

CES Game

by ovely

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HE was nearly there now. After a boat to Jidoor and a second one around to the northern continent, then a few hours' recovery, hanging around the marshlands staring hazily at the local wildlife, he'd pinned down the nearest chocobo supplier. The guy had been looking for a few rare medicinal plants that were easy enough for a man with Locke's expertise to get hold of, so he'd done what was necessary, bartered his way up to a bird, and that was him set for the rest of the journey north.

He'd almost got to Kohlingen when the sky began to change.

At first, it seemed like the Light of Judgement: there was a similar sort of buzzing in the air, that portentous, heavy vibra-

tion. But it wasn't quite the same. He'd *seen* the Light of Judgment – everyone had by now – and it was different: that shaft of blinding light, the way it moved across the land with casual, purposeful menace. This – this was more like a rainbow, but everywhere at once, and the whole sky was changing colour, becoming more vivid before the whole hue shifted, from that dull sickly orange to something quite different altogether –

The chocobo did not like it. The chocobo began to bob its head erratically, trying to cower away from whatever was going on, but finding no respite. He kept a tight grip on the bird with his knees. It would be fine. He was *good* with birds.

“Whoa there, Nelly,” he murmured, running his fingers carefully through its head feathers.

But that wasn't the only matter he had to worry about. There was a shaking in his bag, as if he'd left a living creature in there and forgotten about it. He managed to wrestle it open while still trying to calm the chocobo with his other hand, and immediately, the Phoenix magicite launched itself into the air, and hung suspended, glowing with a more intense light than any magicite he'd seen before –

“Wait,” he said to it. Magicite had some level of sentience, he knew, and talking to it had never come naturally to him, but in the few days he had known the Phoenix, it had always seemed more amenable. “What is this?” he demanded. “What's happening?”

The magicite gave no reply, but slowly disintegrated in

front of him. He was barely aware of the horrified howl that escaped him in response. The chocobo contorted in terror; stunned, he slipped off its writhing back; it bolted.

He lay in the desert, an inelegant, twisted heap, too panicked to think about standing.



Locke had almost reached Kohlingen, so he continued on his intended route in a daze, maintaining the presence of mind to engage in his usual practice of covering the lower half of his face with a spare bandanna before he entered the town. He'd been doing it for years, even though half the townspeople probably wouldn't recognise him by now anyway; on this occasion, as he arranged the cloth over his nose, he was fleetingly reminded of Shadow. Remembering one of his old comrades caused the usual brief pang of regret; he ignored it, as always.

There was some sort of commotion in town, which he took no notice of – better for him that everyone seemed to be distracted by something. Instead, he limped directly to the old man's house. The old man wasn't there, so he went down into the basement and sat there in that dusty room looking at her. It was his own special form of torture – he tormented himself by picturing this place in his mind quite enough, but actually being here was even worse. There she lay, looking as beautiful as he'd ever known her, and yet not beautiful at all, because

the real beauty had been in her gestures and her speech, in the way she had *lived*. Looking at her when she was so still was excruciating. He wished he could sit there forever.

He massaged the back of his neck and stared into her lifeless face.

“Well, look who it is!” said a familiar spirited voice behind him. “You know, it’s customary to knock.”

He whipped around, and remembered why he’d come. “I had it,” he said desperately. “The legendary treasure.”

“To bring her back?” the old man asked, as incongruously gleeful as ever. “Did you really?”

“I had it,” he repeated. “That’s why I came here. I found it at last – it was a magical rock, about this big –” He gestured frantically.

“A magical rock, son? Ha! You’ll forgive me for saying so, but that sounds like an old wives’ tale.”

“No,” he insisted. “Honestly. We used to use them to learn spells.” It was, for some reason, imperative that the old man believe him: he had rarely been so determined. He tried to cast *Vanish* on a vase, there and then, to prove it, but got nowhere. He was distracted, and he wasn’t the most competent magic user at the best of times, so it was hardly surprising.

“So what happened to your rock, son?” asked the old man, casting a sceptical eye over Locke’s fumbling.

“It *went*,” said Locke hopelessly. “It just crumbled away, and now she’ll never –” He looked back towards Rachel.

The old man's face took on an uncharacteristically serious expression. "Stay the night, son," he said. "You don't look well. The guest room's made up."



For the sixth or seventh night in a row, Locke couldn't sleep. Over the last week his head had been full of thoughts about how things would change now that he was to revive Rachel. He would hear her voice again, a voice he wasn't sure whether he really remembered or had been constructing in his own mind all these years. She would stand, and he would take her in his arms, and they would be able to forget all the unpleasantness and go back to a time when things had been so simple and sweet. It was that excitement that had previously kept him awake. Tonight, it was a sick feeling of despair.

