don't go through stuff like this together."

She admired his optimism, but while it was true that the group had formed a peculiar bond, it wasn't as if they all got on wonderfully all the time. Locke and Setzer had never really gelled. Edgar and Locke had had a few arguments back on the

Blackjack, yelling at each other about stupid, trivial things, so loudly that they could be heard all over the ship. Celes considered Terra her best friend, but there'd been no lack of tense moments between the two of them. The only relationship that had remained completely steadfast was between the twins, and that had taken a ten-year separation.

There was a commotion in the corridor, and the door opened to reveal the airship's newest occupants: Locke, beaming, bandanna askew; Rachel, resting her head on his shoulder; they gripped each other around the waist with a confident intimacy. "Celes!" Locke exclaimed. "And you, Sabin! Are you joining us? Setzer bought cake!"

Sabin faced Locke, stiff-backed and serious, and Celes placed a hand on his arm in warning. "Just a quiet night for me, I think," she said, forcing calmness into her voice. "Sabin will join you –" she turned to him – "won't you?"

"Don't wait too long, there's not much left!" Rachel told him, and she and Locke dissolved into giggles – what on earth could be so funny about that? – before she steered him away down the corridor.

"You'll be OK on your own?" Sabin asked Celes, once the intrusion was over.

She nodded. "Thanks for checking up on me. I think I just need some time to myself. And ... please don't be angry with Locke."

"I'll try not to be," he said. "Just let me know if you need

anything.” He hugged her briefly once more, and headed out.

Celes lay on her bed, rubbing the beginnings of tears out of her eyes. She’d hardly ever cried, before – there’d been no place for emotions in her previous life – but since waking up on that island and witnessing Cid slowly fading away, things had been different. There was a strength, or a detachment, that she had once had and that the year of sleep had somehow taken away from her. Her emotions felt more real now, and that had its uses, but right now, she wished she was back on the battlefield, plotting the movements of her men like pieces in a game instead of thinking too much about a man who wasn’t hers.



Locke made it clear that Rachel wasn’t to fight. She stayed in their room each day while a group descended to deal with whatever was happening on the ground: dragons, unscrupulous characters, and sometimes a lead on one of their own comrades. On the day that they headed for Zozo, confident of finding Cyan, it was Locke’s turn to lead the party and he chose Terra as his magic user: it was a decision that he had begun to make habitually. However difficult remaining friends might have been, it wasn’t even an option when he seemed to avoid Celes at every opportunity.

The brothers made up the rest of the group, and Celes found herself left behind on the airship with only Setzer and

the beasts for company – excepting Rachel, who normally confined herself to the quarters she shared with Locke, not spending much time with the others apart from at mealtimes. Having begun to see more of Rachel, Celes had become convinced that the two of them had hardly anything in common: Rachel was loud, unsubtle, tempestuous. The thought that she herself could have once reminded Locke of the girl was baffling.

Wandering the ship, she ran into Setzer in one of the common areas.

“We’re not far from Jidoor here,” he remarked by way of greeting. “What would you say to lunch? I hear there are still a few reputable establishments down there.”

Celes frowned. “Just me and you? Doesn’t this violate our agreement?”

“It’s lunch, not a proposal,” he protested. “And you broke the agreement first, if I remember correctly.”

Of course she had: with that coin, the agreement had never really stood in the first place. Setzer had never shown any romantic intention towards Celes since then, though, and she’d believed his earlier desires were forgotten. Maybe now, with Locke out of the picture, he thought he had another chance.

Her instinct was to turn him down, but she recalled how long it had been since she’d been out of the airship for anything but business, and capitulated. “I suppose it might be nice,” she said.

They walked the short distance to Jidoor, quickly dispatching a few monsters on the way. It had been some time since Celles had fought beside Setzer, and she was reminded that they worked well together: his damage output was somewhat unpredictable, but he was a decent physical attacker, so she could focus on the spells.

Setzer led her through the streets of Jidoor like a man who knew exactly where he was going, and eventually brought her into an extremely fancy restaurant, decorated to give the very best impression that no apocalypse of any kind had affected the world last year. He ordered a bottle of wine and a selection of hors d'œuvres for the two of them with the ease of somebody used to this type of lifestyle, leant back in his chair with a grin, and asked her, "How do you like this?"

She didn't, to tell the truth. She'd never been comfortable with opulence; she belonged on the battlefield. Those banquets back in Vector after the great military victories had always been odd occasions, where Gestahl had got horribly drunk with a handful of the officers and the rest of them had looked on in discomfort.

"It's nice," she said, with a tight smile. "Although I don't know if seafood is really my thing."

"Ah, they all say that to begin with," he replied. "The prawns will astound you."

When the prawns arrived, though, they were grey and meagre, as was the rest, and Setzer put a hand out to stop the waiter

before he could sneak back into the kitchen. “What’s happened here?” he asked, the mixture of annoyance and forced politeness bringing an odd expression to his face. “Not the sort of dish I would expect in a place like this.”

The waiter inclined his head deferentially. “I’m sorry, sir. We’ve had no catches since –” he lowered his voice – “the incident. Not many of the fish species we serve can survive in the sea now.”

“Then why the hell do you still put them on the menu?” Setzer thundered.

“People like to pretend things are still the same, sir,” the waiter informed him.

Oddly, the fact that something had gone wrong made Celes feel more at ease. “You can’t blame him,” she said, once the waiter had apologised himself again and managed to get away. “It’s our fault this happened.”

“It’s Kefka’s fault,” said Setzer, still angry.

They struggled through the assortment of bland, pulpy fish in silence for a while, until Setzer remarked, “Opera’s off, too, I heard.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Something about a dragon on the stage, the orchestra are all trapped inside afraid to move unless it attacks them, so they’re all getting food parcels lowered down from the rafters and sleeping in their instrument cases. Well, the double bass players at least. Frightful, anyway.”

“Maybe we can do something about that,” she said.

“It’s on Edgar’s sacred list,” he replied. “Although I keep trying to convince him to give it a higher priority.” He swallowed a discoloured mussel with a pained expression and caught her eye. “Maybe you could bring it up as well, at one of those meetings of yours. Can’t hurt the cause if two opera fans make a fuss about it.”

She laughed. “I can talk to him. Wouldn’t call myself an opera fan, though.”

“My apologies,” said Setzer. “I assumed, after seeing your performance in *The Dream Oath* ... you seemed to know the part very well.”

Celes thought back to that night, pictured the dressing room, and quickly dismissed the memory before any more details could come back to her. “Beginner’s luck, I suppose. I’ve actually never liked opera much.”

“That’s a shame. It’s one of my greatest pleasures,” Setzer said. “Opera, fine dining, trying my luck at the tables, and, of course, spending the day with a beautiful lady.”

“It sounds like we don’t have much in common,” Celes pointed out. She indicated the array of watery seafood between them. “I can’t tell any of these things apart, I don’t care for opera, and flipping that coin was enough gambling for me. As for beauty ... these clothes were all gifts from Gestahl.”

“Don’t put yourself down,” he said mildly. “I do pride myself on my sense of style, but even I wouldn’t be so shallow

as to call you beautiful because of your clothes alone. You do have a lovely face.”

She felt herself reddening at the direct compliment. “Thank you,” she said graciously, “but that’s hardly important, is it? You must see that there needs to be a common interest – at least *something*. You and I are like chalk and cheese.”

Setzer took a gulp of wine, and considered. “Huh. If this last year has taught me anything, it’s that there’s no gain in trying to force women to like me.”

“Well, of course not,” said Celes.

“You must understand,” he protested. “Darill ... she was so spirited. She was unique. And I thought she must be the only woman of the sort. I thought the rest of you were passive little girls who liked to be ordered around.” He dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. “I had this idea that she was so special, and she was, but – I suppose all of you are.”

“Setzer,” said Celes carefully, gesturing at the restaurant around them. “This is lovely, all of it. But it’s not right for me. I’m sure there are plenty of women who’d love all this, but you’re chasing after the wrong one.”

He grinned. “Yes. I can see that. Well, it was worth a try.”

“You’ll make someone very happy someday,” she told him.

“Kind of you to say so. I suppose we can be friends, then?”

“Of course,” she said.

Edgar

THEY fought a few more monsters – truly the most enjoyable activity of the day – on the way back to the Falcon, and arrived there on friendly terms. The others had returned not long before, and Cyan’s arrival was naturally the main event for everyone; Celes spent a while catching up with him before heading to the outside deck for some time to herself.

She turned out not to be alone, though: Edgar was there too, leaning on the railing, a hand pressed to his forehead to soothe the remnants of a magically cured injury from the day’s fighting.

“General,” he greeted her.

“My liege,” she replied. They had grown accustomed to using the formal style with each other: it helped them both get into the right frame of mind for undertaking their role as the strategists of the group. Of course, Edgar had never truly been Celes’ superior, and she was no longer a general, but there was something comforting about falling back on the familiar military ranking.

She stood next to him and looked out over the scorched earth below. “How was combat today?”

“Tough,” he replied matter-of-factly. “The usual monsters weren’t so bad, but there was another one of those dragons. They’re killers, honestly. But we retrieved Cyan, so all’s well.”

“What was he doing down there?” she asked.

He laughed. "Being very sweet and sentimental. Oh, don't ask. I'm more interested in what you and Setzer got up to today. I saw you coming back to the ship together."

"He took me to Jidoor," she admitted. "We went to lunch at a fancy restaurant. It was a nice day out."

"But not really your style," Edgar prompted her.

She nodded. "He does try. I think he got the message this time."

"That's good," he said. "Poor old Setzer, always the romantic. He can't see that sometimes it's better to focus on the more fundamental matters."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

He looked over at her. "Romance works in some situations. But sometimes ... it's just nice to have a bit of fun. Take your mind off things."

"So this is the secret to your success?" she teased him. "Skip all the dates and straight to bed?"

"It depends on the person. Some girls need to be warmed up a bit before they can be convinced. Some are fed up with all the preamble and just want some fun. I daresay you wouldn't mind a distraction at the moment."

"Are you propositioning me?" she asked in amusement.

He smiled in a way she'd never seen from him before, all teeth and cheeks. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. Look, we know where we stand. I certainly don't intend to try to persuade you to marry me. And, to be frank, I have no interest in you on

an emotional level beyond our status as friends and military colleagues. But if you want, I can provide.”

“Well ... thanks for the offer,” said Celes.

Edgar raised his eyebrows knowingly and glanced at his wristwatch, a huge clunky contraption covered in gears and dials. “We’re missing dinner,” he said nonchalantly, and waved Celes down the steps before him.



There were only two seats left at the table, and Edgar took the one that wasn’t opposite Locke and Rachel, probably deliberately, so Celes was forced to watch the two of them gazing into each other’s eyes and generally acting like idiots throughout the meal. Locke’s hand was bandaged, probably because of the dragon Edgar had mentioned, and Rachel kept holding it and stroking it and cooing about her “poor baby” as if Locke were six years old. Celes busied herself with her stew, trying not to catch the eyes of either of them, or of Sabin or Edgar, who looked, respectively, murderous and amused. As soon as she could excuse herself, she went to the bedroom she shared with Terra and sat on her bed staring through the porthole at the dusk sky as its colour faded from orange to grey.

Terra came in a little later to fetch some warm clothes for the evening. “We’re playing cards,” she said to Celes. “You should join us.”

“Maybe later,” Celes replied, as Terra headed out again. If they were playing cards, “we” probably meant Setzer, and hence probably didn’t mean Locke, but she didn’t fancy taking her chances. Then again, avoiding him was usually quite easy, as he and Rachel spent most of the time in their room, and fortunately, that was on the other side of the ship.



However, that situation changed with the arrival of the next member of the group, Gau. After what Edgar described to Celes as “a long, emotional session on the Veldt,” the boy was brought to the airship by Cyan and the twins and insisted on sleeping in the same room as Sabin, even though he and his brother shared the smallest of the four bedrooms. At that time, Celes and Terra had the biggest – there’d been a lot of unnecessary chivalry when it was just Celes, the twins and Setzer on board, and that was the way things had ended up. Now that there was a group of three, though, it made sense for them to take the biggest room, so they swapped with the girls, and Celes found herself, lamentably, sharing a wall with Locke and Rachel.

Hearing anyone having sex constantly in the next room would have been annoying, but its being Locke was a special punishment. Of course, Celes had once dared to imagine that the circumstances of her finding out what sort of noises he

made during the act would be quite different, but even though there was a wall between them and even though she thought she might actually hate him by this point, being able to hear him was undeniably arousing, which was particularly uncomfortable to admit.

