

Two Dimensions

by ovely

2020

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CELES peered down from the landing – there he was, just the person she had been hoping to see. “Leo?” she called, tentatively.

He looked up and smiled. “Celes. Good to see you. How have things been here?”

“I thought you were stationed at Doma?”

“I was. I still am. Just had a few things to take care of here. I’ll be going back in the morning.”

“Oh,” said Celes. The sight of him had reassured her: an increasingly rare friendly face. She was glad he was going back to his position in Doma – certain other officers would definitely handle that mission the wrong way – but it had been good to

momentarily think she would have an ally in Vector.

“Something wrong?” he enquired.

She considered. Sharing her worries with him would probably help. He’d always been so noble, and he’d be able to remind her of the goals they pursued – the right reasons for doing what the Empire did. “Could we talk? In private?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said, and headed up the stairs into her quarters.

Celes decided there would be no point mincing her words. “I think I want to defect,” she said, once the door had clicked shut behind them both.

He gaped in response. “What? To whom?”

“Not defect, then. But leave. Resign, if I can even do that. I don’t think this is right. What we’re doing.”

“Celes,” he said. “You’ve seen how those people live – those terrible conditions. They need science. We can help them.”

“I just don’t think we’re doing it the right way,” she said. “It’s not right to terrify people into cooperating with us.”

He frowned. “You’re worried about Kefka?”

“He’s got so much power now. Gestahl lets him do whatever he wants. You heard him last month, the kind of things he was talking about doing.”

“But we’re against that, right?” said Leo. “You and me, like we said before. The two of us can overrule him.”

"I'm not sure we can now," she said. "Gestahl trusts him too much."

He shook his head. "Then we need to try our best. And I can't stop him myself. The Empire needs you, Celes. To make sure we do the right thing."

She knew Leo was right – Kefka was a twisted bastard, but with the two of them united against him, they might be able to stop Gestahl listening to his ideas. If she left, on the other hand, it would be much harder. She owed it to Leo, and to all the people of the cities they'd taken, to make sure there was some good in what they did.

"You're right," she sighed. "Sorry for wasting your time."

"Far from it," he replied. "If you ever have trouble seeing the good in what we do, I'll gladly convince you. It's worth it."

"Thank you," she said. She wasn't entirely convinced, to tell the truth, but he'd certainly helped.



Celes received new orders soon afterwards. There was to be a reshuffle among the chief officers; she was to head out into the field, and it would be Leo who was stationed in Vector. She was being sent to South Figaro, though, not Doma: they'd taken the western city recently after the king of that state had broken their alliance, for reasons apparently unknown. Concern was beginning to spread that the people of South Figaro would suf-

fer at the hands of their evidently capricious king, and so the Empire had moved in to assure peace in the city, even if they wouldn't manage to guarantee it in some of the other parts of the kingdom.

It was Kefka that she was relieving of command, and he chuckled when she arrived in the town and approached the hastily constructed Imperial base. "General Celes! How dutiful of you to take over from me. I'm heading over to Doma. I hear they're getting a little thirsty over there."

Nothing he said made sense, as usual. She did her best to give him a cordial smile and waited until he was on his way before turning to the junior officer awaiting her orders.

"What's the situation, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"Ma'am," he replied with a stiff salute. "There's been some trouble subduing the town, but things seem to be settling down now. A number of the residents were helped to escape by an unidentified agent."

He was wearing a visor, but she could tell who he was from the sound of his voice: Lieutenant Erdley, whom she'd worked with a few times before – a complete jobsworth, as she recalled. She frowned at him. "What's wrong with that? We're here to maintain peace, not hem everyone in. If they choose to leave town, that's none of our business."

He inclined his head. "Ma'am."

"Escort me to my quarters," she instructed him. Who had insinuated to the lieutenant that the townspeople were under

some kind of quarantine? It must have been Kefka. The man was always trying to sow additional discontent in places where there was already more than enough of it.

Erdley led her to the inn on the other side of town, and she tried to gauge the mood of the townspeople as they passed among them. Most of them seemed suspicious, if not outright hostile towards her. It was usual for the people of the further nations to distrust the Empire – they often saw Magitek as something to be feared – but she hadn't expected quite this vitriolic a reaction in a place that they had been allied with until very recently. What sort of things had their king been telling them?

They had almost reached the inn when an old woman, dressed in rags and missing an eye, intercepted her path. "Imperial scum," she spat, "trying to take over the world with your witchcraft! It's unnatural –"

"Stand aside," said Celes, her hand on the hilt of her sword. The woman noticed, and withdrew, muttering curses.

She'd seen the type of thing before, but people did seem particularly antagonistic here. Normally it was one lone crackpot who'd address her like that, and any bystanders would seem more embarrassed by it than anything, but on this occasion it looked like people were actually congratulating the old woman as she slunk back.

Celes let the thought slide as they approached the door of the inn. "Thank you, Lieutenant," she said to Erdley. "I've seen

enough for tonight. Is the night watch prepared?"

"Affirmative, ma'am," he answered.

"Good. Send someone to wake me in the morning. I'll need to meet the town elders."

He saluted, and retreated.

The inn had been entirely requisitioned by Empire men, and a private led her to an unoccupied room, where she got into bed without pausing to remove her armour. Sleeping in full battle gear was a skill she'd acquired some time ago, and she usually availed herself of it when she was in the field; as a general, she was a prime target for assassins, so it was good to take precautions where possible. She drifted off to sleep not long afterwards; the long journey from Vector had been tiring.

Celes was awoken by the feeling of hot breath in her face and a strange tension at her wrists. It was pitch dark – it must have been the middle of the night. "Lift her up," said a harsh voice, and she felt a pair of arms seize her by the waist.

"What the fuck?" she exclaimed. "Put me down, you bastard!" She kicked at the air, trying to cause as much disruption as possible.

"I can't hold her, sir!" another voice panted.

Another set of hands seized her legs. "Go on, Corporal," it said.

This time, she recognised the voice. "Erdley? What are you –"

“Shut your mouth, *Chère*,” Erdley spat, and she was so surprised that she found herself complying: what was going on? And why was Erdley addressing her by her name – what had happened to the deferential tones of the previous evening?

It was a rope around her legs now, not mere hands, and a cloth of some kind was forced into her mouth as well; she tried to spit it out, but it was fastened around her jaw with too much tension. She found herself able to produce only inarticulate noises of displeasure, and gave up on them almost immediately; they were degrading. Instead, she stayed resolutely silent as the two men carried her out of the inn and through the streets of South Figaro. It was just as dark as it had been inside; the place was still primitive, and didn’t seem to have adopted outdoor gas lighting yet. The Imperial forces might be able to provide that for them, at least.

At last, they entered a building on the other side of town and descended a flight of stairs. Celes recognised the layout of a dungeon cell: small and grim, manacles hanging ready at the wall, some unrecognisable instruments of torture piled in a corner. As her captors began to transfer her to the chains attached to the wall, she took advantage of the opportunity to start fighting back again. Her arms were pinned back too quickly, but she twisted and contorted herself as much as she could, trying to impede the process. When Erdley busied himself with assuring that a manacle was correctly fastened, she lunged forward and headbutted him in the chin. He retaliated

by seizing her jaw and shoving her head back against the wall. There was a burst of pain at the back of her head where it made contact with the stone, but she forced herself not to show it, and spat at him instead. The small blob of spittle landed on his sleeve, and he retaliated, striking her face with something between a punch and a slap.