Since the Blackjack went down, Locke had been no stranger to insomnia, being haunted intermittently by thoughts of how he might have prevented things going the way they did, and those final panicked glimpses of his companions. He'd developed the habit of casting Sleep on himself if the problem had gone on longer than a few days. It would give him one good night's rest, but he'd get horribly drowsy for a few hours afterwards, so he tried not to do it too often. On this occasion, in the unfamiliar luxury of a proper bed, he felt he ought to allow himself the privilege, so he tried

to make himself as comfortable as he could and began to focus on the spell.

Nothing happened. His limbs still ached after falling from the chocobo, and he was tense with grief; neither of those things could have helped. He concentrated on his breathing, forcing it to slow, and tried again – nothing.

Come on, he thought. This is an easy one. Am I that bad at this?

He tried a third time, and felt vaguely ridiculous. There wasn't even a hint of the usual magical shimmer in the air, the glow he had come to recognise from prior experiences. He suddenly felt totally foolish for expecting to create things out of nothing with his mind. Had that ever worked?

No, he told himself firmly. I know magic is real. He thought of Terra and Celes, who had always cast spells that were ten times better than his, and pictured himself in battle with them, remembering the way they could use magic so casually, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. He thought of Celes especially, and decided crying himself to sleep might prove more fruitful.



He managed maybe a couple of hours' sleep: enough to straighten his head out, just a little bit. It didn't seem fair to presume upon the old man's hospitality regarding breakfast,

so he slipped out early to gather some fruit and nuts for himself. The sun shone down from a brilliant blue sky. He squinted up at it in confusion; it looked unfamiliar. He didn't recall quite why.

It wasn't a good idea to stay outside for too long – there was always a chance, in Kohlingen, that he'd come across someone hostile, and end up doing something he'd regret – so he headed back to the old man's house and went down into the basement again.

After some time – he couldn't say how long he'd been sitting there – the old man entered. “Ah, still here, son?” he chuckled. “Here, you might want to read this.” He thrust a newspaper in Locke's direction.

“Why?” said Locke. What was the point in doing *anything*?

The old man had the gall to laugh. “Haven't you noticed what's going on, son? The world's gone back to the way it was. Didn't you see the colour of the sky out there? You know what that means, don't you?” He shook his head in evident disbelief and retreated up the stairs.

Locke took hold of the paper with a frown, and his gaze settled on the headline: **KEFKA DEFEATED**.

He started in shock. How – no – *who* could have done this? And why hadn't he been there to help? It was his own stinking fault, after all – he'd been there all along, dumbly watching Kefka's gradual rise to power – they all had. And they'd all

tried to stop the bastard, but everything they had done had made things worse. After the Blackjack went down, going after Kefka had been the one thing Locke owed the world. And he'd chosen Rachel instead –

It wasn't like that, he told himself. It wasn't as if he hadn't spent months trying to find his comrades first; he'd known he'd get nowhere trying to take the guy down by himself, even if he trained for years and got hold of the best sword on the planet. The Phoenix had turned out to be easier. After a long and fruitless search for his allies, he'd decided: Phoenix first, then Kefka. Rachel could even have helped with the latter, if he hadn't been certain he was never going to put her in anything remotely close to danger again.

And now he hadn't managed either.

He forcibly gathered himself and read the article.

Reports have emerged of a successful assault on Kefka's tower yesterday. Three assailants were seen entering the building mid-morning, and witnesses confirm that by early evening the tower was beginning to collapse. The wreckage was searched for remains overnight, and a body, later identified as Kefka, was recovered.

Kefka's defeat was accompanied by rapid climatic changes, returning the global weather system to its earlier state. It is understood that world leaders are planning an emergency council to discuss plans for societal and economic restoration. The Light of Judgement has ravaged many settlements over the past eighteen

months, with its latest attack only moments before Kefka's defeat yesterday; the number of casualties is as yet unknown. The city-state of Jidoor has already promised aid to

Locke stopped reading; he didn't care about any of that. He skimmed through the article until he found what he was looking for.

It is understood that the three warriors who defeated Kefka had undergone a strict regime of both physical and magical training, aided by the technology of the former Gestahlian Empire. A witness reported that King Edgar of Figaro and General Celes Chère of the former Imperial army were among them. The identity of the third is unknown. A second young woman was also reported to have accompanied them during their escape from the collapsing tower.

Locke looked up, tears clouding his eyes. They were alive, both of them – the two that he had selfishly hoped would be alive the most. And from the sound of it, so was at least one more of their comrades, as well as a “second young woman” – that was surely Terra. It was wrong to speculate, he knew, but hope was so hard to come by these days.

The relief was tainted by guilt. His friends had managed it, actually saved the world, and he'd done nothing to help them. But they were alive – that, he told himself, was what mattered. He yearned to see them again.

He wiped away his tears, tried and failed to stop himself casting a final look at Rachel, and went up to see the old man.

“Thanks for letting me stay,” he said, trying to keep the tremor from his voice. “I have to move on.”

“And what about your young lady?” the old man enquired, exercising his usual tendency to talk about things Locke would rather not discuss. “If the treasure’s gone – do you still want me to keep her down there? Or are you moving on from that as well, son?”