There was a way he moaned, where the sound caught in his throat and then came out all in a rush: it reminded her of the noises of frustration he sometimes let out during battle, when he was tense from the effort of aiming his dual knives at an enemy. It had been some time since Celes had fought beside him, but she could recall that sound and the look of concentration in his eyes, the way he stood poised, his agile limbs throwing up spiky shadows on the ground; the confident smile when he landed a hit or snatched a treasure; how he bounced on the balls of his feet while he waited his turn to attack; how he turned to Celes next to him – she had always been next to him – and grinned when each monster was defeated.

No, she didn't hate him. She couldn't.

So this was how it went most nights, now: Celes lay in bed, annoyed and turned on by what she could hear from next door. Terra never mentioned it, and seemed entirely unaffected, which was typical. Celes pleased herself, sometimes, under her blanket, and despite much effort to avoid succumbing to fantasies, pretended that it was Locke touching her instead of her own tediously familiar fingers.

Running into him around the ship became even more un-

comfortable than it had been already: he was more attractive than ever. Where he had once tried to avoid Celes as much as he could, he was now starting to make banal remarks to her about such things as the weather, which was always the same now anyway, foggy and dusty and too hot. Responding to him was difficult; she felt like an awkward schoolgirl, and it didn't help that Rachel was always there too, clinging onto Locke like a succubus, staring at Celes with challenging eyes while she failed to construct a sentence about how cloudy it was.

Time passed, and Shadow joined them.



Celes knocked on the door, and Sabin answered. “Good evening,” he said, with the usual friendly smile. “Everything OK with you?”

“Not too bad,” she assured him.

“Did you want a chat? I feel like we haven't spoken properly in ages.”

It was true, and she felt guilty about it, but she shook her head. “I was looking for your brother.”

Sabin raised his eyebrows. “A bit late for strategising, isn't it? The war never sleeps, I suppose. Did you check the engine room? He's in there most nights, even though Setzer wishes he wasn't.”

“Thanks,” she said. “We’ll talk soon. I just need to speak to Edgar tonight.”

“You know where to find me,” he told her.

Edgar was indeed in the engine room, lying on the floor and fiddling with some kind of pipe above him. He was so absorbed in the activity that he didn’t realise Celes had entered until she was standing over him.

“General,” he said, seeming unfazed by her entrance.

“What are you up to?” she enquired.

He used the pipe to pull himself into a sitting position, grinned, and brushed a lock of hair out of his face, leaving a smudge of oil there instead. “I’m looking into making some improvements to the machinery. Our dear pilot is convinced that any modification would be an atrocity, but I do hope to convince him.”

Celes sat down on the floor next to him. “Maybe he wants to keep it how it is because of Darill. Honour her memory.” She shrugged. “That would be my guess, anyway.”

“I didn’t think of that. You’re probably right. How tiresome it is when men get hung up on their dead girlfriends.”

“Wow,” she said. “That’s harsh, even by your standards.”

“But I’m sure you agree,” he replied.

She sighed. “On that note ...”

“You’ve been thinking about my suggestion.”

“At least pretend you weren’t expecting it,” she grumbled.

Edgar threw his hands up in mock surrender. "I'm sorry. I'm just so used to being right. Being king does that to you." His voice took on a smoother tone. "So you're up for it?"

"Yes," said Celes. "I think maybe I do need a distraction."

"I don't blame you," he said. "Those two ... I honestly don't know what's come over Locke. I thought he was decent."

"He is," she protested instinctively.

Edgar gave her a look that was somewhere between exasperation and sympathy. "Forget it. Are we doing it in here, or do you have a better suggestion?"

She was taken aback by the way he spoke, with sudden bluntness and euphemism at the same time. "In here?"

"I'm afraid so. I'll admit I was thinking about how this might work earlier, and this seems to be the only place we won't get walked in on. Your room's out, so's mine, unless we can engineer Sabin and Terra spending the evening together. Also, I don't know about you, but I'm getting quite turned on thinking about doing it in here."

"No, that's just you," she said firmly. "But I suppose there is nowhere else."

"Great," he replied, starting to unbutton his shirt before hesitating. "You have, um, done this before, haven't you?"

She couldn't help laughing at that. "Please. I was one of the few women in the army. The guys were queuing up as soon as I reached majority."

"I don't doubt it," he said, and moved on to his trousers.

Sex with Edgar was how she might have imagined it if she had taken the trouble: satisfying but not overly exciting, more successful than most of her first times with the various officers of her regiment who'd offered her their services when they were in the field. Celes had had enough such encounters to know what she wanted, and Edgar too had had enough of them to know what she meant when she communicated it to him, so she had the pleasant experience of seeing her needs met, which hadn't always been the case on previous occasions. He barely lost his composure during the whole thing, murmuring "Oh yes, that's lovely. Gorgeous," as she let him slip inside her, and even when he came, he was still almost as controlled, save for a short, shuddering intake of breath before he quietly proclaimed "Fantastic," and dotted Celes' jaw with kisses. He had the decency to continue to see to her desires after he was spent, too.

When they were done, Edgar stroked Celes' hair and gave her a tired smile. "That was rather special, General," he said. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I think I needed that."

"It's my pleasure to provide," he assured her. "And I'd be happy to offer my services on future occasions."

She snorted. "Of course you would." Then she inclined her head to let it rest on his shoulder.



After that, Celes and Edgar began to meet in the engine room regularly. They matched each other well, she had to admit; they soon got to know what suited the two of them best, and pursued the act with earnest passion, creating an easy familiarity in their moments of intimacy. On the one occasion that, sore and exhausted after battle, Celes accidentally moaned Locke's name, Edgar took it in his stride, pulling out of her discreetly and wrapping his arms around her instead while she wept in guilt and embarrassment. "Shh, it's OK," he murmured, cradling her head against his chest. "You're alright. I'm here."

Their encounters in the engine room strengthened their bond outside it, too. Celes had always been a match for Edgar's quick mind and knack for military strategy, and as the two of them worked together to plan the group's next actions, their new connection charged the activity with intensity and made the process even more impenetrable to their comrades. They began routinely placing each other on their own combat teams, too, Edgar's machinery working well as a complement to Celes' magic: it soon became common knowledge that whichever of their companions made up the rest of the team would hardly be able to get a look in.

After some time, though, the bond between the two of them began to fade. Locke and Rachel had seemed to stop having sex quite so frequently, and that, coupled with Celes' residual guilt about the nature of her relationship with Edgar –

mostly due to the fact that when things reached their climax, she still couldn't help imagining that it was someone else inside her – meant that they began to see each other less and less often; eventually, they ceased to meet in the engine room at all. By the time Strago rejoined the group, they had resumed a more distant relationship, mostly limiting their contact to business matters.

Sabin

CELES hadn't thought to wonder why Locke and Rachel appeared to have become less intimate. When they were together around the rest of the group, they still acted just as nauseatingly, so she attempted to block them out as much as she could. When she was in bed, though, she could sometimes hear the muffled sounds of an argument, and she began to notice Locke on deck alone from time to time, his face red and his fists clenched, staring angrily at nothing. She continued to stay away from him.

Over time, their fighting grew more difficult to ignore, and the fact of its happening became common knowledge among the Falcon's occupants. Locke and Rachel had stopped coming to dinner with the rest of them, which Celes ought to have been pleased about, but the distant sounds of shouting – Locke had always had a loud voice – often cast a gloomy atmosphere over

the meal, until one evening when Setzer decided that enough was enough, and rose to his feet.

“I can’t take this,” he announced, as everyone miserably finished their soup. “I’m going to go and sort him out.”

“No, you’re not,” said Sabin immediately. “Sit down.” Beside him, Edgar glumly rested his chin on his hands.

Setzer scowled. “What’s your problem? Hasn’t this gone on long enough? He can get off my ship if he goes on acting like this –”

“Sit down, or I’ll whack you,” said Sabin sharply, and Setzer sank back into his chair: nobody would take the risk of coming into contact with Sabin’s fists. Gau wailed at the uncommon sound of Sabin’s raised voice, and clambered over him, flinging his arms around Sabin’s neck and sobbing dramatically. “See what you’ve done,” said Sabin, still glaring at Setzer as he tentatively patted Gau’s head. He turned to Edgar. “You need to talk to him.”

Edgar lifted his head. “Why me?”

“You’re meant to be his best friend, aren’t you? He might actually listen to you.”

“I’m not even sure he would by this point,” said Edgar.

Sabin grimaced. “Edgar ... just try. This isn’t fair on any of us.” He caught Celes’ eye briefly and looked away.

Shadow spoke up from next to her. “I agree with Setzer. They should go and sort out their shit somewhere else. It’s

not like we need him with us anyway – he’s hardly our best fighter –”

Celes found herself automatically protesting at that, and to her surprise, Terra began to speak in Locke’s defence at the same time. Sabin’s deeper voice cut across both of them. “We’re a team,” he said firmly. “Look, we’ve all done stuff we’re not proud of. Especially you. We need to stick together even if one of us is being an asshole.”

“Sir Sabin speaks the truth,” Cyan added, when Shadow declined to reply. “We have all found ourselves in difficulties over the past year. It would be remiss of us not to help a friend in need, even if his troubles are an inconvenience.”

“In need of a kick up the ass,” Setzer muttered, his teeth clenched.

“Yeah, he’s annoying. I vote get rid of him,” Relm said.

“That’s enough, missy,” said Strago.

“This isn’t a vote,” Edgar pointed out, “and you wouldn’t get one anyway.”

Relm pouted at that, but for some reason she always listened to Edgar, so she failed to argue.

“And I think it would be very good for your friend if you talked to him, Edgar,” Strago went on.

Edgar sighed dramatically. “Of course I’ll talk to him. I just wish I didn’t have to. I’d really rather he noticed he’s being a dick without me having to help him out. But I will commu-

nicate our collective concerns.” He stood, nodded at them all, and exited the room swiftly.

The rest of them gradually rose to take care of the dishes, and Celes found herself alone at the table with Sabin. “Want to talk?” he asked her gently.

She opened her mouth to disagree, but ended up nodding. Terra was on washing up duty, so they headed to the girls’ bedroom and sat together on Celes’ bed.

“For the record,” said Sabin cautiously, “I do think he’s being unfair to all of us, especially you, and I’m having to fight very hard with myself to convince myself not to go in there and knock some sense into him.”

“I know he is,” she said. “I just don’t understand it. You remember what he was like before. He was so kind. He’s like a different person now.”

“Sometimes people bring out the worst in each other,” Sabin suggested. “I think the two of you had the opposite effect.”

She was beginning to cry, and he put an arm around her.

“You know ...” she began. “Before I found you in Tzen, when I was on that island – Cid told me there’d been others, and none of them made it.”

He frowned, and she clarified. “They all took their own lives. Jumped off the cliff. And then when Cid was gone too, I – I went up there myself and ...”

His hand stiffened against her back as the tears overwhelmed her, and she forced herself to catch her breath and continue.

“I don’t know how I survived. Magic, maybe. And then – this sounds stupid, but there was a bird there, and its wing was hurt, and somebody had bandaged it –”

She dug out the bandanna from her pocket.

Sabin stared at it for a while. “One of his.”

“I think so,” she confirmed, and hastily put the bandanna away before it became too painful to look at. “So ... that was what kept me going. The thought that he was out there.”

“Oh, Celes,” said Sabin.

They sat there in silence, accompanied by the muted sounds of shouts from next door, as Edgar and Locke’s voices gradually rose in volume.

“We should go somewhere else,” Sabin remarked morosely, but neither of them moved.

They were yelling properly next door now – loudly enough for Celes and Sabin to make out what they were saying.

“Just get it into that fat head of yours!” shouted Edgar. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“This is none of your business!” Locke argued.

“You’re making it our business,” Edgar replied. “Do you think we can’t hear you all the time? You need to sort this out or she goes –”

“Don’t talk about her like that!”

“Why do you care how I talk about her? You’ve been yelling at each other for weeks!”

“And I told you it’s private, so fuck off!”

“Private?” Edgar bellowed incredulously. “I don’t think so. You’ve made us all totally miserable, there’s not a moment’s peace around here anymore, and don’t get me started on what you’ve done to Celes –”

“Celes?” Locke interrupted. “What exactly am I supposed to have done to Celes?”

There was a rush of movement beside Celes, and she looked up to see Sabin storming out of the room. By the time she gathered her wits and headed to the doorway herself, Sabin had dragged Locke into the corridor and was gripping him by one shoulder; Locke was howling incoherently in rage and pain, trying to beat against Sabin’s chest, while Sabin was raising his free hand in a fist –

Celes thrust her own hand forwards and cast a Stop spell on Sabin; he froze in place, and Locke fell from his grip and crumpled to the floor, before getting to his feet again just as quickly.

“Good reflexes,” he said to her, and pushed past Edgar, who was standing ashen-faced in the doorway, headed back into his room, and slammed the door behind him.