She cried out, and he grinned. “That’ll teach you. Filthy whore.”

“At least afford me the privilege of knowing what’s going on here,” she snarled.

“Certainly. My absolute pleasure,” said Erdley. He spoke with a confidence she’d never have anticipated from him. “Order from the Emperor, arrived last night by fast chocobo just after you got here.” He produced a piece of paper and held it up for her to read.

Celes squinted – it would have been much easier to interpret the writing if Erdley hadn’t decided to hold it quite so close to her face. Nevertheless, she eventually managed to decipher it.

*BY ORDER OF HIS EXCELLENCY, EMPEROR GESTAHL,
it is hereby decreed that Celes Chère, currently General of His Excellency’s forces, be removed from all positions forthwith, following reports from Imperial intelligence that the said General has betrayed her position and intends to defect from the Empire.*

Furthermore, given that the said General is in possession of classified information concerning our current military directive,

it is additionally decreed that in order to prevent the spread of Imperial secrets, the said General be neutralised at the earliest opportunity.

Gestahl's signature followed. It looked very much like any other Imperial decree she'd seen in the past – there was no reason to suspect it was a fake. But the bluntness of it shocked her; besides, the information was false. She'd done nothing that might have “betrayed her position”, whatever that could mean. Her intention to defect had only gone as far as speaking about the matter to Leo, and she'd left that meeting resigned to the need to remain part of the Empire.

And then there was that “neutralised”.

Erdley folded the paper carefully and placed it back in his utility belt. “Speechless now, aren't you?” he crowed. “The general is silenced! I never thought I'd see the day.”

“I didn't realise you loathed me so much,” she remarked, trying to ignore the panic building within her.

“Oh, I never had the opportunity,” he responded. “Had to follow your orders, didn't I? Never dreamt I'd be able to get my own back at the ice bitch.”

“Do you hate all women, or is it just me?” she asked mildly.

The question enraged him for some reason, and he struck her face again, knocking the back of her head against the wall for a second time; pain blossomed in the same part of her skull as before. She felt weak suddenly, almost drowsy, and closed her eyes in an effort to stay upright.

When she opened them again, Erdley was addressing the other soldier. “Take her shoes off,” he said, and a cold feeling of dread overcame Celes.

The corporal looked apprehensive too, but he slowly knelt and removed Celes’ shoes, placing them carefully by the wall while Erdley stepped towards her again with a grin. She shrunk back – she couldn’t pretend now that she wasn’t terrified. She was too lightheaded to summon the presence of mind to put on a show now, so she merely cowered and hoped he wasn’t about to do something awful to her.

Erdley raised a foot, shod in a heavy military-issue boot, and brought it down heavily onto one of Celes’ own. It wasn’t the kind of unspeakable act that she’d half been expecting, but the sudden pain made her cry out again – an anguished sound that bore no trace of the dignity befitting her rank. She lost her balance and was prevented from falling only by the manacles that held her wrists to the wall.

He stood on Celes’ other foot in the same way, and a further sound escaped her in response; at this point, she was barely aware that she was making such a noise herself. It felt like each of her feet was in a separate furnace, the flames crackling around them and occasionally sending a shot of pain up through her legs. She whimpered in response.

Erdley drew back, satisfied, and announced, “I’m going to get some sleep before tomorrow. Corporal, you watch her. Do what you want to her.” He gave a final look of vindictive plea-

sure to Celes and left the cell.

Celes could barely tell what was happening by this point – she was about to pass out from the pain and the blows to the head she'd received. It was perhaps better that way, she realised; if she was unconscious, she might be able to ignore what the soldier was about to do to her. She watched as he approached, his face set with grim determination.

He studied her for an instant, and then drew back, resting against the wall to the side. Celes felt relief blended with confusion, and soon slipped away.

When she woke up, her head felt clearer and the pain in her feet, although still very much present, had dulled. The corporal was still in position at the side wall, watching her intently.

“You stayed awake all that time?” she asked him. Her voice came out quiet and fragile, and it sickened her.

“Under orders, wasn't I?” he replied.

“You're from Doma,” she said.

“Is my accent that strong?”

“I'm afraid so.”

He frowned, and then went on. “I know you've got magic. Needed to keep an eye on you. Make sure you didn't escape.”

“What was I supposed to do,” she asked, “freeze my way out of here?”

“Can't be too careful,” he mumbled.

He was from Doma. There was something she was supposed to know about Doma – something that made her tense

with anticipation –

“Kefka’s heading to Doma now,” she said finally.

The soldier seemed to shudder a little at that, and she noted his reaction: he clearly realised that his countrymen were now in much greater danger than Leo might have caused them. “You’re worried,” she prompted him.

His face hardened again. “He’s no worse than you are. The attack on Maranda –”

“We were liberating Maranda from a tyrant king,” she interrupted him. “Those people lived in terrible conditions.”

“And you lost a fifth of the town as collateral damage!” he insisted.

Her stomach twisted at that. Could it really be true? One in five of the Marandan citizens had died at their hands? She’d been spared the details of the outcome at the time – it had been a difficult campaign, her first as General, and the army doctors had placed her on a brief leave of absence from duty once they all returned to Vector, so she hadn’t been present at the debrief.

“It won’t be collateral damage with Kefka,” she managed to say. “He’ll kill those people deliberately. All of them. You know he will.”

The soldier shook his head, and she fell silent. She was certain that Kefka was about to do something despicable in Doma. There was something he’d said to her, and she’d dismissed it as nonsense, but the more she thought about it, the more certain

she was that it meant something. If only she could remember what it was – her senses were still dulled by pain and fear.

“You didn’t ... do anything to me,” she said to break the silence. “When Erdley left last night.”

“I have a wife and three daughters,” he replied, not looking at her.

There was nothing else to say after that, so Celes leant her head back against the stone wall to try and soothe the aching from Erdley’s blows.

The lieutenant himself returned not long afterwards. “Good job, Corporal,” he announced delightedly. “We really have got her.” He faced Celes. “I almost thought you’d escape, weasel away like you always do –”

“What do you know about me?” she asked. “Why do you care?”

“We’ve worked together enough times,” he replied. “I know the precious Magitek knight always got away with everything – she couldn’t do anything wrong even though she was a general. Even though you led that assault –”

She realised, then. Collateral damage, a fifth of the population: “Maranda,” she said. “You – you come from Maranda?”

“What little is left of it,” he snarled.

She considered trying to give excuses. They’d had faulty intelligence, and the power of the Magitek weapons hadn’t been tested properly. It was her first mission as a general, and there were elements of the procedure that nobody had thought to go

through with her. She'd spent days in the medical facility in Vector afterwards trying to atone for her sins, and then after that she'd merely repressed the memory of them.

She'd led the regiment back to base, not saying a word to any of them, and a ceremony to honour the returning heroes had been about to start. Leo had taken one look at her and carted her off to the doctors straight away.