How dare you, Locke thought. “Keep looking after her,” he said. “I’ll be back –”

“Locke,” the old man interrupted. “You’ll have to let go some day.”

“I know,” Locke replied, “just – not yet, OK? I need more time.” He couldn’t think about that now, not for the briefest second. He turned and strode out of the house.



He had to get to Figaro, to the castle. They must have gone back there, or at least Edgar would have, and he would be able to fill Locke in. Getting there would be difficult, but he’d make his way down to the mountains and maybe take a boat from there, or shell out for one of those rare mountain chocobos he’d heard about.

When he’d made it halfway across the Kohlingen desert, there was a sudden rumbling beneath his feet, and he dropped low to the ground in anticipation. He knew exactly what was

happening: it was something he'd experienced in the Figaro Castle engine room, countless times, usually in the company of an excitable Edgar and at least one somewhat anxious member of the castle's technical staff. He watched appreciatively as the castle shuddered out of the ground, sand cascading from its battlements: it really was magnificent to witness from the outside. When the ground stopped shaking, he could see across the empty desert that the castle must only have been about a mile off – he'd be there in no time. Fortune was with him on this occasion. He pressed on.

On reaching the castle, he submitted himself impatiently to the usual cursory check by the guards, and flagged down the most important-looking person he could see, the one he reckoned might be most likely to be able to lead him directly to Edgar. "I need to see the king," he said. "Tell him it's –"

The courtier looked him up and down. "His majesty has only just returned," he said, "from what you've no doubt heard was a most perilous expedition. You'll understand, I'm sure, that he needs his rest."

Locke shook his head urgently; he'd clearly picked the wrong guy. "*Please*. Say it's Locke. He'll see me."

The man merely tossed his head in annoyance and departed, but another passing member of the household approached Locke at that, eyed him thoughtfully for a moment, and then cried, "Oh, goodness! It *is* you, Mr Cole!"

Locke nodded. He vaguely recognised this woman from

previous visits – she, at any rate, certainly seemed to remember him.

“He’s in the infirmary,” she said. “His friends too. Do you need directions?”

He shook his head, mumbled a brief thanks, and rushed there with mounting unease. Please let them be all right, he thought. There was no telling what the encounter with Kefka might have done to them, but they’d made it back here, at least, so surely they couldn’t have been too badly harmed –

He threw open the door to the infirmary and took in the sight before him. Edgar sat on one of the beds – Celes on another (he could hardly believe) – and there, on a third, was Setzer. They all looked glum and weary, but otherwise fine.

There was a moment before they looked up, and then –

“Locke!” Celes exclaimed, and rose from her bed, enveloping him in a fierce embrace. He staggered backwards – she seemed even stronger than she had before.

“Heavens, Celes,” said Edgar’s tired voice, “give him some room to breathe, won’t you?”

Celes stepped back and studied him with an odd expression; he tried to ascertain what it could mean. There was a remoteness there that worried him a little. Before he could think about it too much, Edgar himself stepped forward and offered his own embrace, a much softer one. “It’s wonderful to see you,” he murmured sincerely.

“Same to you,” Locke managed, once Edgar had released him. “I – I thought you were all dead. And then I saw in the paper –”

“Sit down, man, you look like you’re going to faint,” said Setzer cheerfully. He patted the space on his bed as an invitation, and Locke sat there, grateful to relieve his shaking legs. Setzer slung an arm around his shoulder as he did so. “Good to have you with us,” he said.

Locke nodded; he was too emotional to respond. Seeing them now after so long felt like a dream, and he might have thought it *was* one were it not for the pressure of Setzer’s arm around him. He couldn’t trust himself to speak without breaking down completely.

Fortunately Edgar seemed to notice, and spoke instead. “I suppose you want to know what happened,” he said. “I’m not sure any of *us* really knows, at least the first bit. We weren’t exactly in our right minds. The three of us were scattered all over the place – took us months to find each other. Celes was unwell, Setzer was in – er –”

“In drink,” said Setzer, a little too quickly. “I was devastated. Airship gone, all of you gone. Nothing to turn to except drinking. Reckon I kept the alcohol trade afloat singlehandedly for months.”

Locke nodded; it was understandable. He’d felt he was about to go the same way himself on more than one occasion. “You were unwell?” he prompted Celes.

“I don’t really know what happened,” she said, “but I didn’t wake up until a whole year had passed. It’s fine, Locke,” she added quickly; his expression must have betrayed his horror. “I recovered.” She looked away from him and said no more.

“Meanwhile, I was trying to get back to Figaro,” Edgar went on hastily. “Thought I might find – well, never mind that. But there was no sign of the castle there, and none up here either. I realised it must have got stuck in transit somehow, so I had to work out a way of getting in through the caves. That was when I found Celes – well, she found me.” The two of them exchanged a brief smile. “We managed to get the machinery going again, and then naturally our attentions turned towards getting rid of Kefka. Then fortunately we ran into that one” – he nodded at Setzer – “and after that we could use the airship, so we were set.”