Celes cancelled the spell and buried her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” Sabin said breathlessly. “Celes, I’m sorry.”

There was a light touch on her arm, and Celes raised her head to find that it was Edgar, wide-eyed with concern. “Hey,” he said, his voice hoarse from shouting. “You OK?”

She let out a shaky laugh. “Are any of us?”

He made no reply, but continued to look at her until the silence was interrupted by the sound of Sabin slamming a fist into the wall and yelling “Fuck!”

Edgar immediately left Celes’ side and moved instead to his brother, taking hold of both his elbows. “Sabin, Sabin,” he murmured. “It’s alright. It’s fine. Deep breaths. Look at me.”

Celes averted her eyes, embarrassed to be witnessing this peculiar act of intimacy, and stepped back. Edgar turned to face her at the sound of her footsteps.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Take care of your brother.”

He nodded, and she retreated to her room.



Locke must have taken some notice of Edgar after all, because his arguments with Rachel became far less frequent, or at least less detectable, after that. Now that the entire group had reunited, attention was beginning to turn to preparing the assault on Kefka, and everyone was out fighting as often as they could manage it.

Celes devised a training regime for herself and the other magic specialists, and the four of them went out together each

day, swapping their equipped magicites around every hour or so to learn as many spells as they could. The rest concentrated on physical combat, going out in groups to beat down all the monsters they came across at whatever random locations Setzer was able to land the airship.

Celes was determined to push her group, and they were usually the last to get back to the airship each evening: learning those spells took time, after all. She was surprised, therefore, when one night they returned and one of the other parties was still absent: Sabin, Edgar, and the moogle.

Dinnertime came around, and the rest of them picked at their food distractedly; Setzer made a valiant attempt at some lighthearted conversation, but nobody else could muster the effort to engage with him. When dinner was over, they continued to sit at the table in silence.

Eventually, they heard the distant noise of somebody boarding the ship, and Edgar and Sabin emerged from the darkness, the latter cradling a small white body in his arms.

Terra leapt to her feet. "Is he –"

"He's fine," said Edgar grimly. "Just knocked out. We ran out of magic power and lost most of our items."

As they came closer, Celes noticed the shared look on their faces: eyes widened slightly, mouths pinched, as if something awful had happened. They sat down unsteadily, and Sabin laid Mog on the table, whereupon Terra set to work with some healing magic.

“Sirs,” said Cyan, “are you quite alright?”

The brothers exchanged a glance before Edgar answered.

“We were fighting a monster,” he began hesitantly, “some frightful thing with about a hundred teeth, and it –” He broke off and shuddered.

“It swallowed us,” Sabin supplied.

There was a silence. Celes eventually broke it, ineloquently, by muttering “What?”

“Exactly that,” said Edgar. “One moment we were fighting it, and then – well, it got me first. Snatched me up in its jaws and I went right down its throat –” he stopped abruptly again and clamped a hand over his mouth.

Sabin began to run his fingers through his brother’s hair in concern, and there was another silence, until the recently revived Mog said, “But we made a new friend, kupo!”

“That’s right,” said Sabin, gently lifting his hand away from Edgar and gesturing into the darkness behind him. The others started in surprise as a mysterious figure stepped out of the shadows and raised an obscured hand in greeting. “Um, everyone, this is Gogo. Gogo, everyone.” Edgar would have performed the introduction much more competently, but he didn’t look like he was up to it.

The rest of them introduced themselves, and there followed some discussion about where Gogo would sleep. Most of the men were now sharing one room, as it had been thought proper to let Strago and Relm have one to themselves, so there were

now three rooms of two and one of six, which was awkward but had seemed the best way of dividing the group. There was hardly the space for a seventh bed for Gogo, who might not even have been male anyway – nobody was quite brave enough to ask. The discussion turned out to have been unnecessary, though, when Gogo admitted to being quite happy without sleeping at all.

Relm in particular was outraged by this. “You don’t sleep? Ever?” she exclaimed suspiciously.

“I do not require it,” said Gogo, unperturbed by the somewhat hostile tone of the question. “But if it makes you feel more comfortable, I am happy to spend the night in a bed.”

“No, it sounds like it’ll suit us all much better if you don’t,” said Edgar faintly. “Now if everyone will excuse me, I’m going to go and lie down.”

The rest of them soon departed too, and Celes made for Sabin as he slowly stood from the table. “Sounds like you had an awful time today,” she said.

“You could say that.” He smiled shakily. “It was just so unlike anything that’s happened before. The fights weren’t so bad, but we were covered in this stuff – its spit or something, I think – and it really did a number on all of us, but especially Edgar. He could barely handle any of his tools, and he dropped half our items off the side of a bridge.” He shook his head. “I honestly didn’t think we’d ever get out of there. I thought I’d never see any of this again – never see you again –” He broke

off and gulped.

She saw the pain in his eyes, and suddenly, impulsively, stretched upwards and kissed him.

He returned the kiss, but when they broke apart, he shook his head. "Celes. Don't worry about me. This isn't what you want."

"No," she protested. "I think – I think it is what I want." The more she considered it, the more sure she was. Nobody else was so kind to her, so genuinely concerned with her wellbeing. Nobody – almost nobody else had trusted her from the moment they first met.

"Don't do this to me," he said. "I can't bear it."

"Sabin," she murmured. "Put your hand in my pocket."

He frowned at her.

"Do it," she urged him.

He slowly reached in, met nothing, and realised. "The bandanna."

She nodded. "I got rid of it. That's not important anymore."

He leant down and kissed her again, and then held her to his chest. "You have no idea how long I've wanted this," he breathed into her ear.

Celes couldn't help thinking about how long she'd wanted it too: no more than about two minutes. But this had to be right: logically, it made so much sense. "Can I take your shirt off?" she asked to distract herself.

He gave her the space to unbutton it, and she pulled it slowly across his arms before casting it aside and starting to rub her hands over his bare shoulders.

“Um, Celes,” he said as she did so. “I need to tell you – I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“You’ve never been with a girl?” she asked, trying and failing to keep the surprise out of her voice – he was almost thirty, after all.

“Never,” he confirmed. “They all used to go for Edgar over me, and I was too focused on training to care about it much after that.”

The first part of the sentence had awoken her guilty conscience, and she braced herself: she had to say it. Now that she knew this was his first time, she owed it to him.

“Sabin, I need to tell you something,” she said desperately. “I – I had a thing with your brother. Edgar.” She cursed herself internally – of course his brother Edgar, what other brother did he have?

“A thing,” he echoed carefully. “What sort of a thing?”

“A ... sex thing,” she confessed. “For maybe a couple of months. Around the time Relm and Strago got here.”

He stiffened under her touch. “Wait – what? You and Edgar were –”

“Meeting up for sex,” she replied apologetically. “In the engine room.”

Sabin took a step back, and now there was no physical contact between them at all. “I –” he began, and stopped. Then he tried again. “I don’t think this can work. I – misjudged you.”

“Sabin –”

“*Don’t.*” His voice came out all harsh, and she flinched. “I can’t – that means – oh god. I thought you might have done it with *Locke*, that would have been fine, but – not him. My own flesh and blood –”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Nobody has ever understood what it’s like to be a twin,” he said in a rush, before grabbing his discarded shirt from the floor and walking out.

Celes stood for a moment, stunned, before returning to her own room. When she got there, she couldn’t help glancing at the bandanna, which she’d left on top of her bag for safekeeping before going out to fight for the day.

Terra

IT was time to go after Kefka. Celes and Edgar had cordially worked together on drawing up the final strategy. Each of them was to lead a group, as was Locke, which suited Celes well enough, as it meant she wouldn’t have to fight beside Locke or either of the brothers: Sabin would be in Edgar’s party, as always.

Terra was the only one of her companions that Celes was still close to, and she had never been the kind of person who took well to the sort of complex, emotional conversations that might have been good for Celes at this point, so Celes threw herself into training for the last few weeks, learning her final spells in intense solo battles, finding opportunities to break away from her assigned allies even though she and Edgar had established that nobody was to fight alone for reasons of personal safety. She'd take down Kefka, even if she had to do the whole thing herself: she could at least offer her allies this one service.

When they reached him, and he started on some predictable speech about destruction, Celes was surprised to find that Terra was the one who challenged him first. Then, as it emerged that everyone seemed to be spontaneously supplying their own reasons for maintaining hope, she tried her hardest to think of something. Locke confidently offered "a person worth protecting," and she tried to ignore the tight feeling in her chest. Sabin named his brother: oddly, Celes' confession of her history with him seemed only to have strengthened the twins' devotion to each other. She was next, and supplied "the chance to prove myself". It felt like a wrong answer.

But wrong or not, Kefka was vanquished, and even as the magic faded from within them, they found their way out of the crumbling tower, leaping over the growing crevasses. When Locke's bandanna escaped his head and began to flutter

down into one of the rifts, Celes dived for it instinctively, and a strong, lean pair of arms pulled her back from the brink.

Locke let her go as quickly as he had grabbed her. “Are you crazy?” he asked blankly. “You almost got yourself killed for that?” He shook his head, and dashed on.

They got back to the airship, and Setzer pulled off a truly heroic manoeuvre that Celes wasn’t able to fully appreciate – she could still feel the ghost of Locke’s touch on her skin, and Sabin, who had noticed their interaction, looked ready to thump him: he was still looking out for her, and she wished he wasn’t. For his part, Locke had commenced a passionate and seemingly endless kiss with Rachel, who had been awaiting their return in the safety of the Falcon.

They all stood on the outside deck, celebrating as the sky moved through all sorts of colours on its way back to blue and Gau and Umaro undertook a friendly wrestling match. Celes concentrated on the feeling of the magic dissolving within her: it was leaving behind an intriguing emptiness, one that felt intimidating but delicious at the same time. Maybe she had an opportunity to start a new life now, without a series of destroyed relationships behind her.

That night, Celes and Terra sat in their beds, too exhilarated to sleep. Terra was looking down at her own arms in amazement. “I’m human,” she breathed. “Fully human.”

Celes smiled at her earnestness. “How does it feel?”

“Sad,” said Terra. “But ... exciting. I just never imagined

people felt like this. This is like the opposite of what I thought being human would be like. Maybe the bits of me that I thought were esper were human, and the bits I thought were human were esper.”

Celes couldn't quite see what Terra meant, but she did her best to empathise. “It's a bit like that for me,” she said. “The magic leaving. I suppose it's not affecting the others like this, but it's like ... I've got my real self back.”

“How old were you when they infused you?” Terra asked.

“I don't know. Young. Who's to say.”

Terra was quiet for a moment, and then said, “You should come to Mobliz with me.”

“Yeah?”

“I assume you weren't planning to go anywhere else in particular,” Terra went on. “You can come and look after the kids with me while you think about where you want to end up.”

“Kids aren't really my thing,” Celes pointed out.

“They're cute,” said Terra.

“I'm sure they are.”

“They taught me how to love.”

Celes laughed. “OK, that sounds like quite a strong argument.”

Terra smiled too. “You'll like it. Honestly.”



Terra was right: there was nowhere else for Celes to go, so she decided Mobliz wouldn't be the worst option: she'd spend some more time with her best friend and try to work out what she intended to do with her life in a world without magic and apparently, more jarringly, without conflict.

On the day that everyone was to leave the Falcon, they gathered for a ritual farewell. If Celes had ever had the optimism to believe they might get to this point when she woke up in the ruined world, she would certainly have thought they would all be the best of friends: nothing like this.

"Right, you bunch of bastards. Get off my ship," Setzer joked, but nobody really laughed.

Locke and Rachel left the airship with barely a word of goodbye to anyone. Edgar and Sabin were generally much friendlier, of course, hugging Terra and most of the guys as well, but when they reached Celes, they were distant. Edgar shook her hand briskly and said, "Until next time, General"; Sabin merely nodded and mumbled "See you." Then Edgar, with a cautious eye on Celes, placed his hand on his brother's back and led him away; that was the last she saw of them.

Celes went with Terra to Mobliz, and got used to the banal, magic-free existence that they took up there. Despite Terra's initial excitement at becoming fully human, she found it difficult to cope as the change sank in; on numerous occasions, Celes came upon her struggling to light a fire, forgetting she could no longer use her bare hands. Then the realisation that

the magic had gone would hit her again, and Celes would have to calm her as she sat and wept. Rebirth was so often accompanied by death.

As Celes had expected, looking after the children wasn't her favourite activity, and she busied herself instead with organising the trade routes into the town, ensuring everyone had fresh supplies and standing up to the various merchants who had decided they could rip them off because nobody in the whole place was older than twenty. She became, somewhat boringly, an expert in wholesale prices.