Erdley was from Maranda, and the corporal from Doma. Maranda weighed on Celes' conscience as maybe Doma would someday on Kefka's – assuming he had one, which was probably naive. She stilled, trying to work it out. Kefka hadn't said outright that he was going to do something terrible to Doma, but she had a feeling of foreboding nonetheless. There was something he'd said – something about drinking –

She remembered another occasion, not too long ago. There'd been a banquet of some kind, with a visiting dignitary from Jidoor, and Kefka had said something then, too –

She could picture it now. The visitor had excused himself to the bathroom, and there'd been some cruel remarks thrown his way by some of the officers.

“Perhaps he's thirsty,” Kefka had said. “Maybe I should offer him –”

Gestahl had lowered his hand over the visitor's wine glass and laughed. “Now, Kefka,” he'd said. “I know you're eager to try out that concoction of yours, but we're not trying to cause a diplomatic incident here.”

Some of the others had laughed too, and Celes had exchanged a dark look with Leo across the table.

Thirsty – that was what Kefka had said about Doma. Everyone in Doma was thirsty.

It clicked into place, and she gasped. “Kefka’s going to poison Doma. Lieutenant – listen to me. We need to get a message to the king in Doma – tell them not to drink any of the water –”

Behind Erdley, the corporal’s face had turned white, and Erdley rounded on him. “Did you tell her you’re from Doma? You didn’t realise she’d try to use that against you?”

He shook his head, colour returning to his face. “I didn’t tell her, she guessed –”

“Well, Doma’s safe, anyway,” said Erdley boldly. “She’s lying. Like the sly bitch she is –”

“Please,” Celes protested. “This could wipe out the whole kingdom.” She held Erdley’s gaze, and added, “It’ll be worse than Maranda –”

He struck her across the face again for that. He was wearing a heavy ring on one finger, and it dug into Celes’ cheek; she could feel a trickle of blood running down her face. “Please,” she said again, weakly.

“Don’t talk about Maranda to me,” he snarled. “Don’t use Maranda.”

“Or Doma,” said the other soldier.

She shook her head vehemently, trying to ignore the fact that the pain intensified as a result. “I’m not. I swear it. Kefka

is about to poison Doma –”

The corporal stepped forward and struck her himself then; the look in his eyes was almost worse than the blow. “Don’t lie to me,” he hissed.

Erdley looked triumphant at his subordinate’s anger, and turned back to Celes with a grin. “Ah, Chère. We won’t fall for your trickery. Look at you now: the mighty general, fallen so low –”

“You’d rather stand by while Kefka does this? He’s the one who’s fallen – and so have you if you let him kill innocent people! So has the whole Empire if he continues to run roughshod over –”

“Shut up!” Erdley roared.

“Lieutenant,” she pleaded. “He’s going to poison every last man, woman, and child. I don’t care if you keep me here, but you need to go out and warn someone – anyone –”

“No! We won’t listen to your lies!” yelled the corporal.

“There’s no use,” Erdley concurred. “Talk all you want, but we know it’s total fiction. It won’t make a bit of difference; your execution’s tomorrow.”

She closed her eyes as he continued. “There’s a delegation coming from Vector today to see it’s done. They’ll be arriving tonight, and then we’ll have the pleasure first thing in the morning.”

“Are we keeping watch here today, sir?” the corporal asked.

“You’ll have to,” said Erdley. “I’m in charge in town until they send out another general. There’s still a lot of resistance from the townspeople – got to go and sort out the arrogant bastards. You’ll watch her?”

“Of course, sir,” said the soldier.

Celes’ eyes were still shut, but she felt Erdley’s hot breath against her face as he leant towards her. “Enjoy your last day on earth,” he muttered through gritted teeth, before turning away.

She heard the door slam behind him, and opened her eyes slowly. The view in front of her was blurred, but she forced herself to focus. The corporal had stepped back and was leaning against the wall.

“He’s making you keep watch all day?” she murmured. “Doesn’t he realise you were already awake all night in here?”

He glared at her. “So what? I can go for days without sleep.”

She doubted it – the man already looked tired – but she didn’t have the strength to argue, so she leant back and closed her eyes again, hoping it would lessen the pain.

She must have passed out not long afterwards, because the next thing she knew, the corporal was most definitely asleep and there was another young man in the cell with them, not wearing an Imperial uniform but rather a fairly haphazard assortment of clothes, some that might have marked him out as a merchant coupled with others that seemed to have no practical

purpose at all. He was picking her manacles open with some kind of tool, and she began to crumple to the floor as soon as the first one was open. He took hold of her gently, and lowered her down, kneeling beside her with a concerned expression.

“Who are you?” she whispered. Was this a dream?

“I’m Locke,” he replied, as if that meant anything to her. “With the Returners.”

She almost had to stifle a laugh at that. “You know who I am, right? General Celes of the Imperial army?”

“I had an inkling,” he replied casually. “Didn’t think Gestahl normally treated his generals like this, though. Unless I was mistaken.”

He was mocking her, and she bristled. “Well, I *was* a general. Now I’m nothing but a traitor, apparently.”

He frowned. “Are you?”

Was she? She wasn’t sure. She’d thought about defecting, and after this experience, getting very far away from the army seemed like the most appealing option once again. But she’d done nothing that actually betrayed the Empire, other than trying to warn Erdley about Kefka’s plan. If that counted as a betrayal, then she *was* a traitor, and proud of it.

Locke tugged insistently at her arm, and she flinched at his rough touch, the uncultured hand of someone who had never set foot in Vector, at least not on legitimate grounds. “We need to get going,” he said. “Don’t want old flak jacket over there waking up –”

“You’re taking me with you?” she said, uncomprehending.

“Why else would I break in here?”

“Returners don’t usually make a habit of rescuing Imperial officers.”

“We’re not all the same,” he said evasively. “Anyway, I heard what they were saying. They’re planning to execute you. You think I’d have that on my conscience?”

“Why would it be on your conscience?” she argued. “What’s it got to do with you?”

“Look,” he said, suddenly seeming a little annoyed. “I’m sure it’s different in the army, but decent people don’t just stand around when someone’s about to get killed, you know?”

He was terribly naive. She almost told him that, but decided it might be better to stick to practical matters. “I don’t even think I can walk,” she said, gesturing at her feet, and his face twisted with concern as he looked down at them.

“Do you have – magic? Could you use –”

“Magic?” she repeated incredulously. Her powers were a secret, known in theory to only the chief officers and in reality to most of the soldiers, even if the details were vague to many of them. The citizenry, though – they had no idea. Any magical power she displayed in front of them could be written off easily as the result of Magitek. It was thought best to hide her skills from the public, particularly as nobody had managed to work out their exact ramifications yet, even so many years after the infusion.

“I heard – certain members of the army,” said Locke, looking embarrassed. “Just a rumour, see – no, but it’s more certain than that, I mean –”

She interrupted his flustered monologue; there was no point in lying to try and preserve Imperial secrets now. “I do have magic. Under normal circumstances, I’d be able to perform a basic healing spell, but not in this state.”

“I see,” he said. “Well, I’ve got some bandages – that’ll be better than nothing.” He withdrew them from his bag, and leant towards her feet, holding the fabric taut.

