

RECENTLY, Celes had noticed some of her things were going missing. It started small: one earring – although that was as annoying as two, really – some old armour that was much less effective than the pieces she tended to equip these days; a few components of her camping gear. That didn't matter either, now that they all normally slept on board the Falcon, but it remained puzzling.

As time passed, though, the disappearances started to become more serious. One morning, she was getting ready for training and found that one of her boots was missing. With only half of the only footwear she had, the thought of going out in just socks was less than appealing – so she resigned herself to staying on the airship that day. Usually one or two people stayed behind anyway, so it wasn't terribly unusual. It was a little irritating, though, as she'd been in a particular mood for some good fighting on that occasion. She spent most of the day searching the Falcon's common areas for the missing shoe, but to no avail.

“Didn't see you down there today,” Locke remarked to her that evening.

“Yeah,” she said. “I couldn't go out. One of my boots has gone missing, and I don't have any other shoes.”

“Oh,” said Locke, his eyes wide. “They're your only ... hang on. I think I might have seen it somewhere.”

Before she could tell him that she'd already searched the whole place, he was away; and he returned not long afterwards,

brandishing the offending article in triumph.

“Thanks,” Celes said in surprise. “Where was it? I spent the whole day looking.”

“I’m just good at finding things,” he replied enigmatically.

She supposed that was true; the Phoenix magicite had of course been the outstanding example. Locke had assured her that Rachel’s passing had finally allowed him to move on, but she wasn’t totally sure that was the case: he seemed different from before. Although, of course, they all did. It had been nearly two years now since the apocalypse, and she herself had spent half that time unconscious. Sometimes being an Imperial general felt like nothing more than a strange dream she’d once had.

But Locke seemed preoccupied sometimes. He was somehow more serious than before, and he lacked the impulsiveness he had had when they first met, a quality that had initially unsettled her, but which she had come to appreciate. These days, he seemed more hesitant, and she wondered whether it was a permanent change, or merely the result of a lingering dullness of spirit after the incident in Kohlingen.

The next thing to go missing was one of Celes’ swords. It wasn’t her best one by any means, and she rarely used it these days, but it did have a useful elemental property that she suspected would be quite effective against certain creatures. On the eve of a day that she knew would afford her encounters with several such beings, she decided to go straight to Locke’s

quarters.

“A sword of mine has disappeared,” she told him. “And since you’re so good at finding things –”

“Oh,” he replied. “Um, yeah, I can probably –”

As he spoke, Celes found herself becoming distracted by the bulky holdall on the ground behind him. Something metallic protruded from it, and she realised slowly that it was the exact item she had hoped Locke would be able to locate for her.

His gaze followed hers, and he flushed.

“Locke,” she said quietly, “have you been taking my things?”

He walked over to the bag and carefully opened it. She followed behind, and peered inside. There were all sorts of objects in there: some she recognised, a number she didn’t.

Locke pulled out the sword and handed it to her. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he did look genuinely apologetic. “You know I ... take things. It’s become a sort of ritual for me. I worry about everyone, see. And I always think, if I have something of theirs, they’ll be safe. If I can keep hold of that one thing, that’ll make sure nothing terrible happens to them.”

She peered into the bag again as he went on. “I know it’s a stupid superstition. And I try to stick to small stuff. But sometimes it feels like it’s not enough. When I really care about someone –” He broke off, embarrassed.

Now that Celes inspected the bag's contents more closely, she could see that there was at least one thing there that belonged to everyone on the ship. The bandanna that Setzer had briefly worn. An unusual talisman that must have come from Cyan's armour. One of Relm's tubes of paint. A scrap of colourful fabric that she suspected belonged to Gogo. There were quite a few things of Edgar's, she realised. But by far, her own belongings were the most numerous. There were things there that she hadn't even known were missing; things she'd forgotten she even owned.

"I'm sorry," said Locke again. "I know it's not the right way to – you can have all your things back. I know I should stop doing it."

She looked at him. He was right; it was a silly thing to do, with no practical purpose and no effect other than inconveniencing the people he claimed to care for most. If she hadn't had that experience on the Solitary Island, she might have been angry with him. But instead, she shook her sleeve back over her arm and presented him with the wrist where she had tied his old bandanna all that time ago.

"I don't think we're so different," she said, as he stared down at it.

She explained. "It was the one sign I had that you were alive. And – I was in a bad place. But knowing you were out there: that gave me just a little hope, and it turned out it was enough to carry on."