Terra kept in touch with most of the others by letter: with all her diverse correspondence, something arrived almost every week. There were letters from the brothers in Figaro, from Cyan who was valiantly trying to rebuild Doma, from Shadow in Thamasa – Celes had never understood how Terra had managed to get close to Shadow of all people, but somehow she had – or indeed from Setzer, who was anywhere and everywhere. Setzer exchanged a few letters with Celes as well – he wrote about the very dull-sounding balls he had begun to frequent, and she informed him of the trends in the vegetable market – but that was it.

Terra caught sight of Celes staring absentmindedly at the envelope of a letter she'd received from Edgar one day – always identifiable from the overly elaborate handwriting – and remarked as she sat down to read it, "You should write to Figaro too. They're always saying they'd love to hear from you."

“I’m sure they’re just being polite,” said Celes.

“They always ask after you,” Terra insisted. She flicked through the sheets of the letter and stopped somewhere around the fifth. “*Do send our love to Celes as always,*” she read out. “*Is she still the scourge of the mercantile profession? Men have come here begging us to accept payment for taking their carrots away, and there are rumours that it’s all her doing.*”

Celes smiled despite herself: she could almost hear Edgar’s voice in those words. “How long have they been saying that?” she asked before she could restrain herself. “Sending their love.”

Terra smiled knowingly. “Since we got here,” she replied. “Every letter.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

Celes had always assumed that Terra hadn’t picked up on exactly what had gone on between her and the others on the Falcon, but she wasn’t sure of that anymore. “How much did you know?” she asked eventually. “When we were all on the airship –”

“Well, I was a bit distracted by all the esper energy floating around the place,” said Terra. “But I knew something was going on. You were sleeping with one of them for a while, right? I assumed Edgar, but I was never really sure –”

“What?” Celes exclaimed, her face hot. “How did you find out about that?”

“Oh, so it *was* Edgar?” Terra remarked in a tone of mild interest. “We shared a bedroom, it was obvious enough.” She paused. “That whole time was a weird one. We were all so on edge, I’m amazed none of us killed each other. And you carried around that bandanna all the time. Where did that get to?”

Celes retrieved it from her pocket and looked down at it.

“Oh,” said Terra softly. “Even now ...”

She nodded miserably, and Terra gave her an encouraging smile. “Well, we all acted like idiots back then. Some more so than others.” Her gaze drifted back to the bandanna in Celes’ hand.

Celes put it away again, and sighed. “I was just as bad. I was awful to Sabin. I kept things from him and I lied to him and I led him on, and I didn’t realise he was in love with me until it was far too late –”

“That’s right,” said Terra. “I remember that. He was pretty cut up about it.” She beamed suddenly. “But he’s much happier now, I think.”

“That’s good,” said Celes, and she meant it. She still couldn’t bring herself to write to the twins, though.



Some time later, Terra was reading her latest letter from Edgar and Sabin, when she suddenly raised her eyebrows and fidgeted in her chair.

“What is it?” Celes asked, looking up from her calculations.

“What’s what?” said Terra innocently.

Celes rolled her eyes. “Don’t be like that. What is it in the letter that’s making you all shifty?”

“Nothing. Well, er, some news, I suppose,” said Terra. “Um, Locke and Rachel broke up.”

“Oh?” she managed to reply.

“Yeah.” Terra looked back down at the letter. “Actually, it was quite a long time ago – not long after we all left the airship, it seems like. But Edgar’s only just found out about it. He thinks Locke was trying to keep it secret.”

“Wow, OK,” Celes said, leaning back in her chair and attempting to process the news. “Some ‘person worth protecting,’” she muttered.

“What’s that?”

She grinned ruefully. “That’s what Locke said. When we were all having our big love-in for Kefka. That was his *reason*.”

“Oh,” said Terra. “I don’t think I even remember what I said.”

“I don’t either,” Celes admitted. “Or what I said. I remember thinking it was pretty weak, though.”

“Hmm,” Terra replied, and looked back at the letter. “Anyway,” she went on, “Edgar thinks Rachel’s still in Kohlingen, and he says Locke’s based in South Figaro now.”

“South Figaro?” Celes echoed.

“Yeah. That’s how he found out about the whole thing. He was down there for some state function and ran into him. He says he thinks Locke would never have told him otherwise.”

“That is kind of odd,” she admitted.

“You’re telling me,” said Terra. “So what shall I tell them you said about it?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, they’re very eager to know your reaction,” she explained.

Celes was at a loss for words. “Are ... are they actually? Or are you bluffing?”

Terra smiled inscrutably.



More time passed. Celes picked up a pen a few times, but could never get much further than *Dear Sabin* or *Dear Edgar*: she knew she wouldn’t be able to write a single thing without commencing with a sincere apology, and she had no idea how she was supposed to express that in writing. She let them hear from her via Terra instead, and received their news in the same way, learning with interest about the way Figaro was handling its reconstruction activities and the fact that Gau was having to suffer the ignominy of taking elocution lessons from the king’s chancellor.

One morning, they received a rather heavier envelope than usual, and when Terra opened it, five thousand gil spilled out.

“They’ve invited us to stay,” she said, once she’d scrambled through the coins to reach the letter itself. “Look.”

Celes glanced down at the letter. *As the General is still intriguing us with her mysterious silence, it said, we wondered whether she might be more amenable to a visit in person. To put it bluntly, it’s been far too long since both of us saw both of you, and I’ve installed some more equipment in the castle that I’m desperate to bore you about, so do come as soon as you can. The money is for the journey, if you don’t both manage to charm your way around the world without paying for a single thing, which would hardly surprise me.*

Terra was grinning at Celes when she looked up again. “How about it?” she said.

“I don’t know,” said Celes. “Don’t you have to look after the kids? And someone’s coming to reopen the armour shop next week, I need to make sure that goes smoothly.”

“We’ll go the week after, then,” said Terra decisively. “I’ll write back straight away.”

“Terra ...” Celes sighed. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

“You want to apologise to them, don’t you?” Terra persisted. “The longer you delay it, the worse it’ll get. They’re giving you the chance.”

“Fine,” said Celes.

Gogo

WHEN they arrived at the castle after a series of ferry journeys, a porter took them to a small but lavishly furnished room, where they were to wait for the brothers. It didn't take long before the two of them entered and swept both Celes and Terra into warm embraces.

"General!" Edgar crowed. "The lady herself!"

"How've you been?" said Sabin with a grin.

They seemed so genuinely delighted to see her, both of them, that Celes forgot her reticence. Soon enough, all four of them were chatting, exchanging news of the reconstructed world with enthusiasm. Cyan had recruited a small colony of former Doman citizens and convinced them to build the new kingdom with him. Mog had begun to train the other Narshe moogles in fighting, apparently in the hope of forming some kind of vigilante squad, which they all agreed sounded terrifying. Celes joined Terra in sharing the news from Mobliz, including, after a lot of persuasion from the other three, detailed information on fruit prices.

"You must both be hungry," said Edgar after they'd been talking for a long time. "I'm sure dinner's ready by now. Shall we retire?"

"I'm starving, for one," Sabin added.

Edgar punched him lightly on the shoulder. "You would be."

They moved to the dining room – not the grand banqueting chamber that served for state occasions, but the smaller room within Edgar and Sabin’s private quarters. “Oh, and Gogo’s here too,” Edgar remarked as he opened the door and ushered the others ahead of him.

Celes was surprised: Gogo hadn’t seemed to get particularly close to anyone on the Falcon, but she supposed the circumstances of Edgar and Sabin’s first meeting with the mimic might have been enough to forge a bond between them. “It’s good to see you again, Gogo,” she said politely; despite their lack of previous interactions, it was nice to see a familiar – not face, really – a familiar assemblage of clothes and random items, she concluded.

Gogo raised a hand in greeting, never having been one for doing much talking, and they all sat around the table to eat.

When the main course was over, there was a lull in the conversation, and Celes steeled herself: it was time to deliver the apology that she had been putting off for so long. She glanced at Terra, who smiled at her in encouragement, and then spoke.

“Um – I have something to say to both of you.”

Gogo began to stand up hastily, clearly attempting to leave the table, and oddly, Edgar and Sabin both reacted to that: Sabin exclaimed “You sit down!”, and Edgar said, in a warning tone, “You know what we agreed.”

The mimic slumped back into a sitting position, and Celes, briefly mystified, continued. “I owe you both an apology.

Sabin especially. I – I was so horrible to you when you'd been nothing but kind to me. I should have told you about me and Edgar, and I shouldn't have taken advantage of you. I was confused and I didn't know what I wanted. That's a terrible excuse, but it's the best one I have."

Sabin smiled, his kind expression laced with sadness. "I won't lie," he said. "That did really hurt me. But I know you were hurt too. I couldn't blame you for long. There was a moment when I realised it wasn't worth holding onto all those regrets. I just wanted my friend back."

Celes pressed a hand to her forehead. "You're too good to me. I'm not sure I deserve it."

"We all deserve a Sabin in our lives," said Edgar softly, gazing at his brother in devotion.

"Stop it, you're making the girls uncomfortable," Sabin said.

Something escaped from Celes that was between a sob and a laugh. She composed herself and addressed Sabin again. "I lied to you too that night. That really was my fault."

"About the bandanna," he guessed.

She nodded. "I had it all along. I never got rid of it. Even now, I still have it." She hesitated. "It was always him – Locke. It could only ever be him. Even when I thought I hated him."

"You *see*?" Edgar exclaimed triumphantly, flushed with excitement. "I told you!" For some reason, he was facing Gogo,

who, as usual, made no reaction. Then Terra briefly laid a hand on Edgar's arm and frowned at him.

"Ignore them," said Sabin dismissively. "Look, I should have known. I *did* know. I'd never have let it happen – it was just that night, after we came out of that thing –" He exchanged a look with Edgar. "I let my guard down."

"I took advantage of you! I led you on!" Celes pleaded. "Why aren't you angry with me?"

"Why aren't you angry with Locke?" Terra cut in.

Celes fell silent at that, as did the others; the only sounds came from Gogo, shifting uncomfortably, as Celes reckoned she'd have been doing too if everyone else was airing their private drama around her. Wasn't she angry with Locke? She had been. She'd loved him and hated him all at the same time, and now – she didn't think she hated him. Loving him was probably out of the question too, she reasoned. Maybe she didn't care. No – that wasn't right either.

Edgar broke the silence. "Hey," he said. "There's a few things we all need to agree on here. Number one, we all climbed that tower together and gave that maniac a good seeing to. Number two, we all did things that we absolutely shouldn't have when we were preparing for it. Number three – look at us all. We've got a bond. We're a family. That's something special."

He stood up and made his way around the table, embracing each of them in turn, until he got to Gogo. "You, though, I think

you might hit me if I try anything,” he remarked, and sat down again.

Celes looked down at the table and smiled. “Thanks,” she said. “I suppose I owe you. Feel free to be horrible to me sometime.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll come sooner than you think,” said Edgar with enthusiasm.

“So, Edgar,” said Terra breezily. “I’ve suddenly become very interested in machines. Would you mind showing me your collection?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he replied, and offered her his arm.

After the two had left the room together, Celes stared at Sabin in confusion. “Are those two –”

“What? Oh – no – it’s not *that*,” he said, amused. “Terra’s just a very bad actor. Actually, I have somewhere I need to be myself, so I’ll leave you two to catch up.” He strode out of the room and the door clicked shut behind him.

Celes shrugged apologetically at Gogo. “They’re all mad. I suppose I’ll be heading out too, then.” *Catching up* with Gogo would consist mostly of various types of awkward silence, she knew, so it would be best to put a stop to that before it was even on the table.

She reached the door, and it stayed immobile under her touch. She wiggled the handle, and peered into the gap to work

out what was going on, only to see the unmistakable shape of a bolt connecting the door to its frame.

“OK, that’s weird,” she said. “I think Sabin just locked us in here.”

“They’re all playing a trick on you,” said Gogo. Except, Celes realised, that wasn’t Gogo’s voice. She turned back towards the table, stunned.

“I think it’s actually quite mean of them, so I’ll be taking off this costume now,” the voice continued, and Celes watched as a pair of slender hands emerged from under the voluminous sleeves of Gogo’s outfit, and began to unwrap the scarves that swathed the mimic’s head, and a pale face emerged from within, looking distinctly unamused –

She gripped the edge of the table and somehow managed to manoeuvre herself into a chair.

“I did tell them not to,” Locke grumbled, as he removed the last of the drapery from around himself. Then he caught her eye, and looked away.

Celes could feel her heart pounding. He was still the same – his pale hair still stuck out in every direction under his bandanna and his brown eyes still caught the light and his sharp nose still – she closed her eyes.

“I owe you a long apology,” he said at last, “and a long explanation.”

She opened her eyes – he was still as handsome – so she shut them again.