“Thank you,” said Celes. “I’ll do it myself.”

Locke drew back, red-faced, and offered the bandages to Celes. She wrapped them around her feet trying to ignore his expression. They would help a little – she fancied a few of her toes were broken, and this would at least hold them in place – but putting weight onto her feet would still be agony. She looked back at Locke, who was studiously avoiding her gaze, and remarked, “There’s no point.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I appreciate your kindness,” she went on cautiously. “But you won’t be able to get me out of here. We can break out of this cell, but then what? The whole army will be looking for me. You won’t be able to protect me from that.”

“Nonsense,” he said cheerfully.

If she’d had more strength, she might have slapped him. Instead, she continued through gritted teeth. “Let me just wait

here for the executioner. At least I'll be able to let everyone know what I think of them before they kill me. Maybe it'll encourage the townspeople to rebel. They already seem badly disposed towards us."

"Yes," said Locke proudly. "That was my doing."

She looked at him in confusion. "You –"

"Well, they weren't too keen on the Empire to begin with, but as Edgar – er, the king had the alliance with you, they assumed you probably weren't too bad. So I dropped a few hints here and there to turn them against you. Managed to change the mood, and then a lot of them were much more willing to get out of here. About a quarter of them made it out, with my help."

"You did that as well?" she gaped. So the scruffy, unrefined young man in front of her was the person who had managed to sneak out a good deal of South Figaro's population from under the army's noses. And he was apparently on first-name terms with the king.

"See," he said. "It's a skill of mine. I will be able to get you out of this place. And I promise I'll protect you."

He stood, retrieved her shoes from the corner they had been thrown into, and handed them to her. She took them and pulled them gingerly over her feet, wincing as she did so.

"Ready to stand up?" he asked gently.

"I'll need your help," she told him. "If you insist on doing this."

He looped an arm around her waist and hoisted her upwards, and she rose, ashamed of her weakness, gripping the hem of his jacket.

“That’s it,” he murmured. “Put your arm across my shoulders. I’ll keep mine around your waist. If you fall, we’ll go down together.”

“Is that supposed to reassure me?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he said seriously. “Try to keep the weight towards the back of your feet if you can. And if you need to stop and rest, let me know.”

“I will,” she lied.

They advanced with difficulty for a few paces. “Wait,” Celes breathed, looking at the sleeping corporal, and Locke stilled obediently. “Just check him. He might have something that would help us get out of here.”

“Good thinking,” said Locke cheerfully, and guided her over to the soldier, using his free hand to fish around in the man’s pockets. “Aha.” He held up a small key in triumph.

Celes frowned. “Looks like a clock key.”

“Very useful indeed,” Locke replied, grinning. “You’ve never opened up a clock?”

She shook her head.

“Might want to make a habit of it,” he said. “Ready to keep moving?”

They walked on slowly, his warm hand against her waist, while she tried to stay alert. Her head was swimming with pain

and confusion, but she let him guide her onwards. A Returner helping her escape from the army, the organisation she had grown up at the very heart of and which now sought to execute her; she would never have anticipated it. The bravery and guile in this man who'd been determined to let as many people as he could escape the Imperial occupation, but who was just as adamant that Celes too deserved to get away from her cruel fate.

"Why are you helping me?" she muttered.

"You remind me of someone," he replied, and she saw his face turn towards hers out of the corner of her eye. "No, it's not just that. I – I strongly believe that everyone deserves to be protected."

"Even if they've done terrible things," she supplied.

"Yes," he said resolutely.

She paused. "You know what happened in Maranda."

"Of course I do."

"And you still think I deserve –"

"I don't think that was how you intended it to turn out."

She remembered the flames, and said nothing.

"We've all done things we regret," he added gently.

Rage bubbled within her. "How could you possibly compare that to – how many people have died because of you?"

"At least two," he said. "And I don't want it to be any more than that." His voice was light, but she could feel his fingers shaking a little at her side.

They continued in silence.

2

SHE was thrown against the floor of the room where Gestahl held his private audiences – it was the first place she had thought of. Kefka was slumped against the opposite wall, breathing heavily. Celes sat up with care, tightening her grip on her sword: he would surely confront her as soon as he gathered his wits.

Sure enough, he stood and rubbed his hands together, scowling at her. “What in all the gods’ names was that frightful display?” he spat. “We almost had all that magicite – and those stupid little rebels to boot! What were you thinking?”

She stood too, and faced him. “I’m on their side, Kefka,” she countered. “I’m not working with you anymore. You know I

was sentenced to death for treason – you think I’d come back after that?”

He was about to reply, but was cut off by the appearance of Gestahl and Leo, who hurried in with grim expressions.

“We saw everything,” said Leo breathlessly.

“Marvellous,” Kefka replied, still looking at Celes. “I was about to punish General Celes here for her treachery –”

Leo looked stricken, but it was Gestahl who interrupted. “There won’t be any need for that,” he intoned. “Kefka, would you leave us please?”

Kefka’s face twisted in rage. “Leave you? But we’re only just starting –”

“Kefka. Please. I’ll be the one to punish General Celes. I request that you leave us for now.”

He looked incensed, but even with all the power he now had, Kefka wasn’t above obeying the Emperor’s orders. He stalked off with a final murderous glare in Celes’ direction.

She kept a tight grip on her sword, waiting to defend herself.

“General Celes,” said Gestahl, once Kefka was gone. “How wonderful to have you back with us.”

She frowned in confusion.

“I’m glad all that mess is over,” he continued. “There was clearly a great deal of misunderstanding. I hope that now we can clear things up –”

Celes found her voice. “Misunderstanding? You were going to have me killed! You signed that warrant with your own hand –”

“A mistake, a terrible mistake,” said Gestahl placidly. “I’m so glad none of that came to pass.”

“It didn’t come to pass because I escaped!” she insisted. “I joined the Returners and I told them as many Imperial secrets as I could – I fought with them in Narshe, against your men, and I helped them break into the Magitek Research Facility. So don’t pretend I’m still on your side. I want nothing to do with this Empire –”

“General,” said Gestahl, “you are delirious. You must rest. Leo, escort her to her quarters.”

Leo offered his arm, and she frowned at him, but accepted: he would be able to explain what was happening. They walked towards the generals’ rooms in silence. Leo took Celes to her own chambers – as soon as they were inside, his face suddenly twisted with an anger she’d never seen before.

“What were you thinking?” he shouted. “Do you have that little respect for your own life? You know he was going to have you killed! And now he gives you the chance to forget about it, and you insist on arguing with him?”

She stood there, stunned; she could count the number of times he’d raised his voice on one hand. Before too long, though, she found herself yelling back.

“Do you think this is our great mission? Is this supposed to

be how we civilise the world? Doesn't that prove to you that we're doing this all the wrong way? Maybe I couldn't bring myself to serve these people anymore – maybe I'd have rather died –”

“Don't say that,” he said, looking horrified.

“Leo, when are you going to realise that we're not good people? We're destroying the fucking world, and the longer we play into it, the worse it's going to get. We're digging this hole for ourselves, Leo. You need to realise that.”