“The Blackjack?” said Locke, puzzled. “Wasn’t it destroyed?”

“Another one,” said Setzer. “Favour from a friend.”

“Right,” he replied. “And then what?”

“Well, that’s it,” said Edgar. “We just trained up for a few months, got our hands on some more equipment, kept going until we felt as strong as we’d ever be. And then we mounted an attack.”

Locke frowned – surely not just the three of them? They couldn’t have been reckless enough to –

“That’s it?” he echoed.

Edgar merely blinked in response.

“You didn’t bother looking for any of us?” he went on. “How many were we, twelve? You didn’t think you might stand a better chance against Kefka with a few more allies?” His voice had risen to a shout.

They all seemed taken aback by his outburst. Setzer’s arm made a careful retreat from Locke’s shoulder.

“You all sound *crazy*,” said Locke less loudly, “you sound like you just went on a suicide mission –”

“And is that so difficult for you to understand?” said Edgar sharply. “You of all people? We didn’t want anyone else to get hurt –”

“What, as if we weren’t already?” Locke argued. “*Everyone* was in danger out there. We could have *helped* you. And you didn’t even bother looking –”

“And nobody looked for us,” said Celes. “We’re not the only ones at fault.”

“I *tried*,” he said. “I spent months trying to find you. You in particular –”

Celes stood up. “I’ve recuperated enough,” she said flatly. “I need some air.”

She walked out without a backward glance; Setzer, after a moment’s pause, rose and followed her. Locke watched him leave, confused and dismayed.

“Locke,” said Edgar gently.

“No,” said Locke. “I don’t want to hear your bullshit. Didn’t you want my help? And not just me, what about Sabin? Didn’t you want to see him again?”

“Of course I wanted to see him,” Edgar replied, a morose expression settling on his face as he glanced into the distance. “More than anything. But” – he seemed to gather himself – “we couldn’t just put everything on hold and go looking for him, or for anyone. Who knows how long that would have taken. We’d already wasted enough time. Innocent people had had their lives destroyed – looking for all of you would have just added to that. And I’m sure there were some people we wouldn’t have found.” His voice hitched as he spoke the last few words, and he cleared his throat before speaking again. “Did *you* come across anyone?”

There was a note of hope and desperation in the question that Locke found, given the circumstances, to be in very poor taste. “No one,” he said. “But you know what, at least I tried. And fuck you for not doing that.”

He lay back on the bed; he felt miserable and angry and the lack of sleep was getting to him. He tried the Sleep spell again, and again he failed.

“Edgar,” he mumbled reluctantly, “would you cast Sleep on me?”

“What?” said Edgar.

“I know it sounds weird,” said Locke. “I’ve been having trouble with it. Sleeping. So I’ve been using magic to knock

myself out.” He struggled back into a sitting position and raised a conciliatory hand. “I know you’re gonna tell me it’s dangerous. But when I haven’t slept for a week, there’s not much else I can try. Only I’ve had trouble with the spell the last couple of days.”

“Yes, no wonder,” said Edgar quietly. “Magic – it’s gone, Locke.”

“Huh – what d’you mean?”

Edgar grimaced. “After Kefka went down, the magicites all just disintegrated. We thought Terra might end up – well, she was fine, but things were looking bad for a while. And since then none of us has been able to use magic. It’s as if it never existed.”

Locke felt sick.

“Celes has been struggling, I think,” Edgar continued. “I think that’s part of why she’s” – he glanced towards the door – “a bit on edge.”

“I –”

“Don’t take it personally. I know for a fact that she still has very strong feelings about you –”

“No, not that,” said Locke. “I had – I found it. The Phoenix.”

Edgar’s mouth hung open in recognition.

“I just found it a few weeks ago,” said Locke, “and I was on my way there – to Kohlingen – I think that was when you must have destroyed Kefka. The magicite did the same thing. It sort of flew up into the air, and then it crumbled away and –”

I didn't have it anymore. The one thing. The one small thing I thought I could put right – I was too late. If I'd reached her a few days earlier, I could have brought her back. She'd be alive *right now* –” He broke off, and thought, gods, what have I done? How much closer could I have got? If I hadn't wasted that time after the Blackjack broke up, looking for people I thought were my friends, who it turns out weren't planning on finding me at all – if I'd gone straight for the Phoenix, I'd have had time to save her –

He became dimly aware of Edgar moving to sit next to him, and of his own tears, and of Edgar's arms around him as he shuddered against them.

“I fucked up,” he croaked.

“Hey,” said Edgar. “I know. We all did.”

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IT turned out that the infirmary stocked some sort of herbal sleeping potion – Locke had probably had it used on him years ago – so he was grateful to be knocked out for a few hours. The after effects didn't seem as bad as using magic; he felt a little sluggish when he woke up, but nowhere near as out of it as the spells used to make him.

In the morning, he headed up to the royal study; he didn't quite trust himself to be alone after the previous day's discoveries.