“But I’m not going to force you to listen to me if you don’t want to,” he went on.

She forced herself to look at him again. He met her gaze steadily this time, and she let the impression of his face sink in, remembering: those were the curves his eyebrows made, that was where his few freckles fell, that was the part of his lip that curled up when he was joking. Although now, his expression was sad and serious, and his voice was low.

Celes managed to speak at last. “They really thought they were being clever with that, didn’t they.”

“They did get you,” he said, with a small smile.

“That’s true,” she admitted, before lapsing back into silence.

He gazed into her eyes for a while, and then spoke again. “Celes. Will you let me try to explain?”

“What were you doing in South Figaro?” she asked quietly.

“I was looking for a book. I wanted to learn more about espers – you know the way they sort of got inside you? Apparently there are theories that if you rely on it too much, it totally takes you over. You can absorb its entire personality.” He shrugged. “I guess nobody can prove it either way now.”

“Locke,” she said hesitantly. “I’m worried that if you tell me – whatever explanation you give me won’t be good enough. And then – that might be it.”

She felt within her pocket and produced the bandanna.

“I carried this with me. Because during all that, however awful you were being to all of us, I believed you were still de-

cent. And I – I don't want to have to stop.”

“I'm honoured that you thought so well of me,” he said. “I deserved much less from you.”

Celes had been wondering how long it would take her to break down, and apparently now was the time: she buried her head in her hands and wept, and Locke stood, walked around the table, and placed a hesitant hand on her shoulder.

She meant to shrug him away, but she couldn't bring herself to. After a while, she turned to face him and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face against his stomach as the tears continued to shudder out of her.

He prised her away from him gently. “Don't,” he murmured, “we're doing this all in the wrong order.” He sat on the chair next to her.

She sniffed, reluctant to catch his eye now that he was sitting so close, and muttered, “Tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Go on.”

He leant back in his chair. “I think that theory about the espers is true. If someone had almost totally faded away – if they relied on magicite to bring them back – they wouldn't even have any of their own spirit left. It would just be the esper inside them. Wouldn't it? Well, I reckon some of those espers must have been real bastards.

“Anyway, after all that business on the Floating Continent, I ended up in Thamasa, of all places, and I travelled around

for a few months trying to find you all. I started getting leads after a while, but I think we must have always just missed each other. Then I heard something about the Phoenix, totally by chance, and I thought, well, that was always my big quest, why abandon it now. Especially when I wasn't getting anywhere with finding anyone else. I mean, magicite's a stone, it stays in one place." He laughed bitterly.

"So I went down into that cave, and in the end, I found it, and as I picked it up, it did that esper thing where it sort of speaks inside you, you know? And it said *she doesn't love you, I love you.*"

Celes stared at him.

"Obviously it was – unusual. I'd never heard an esper say something like that before, it's usually stuff like *avenge my father* and *the power of the Triad is within you* and that kind of thing, isn't it? But I turned around, and you were right behind me, and then it said the same thing to me again, and I –" He looked contrite. "Well, I didn't know. I'd never been totally sure, I always knew you were out of my league, and then – we hadn't seen each other in more than a year, so I thought you might have moved on even if you did –"

He sighed and shook his head. "We'd been told all that stuff about espers, I was so sure they all wanted to help us, so – I thought maybe I should believe it. But anyway, we went off to Kohlingen. I'd had this idea before that I was going to revive her and then stay around to see how things went, but

then with you all there I thought maybe I'd just get it done and leave her to get used to things while we went off to save the world, and then I might have worked out what was actually going on between you and me in the meantime. So when she woke up, I told her. About you and everything. Rachel ... she would have understood. So I had no reason to think – you know, I thought it was just her.

“And she asked if I was sure you had feelings for me, and of course I wasn't. I told her the truth, as I always used to, and she ... she said she'd ask you.” He paused and looked at her. “I, er, assume she didn't ask you.”

“Of course not,” said Celes.

“Right. But she came back and said, no, she doesn't love you, but she cares about you very much as a friend, et cetera. That kind of confirmed what the esper had said, so it was believable enough. I was upset, obviously, but I decided I just had to concentrate on the good news: I mean, I had Rachel back. I thought I had her back. And I reckoned, at least I wouldn't have to choose between you.

“So you know the rest. Most of it. I was pretty happy for a while, but then I realised I still had feelings for you and they weren't going away. So I tried to avoid you as much as I could – thought it would help me move on. Then at the same time I was starting to notice strange little things about her. Things she would have never done before, and I thought, maybe being out for so long does that to you, maybe I'd forgotten – like,

before, she was never hugely into getting, um, frisky, but there was this point on the ship where she suddenly became a sex maniac, and we used to do it every night for ages –”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Celes cut in.

He grimaced apologetically. “I mean, I enjoyed it, so I wasn’t too worried about it. So I tried to keep her happy, and I tried talking to you like a friend, because that was what I thought you wanted, but it was too hard.”

“It was hard for me,” she said. “You seemed OK at it.”

“No, I think you were too worried about trying to be casual to notice I was a wreck too.”

“Oh.”

He went on. “Then a bit later on, she completely switched again, and she started picking fights about every single little thing, and it just got worse and worse. It was totally irrational, nothing she said even made sense. But I was so angry, and confused, so I just bit right back. Even though I knew we were making life hell for everyone else. I just desperately wanted to fix whatever I’d started.”

“Why didn’t you talk to any of us?” she asked him.

“That’s the thing, I thought you all hated me. She turned me against all of you. Used to talk about how she’d heard you discussing how you were going to use me as bait for Kefka, leave me somewhere without any weapons and wait for him to come and get me –” He stopped, took a deep breath, and went on. “It didn’t even occur to me that it was all made up.

I thought she was the only one I could trust. So then when Edgar came to talk to me that night, I got it into my head that you'd all sent him to tell me you wanted me off the ship, and I just yelled at him too.

“So then after we went for Kefka, and the magic started fading away, we were about to go back to Kohlingen. I thought maybe going home might be good for her. Settle her down. That airship did weird things to all of us. But as we were heading towards the town, she started falling behind, and soon she could hardly walk, so I had to start carrying her. Then I noticed she was barely conscious, so I put her on the ground and tried to find a phoenix down or something. Obviously that was no help – it was the esper inside her dying, but I didn't realise that at the time. And without that – there wasn't enough of her to live.”

He looked into the distance, and corrected himself. “Well, she lived for a few moments. After the esper was gone – she looked different. Like I remembered. And she said, *give your love to the one who now dwells within your heart – love her, as you loved me*. And then – she died. And – I don't know, I was in shock. I just buried her right there in the desert and turned around and went to Narshe instead.”

“I'm sorry,” said Celes.

He shook his head. “She died years ago, really.”

“That esper ...” she wondered. “How could it be so terrible? Why would it?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to find out,” he replied. “Maybe ... most of them gave themselves to us willingly, didn’t they? This one was just sitting in that cave. Maybe it wasn’t on our side.”

He paused, and then went on. “So that was the explanation, and now for the apology.”

Celes placed a hand over his. “Locke. You don’t have to. I can see now –”

“I do,” he insisted. “Celes, I behaved horrendously towards you for months. I was too much of a coward to realise that everything I was being told about you was a lie. I saw that I was hurting you and I didn’t do a thing about it. I – I am profoundly sorry, and I understand if you want me never to trouble you again.”

She tightened her grip on his hand.

“But,” he continued, “if you were to do me the immense honour of letting me be part of your life, in any way at all, I would – well, I’d just try my absolute best not to mess things up again, because you deserve so much better from me.”

She caressed the back of his hand with her thumb. “You’re right, you did hurt me,” she mused. “I think – we can’t just go back to how it was straight away. When I look at you, I can still picture how cruel you were. But Locke, please don’t doubt me about this. I did love you. I still do.”

Tears were beginning to escape his eyes, and he rubbed his face impatiently with his free hand. “That’s so much more than

I deserve,” he said.

He was trembling, and she drew herself closer to him and wrapped her arms around him; he returned the embrace uncertainly, and then began to run one hand slowly over her hair, down her back and up again, while she leant her head on his shoulder and let herself melt into him.

After a few moments, she raised her head and found his lips with hers. Their kisses were slow and tender, and she savoured the feeling of his warm breath against her own, brushing her fingertips over his neck as he cradled the back of her head. Then they resumed their embrace, cheeks touching, breathing together.

Celes felt she could sit that way forever, but she spoke. “I suppose we should find the others.”

He stroked her ear in assent. “Will you be fighting them, or shall I?”

She let out a gasp of laughter, gently removed herself from his grip, stood unsteadily and headed towards the door. “Oh. It’s still locked.”

Locke sighed, joined her at the door, and pounded against it with a fist. “Oi! We’ve made up! Come and let us out!” he shouted.

Eventually, they heard the sound of approaching footsteps and scrambling at the keyhole, and then Edgar’s grinning face appeared.

Locke punched him.

Edgar staggered backwards, and behind him, Sabin assumed a fighting stance, but Edgar managed to step forward again and blocked the path of Sabin's fists with one arm, pressing his other hand to his chin where the blow had made contact. "Don't," he wheezed. "I can admit I may have deserved that. Although my face is insured for three million gil, and if you are found to have damaged it irreparably, then I'm afraid to say I shall have to -"

"You're all dicks," said Locke. "Even you," he added, looking at Terra, who was standing behind the twins trying to assume an innocent expression.

Edgar snorted. "Despite the biological impossibility -"

"Edgar, would you ever stop talking for one second?" Celes interrupted.

He seemed only too happy to oblige, and raised his eyebrows knowingly at her instead.

"Well, I'm glad you had a chance to talk," Sabin supplied mildly. Celes became aware that her hand was on Locke's back, and rubbed her fingers against it soothingly as Sabin continued. "And I'm sorry for locking you in there."

"I think we needed it, actually," Celes admitted.

Terra stepped forward and met both Celes and Locke with brief hugs. "I'm glad you've both come to your senses," she said happily. "Although you probably shouldn't do that to her again," she added to Locke.

Edgar let out a bark of outraged laughter at the understatement, and dodged around Terra to embrace Locke himself, thumping him on the back. “Welcome back, you bastard,” he said to him.

“Sorry I hit you,” Locke replied, grinning.

“A small price to pay for your happiness.”

Locke shouted in triumph, and enveloped Edgar in his arms again.

“Well,” said Terra once they had broken apart, “I think I’ve learnt enough about engineering tonight for a lifetime, so if you’ll all excuse me, I’ll be going to bed.” She waved cheerfully at Celes and headed off.

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” said Edgar, and he draped an arm over Sabin’s shoulders and led him off too, after a parting wink at the others.

When they were alone, she slipped her hand into his. He looked down at it and said, “It’s going to take me a while to figure this out.”

“Me too,” she admitted.

He smiled. “Nobody I’d rather have to help me through it.”

Extra scene 1

SABIN made his way back to the bedroom. The others hadn't turned in yet; there was only Edgar, frowning and fidgeting in his sleep. Sabin sat on his own bed, mere inches from his brother's, and looked down at the face so like his own.

Edgar opened his eyes and smiled weakly.

"Feeling OK?" Sabin asked.

"Better," said Edgar. "What about you?"

"I'm fine," said Sabin.

"Thanks for looking out for me," Edgar murmured.

Sabin studied his brother's features. Only a few hours ago, they'd thought they might lose each other.

"I love you," he said.

"Love you too," said Edgar sleepily.



They both woke late the next morning, and only Celes was still eating by the time they arrived at breakfast. She flinched at the sight of Sabin, gulped down the rest of her porridge and left the table hurriedly.

“What was that about? Did something happen between you last night?” Edgar asked as he took the chair she had vacated.

Sabin hadn’t wanted to have this conversation so soon, but he steeled himself and said, “Why didn’t you tell me? About you and her?”

Edgar paused, and then replied, “You know she’s still in love with Locke, don’t you.”

He nodded and looked down at the table while Edgar reached for his hand. “Hey,” he said softly. “I’ll always be here for you. Don’t forget that.”

Sabin nodded and squeezed his brother’s palm.

Extra scene 2

“A nightcap, Your Majesty?”

Edgar yawned. “Please.” The relentless formality of a state visit always wore him down. Finally, the elders of South Figaro had made their excuses and retired, and he was left with his entourage. At least they knew how he would prefer to round off the evening.

They made for the pub, where there was the usual commotion of an unexpected royal visit: a lot of hoo-ha about finding the most comfortable seats and making sure the most attractive barmaids were on duty. Edgar let it wash over him. He’d seen the sort of thing enough times before, and he’d spent too much of the day in character to bother with playing the game now. He sat at the table they had been escorted to and waited for his men to return with the drinks.