He shook his head. “I – I don't know what I'm supposed to say to you, Celes. It seems we have ... irreconcilably different perspectives. I'll leave you to get some rest.”

“Wait,” she said as he turned away, and he looked back towards her impassively. “Leo – I just need to ask you – you were the only person I talked to about defecting. And then the very next day, in South Figaro –”

“What are you suggesting?” he said, appalled.

She saw that he was genuinely hurt by the near accusation, and tried to backtrack. “Forget it. I didn't mean –”

“Then don't,” he said. “I can't believe you'd think that of me, Celes.”

“I – I wasn't thinking. You know I trust you.”

But as he left the room with a grim look on his face, she realised that perhaps it was the opposite situation that she should worry about: maybe he didn't trust her now.



Celes had been ostensibly reinstated to her position, but there seemed to be subtle restrictions on her movements. She attended the planning meetings with the other senior officers, but while the rest of them were all sent out on brief field missions, Gestahl always found an excuse to keep her in Vector. She began to suspect that she was confined to the city, and tested her theory by heading out of one of the gates one afternoon. The guard on duty nodded and let her pass, but as soon as she set foot outside Vector, there was a whistle in the air beside her and a brief sting in her arm, and she lost consciousness.

Celes woke up in her own bed in the generals' quarters, ran a hand over the puncture mark below her elbow, and realised immediately that she'd been hit with a tranquilliser: probably one of the new Magitek-enhanced models, judging by the accuracy with which it had targeted her and the fact that she'd passed out without delay. Strangely, she found herself remaining totally calm in the face of this discovery, merely pondering the facts from a rather detached perspective. So there had been some kind of order to keep her in Vector, which the guards were aware of, but which nobody spoke of openly. Gestahl's apparent dismissal of her confession to being involved with the Returners had been feigned: he knew she would willingly rejoin them and take Imperial secrets with her as soon as she

could get out of the city. And as a result, she was contained.

She carried out her duties mechanically over the next few weeks; there was a dullness in her head similar to the one she'd experienced after Maranda. Leo was no help this time, as he'd been distant ever since their argument on the day she'd returned. As for the Returners, she was beginning to think they didn't want her back – wouldn't they have at least tried to get a message to her by now? She could still picture Locke's face when Kefka had pretended she was a spy. She might otherwise have been angry with him for seeming to believe it so easily; did their friendship mean so little to him? But she couldn't bring herself to feel anything. It was easier to let her memories of the Returners slip away and convince herself all that had been a dream. Vector was where she had always belonged, of course.



It was the middle of the night, and Celes was awoken by a great shudder, like an earthquake: it felt as if half the building had been ripped away. She dressed quickly, ready for action, and perched on her windowsill to try and work out what was happening.

Further loud noises followed, and lights flashed in the sky. It seemed like there was something flying around out there: people? Creatures?

Espers, she realised, and frowned in concern. Terra was the only person who could open the Sealed Gate: that had been established. Had Kefka then captured her? Surely the Returners wouldn't have been foolish enough to head there and open the passage themselves. Of course the espers would have come straight to Vector to try freeing the rest of their kin, for all the good it would do them. She could have told them that, but they must also have known themselves.

There was a hurried, urgent knock at her door. "Celes!" a familiar voice called insistently.

She hopped down from the windowsill to let her visitor in. It was the scientist, Cid, whom she hadn't seen for some time, other than during the Returners' visit to the Research Facility; there wasn't much contact between the army and the research department, and it had been more than ten years since the infusion now, so she was no longer regularly monitored. He was still familiar, though; she knew him too well to grow distant from him.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"Espers," said Cid. "They're destroying the place. My lab – it's ruined."

She gasped, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry – all those years of work –"

"I don't know," Cid replied. "In a way I'm quite pleased about it. I'd suspected for a long time that what we were doing in there was wrong – I'd been looking for an excuse to pull the

whole project. It doesn't look like we have much choice now."

"I've been having doubts too," she admitted. "About all this."

"That was why you were with the Returners at the lab," he guessed.

"Yes. I – um, I defected. For a while." It was difficult to explain.

"What? But you came back?"

"Not by choice, initially."

"I never knew about any of this," said Cid.

"The Emperor's trying to hush it up," Celes explained. "He's acting like I never left –"

She was cut off by the sight of Leo, who had appeared in the hallway behind Cid. "Celes!" he exclaimed. "I was just coming to fetch you. You need to come and see this – you can come too, Professor."

It was the first time he'd addressed her directly in weeks, and she couldn't bring herself to be quite as unguarded with him as she once would have. "What's happening?" she asked.

"You'll see. Come on," he said impatiently, and hurried down the stairs.

"Shall we?" Cid suggested.

Celes accompanied him out, following Leo to one of the main courtyards of the palace, where a small crowd had gathered. They had left a space in the middle, where there stood Gestahl and Kefka, the latter draped in some kind of rope that

glowed eerily, casting a green light over the assembled onlookers.

“What is that?” Celes murmured.

“It’s a reflect chain,” Cid whispered back. “Anyone tied up in that would be totally unable to use magic.”

Before she could say anything more, Gestahl spoke, and the crowd fell silent. “Kefka,” he roared. “I have trusted you long enough. You brought this misery upon us. It’s your fault that our labs have been destroyed, our palace is in ruins, our city is devastated: you caused all this.”

Kefka was merely laughing.

“I should have listened to my generals when they warned me about you,” Gestahl went on. Leo nudged Celes and raised his eyebrows; she ignored him. “We had a noble goal once, but you’ve made us into everyone’s worst fear. That was never what we wanted. And your poisoning of Doma was inexcusable.”

There were murmurs and gasps from the crowd at that: some of the soldiers looked incensed.

“Oh dear,” said Kefka, not sounding worried in the slightest. “Oh dear, dear, dear. And what exactly are you going to do with me, Your Excellency?”

“I’m locking you up,” Gestahl informed him. “At once. I don’t want you causing any more trouble for us. There will be a thorough investigation of what you’ve done, and then you will be severely punished. Guards!”

Three guards, who had clearly been expecting the order, sprung forth from the crowd and began to escort Kefka away. He put up no resistance, merely offering a low, mocking bow to Gestahl, who turned towards some of the soldiers standing closest.

“Get away!” he entreated them. “What do you think this is, a show?”

The crowd hastily scattered, and Celes started to turn around too, but Gestahl made his way towards where she and the others were standing. “Leo, Celes,” he said. “I’m glad you were able to see that. The two of you were always warning me about Kefka. I hope this has made it clear that I’ve realised I was wrong to trust him.”

“Very clear, Your Excellency,” Leo confirmed. “This is an enormous relief.”

“I owe you both a sincere apology,” said Gestahl.

Celes was surprised; she’d never heard of him apologising to anyone. “That’s appreciated,” she said.

He nodded at her. “We’ll need to have some very important discussions in the next days. Cid, would you join us too? You’re the person with the best knowledge of these espers.”

“I wouldn’t say I can predict what they’ll do, but I’ll certainly try my best,” said Cid.

“I suspect we might need help from the Returners as well,” Gestahl went on, looking back at Celes.

She couldn't immediately think of a response, and was spared from having to come up with one by Leo, who answered instead. "That would seem prudent," he suggested. "From what I've heard, they do care very much about this world and all its citizens. Their approach is different from ours, but it may be worth trying to work on some sort of compromise."