“Ah,” said Edgar when Locke entered, putting what appeared to be a sheaf of mostly blank papers aside. “How are you feeling?”

“Hopeless,” said Locke. He didn’t feel up to lying. “Utterly desperate.” He took a seat by the desk and waited for Edgar to try coming up with some useless way of making him feel better.

Edgar nodded. “Right, I see.” He paused for a moment. “Terra helped us escape, you know.”

“I heard.”

“Maybe you’d like to hear more.”

“Go on then,” said Locke irritably, “distract me.”

“With pleasure,” said Edgar. “The magicites called to her, apparently. She was in Mobliz, but she took her esper form and flew right over to us. It was quite something.” He smiled wistfully for a moment. “Anyway, she turned up just as Kefka was going down, and not a moment too soon – the whole place started collapsing. We thought we might not even make it out of there in time, but the espers’ souls guided us back to the airship. They communicated with Terra, and she knew exactly what to do – pretty amazing, really.”

Locke gave a begrudging hum of assent.

“The espers were dying, though,” Edgar went on. “We thought Terra might go the same way. Her father’s magicite told her she’d survive if she had enough of a connection to the human world, but – you know Terra. We got back to the Falcon –”

“The what?” said Locke irritably.

“The airship.”

“Right,” said Locke. Damn birds again. “You were saying?”

“Well, we got to the F– the airship,” Edgar said, clearly fearing that he might provoke another outburst, “and Terra was still guiding us out. She was flying in front of the ship, but we knew that when the last of the magic faded away, she’d either die, or if she could survive as a human, she’d certainly stop being able to fly and probably die that way as well. Celes and I could hardly stand up there, with everything breaking apart all around us, but Setzer managed to steer the ship to catch her when it happened, and when we all came to, she was there. Totally unharmed. So it worked.” He sounded as if he didn’t quite believe it.

“So then what?” said Locke. “Why isn’t she here?”

“She went back to Mobliz,” said Edgar. “She’d been living there with a group of orphans, I think – we didn’t want to pry – and she was insistent about getting back and helping them as soon as possible. She said they were the people who’d kept her anchored to the human world. Always a mystery, that one.” He shook his head. “But what a woman.”

“I’m glad she’s OK,” said Locke.

“Absolutely,” Edgar agreed. He grinned, almost convincingly. “But what you really want to hear about is what I got up to in the first year after the crash. Bet you never imagined I could be a criminal mastermind.”

Locke couldn’t quite bring himself to smile, but he leant forward and said, “Go on.”



Locke hung around Edgar for the next few days. The others joined them for meals, and things were still tense; Edgar and Setzer did most of the talking, which meant it was mostly about physics and other things that Locke neither cared about nor understood. He exchanged a few glances with Celes, but she never caught his eye for very long before turning back to her food.

Locke didn't have much of an appetite.

The rest of the time, he kept Edgar company in his study. Edgar didn't seem to be getting much work done with Locke there, but he didn't say he minded. Instead, they caught up with each other's exploits of the past year and a half, and reminisced about other times too. Locke had thought it would be too painful to talk about Rachel, but at a particular moment he found the floodgates opening and after that there was little else he was able to discuss. Edgar appeared to listen, and said the right things at the right times, but after a couple of days, he seemed to be getting restless.

"I'm sorry, Locke," he said eventually. "I do enjoy your company, but I really ought to get some work done. I've already cried off this world leaders' council next week and I think they've accepted my excuse, but I have to keep on top of things if Figaro is to have any say in global matters moving forward."

"Oh," said Locke, who had been halfway through an emo-

tional account of the time he and Rachel had tried to make cottage pie with megalodoth meat, and everything had gone terribly wrong so they'd ended up having cold soup instead even though it was the middle of winter. "Right, sure. Sorry for bothering you."

Edgar's brow creased in sympathy. "I don't want you to feel lonely," he said. "You can talk to the others."

"Not about Rachel," Locke pointed out.

"Maybe not to Celes," said Edgar. "But I'm sure Setzer wouldn't mind. The two of you have more in common than you might think."

"Maybe," said Locke, but he doubted it. His relationship with Setzer had never been totally smooth, especially at the start: Locke had been furious about Setzer's ridiculous notion of marrying Celes, and he'd just been fighting that damned octopus, and Setzer had looked at him like he was dirt just because he'd dared get blood on one of the casino tables. They'd warmed to each other enough to get on cordially since then, and Locke had certainly been relieved to find that Setzer was alive and unharmed after the attack on Kefka, but he couldn't quite imagine opening up to the guy, not in the way he did around Edgar.

"Look after yourself, won't you," said Edgar.

"Sure," said Locke, and he left him in peace.