It was late, and the pub was quiet. A couple of lowlifes playing some kind of crude card game in one corner; two an-

cient, disfigured women gossiping in another; and in the third, a solitary man of around Edgar's own age, clutching a pint that he sipped at morosely, adjusting his bandanna with weary fingers –

Edgar realised who he was looking at, and struggled to gather his wits; he hadn't seen Locke in months. Not since they'd all parted after defeating Kefka, when he and his supposed best friend had barely said a word of farewell to each other. He had no clue about what might have become of Locke since then, and going by his correspondence, neither had any of their other erstwhile companions.

As his servants began to make their way back to the table, Edgar gradually stood and headed for Locke. The man seemed to be in a daze: he didn't notice Edgar approaching, tall and royally conspicuous though he was, until he was almost right beside him. But while Edgar was frowning his brow trying to think of what to say to his long-lost friend, Locke looked up, saw him, froze briefly and then set down his glass and hurried out.

Edgar found himself shouting after Locke in desperation, pleading with him to wait, and his raised voice attracted a handful of his guards, who moved to their king's side attentively. "Is there any trouble, Your Majesty?" one of them asked.

He forced himself to think straight. He couldn't let Locke get away, now that he knew he was in Figaro: the man was his closest friend, despite the fact that they hadn't spoken in

a long time, and from the little Edgar had seen, he looked in serious need of help. "Follow that man," he said to the servant who had spoken to him. "Find out where he's staying. I need the address."

"Certainly, Your Majesty," the man replied, and rushed off.

Edgar sipped his gin contemplatively for the remainder of the evening, declining to join his men in their game of three-card whist. So Locke was here in South Figaro, in his own domain. And without the girl. That was interesting, and somewhat unsurprising, given the way things had ended up on the ship. But above all that, Edgar was concerned for his friend. Locke seemed to be in a bad way, determined to avoid speaking to him or, he supposed, to any of their other companions from that time. However much he'd wronged them all on the airship, Edgar was still intent on reestablishing contact and doing his best to provide whatever help Locke required. Their friendship had lasted through some difficult times before, after all.

He had nearly finished the gin when the servant he had sent in search of Locke returned. Locke was staying in one of the less salubrious boarding houses in the northern part of town; somehow the man had been able to find out the details down to the very room number. Edgar thanked him, and informed his men that they would be paying a visit to the address first thing the next morning, before setting off for the castle. Not long afterwards, they retired to their rooms at the

inn, and he tried to sleep despite the lingering feeling of unease.

Edgar had never been able to let go of his worries at night, and he slept badly, glad of the change of scene when the sun rose and his men packed up their belongings before they all headed to Locke's lodgings. He led the others up the narrow stairs in grim determination and knocked on the door. There was no answer.

He turned to the nearest of his guards. "If you wouldn't mind –"

"Certainly, sire." The guard knocked sharply on the door himself, and spoke in a raised voice. "By royal order of His Majesty, you are commanded to open this door! In the event of non-compliance we will be entering the room using force and restraining the occupant if necessary. The occupant is reminded that the king's jurisdiction overrides all other authority in this area –"

He broke off as the door slowly opened and Locke stood there angrily. "Really?" he said, looking past the servant at Edgar. "Using your power to get in here? Do you really care that much?"

"I had no choice," Edgar informed him, and turned to his men. "Stay here, please. Although if you hear any kind of struggle, you may enter." He manoeuvred himself into the room and shut the door.

Locke sat down on the bed, and his hand moved to his belt.

Edgar raised his eyebrows. "I know I said struggle, but I didn't think you'd actually attack me," he said.

"I'm defending myself," Locke replied.

"Against what?" said Edgar. "I can assure you that I'm unarmed."

Locke scowled, but he let his hand drop and lay down, accompanied by the dull groan of bedsprings. Edgar, satisfied now that no knives would be brought out, looked around the small room: it was a state. Papers and clothes and who knew what else strewn around the place, and Locke himself lying on the bed fully clothed refusing to meet Edgar's gaze, his eyes red and his arms folded.

"I wanted to see if you were alright," Edgar went on, "and you're not, obviously."

"Very observant," Locke muttered.

"Locke," said Edgar. He tried to affect a soothing tone. "You're my closest friend. I'm worried about you. I don't want to see you like this. Will you tell me what's wrong?"

Locke sat up. "Are you seriously trying to help me?" he said, fixing Edgar with an irate look. "After everything that happened?"

"Of course," Edgar spluttered, feeling anger arise within himself in response to Locke's demeanour. He forced it aside: arguing would solve nothing. "Look, I don't know what was going on with you back then, but you weren't yourself. And I should have tried to help you at the time, but I didn't try hard

enough. I let you push me away, but I ought to have fought back.”

Locke was lying on his side again, facing the wall, and Edgar placed a hand on his shoulder. Locke flinched violently at his touch, and Edgar drew back again in surprise.

“Don’t *fucking* touch me,” Locke snarled.

It was Edgar’s turn to flinch, disconcerted by the venom in his friend’s voice. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, as gently as he could. “I promise I am totally unarmed and – god, Locke, you’re my best friend. I care about you more than anyone.” In reality, Locke was second to Sabin in that regard, but bringing up his brother probably wasn’t the best idea at the moment. Really, Edgar tried to look out for everyone – he was that kind of person – but Sabin came first, closely followed by Locke, and most others were much further behind.

Locke turned to face Edgar, who had evidently sounded sincere enough to be believable. “Sorry,” he said. “I was convinced you’d all turned against me until ... quite recently. Sometimes I forget you’re probably not out to get me.”

Edgar found that somewhat concerning, and asked, “Will you let me help you?”

“I’m sorry,” said Locke again. “I don’t think I can trust you.” Edgar tried not to look visibly hurt by that, but he must have failed, because Locke quickly added, “It’s not your fault. It’s my problem.”

“If there’s anything I can do to regain your trust –”

“There isn’t,” Locke cut in. “It’s – not like that. I just need to work through this myself. I need time.”

“OK,” said Edgar uncertainly. “How long? Three weeks?”

Locke frowned.

“I’ll be in town for another state occasion,” he explained, and then lowered his voice. “Look, I can’t just leave you here now that I know you’re around. If it’s going to take a while, fine, but I want to help you. You won’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Yes. Thank you,” said Locke. “I’ll be here.”

Edgar left, and headed back to the castle with his men, too mired in concern to pay heed to their talk of the pretty girls they’d seen in town and the gil they’d won at poker. On most days, he wouldn’t be above joining in with the discussion – on the latter subject, he often proved to be quite the useful conversation partner, having picked up a few tricks from Setzer back in the Blackjack days – but on this occasion he was too anxious to fully concentrate on the banter. He couldn’t shake the feeling even when they returned to the castle and he joined Sabin for lunch in their quarters.

“Good state visit?” his brother enquired. “All falling all over you as usual?”

“Something like that,” said Edgar, taking a bite out of his pasty.

“What’s up?” said Sabin.

Edgar looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“You’re worried about something.”

In truth, Edgar had never been able to keep secrets from his brother. “I met Locke in South Figaro,” he told him.

Sabin stiffened almost imperceptibly. “Oh,” he said, in a measured tone. “How is he?”

“Odd,” he concluded. “Something’s wrong with him. He didn’t want to talk to me about it, but maybe I’ll get something out of him when I’m in town next.”

“It didn’t work out with Rachel, then?”

Edgar had barely considered what might have happened between Locke and Rachel: once he’d set foot in Locke’s quarters, he’d been too worried about his friend’s wellbeing to give any thought to why he wasn’t with her. “I suppose not,” he replied.

Sabin went back to eating, frowning as he buttered a scone.



Three weeks later, Edgar was back in South Figaro for the planned state visit. He’d lost surprisingly little sleep over Locke over the intervening time: there were other, more banal matters that he had had to prioritise. It was all in the business of being a king: there was no point worrying about more than one thing at a time – that would be enough to send a weaker man to an early grave.

When the formalities were over, he left his men at the pub and made his way to Locke’s lodgings alone. It was probably

risky for the king to venture out in the evening unaccompanied, but he was one of the world's most skilled fighters now after the training the whole group had undergone in preparation for Kefka, and he felt confident enough that he could take a gang even without any of his tools.

No gangs revealed themselves, though, so he made his way up to Locke's room and knocked on the door.

There was a dull sound, a suspicious eye at the crack between the door and its frame, and eventually Locke opened it. "You came," he said.

"Of course," Edgar replied. "I said I would, didn't I?" He followed Locke inside and sat on the one chair; Locke took the bed, watching Edgar carefully.

"Are you feeling any better?" Edgar asked cautiously.

"A little," Locke conceded. "I've just about managed to convince myself that you're not about to attack me. So that's a start." He let out a shaky laugh.

"Will you tell me what's wrong?" asked Edgar.

Locke shook his head. "I can't. I'm not ready to talk about that."

"About Rachel," Edgar guessed.

"Yes." He hesitated. "Please don't make me –"

"Fine, I won't," Edgar replied. "But I've got to be able to help you somehow. Maybe I can get you out of this awful place. Why are you in Figaro anyway?"

“The library,” said Locke, with a little reticence. “There’s books I need, and someone told me Figaro has the best library. Although I’m yet to see why.” He looked at Edgar with reproach, as if the poor quality of the town’s public services were his fault.

“Ah.” Edgar chuckled a little in embarrassment. “I see. You seem to have misunderstood ... the town library’s nothing to speak of. I imagine your informant was referring to the one in the castle.”

Locke pressed both hands to his face.

“You can come and stay,” Edgar ventured.

“You can’t honestly think I’d –”

“No, listen,” he interrupted. “We’ve got a whole wing we don’t use. I’ll leave you alone and I won’t tell anyone you’re there. Not even Sabin.”

“He really does have it in for me,” said Locke miserably.

“No – he doesn’t *have it in for you* – he –” Edgar sighed and tried again. “You know what he’s like. He acts before he thinks, sometimes.” Locke and Sabin had that in common, he thought to himself.

“That night he went for me –”

“He lost control,” said Edgar. “He wouldn’t normally have – it was just because of how he felt about Celes –”

He regretted saying her name as soon as it came out, but Locke lifted his head with a sombre expression. “Have you heard from her?” he asked. “Is she safe?”

“I haven’t heard from her directly. We didn’t leave the airship on the best of terms,” Edgar admitted. “But Terra tells me about her when she writes – it sounds like she’s fine.” He paused. “You still have feelings for her, don’t you.”

“All that time,” Locke conceded. “As much as I tried to move on – when I had Rachel back and I knew it was one-sided anyway – I still couldn’t let go of her –”

“Wait,” said Edgar, catching up with what Locke had said. “One-sided? You thought she didn’t feel the same way about you?”

“I know she didn’t,” said Locke quietly.

Edgar shook his head in impatience. “You’re wrong. I can guarantee it. She loved you. And I suspect she still does. I think that’s part of why she won’t write to me.” He and Sabin had been encouraging her to do so for weeks via their letters to Terra, but nothing had so far come of it.

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” Locke replied.

“Well, I hope I can convince you someday.”

“You won’t.”

The discussion seemed to have made Locke a little more like his old, argumentative self, so Edgar resumed the previous topic. “Come and stay,” he insisted. “Whatever books you’re looking for, I’m sure we have them. I promise I won’t bother you.”

“Fine,” said Locke. “It’s not as if I can refuse royal orders –”

“It’s not a *royal order*,” Edgar interrupted, slightly irked. “If you’re that against it, I won’t make you. But it sounds like you really need these books.”

“I do,” said Locke.

“See you in the morning, then?” Edgar asked.

Locke nodded.



The royal party stopped by Locke’s accommodation on the way out of town, and Locke emerged from the building squinting in the sunlight. Edgar called out to him from his coach; there was another behind carrying everyone’s belongings, and most of the guards would accompany them on chocobos, following the usual protocol.

Locke looked a little apprehensive as he climbed into the coach and squeezed onto the seat next to Edgar; he still didn’t seem entirely comfortable in close quarters with the man that he had for some reason thought was about to attack him until only recently. Edgar pressed himself into the corner, hoping to assuage Locke’s unease by putting some distance between them. Not much could be gained in the limited space, though, and he found himself staring closely at Locke’s face for want of any other view. At such proximity, his exhaustion and despair were obvious.

“I’m assigning you a nurse,” said Edgar.

Locke glowered. “I’m just coming for the books,” he argued. “I don’t need coddling.”

“I’m afraid I must insist,” said Edgar. “What you do out here is your business, but I’m not having you getting ill in my castle.”

Locke fell silent again, so Edgar took that to mean the protest had been withdrawn.

They drew up to the castle, and Edgar disembarked from the coach with instructions to the servants to escort Locke to the unoccupied wing privately; he, meanwhile, greeted the staff who had been awaiting his return and strode back to his own quarters.