She glanced down at the bandanna. Locke had stretched out a hand to touch it, as if he couldn't believe what he saw without physical confirmation. She could feel the light pressure of his fingertips through the fabric.

"I was going to give it back to you," she went on. "After we found you. I thought I wouldn't need it anymore – it was my sign that you were alive, and I had proof of it after that, so I thought I wouldn't have any use for it. But – I couldn't just part with it. I felt like –" she looked back at the contents of the holdall – "it connected us somehow. Like I wouldn't lose you again, as long as I had it."

"You're right," said Locke eventually. "We're not that different." There was a noticeable tremble in his voice.

Celes considered, and then moved her hands to the back of her neck – as she pulled back from Locke's touch against her arm, he withdrew his own hand hastily, and twisted it behind his back as if trying to restrain himself from reaching for her again. She unclasped the necklace that she wore, and handed it to him.

"Here," she said. "I'll take the rest back, but just have this one thing of mine. It's one of my most cherished belongings. Cid gave it to me years ago."

Locke looked down at the pendant that hung from the chain, and rubbed a careful thumb over the delicately etched image of a flower that decorated it. He glanced back at his own bandanna on Celes' wrist, and said, "Do you mind if I –

wear this? It seems only fair, if you're –" He raised it towards his neck.

"Let me," said Celes automatically. The clasp had always been fiddly. Locke turned obediently, and she took the ends of the necklace and fastened it at the back of his neck, her fingers brushing against his warm skin.

The fastening clicked into place, but Locke made no move to turn around. Celes was just as reluctant to lower her hands. She let one rest where Locke's neck met his shoulder, and began to tentatively run the other through the short, unruly hair that grew from his nape.

He raised a hand to meet hers on his shoulder, rubbing it tenderly with his thumb. "Celes," he murmured. "I – care about you very deeply. It's not just – you know I'd protect any of them. But it's more than that."

Celes leant forward, resting her head on his other shoulder. "I'm scared," she admitted – as she said it, she knew the Solitary Island really had changed her. "What if we can't defeat Kefka? What if the world stays like this? What if I lose you again – for good?"

He turned slowly to face her, moving a hand behind her head to caress her hair. "I don't know," he admitted. "I'm scared too. Terrified. That's why I –" He nodded towards the holdall.

"Stay alive for me," she urged him.

Locke tightened his grip on her.

They stood in silence for a while. Celes could hear Locke's breathing loud by the side of her head, all hot and ragged. "Locke," she said. "Locke. Is this – are you and I –"

He sighed, and the breath tickled her ear; she tried not to flinch. "I'm trying," he said. "To move on from – it's just not always easy."

"I can understand that," she said. She'd said similar things to him before; they had all been lies, and this was no exception. When would she ever understand his precise set of circumstances? But that wasn't quite what she meant: she had no way of understanding, but she hoped. She was hopeful that he would move on and be able to recover – and if the gods were good to her, he might think of her as he did so.

"You mean a lot to me," he said.

She thought back to his collection of her belongings: if there had ever been any doubt about that before, it was certainly obvious now.

Locke spoke again. "I just can't. Not yet."

She felt him relinquishing his grip on her, and drew back herself. "Yes," she replied, noticing that his eyes were red, and deciding almost immediately not to draw attention to it. "It's fine." That sounded unexpectedly insincere, so she tried again. "Really, Locke."

Eager to break eye contact, Celes knelt by the holdall and retrieved as many of her belongings as she was able to carry. She stood carefully with the objects nestled in her arms, and

looked back at Locke. He was fingering her necklace around his neck.

“Sleep well,” she said to him.

His lips tightened into a half-smile. “I’ll try.”

For weeks afterwards, Celes couldn’t help glancing at the fine chain around Locke’s neck whenever they met. He kept the necklace tucked inside his clothes for the most part, but it was always visible at the back, catching the light in a way she found impossible to ignore. None of the others seemed to notice that he had acquired a new trinket, much less that it was one that had formerly been in the possession of another of their companions – he had always had a somewhat overwhelming fashion sense. Sometimes, she would catch him with the pendant out, studying the etching or running his fingers over it absentmindedly as he stared into the distance, or at her. On a few of these occasions, he would catch her eye, and nod or flush or give her a hesitant smile while he tucked it back under his shirt.

She remembered the warm press of his body against hers, and felt the folds of the bandanna at her wrist, and waited.