Locke started taking walks outside the castle. The thick, hot desert air had never suited him, but it was good to have a change of scene. He came across Celes and Setzer sparring a few times: that seemed to be their main activity now. He watched as Setzer flicked his wrist with improbable speed and sent his various projectiles flying towards Celes; she blocked them with equally expert swordplay. Even without magic, she was a fearsome combatant. They were both significantly more skilled than Locke could ever hope to be; he'd trained up before going into the Phoenix Cave, but the preparation they had done for Kefka's tower had evidently gone far beyond what he'd managed. He was sure Edgar would be just as impressive. All three of them were leagues ahead of him. He thought of asking whether he could join them – he could see the attraction of a good fight – but he knew they'd either thrash him or go easy on him, and neither seemed appealing.

Instead, he kept watching. Celes' new sword looked like it weighed about as much as she did, but she wielded it effortlessly. Setzer had somehow got the hang of throwing his dice, gathering them up, and throwing them again another two or three times before Celes had a chance to respond. They were both brilliant. No wonder they'd triumphed against Kefka. What could Locke have done, steal the stupid feather the guy wore in his hat? Maybe it would have caused the old bastard to have another breakdown. It'd probably have made things even worse.

He took one of the shortcuts he wasn't supposed to know about and went onto the castle roof. It almost felt like there was a bit of wind up there, which was strangely comforting. He peered down at the ground below; the guards patrolling looked like ants. He wondered what it would feel like to fall. Would he plummet straight down, or would the slight breeze push him further out into the desert? If he landed on a guard, would they both be killed, or just one of them?

He was standing at the edge, still looking down, when he heard footsteps behind him, and turned to see Edgar, doubled over and gasping for air.

"Locke," he panted, "don't jump –"

Locke stepped back. "I wasn't gonna jump," he said defensively. He'd been picturing it, sure, thinking about what the consequences might be, but that was a far cry from actually planning to *do* it. "Why'd you think that?"

"I heard you were up here," said Edgar, still trying to catch his breath. "Just thought – wanted to make sure you were safe –"

Locke let out a mirthless laugh – the king had certainly changed his tune. "Don't worry about me," he said. "Haven't you got work to be doing?"

Edgar's face twisted in anguish. "Locke – if you're in danger – that's far more important than work –"

"Relax," said Locke. "I'm fine. I'm not gonna throw myself off. You don't need to keep tabs on me. I'll live."

“Well, that’s good,” said Edgar. “Just – don’t do anything stupid. You know I care about you.”

“Yeah,” said Locke, and then, because he couldn’t stop himself, “was that why you didn’t look for me before you went after Kefka? Because you *cared* about me? Wanted to keep me out of harm’s way? Wanted to stop me being of any use whatsoever?”

Edgar gaped at him. “Oh, Locke,” he said, “are you still –”

“Yes,” Locke cut in. “*Still*. I could have done something, but I didn’t get to do *anything*. I couldn’t put either of my mistakes right. And if you’d bothered looking for me, I could have at least helped with one of them. To be honest, I find it hard to believe you care about me at all.”

“Locke,” Edgar pleaded.

Locke made no reply, and Edgar seemed to have nothing to say either: he slowly turned and retreated, looking helpless. Locke rubbed a hand over the rough stone wall and willed himself to calm down. Quite apart from the others’ insistence on going after Kefka without his help, he felt irritated by Edgar’s assumption that Locke would be so impulsive as to just throw himself to his death. It was infantilising. He cast a final glance over the ledge and retreated to a still safer distance. As if he couldn’t look after himself – he knew he was weak, especially now, compared with the three of them, but not *that* weak. He had, if Edgar could possibly believe it, a modicum of self-respect.

There had been something enticing about it, though, leaning over the wall and thinking about how everything could end so suddenly, everything could just stop.

He went inside the castle and intercepted a servant. “Tell them I won’t be at dinner,” he said. “I’m not feeling well.” He retreated to the guest room he was staying in, took a swig from the bottle of sleeping potion that had been left by the bed, and lay down, waiting for his mind to empty.



Locke decided that it was worth making use of the castle library while it was available to him. He needed to get working on alternative methods for reviving Rachel, after all; he’d always pinned his hope on the Phoenix, but that didn’t mean there couldn’t be other options. The old man had been able to preserve her using herbs, so maybe there was a herb out there that could bring her back. He’d never come across one before, and he was fairly clued up on medicinal herbs, generally speaking, but there was always a chance, he told himself.

The library was peaceful. It was the one place he could be sure that he wouldn’t run into anyone else – Edgar had books sent up when he needed them, and there was no reason for Celes or Setzer to be consulting any. He was thankful for the respite. Spending time with the others at mealtimes was enough, particularly when he had nothing to say to any

of them. None of them seemed to have much in common with him anymore; their dinners were full of little glances and obscure references that clearly had meaning for the three of them, but were lost on Locke.

Despite the peace and quiet, concentrating on the books was hard. He'd never been much of a reader, particularly not of dense textbooks, and it wasn't the best time to be alone with his thoughts: things he would rather have forgotten kept distracting him. He forced himself to read everything as thoroughly as he could, even though he knew most of it already and the bits he didn't know were largely irrelevant.