Over lunch, Edgar watched Sabin with anxiety. How could he reconcile his friend and his brother? Locke, who had been his only companion in the dark years after his father had died, and Sabin, whom he loved more than anyone. He was ready to make amends with Locke – he knew something had been going on on the airship that none of them had figured out – but getting Sabin to come around was going to be much more challenging. He’d forgiven Celes for leading him on, but this was something quite different.

For a few days, all he heard of Locke was via the nurses. The girl Edgar had asked to keep an eye on him gave him regular reports: the guest was resting and taking his potions, and he seemed to be recovering something of his usual vitality. Eventually, around a week after Locke’s arrival, a servant

approached him with a message: "His Majesty's guest would like to speak with His Majesty in the library."

Unfortunately, the missive was delivered at a time when Sabin was with him, and he challenged Edgar as soon as the servant had departed. "His Majesty's guest? Who are you keeping here?"

"I'll tell you later," said Edgar hastily, and hurried down.

Locke looked much better when Edgar found him; he was even smiling. "I didn't expect to have to call for you," he said. "Thought you'd be on my tail before this."

"I can respect your privacy," said Edgar, who couldn't help grinning at the sight of his friend acting something like his old self.

"Anyway, I've worked it all out," said Locke, gesturing at the array of books and papers before him.

Edgar listened as Locke explained. So espers couldn't really revive a person, but instead put their own spirit into the body and reanimated it, in a way; once somebody was gone, not even magic could truly bring them back. Rachel had died years ago.

"And you're happy about that?" he asked, trying to understand.

Locke let out an incredulous laugh. "Of course not! I'm devastated! But you see, it means none of that was her. It wasn't her that convinced me you all hated me. She had me thinking you were all trying to do me in. I had this idea that

going after Kefka was some kind of suicide mission: you were all sending me in first so I'd get the worst of it. So you see why I couldn't trust any of you – not even you.”

“You thought I was in charge of the whole thing,” Edgar mused, thinking back to their time on the Falcon: he was the one who had planned most of the group's strategy. He and Celes – and he knew which of them Locke would have blamed.

Locke nodded sadly. “After we came off the ship, she – er – some things happened. Anyway, it made me realise that the way I'd seen everything back then might not have been exactly right. So I tried to convince myself that you weren't trying to have me killed, but it was still difficult. With this, though –” He looked down at the books in front of him. “It makes sense now. I can see none of that was real. I'll be able to relax again. I might be able to sleep at night without worrying that someone's going to break in and attack me.”

Edgar understood, now: it had been similar for him after his father had died. The constant feeling that the people he was closest to were conspiring against him; the suspicion that if he let his guard down for an instant, his safety would be compromised. For months, he'd insisted all his meals were thoroughly tested for poison. Then, a few short years afterwards, he'd met Locke, and his new friend had helped him get over the final stages of that paranoia.

“I'm so sorry,” he managed to say. “I wish I'd known. When we were on the ship –”

“You couldn’t have done anything about it,” said Locke resolutely. “I was so desperate for things to go back to the way they had been with her. I thought I could love her like I had before and then everything would be fine.”

Edgar nodded. He wasn’t the only one who had struggled during those first years of their friendship: Locke had been grieving too. Back then, finding a way to get Rachel back had been his sole focus. Edgar had helped him recognise some of the pleasures that remained in life. In those days, they’d supported each other when neither had had anyone else.

He gazed at his friend’s face, lost in thought, until there was a sound behind him – the noise of someone big trying to be discreet.

“Oh no,” Edgar breathed. “Sabin?”

And indeed, his brother stepped out from behind a shelf. Edgar stepped between him and Locke automatically. Sabin’s fists weren’t raised – that was a good sign – but they were clenched, and his face was red.

“How much did you hear?” said Locke.

“All of it,” said Sabin, looking at Edgar.

“So you know what he went through,” he said.

“I know what *we* went through. What *Celes* went through,” Sabin replied. “Look, I know you two were close, all those years I wasn’t there –”

“Sabin!” Edgar exclaimed. He felt Locke’s hand on his arm.

“It’s not like that for me,” Sabin went on. “I can’t just forgive him.” He turned towards Locke. “You broke her heart.”

“I thought she didn’t feel that way,” Locke argued.

“Were you *blind*?” shouted Sabin.

“I was misled,” he replied through gritted teeth. “You could have set me straight if you cared about her so much. But I suppose you were just waiting for the chance to stick it in –”

“*Stick it in?*” Sabin echoed, appalled. “That’s – you’re looking at the wrong person there –”

Edgar felt Locke’s eyes turn on him, and met them reluctantly. “She needed comfort,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm. “I was taking her mind off things. It was only because you and Rachel were going at it so much –”

Locke groaned in frustration and ran his hands through his hair. “I was so stupid!” he cried. “I threw it all away with her and I let that thing convince me it was Rachel and that it was the only person I could trust. I fucked it all up and I made all of you hate me. I made Celes hate me ...”

“No,” said Sabin, stony-faced. “She never really hated you. She loved you all along, even though we told her you didn’t deserve it.”

Locke shook his head.

“I think she still loves you,” Sabin went on, a trace of bitterness in his voice. “Even now.”

“I told him the same,” Edgar murmured, “but he won’t accept it.”

Locke shook his head sorrowfully. "I can't. Don't you see? I was told lies about her. I never asked her myself. I'm not basing what I think her feelings are on secondhand speculation anymore. I can't do that."

Sabin sneered. "You're nobler than I thought."

"Please," Edgar moaned, as Locke's expression shifted to anger again. "Both of you. Don't fight." It was supposed to be a happy occasion, being together with the two men he loved the most for the first time in months, and with Locke finally ready to open up to him again. The hostility between the two of them was giving him a headache.

"We'd certainly be fighting if you weren't here," said Sabin, rubbing his fists together.

Locke paused, but then touched the knife at his belt. "Sure. Bring it on."

"*Stop it,*" Edgar pleaded, making sure he was still positioned between them, but then a thought occurred to him: maybe he should let them settle things physically. It had always helped Sabin to express himself using his fists, and neither of them would have had a good fight since Kefka. But Locke probably wasn't yet at his full strength after the time he'd been having, and Edgar didn't fancy the idea of the two of them in close combat: Sabin was six inches taller than Locke and almost twice as heavy.

"Fine," he said eventually. "If that's what it'll take for you to be civil to each other, then fight. But no fists. Swords and

heavy armour for both of you.”

Sabin seemed to be about to protest, but Locke said, “No problem.”

Edgar accompanied the two of them outside, flagging down a couple of servants on the way and arranging for them to bring out the necessary equipment. He forced Sabin to walk in front, putting distance between him and Locke: he didn’t want this starting in one of the castle corridors.

They alighted on a patch of dusty ground and were shortly joined by the two servants, who had succeeded in bringing out the armour and weapons in a small cart. Edgar moved to Sabin’s side as he donned his helmet.

“I thought he’d be more angry with you,” Sabin remarked. “For sleeping with Celes.”

“You weren’t angry,” Edgar pointed out.

“I’m your brother.”

“And the closest thing he has to one,” said Edgar. “Just don’t – just remember that, OK? When you’re out there.” He nodded towards the expanse of sand separating them from Locke. “You mean more to me than anyone. But I care about him too.”

“You care about everyone,” Sabin grumbled, and strode forth.

Edgar watched anxiously as the two began to spar. Neither was used to heavy swords and armour, and it showed: they were slow and hesitant. Sabin was trying to use his sword more

like a staff, thrusting the whole thing towards Locke with both hands. Locke waved his around in the air ineffectually. Edgar resigned himself to waiting for them both to tire themselves out – it wouldn't take long with this setup.

Sabin finally succeeded in driving the whole weight of his sword against Locke's ill-fitting breastplate, and Locke staggered backwards. Sabin drew back too to catch his breath, and Edgar watched with increasing trepidation as Locke frantically undid the straps of his armour and cast it and the sword aside, retrieving two knives from his waistband instead and stepping forward again with a grin.

Edgar debated how to intervene – he couldn't let the two of them face each other with such a mismatch in protection – but Sabin threw down his sword and began to cast off his own armour as well, soon facing Locke with his bare fists and a confident expression. “That's more like it!” he shouted. “Come on then!”

The two of them began to circle each other, clearly much more at ease now. Edgar was worried – he'd thought the armour would give both of them some protection, and now they didn't even have shields. He watched uncomfortably as Sabin parried the thrusts of Locke's knives with his bare hands and slammed bleeding fists into Locke's chin. Locke managed a few slashes across Sabin's forearms before Sabin got him right in the nose and Locke fell back onto the ground, hands pressed to his face to stem the flow of blood, his knives on the ground.

Sabin drew back in triumph, but Locke jumped forward again and gripped the bottom of Sabin's vest, pressing his head into his stomach. Sabin shoved Locke upwards and delivered another punch to his face, and he fell back again, staying on the ground this time.

Edgar sprinted forward. Sabin was panting and his arms were soaked in blood up to the elbow, but he gave Edgar an exhilarated smile as he approached. "How about that?" he said.

He ignored the question and looked down at Locke. "God, Sabin," he said. "He's out cold. Did you really have to –"

Locke's eyes opened and slowly fixed on Sabin above him. "Good fight," he said weakly.

Edgar could barely prevent himself from rolling his eyes: they were typical men, both of them. And all the worse for him that this was apparently the kind of person he enjoyed spending time with. "You both need to go to the infirmary," he informed them, as the two servants moved in discreetly to clear away the discarded armour. Edgar assisted Locke in getting to his feet and let him lean against him while they returned to the castle interior. Sabin brought up the rear, having probably realised that Edgar wouldn't be too pleased if he went first and got blood all over the door handles.

When they arrived at the infirmary, Edgar helped Locke into a sitting position and turned to Sabin. "You can explain," he said, and walked out.

He returned to his quarters in irritation. Sabin had always believed that a good fight would settle an argument, and Locke wasn't too dissimilar, but it was something he had never empathised with himself – he'd been known to shout and argue, yes, but physically hurting someone was something different. He busied himself with some paperwork in an attempt to take his mind off it.

Sabin came in not a lot later, with a clean shirt on and his arms swathed in bandages. "Alright?" he greeted him.

Edgar looked up unamused. "How's Locke?"

"I broke his nose," said Sabin proudly, "and they say he's concussed."

"Marvellous," Edgar sighed. "Just when he was getting better."

"You're really worried about him," Sabin remarked.

"Of course I am," said Edgar. "I know he was cruel to all of us, but he was having a pretty terrible time himself. We all made mistakes back then."

"I know," said Sabin. "I just – it's not fair on Celes. That's what matters. None of that should have happened to her."

"He still loves her," Edgar murmured.

"And she loves him. Don't you think?"

"I'm sure of it," he replied.

Sabin smiled sadly. "So what can we do about it?"



“Mr Cole, your majesty,” announced the butler the next day at breakfast, and Edgar exchanged a surprised look with Sabin before Locke walked in, clutching a bag of ice to his face.

“Wow, you look awful,” said Sabin in delight.

“Thanks,” Locke retorted. He sat down gingerly at the table. “Only just escaped the infirmary. They wanted to keep me in overnight to *observe* me.” He said it like it was an inconvenience.

“I should think so too,” said Edgar, casting a worried eye over Locke’s bruised and swollen features. “How are you feeling?”

“Terrible,” he replied, glaring at Sabin, who grinned and said, “You’re welcome.”

“I’d argue with you,” said Locke, “but they said I should try not to move my jaw too much.”

Edgar allowed himself to relax a little: the tensions of the previous day seemed to have given way to nothing more than an exchange of repartee. If they were sniping at each other like this, the fight must have been good for both of them. “So you’ll be quiet? That’ll make a nice change,” he ventured, and was rewarded by a laugh from both Sabin and Locke, although it turned into a pained wince in the latter case.

“Anyway, we were talking last night,” said Sabin, “and we decided you owe us a favour.”

“Was letting you bash me around not enough?” Locke asked wearily.

Sabin smirked. “That was your payment for using our facilities. This is your apology for not accepting our help before.”

“We’re going to bring Celes here,” Edgar took over gravely. “You’re going to sit down with her, and listen, and maybe even believe her when she says she’s still in love with you.”

“Edgar,” said Locke, suddenly looking distraught. “I can’t possibly do that. Don’t make me hurt her again. Just let her move on. She deserves better.”

“She deserves what she wants,” said Sabin, “and as much as I hate to admit it – she wants to be with you.”

“I can’t accept that,” said Locke.

Edgar sighed: they were going around in circles. “That’s why you need to hear it from her.”

Locke shook his head. “No. Even if I get the chance to talk to her. She’ll still have to sit there and look at me –”

“We’ll wait until your face is fixed,” Sabin suggested.