"We'll certainly discuss it," said Gestahl. "I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Looks like we may be at a turning point," said Leo, once the Emperor had departed.

Celes sighed. "If only it hadn't taken so much. Vector's in ruins. Your lab, Cid -"

"Probably for the better, as I said," Cid reassured her. "Rebuilding the city is a more important task now, and subduing those espers."

"Rebuilding won't take long," said Leo confidently. "We have the technology. Better Vector than somewhere out in the mountains. We just need to make sure everyone has food and shelter, and then we'll get the job done in no time."

Celes was in two minds. Gestahl's news was wonderful: Kefka had blighted all their activities for so long, and had been the reason she'd almost defected and then almost been executed. To see him get his comeuppance was more than welcome. There was still the matter of the espers, who remained at large and would undoubtedly return after their initial assault

on Vector. And collaborating with the Returners: part of her longed for it – to see the faces of the people she had known as friends, and to work with them – the two parts of her life settling into a whole. But she remembered their reaction when Kefka had suggested she was a spy. By now, some time after the event, she had a clearer sense of how she felt about that: she was hurt. Locke in particular, who knew her best out of all of them: how could he have been so quick to believe the word of a madman? Was the relationship they had built so fragile?



Meetings began the next day, and Leo commenced with an emotional speech about how they now had the chance to become “the Empire I dreamt of fighting for when I was a boy”. Celes found herself applauding along with the others; she couldn’t deny that it stirred her. At the head of the table, Gestahl wiped a tear from his eye.

There were two urgent matters at hand: rebuilding Vector, and dealing with the espers. Leo volunteered his regiment for the former, and most of Cid’s subordinates were allocated to the task as well, with the work they had been doing in the Research Facility necessarily curtailed. The townspeople whose homes had been destroyed had been temporarily housed in the Imperial palace, but it seemed that they would be able to move into rebuilt accommodation before too long, given the speed

at which plans were devised by Leo and his collaborators.

Cid himself had been able to plot the course of the espers, and had determined their location. As the next steps were discussed, Celes found herself becoming angry with the Returners for their part in what had happened: if they'd taken a moment to think, they might have realised that opening the Sealed Gate would cause more problems than it might solve. Vector was half destroyed, and of course they wouldn't care about that as much as they might have cared about somewhere like Narshe, but innocent people did live in Vector as well as the Imperial army. Who could have come up with such a plan? Edgar had seemed to be in charge of decision-making when she was with them, but he would never have presided over something so rash. She had a horrible feeling that Locke might have put them up to it: it had the hallmarks of his impetuous nature, his misguided belief that things could be solved with one grand gesture.

Over a few days, it was decided that negotiating with the espers was the best way forward, and that it needed to happen soon. They'd been seen flying over Vector a few times – not the whole group of them, but normally just one or two at a time; still, it was feared that these visits were some kind of reconnaissance in preparation for a further attack. It was similar, according to the Imperial historians who attended their meetings, to the type of tactics that had been used during the War of the Magi some thousand years earlier.

Gestahl was still insistent that the Returners needed to be involved in the discussion. By this point, Celes wasn't sure she wanted anything more to do with them, but the Emperor was adamant that Terra was the best person to negotiate with the espers, and she could see the logic in that decree. They were to follow the usual Empire protocol for forming alliances: the Returners were to be invited to a formal banquet. The only thing that hinted at the abnormal situation was the fact that this was planned to take place within a matter of days. The short notice meant that they wouldn't be able to procure the fine foods and wines that were usually brought out for these occasions, although Celes suspected that none of them would notice the inferior quality of the dishes, except perhaps Edgar.

Other than that restriction, the standard procedure was still followed, and Celes shortly received an elaborately decorated invitation to the banquet herself. She was with Cid when the messenger brought it to her; they'd been spending a lot of time together since the lab had been destroyed, making up for their relative lack of contact over the last few years. He seemed to have become an old man since she'd stopped having to visit the lab regularly – he moved slowly now, and his voice was weak. But his mind was still as sharp as ever; he still deserved his reputation as the most insightful person in the Empire.

Celes felt an odd twist in her stomach as she looked down at the invitation. She was fairly certain by this point that she didn't want to spend any time back at the sides of the Return-

ers, at least not until the esper situation had been dealt with – her personal troubles could wait until that more important matter was resolved.

Her worry must have shown on her face. “You don’t want to go?” Cid guessed.

“Not really,” she admitted. “I think it’s best I stay out of this. There’s too much history between me and the Returners.”

“You always speak very highly of them,” said Cid. “I would have thought you’d be pleased to see them again.”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I think I just want to stay away for a while.” A thought occurred to her. “Why don’t you go instead?”

“You know the Emperor wouldn’t invite me,” he replied. “I don’t really fit in with the public face of the Empire, do I? A little old man like me –”

“You should be there,” she pressed him. “They met you in the Research Facility, and they know you’re a good person. They don’t think of most people in the Empire that way. I dare say Gestahl could be persuaded of the benefits of having you there as a result. You’re the only person they’ve met here who they might trust.”

“I think he might have foreseen you playing that role,” Cid suggested.

“Well, I’ll tell him I can’t,” she said flatly. “You’ll do just as well as I would have.”



Celes had imagined Gestahl might not permit her request – it was true that Cid was typically kept out of the spotlight on public occasions, given his blunt way of speaking and his insistence on wearing laboratory gear even when off-duty. The Emperor seemed all too happy to acquiesce, however. Although he hadn't brought up the matter of Celes' imprisonment and near-execution again, he did now appear to be trying to make up for the episode by agreeing enthusiastically with anything she suggested. She had thought it a front he was putting on during meetings, but his willingness to allow Cid to take her place at the banquet perhaps suggested otherwise.

She was able to leave the city again now, too; she'd tried, and had made it out into the countryside unhindered. Once she'd got there, she'd fought a couple of weak monsters and headed straight back to base – there was nowhere else for her to go.

The evening of the Returners' visit came around, and Celes kept a cautious eye on the city. The espers' attack was still recent, and the rebuilding process had some ways to go. Vector must have looked a sore sight to an outsider. She had intended to remain in her quarters, but her curiosity got the better of her and she headed to the public gallery above the banquetting chamber to get a glimpse of her former allies.

She felt that strange clench in her stomach again as she

recognised each of them. Edgar sat opposite Gestahl, clearly deep in negotiation, both his elbows lodged firmly on the table in contravention of the usual etiquette – the discussion must have been fairly intense for the king to be forgetting his manners. Sabin was on Edgar’s left side, unsurprisingly; he appeared to be paying more attention to his food than to anything else, but Celes knew he would be listening to the discussion carefully, ready to compare notes on the matter with his brother afterwards. Terra was on Edgar’s right: she was the guest of honour – the only reason any of the Returners had been invited. From what Celes could see, she wasn’t actively participating in the dialogue, but seemed to be taking a keen interest in its progression.