The botany section was close to the newspaper archive, and he found himself drifting towards that as time went on. He hadn't really kept up with news while he'd been searching for the Phoenix: he'd seen too much horror with his own eyes to make him want to read about whatever awful things were happening elsewhere. But now the newspapers from that time held a sort of morbid fascination. He leafed back to the issue from the day before Kefka was defeated, and read through it; it was bleak, to say the least. At the back, there was a page of obituaries. He looked through the causes of death, and calculated that at least two-thirds of them were because of Kefka – because of him.

He began to look back through the other papers from the last couple of years, working slowly back towards the day the Blackjack had crashed. As the days passed, it became some-

thing of an obsession, the obituaries pages especially. The worst ones had a note at the bottom that would say something like “a village with a population of two hundred was also obliterated this week”. There were no names, because the only people who might have been able to identify the dead had died themselves. Just the smallest footnote to a whole litany of misery.

All this destruction, Locke thought, and it was our fault. Reading each day’s list of obituaries made him feel sick, but he couldn’t stop himself. He owed it to these people to show some sort of concern for them.

He continued to see the others at mealtimes under the pretence that everything was fine. Even the engineering talk and the twee little exclusionary references seemed to have dried up, and the meals mostly passed in silence. Locke forced his food down, but he rarely had the appetite for it. He was dogged by the thought of the hundreds of people who had died because of them.

Celes still didn’t seem happy either, and he desperately wanted to see if he could help, but he had no idea how to approach her these days. She probably wouldn’t accept his support anyway, even if he could have provided it. Looking at her filled him with regret and desire and confusion. They’d barely spoken since he’d arrived at the castle, when she’d hugged him so tightly he could hardly breathe.

Eventually, there came an evening when the two of them

had to speak. Dinner was over, and everyone was getting up to leave the table, but Edgar said, “Setzer, could you stay for a minute? I need a word,” and Locke and Celes found themselves leaving the room together.

While he was trying to think of something to say that wasn’t overly sombre, she looked at him and said, “We ought to talk,” in that blunt way she had.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve been meaning to speak to you. Just hard to get you on your own, I guess.”

“You should have just asked,” she said.

“Didn’t want to get in the way. I know you’ve been training with Setzer.”

“It’s about the only way I can take my mind off things at the moment,” said Celes. “It’s weird. Something being in your life for so long, and you just take it for granted, and then it’s suddenly gone. What are you supposed to do?” She looked at him as if she expected an answer.

He shrugged.

“A lot’s changed,” she went on, looking at him carefully. “More than I expected. When you go through things – when you share experiences with other people – I’ve been through a lot with those two –”

She sounded as if she was trying to tell him something, but he couldn’t comprehend what it was. If he’d seen more of her over the last few weeks, he might have been able to interpret

the cryptic message she seemed to be attempting to convey. But she'd spent most of that time with Setzer –

“Celes,” he ventured, “are you and Setzer – are you an item?”

Celes stared at him. “What – are you –”

“I just wondered,” he said sheepishly.

“OK,” said Celes, far more annoyed than he thought she had any right to be, “let me explain this to you. The three of us – we have been through things together that nobody would understand. *Nobody*. We have seen some *shit*. That's a bond that we will never be able to form with anyone else. The reason I've been spending time with Setzer is because he's one of the *two* people who comes anywhere *close* to understanding what I'm going through. And you think it's some cheap romance thing –”

“I didn't say it was *cheap*,” he protested. “I just thought –”

“You thought it would be that easy for me to forget how I felt about *you*?” she exclaimed. “You thought I wasn't worried sick about you the whole time? You thought I wasn't crying myself to sleep half the time because I thought you might be dead, I thought I'd never see you again, and I was supposed to hold it together and go after that bastard as if I'd have anything to live for when we got to the other side?”

“Celes –”

“You know why the castle's in this part of the desert?” she said. “It's because as soon as we got here, I knew that if you

were anywhere, it'd be Kohlingen – if you hadn't *died* – and I thought there might be a chance that you'd want to see us – you'd want to see *me* –”

“I did,” he pleaded. “More than anything.”

“And you thought I might be with *Setzer*?” she went on. “You were really idiotic enough to believe that for one *second*? Do you not understand how I felt about you? How important you were to me?”

She was starting to cry. He looked on, horrified. He'd never seen her cry before – she'd seen *him*, plenty of times, but she wasn't the kind of person to whom tears came easily. He stepped forward, raising his arms to embrace her.

“*Don't*,” she hissed. “That's the *worst* thing you could do.”

He moved back again, chastened.

“I didn't realise,” she said. “I didn't know you would misunderstand so badly.”

“What can I do, Celes?” he begged. “I'm sorry. I –” I love you, he wanted to say, but he thought of Rachel and the words failed to come.

“Just – leave me,” she said. “I can't talk to you about this. Not now. Just – just go away, Locke. Just leave me in peace.”

But she was the one who walked away, her shoulders jerking up and down as she sobbed. Locke closed his eyes and leant his head against the cool stone of the castle wall. His stomach was churning, but strangely, he didn't cry. He just felt numb.