“That’s not what I meant. I can’t just sit there and wait for her to tell me she’s in love with me. That’s not fair on her.”

“Then we’ll disguise you,” said Edgar.

Both Sabin and Locke looked startled by the suggestion, and Edgar felt a little surprised himself; the thought had come to him from nowhere.

“We can wrap you up in some shawls,” he went on, talking through the idea to see how it might work, “and you can pretend to be – a visiting traveller –”

“Like Gogo,” Sabin supplied.

“Yes!” Edgar exclaimed, his mind racing now. “Exactly!” He cast an eye over Locke. “Gogo was a bit shorter, I think, but if he stays sitting down – that would be believable, wouldn’t it? That Gogo would be coming to visit?”

“Oh,” said Sabin, catching up with Edgar’s half-formed sentences. “We dress him up *as* Gogo? Right!”

“Hang on,” Locke cut in. “You’re trying to deceive her now? Trick her into thinking I’m not there and then get her to say she –” He broke off with a gasp of pain and glared at the two of them instead, rubbing his jaw.

Edgar frowned in sympathy. “It’s the best solution,” he said. “She won’t know you’re there, so she might actually come out with it without being upset by seeing you first. You’ll hear what she has to say first, and then you’ll be able to talk to her alone.”

“I don’t like it,” said Locke.

“So what’s your suggestion?” Edgar asked.

“Drop the whole thing. Let her move on.”

“And make sure both of you are miserable for years,” said Edgar.

Locke rolled his eyes. “It won’t be years.”

“It was years for you before,” said Edgar. He noticed Sabin flinch a little at that: maybe he had overstepped the mark.

“That was different,” said Locke. “Rachel was dead. I – we loved each other. It wasn’t a case of me behaving awfully to her and making her turn against me.”

“She –”

“I know what you’re going to say.”

Sabin spoke. “You owe us this. This is the easiest we can make it. You come in here disguised, you get to hear how she really feels without upsetting her, and then you get the chance to sort things out with her.”

“You want to see her,” Edgar prompted.

“I – what I want isn’t important. It’s what she wants that matters,” said Locke.

“Yes,” Edgar persisted, “and as you won’t believe us about what she wants, this is your only option.”

Locke opened his mouth, winced, clutched at his jaw again and then spoke. “I need to go and lie down,” he said. “But I’m not happy about this.” He stood and turned to leave.

Edgar watched with concern as he shuffled out, and then turned to Sabin. “Was it really worth doing that to him?”

“Absolutely,” said Sabin earnestly. “Means I don’t start wanting to kill him every time I look at him anymore.”

“Honestly,” Edgar sighed. “What happened to talking things through? Can’t anyone have a mature discussion these days?”

“We can’t all be king,” said Sabin.

Edgar smiled at him gratefully. “Do you think it’ll work?” he said.

“Worth a try. Got to be better than – like you said. Them just avoiding each other for years –”

“I hope so,” said Edgar.

Sabin clapped a bandaged hand onto Edgar’s shoulder.
“We’ll make it work for them,” he said.

Extra scene 3

“THEY’ve set a date,” he said. “For Kefka.”

She took both his hands in hers and ran her thumbs over his wrists.

“A week from today,” he went on. “They’re – they’re sending me in first.” He corrected himself. “Well, I’m to lead a group.”

“Who’s going with you?”

“The girl and the old man. And the assassin.”

“So if Kefka doesn’t kill you, he will,” she said. “They’ll have paid him to make sure you’re taken out.”

The thought had crossed his mind too – he hadn’t been sure, but she said it with such certainty. “I think so,” he agreed.

“You know that’s what they’ve done. They’ll just use you to weaken Kefka, and then they won’t need you anymore. They’re sending you in with the two worst fighters, so they’ll be down before the end of it, and then it’ll just be you and the assassin

and he'll slit your throat."

"Rachel," he said, his voice cracking. "I can't do this. I can't go in there with them. They want me dead. We just need to get off this airship –"

"No," she said forcefully. "You need to make sure Kefka is destroyed. He has to suffer. He killed me, Locke."

He looked into her dark eyes. "I can't. I can't face it. They hate me so much."

"Of course they do," she said, her grip on his wrists tightening. "You're weak. You're a coward, aren't you? That's why they hate you. Do you think you deserve better?"

He shook his head. "I don't deserve anything," he agreed.

"That's right," she said coldly, letting go of him and turning away.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," he mumbled. She made no response.



Edgar and Celes had issued some order to stay in groups during training – there were some fearsome monsters in this part of the world – but Locke managed to give his assigned partners the slip on most occasions. They would be glad of it anyway. He fought fiercely, concentrating on learning to defend himself; he certainly couldn't rely on his comrades to protect him when it was increasingly evident that they were hoping to do just the opposite. He wore himself out most days, returning

to Rachel sweating and sore, and she would either take him in her arms or turn away according to her whims.

When the time came, and they entered the tower, Locke led his group without much interaction. The old man and the girl were raving, as usual, and Shadow didn't care to make any decisions for himself. So Locke led the way and was first into battle. He'd been given a surprisingly good sword when all the weapons were pooled, but he suspected those in the other groups had better ones.

Then they all faced Kefka, together, and Locke listened while Terra made some impromptu speech about hope and having things to live for. Strangely, he began to recall the affection he'd once felt for her as she did so, thinking back to when they'd first met and all this had started. She'd been so helpless, and he'd rescued her and set her on the path to becoming the confident young woman who challenged Kefka now. And despite the fact that he was sure she hated him by this point, he still felt she was worth it. So when it seemed to be his turn to contribute his own source of hope, he looked at Terra, who had spoken last, and said, "A person worth protecting." There wasn't much else he could think of.

The battle got underway soon afterwards. Edgar and Celes marshalled everyone into an order and Locke ended up fifth, which surprised him: he had expected to be first again, so Kefka could dispatch him quickly. But when the first four went into battle and Terra cast reraise spells on them all before turn-

ing towards the hideous creatures she was supposed to be fighting, he understood: by entering fifth, he wouldn't benefit from the same level of defence.

Terra was the one who fell, when they had almost reached the top of the pillar – fortunately, it wasn't fatal, but she clearly had no strength to fight. Locke filled her position as planned, and tried his luck at stealing from Kefka – whatever he ended up with might help him defend himself. It turned out to be a megalixir: it would help all of them defend themselves, then. Locke scattered the gleaming droplets over the whole group and tried to ignore their looks of surprise.

And then, not long afterwards, Kefka was defeated, and they had to get out of there. A raging wind had kicked up from nowhere, and Locke's hair fluttered into his eyes as his bandanna flapped free. He ignored the piece of cloth as it began to flutter away, but Celes, of all people, jumped after it, losing her footing on the trembling ground. Locke, instinctively, grabbed her as she began to fall, and let go as soon as he could: the feeling of her in his arms was unbearable.

“Are you crazy?” he managed to exclaim. “You almost got yourself killed for *that*?” He could hardly hold her gaze any longer, and hurried on, trying to forget about the interaction.

They reached the exterior of the tower. The other members of Locke's original group were nowhere to be seen now; Shadow had dashed off somewhere and the other two, after a moment's hesitation, had followed him. It seemed, at least,

that Locke wasn't going to be assassinated. But there was still the matter of returning to the airship. He managed to grab hold of the crane as it passed him, and began to grapple his way up the rope.

Edgar had made it up before him, and stood on the deck of the Falcon looking down at Locke as he climbed up, his expression inscrutable. Locke's heart sank as he realised this was the end. Edgar was going to unhook the rope, and Locke was going to fall right back down into the tower. From this height, with the progress he'd made, it would kill him. He gritted his teeth and concentrated on ascending as fast as possible; if he got to the top before Edgar expected him, he might not have time to unfasten the rope and let Locke fall.

It paid off. Locke reached the top, and Edgar stretched out a hand as if to help him pull himself onto the deck; Locke ignored it, knowing it would be a trick, and hoisted himself aboard, ignoring Edgar and making straight for Rachel.

She threw her arms around him and kissed him passionately, before drawing back. "You did it," she breathed. "You made it out of there."

Locke had been the one fighting, but Rachel looked tired and ill; he studied her face carefully. "What's wrong?" he murmured.

She shook her head. "I was just worried about you. But you're safe. And Kefka is gone."

He nodded and kissed her again.

They maintained their embrace for some time; Locke was dimly aware of the events happening around them – something involving Terra, and magicite. Edgar was making a lot of pronouncements that Locke managed to avoid listening to. He stroked Rachel’s hair as she leant against him, and gazed at her in concern: she looked awful. Her skin was beginning to take on a grey tinge, her eyes were dull, and her voice had receded to a hoarse whisper.

“We need to get you out of here,” he told her. “Get on dry land.” She nodded.

He took her hand and made for Setzer, who was having a jocular conversation with Cyan and the mimic. Setzer frowned when he saw Locke, and the joy vanished from his face. “What do you want?” he snarled, looking both of them over.

“Rachel’s sick,” said Locke, bristling. “We need to get off this ship. Take us to Kohlingen.”

“All in good time,” said Setzer.

Locke fumed, but there was nothing he could do about it: he could probably take Setzer in a fight, but the others would certainly join in on the gambler’s side. He took Rachel back to their room instead, and held her close in bed. “It’s OK,” he assured her. “We’ll be down there tomorrow. You’ll be fine.”

She nodded, and nestled closer to him.

The next day, things were the same: at least they hadn’t got any worse. Rachel was still weak and pallid, and Locke stayed with her in their room, making sure she had enough food and

water. All the while, he could feel the rumbling of the airship's engine as it continued to move: Setzer clearly had no intention of stopping yet.

Finally, a few days later, the engine's vibration mellowed to a soft hum. Locke coaxed Rachel out of bed and led her into the common area, where he found the rest of the group assembled at the table.

Something was wrong. Setzer and Cyan seemed happy enough, and the wild boy was up to his usual mischief, but Edgar and Sabin looked uncomfortable. So did Terra, and, when Locke dared sneak a look at her, Celes – and even the moogle seemed anxious, his whiskers twitching.

“Ah,” said Setzer, as Locke and Rachel approached. “Here he is. We're at Kohlingen now, so you're welcome to leave.”

Locke gave a brief nod of farewell and led Rachel down the stairs.

Setzer had lied: they were a considerable distance from Kohlingen, almost at the other end of the desert. A strong wind was blowing and sand swirled in their faces. Locke clutched Rachel's hand as they battled their way towards the town, cursing Setzer internally; he'd always been a stuck-up prat. They hadn't got on, even in the Blackjack days.

Rachel was faltering, and Locke looked at her in concern. “Are you having trouble?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Locke – I'm sorry –”

He hoisted her over his shoulder and continued: they had to get to Kohlingen, and then everything would be alright. He could feel her breathing against him; her breath was shallow.

“It’s OK, Rachel,” he murmured as they continued. “We’ll get there. We’ll go to Kohlingen and everything will be back to normal and we’ll be able to go treasure hunting like we did in the old days. We’re nearly there now, just hold on.” He was babbling, he knew, but it was out of fear; something was badly wrong.

“Just a bit further,” he went on. “I’ve got you, and we’re going to get home and then you’ll be alright. I’ll take care of you.”

Her breathing had become even shallower; he couldn’t hear it at all. That was when he began to panic. He set her down on the sand, trembling, and began searching his clothes for a phoenix down, or a potion, anything. But he had nothing: he’d left all the healing items back on the Falcon, now that there was no more fighting to be done. He ran his hands through his hair in desperation and dropped to her side. “Rachel,” he sobbed. “Rachel, please.”

He studied her face, and it seemed different, somehow. More like how she’d looked years ago: earnest and loving and maybe even happy. She’d looked quite different on the Falcon, he realised.

He brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes with a shaking finger.

“Locke,” she said, and he drew back, shocked to hear her speak.

“Give your love to the one who now dwells within your heart,” she went on. “Love her, as you loved me.”

He moaned in frustration. What did that even mean? “I love you,” he gasped desperately. “I love you, Rachel –”

But her eyes were closed, and she was still again.

He felt himself stand up, barely in control of his own body. She was dead. He felt like screaming, but nothing came out. Instead, he knelt down in the sand again and began to scabble out a hollow with his bare hands. Dead people were buried, right? That was what happened, when someone died –

He went on, barely conscious of what he was doing, until he had scraped out a sizeable pit in the sand. Then he lifted Rachel over his shoulder for a final time, let her slip down into the recess, and kicked the sand back over her body. Soon, there was no trace of her.

He still felt numb. Kohlingen still lay ahead, but he couldn’t go there without her: she had been the only thing about that town he hadn’t hated. He turned east, instead, and made for Narshe.