On Terra’s right – the knot in Celes’ stomach grew tighter – there was Locke. Of course he would have come: he wasn’t one for diplomacy himself, but Edgar would certainly have wanted to have his closest friend there, and to benefit from his sharp eye and ability to get out of a sticky situation. Still, Celes felt a prickle of discomfort at the fact that he was involved in this: he wasn’t exactly known for his negotiating skills. And if he, as she suspected, was the person who had encouraged Terra to open the Sealed Gate, he’d been the cause of this whole mess.

She found herself watching him more than the others – he was the one she had been closest to, after all. The way he snatched at his food in such an unrefined manner made her embarrassed on his behalf. He appeared to be contributing

to the conversation, as well, and she hoped whatever he was saying wasn't too detrimental to the negotiations.

She continued to watch. Later on, Leo entered briefly, introduced himself to the Returners, and left again; they must therefore have agreed to travel to Crescent Island with him, as had been planned in the recent meetings with Gestahl. Everything seemed to have gone smoothly. Celes discreetly made her way back towards her quarters as they all rose from the table.

There was a knock at her door not long afterwards, and she opened it to find Cid. "Thought you might want to hear how it went," he said.

They sat down at the table in her little living room, and he continued. "Your friends do seem like honourable people. I had a good talk with the one who sat next to me – the big chap in the vest."

"Sabin," she murmured.

"Yes. The king's brother? He seems very thoughtful. And it all went incredibly well. King Edgar is an expert negotiator. The Emperor was extremely impressed. They've agreed to send Terra with Leo as planned."

"That's good," said Celes.

"Sabin was very insistent that I tell you whose idea it was to open the Sealed Gate," Cid went on. "He said he hoped you hadn't misunderstood."

"Oh?"

“Yes. It was their leader, he said. Banon. A rash decision that he’d made while the others were infiltrating Vector. He’s very repentant, apparently.”

She stared. She was so sure it had been Locke – it had seemed like the kind of risk he would be keen to take. But of course, other people took risks as well, and Banon, from her experience of him, had always been a little forceful: pushing the Returners to follow his orders even when the consensus went against him.

“Thank you, Cid,” she said. “Sabin was right to suspect – that clears a few things up.”

Cid looked at her inquisitively, but she said nothing more.

“I’ll see you at tomorrow’s meeting, then,” he concluded.

She nodded. “Goodnight, Cid.”



The events of the banquet were recounted again in the morning by Gestahl, to an audience of his senior officers. “They’re an extremely skilled group of people,” he said, clearly impressed. “Fearsome fighters, too. They’ve requested that one of them go with Terra, and I felt that a suitable compromise. I hope Leo doesn’t mind, but in light of that, I’d like to take the precaution of sending another general to accompany this mission.”

Leo nodded briskly.

Gestahl’s gaze fell on Celes. “General Celes. You’ve always

worked well with General Leo. And these Returners are known to you, of course. I'd like you to travel with them."

His mild tone of voice didn't disguise the fact that this was an order, not a suggestion. Her heart sank. Still, it wasn't to be all the Returners that she would have to spend the time with: only Terra and one other. She didn't want to have to work with them, but if she had to, she would be able to do so on a professional level. There was only one person that she truly desired to avoid, and the odds of its being him accompanying Terra were low; she imagined it would be one of the more skilled swordsmen, perhaps Edgar or Cyan.

Leo went ahead to Albrook to see that the ship was prepared, and Celes joined him there the next day. She found him in the company of a familiar figure.

"We meet again," said Shadow enigmatically.

"Oh, you know each other?" Leo asked. "Thought I'd take advantage of the fact there was a fighter for hire here. I've tested his abilities personally, and he seems just as skilled as we are."

Celes stifled a sigh: Leo would be the only person to take it upon himself to check the skill level of a mercenary by engaging him in hand-to-hand combat himself. They clearly hadn't held back, judging by the graze on Leo's forehead and the way he moved a little more stiffly than usual.

At least Shadow wasn't the kind of person to pry, and he didn't question Celes on her change of allegiance. Leo did most

of the talking for all three of them; Celes was too thrown by the unexpected encounter with the assassin, and preoccupied by the fact that she was about to have to work with the Returners again. She tried to concentrate on Leo's monologue.

"There should be plenty of room on the ship," he was saying. "It's not really built for passengers, but there'll only be five of us."

"Who's the fifth?" Shadow asked. "I thought we were escorting the girl."

"Oh, they're sending someone else to protect her as well," Leo replied.

Celes stiffened. To protect – of course. She finally realised what must have happened. After the successful negotiations, and with the knowledge that it was to be the honourable Leo accompanying Terra to Crescent Island, most of the Returners would have been happy. There could only have been one person who would have insisted she needed additional protection – who would have offered to supply that protection himself, and shrugged off any discouragement from the others –

She groaned.

"Something wrong, Celes?" said Leo, with a tone of mild concern. Beside him, Shadow snorted.

"It'll be difficult working with the Returners again," she admitted – it was the truth, after all. "I'm not entirely sure where I stand with them."

“I know I can rely on you to be professional,” said Leo. “We’ve told them to meet us on the ship. I’ll go ahead and make sure it’s ready.”

He headed off, and Celes turned to Shadow. “I have some unfinished business in town,” he said. “A man’s got my dog –”

“Fine,” said Celes. “You understand I’ll have to come with you. We can’t have you running off while you’re under contract.”

“I’m sure the Returners have as much faith in you as you have in me,” Shadow replied, and headed off. She followed, fuming.

After the dog had been retrieved, they headed for the ship in silence. The others had arrived too, and Celes looked at them numbly as she approached. Yes, of course it was Locke accompanying Terra; she had been a fool and an optimist to think otherwise.

“Let me introduce our companions for the journey,” Leo said as the two of them boarded the ship. “This is General Celes, of course, and Shadow.”

Celes tried to look straight ahead, not wanting to catch the eye of either of them. She couldn’t help noticing the surprise on both their faces, however; neither could Leo. “Is something the matter?” he asked Locke, who seemed the more put out of the two.

“No,” Locke stammered, looking like he was desperate to both stare at Celes and run away from her. “It’s nothing.”

“Good,” said Leo. “We’ll be leaving in the morning. The inn is expecting us all in the meantime. Just give them my name. Make sure you get a good rest before the journey.”

Locke nodded, and Leo turned away to attend to the ship. Celes made to move away as well – she had a good mind to get to the inn as soon as possible and hide away for as long as she could – but Terra approached her first. “Um – Celes?” she said tentatively.

Celes nodded. She didn’t really trust herself to speak.

Locke approached her too, and she steeled herself. “Celes ...” he breathed.

There was nothing she could say: no way of conveying her anger at Locke for believing Kefka over her, her guilt at thinking he had been the one to come up with the foolish plan to open the Sealed Gate, her irritation at his need to involve himself at every turn and his insistence on protecting everybody, and the odd, indescribable feeling that coming face to face with him for the first time in so long seemed to be causing. She shook her head and walked away.

She headed straight to the inn, hoping they weren’t all to share a room. “I’m here for the booking under Leo Christophe,” she informed the innkeeper.

“Ah yes – you’re General Chère, aren’t you?” he said. “We’ve just finished getting everything ready for you.”

He gave her the key and directions to the room; she was relieved to find that it contained just one single bed, so she

would at least be able to avoid her companions for the night. It was still early, but she went to bed anyway; there was little else to be done.



Celes woke early; it was still dark. She was already well-rested, having fallen asleep even before the sun had set. Something put her in mind of the last time she had slept alone at an inn: back in South Figaro. This was, of course, the first time she'd set foot out of Vector since rejoining the Empire, and the Returners had never had the gil to spare on separate rooms; they'd always taken a dorm together.

She headed outside for a walk. Again, she couldn't help but be reminded of South Figaro, but now it was due more to differences than to similarities. That town had still been backward, but this one, under well-established Imperial rule, seemed far more modern. It was quiet while the market was closed, of course, but the streets were well-lit and she could hear the faint sounds of a phonograph and the laughter of a young girl from an upstairs window. There were none of the signs of poverty that had plagued the other town: no cripples begging in the streets, no half-starved chocobo chicks lying dead in the gutters. The Empire seemed to have been good for Albrook – not so long ago, she'd have believed that wholeheartedly.

Celes paced around the town for a while. On a previous

mission, she'd have been running through her duties for the following day, working out how she might respond to any eventuality. But her relationship with the Empire had changed since then; she couldn't throw herself blindly into her work as she had before. She had other allegiances and concerns now. She couldn't entirely trust Gestahl and Leo – but nor could she be totally at ease with the Returners. The only person she could really rely on was herself.

She returned to the street where the inn was located. Although there were so many things to think about, a multitude of factors distracting her from the upcoming mission, there was one thought that had been foremost among them: the thought of Locke. Nothing more than the image of his face, in all its different forms: his look of betrayal in the Research Facility, of earnestness in South Figaro, of pride at the banquet with Gestahl; and his look when he had seen Celes on the ship that day – what had that been? Apprehension, she supposed. Was he afraid of her?

He hadn't seen her since they'd infiltrated Vector, when Kefka had made that ridiculous claim. She had stayed with the Empire after that – willingly, in the end. To begin with, she'd been desperate to rejoin the Returners, but that had worn off; and as far as Locke knew, she'd never wanted to go back to them at all.

So perhaps he still thought she really had betrayed them.

There was a noise behind her, and she turned around: of

all people, it was him. Locke. He looked unkempt, as if he'd just got out of bed and come straight outside. Celes looked at him: what was she supposed to say?

"Celes," said Locke.

She turned away; she wasn't ready to face him.

"Please talk to me," he said.

She felt a surge of irritation at that: as if it were that simple. It was typical of Locke to think everything could be sorted out with a quick conversation. As if she could just say yes, I'll talk to you, and then everything would be fine.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," Locke went on. "It was just for a minute. As soon as you were out of there, I realised."

He had changed his mind so quickly: how did he do that? Why couldn't she do something of the kind herself, instead of holding onto all these doubts?

"We can still be friends, Celes," said Locke. "Can't we?"

Was that what he wanted: to be friends? Did he think it was that easy? She thought back to the time she had spent with the Returners – Locke introducing her to all of them, defending her against their understandable mistrust; Locke visiting her in the dressing room at the opera house – why did he always say the right thing at the wrong time?

What was she supposed to say: "yes, let's be friends"? Was that supposed to sort out everything between them?

She walked away quickly, ignoring his pleas.

Celes went straight to the ship. It was almost dawn anyway, so they would be setting off not long afterwards. Leo arrived as the sun rose, and ran through the procedure with her. It was to be a long journey; nearly a full twenty-four hours. The Empire had ships that could travel much faster – this one was normally intended for transporting weapons, but Gestahl had insisted on their using it on this occasion. It was certainly one of the most impressive of their ships, although she didn't know who the Emperor was intending to impress, the espers or the Returners. Maybe both.

There were three cabins available for the use of the passengers: Leo was to take one with Shadow, and Locke and Terra would stay in the second, which left the third for Celes. After they set sail, she joined Leo and Shadow in their larger cabin and worked on the plans for the mission with Leo, both of them trying to ignore the occasional pointed remark from the assassin.

In the evening, Celes retired to her own cabin to consume her provisions, and then lay in bed. While she'd been able to concentrate on strategy during the day, she now found her thoughts turning back to Locke. She couldn't go on ignoring him forever. Even if they couldn't be friends immediately, they would have to talk at some point. She needed to admit to him that just as he hadn't constantly trusted her, she too had had reason to doubt him. Maybe if she was honest about that, and about the fact that she did truly believe there to be some good

in the Empire, they would be able to resume their alliance in the spirit of mutual respect.

By the time she drifted off to sleep, she had resolved to talk to Locke as soon as possible. No more of this awkwardness would do: there were bigger things at stake. She wasn't about to jeopardise the fact that the Empire and the Returners were finally working together. They might have been about to save the world, and there was no place for her personal issues in that.

She was awoken in the morning by the grinding of the ship's engine as it manoeuvred its way to land, and made her way quickly out to the deck, where the others had already gathered.

Leo was explaining the plan to the others. "We're about to dock," he said. "We'll be splitting into two groups. I'll go with General Celes, and the rest of you can go together. If you hear anything useful, go to the town square and we'll see you there. Keep an eye out for us there too. Or the inn, if we end up staying a while."

Locke nodded. "That sounds clear enough," he said. "Shadow, are you coming?"

Shadow stepped forward to follow Locke and Terra off the ship, but Celes stepped forward too: it was time to confront him. Never mind that the others were here too; she knew them well enough. If they could get this sorted before the search for the espers began, she would be able to concentrate fully on the

job.

“Locke ...” she began, and tried to think about how she would approach the subject. “Um, Locke, I –”

He turned to her with an uncertain expression: as if he didn’t know her. As if he couldn’t tell she wanted to make amends.

“Come on,” he said to the others, his voice sharp, and he hurried off the ship, followed by Shadow. Terra hung back, casting a look at Celes, and Celes caught her eye – she would know, surely. Even if Locke didn’t; Terra would realise that Celes wanted to repair things with him, with all of them.

She bowed her head as Terra studied her, and waited until the other girl had followed her allies off the ship to look up again.

Leo turned to her. “What was that about? I don’t want to pry, but if you have personal issues that might interfere with this mission, I need to be aware of them.”

“It’s not that dramatic,” she sighed. “It’s just – Locke was the one who rescued me from South Figaro. After the execution order. You know what the Returners thought of the Empire at that time. He was the one who convinced the others that I wasn’t a threat to them. We were – good friends, I thought. But then when we broke into the Research Facility and Kefka told them all I was only working with them as a spy, he didn’t even think to question it.”

Leo nodded slowly.

“But he tried to apologise to me,” she added hastily. “The night before last, in Albrook. And I didn’t let him. I – I just didn’t think it could be that simple. Although maybe I should have.”

“I spoke to Terra last night,” said Leo by way of reply. “It made me realise that things are never black and white. What we’ve done: I’m not sure it was all for good.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that,” she admitted.

“And I know you’ve tried to tell me before,” he replied wryly. “It was just – I realised what we did to Terra. For years – she didn’t even have control of her own mind –” He gazed into the distance, distraught.

Celes gestured towards the land. “So this is our best shot at making it right.”

Leo smiled slowly. “It is.”