Locke continued to work his way back through the newspapers. It had become a ritual. He always read the obituaries in detail, but flicked through the rest as well, dwelling on anything particularly grisly or tragic. Anything that had to do with Kefka or the fallout of Imperial conquest was something that he had to read. He needed to know exactly how much suffering he had been responsible for.

The papers, he had come to realise, talked about Kefka in a careful, measured way. The article from the day after he was defeated had been clear that what had happened was unequivocally beneficial, but the editions from before that seemed much more reluctant to play their hand regarding their sympathies – lest, he supposed, Kefka discover their treason and turn his wrath on the press agencies. Everyone had known he was a tyrant, and there hadn't been a single sane person who'd supported him, but everyone had had to be careful about what they committed to print.

It was probably for that reason that the article about an attempted assault on Kefka's tower was so small and inconspicuous, buried on page twelve between an advert for a clothes shop in Jidoor and a piece about a dog show in Thamasa that had attracted only one entrant. Nonetheless, the piece failed to escape Locke's notice; he read through it feeling increasingly sick.

The Lord Kefka's authority was challenged this week in a surprise attack, it read. A lone assailant infiltrated Kefka's tower and succeeded in breaching a number of the defences in place, but was struck down and killed before reaching the inner part of the building. It is believed that the attacker was the former retainer to the king of the destroyed city-state of Doma. He leaves no survivors. Kefka remains unharmed and is understood to have increased security measures following the incident.

Locke leant back so as not to blot the paper with his tears. It was the first evidence he'd come across of one of their comrades being dead. In all the papers he had been through so far, there had been no mention of any of the others – who knew what had become of them. But now there was this horrible news of Cyan, who had clearly tried to take down Kefka by himself; something Locke had considered, but had never quite become desperate enough to actually go through with.

He buried his face in his hands and wept in earnest.

He thought about whether to tell the others. There was probably no point: they all seemed to be suffering enough, for reasons they hadn't taken the time to elucidate to him. He hadn't said much to any of them in a while; talking to them at length would have made him either too angry or too sad to keep a hold of himself. He still joined them for meals when he could bring himself to, to keep up appearances, but always tried to force his food down and excuse himself as quickly as possible.

He'd keep the news to himself. Another select piece of information to add to his personal burden.



On his way to the library one morning, Locke happened to pass Setzer in a corridor. "Ah," said the latter. "I wanted to catch you. Can we talk?"

"Go on," said Locke.

"You know Edgar wanted that chat with me the other day," Setzer said. "Well, it was about you. He told me not to tell you this, but I think it's best you know: Edgar thinks you're going to do something to yourself. He asked me to keep an eye on you."

"Do what kind of thing to myself?" Locke asked.

"He thinks you're suicidal," Setzer replied bluntly. "And really, it's none of my business whether you are or not, but I just wanted to remind you to be aware of Celes. You know she's having problems at the moment."

Locke's jaw clenched. So Edgar still had this misguided thought that he was trying to put himself in danger, but now he wasn't even bothering to confront him about it himself. Was the thought really so misguided, though? He couldn't pretend his mind hadn't been drifting back to the castle roof, that calming, gentle breeze, the fact that taking one simple step forward could put an end to his misery. He couldn't deny that he took

his sleeping potion every night in the vague hope the dose would be a little too much. He certainly knew he was drinking the stuff more often than he should; he couldn't pass up such an easy transgression.

"He says you're acting like you did before," Setzer went on warily. "When he first knew you."

Locke thought over what Setzer had been saying, with some difficulty. "What did you say about Celes?" he managed to ask.

"You know how she feels," said Setzer. "If you harm yourself – well, if you ask me, it's selfish. That's all."

"I don't know," said Locke. "Last time I spoke to her she made it pretty clear she'd be happier without me around –"

Setzer shrugged. "That may be. But it's a bit too close to the bone where she's concerned. Suicide, that is."

"How d'you mean?"

"I don't know if I should tell you," he said. "Just don't do anything rash, for her sake. Have some decorum." And he walked away.

Locke was furious. The three of them had so many secrets, that was the problem. So many things that they shared, and that he'd never know about even if he spent the next ten years in this godforsaken castle. Celes had been right: he could never understand what she'd been through. The connection she had forged with Edgar and Setzer was much stronger than anything she'd ever shared with him.

And Setzer's audacity was such that he had told him to have the *decorum* not to kill himself. If he really had been planning to, that might have sent him over the edge.

But the thought arose again: maybe he was deluding himself by telling himself it wasn't what he wanted. So what if it was? Could death really be much worse than this? This feeling of utter uselessness, of having thrown away everything good he'd ever had – what could possibly be any worse than that?

He couldn't bring himself to go to the library. Any additions to the retrospective body count would not be a good idea at this point – that, he was sure of. He returned to his room, reached for the sleeping potion, and spent the rest of the day in bed.

3

LOCKE hated to admit it, but Setzer's comments had had an undeniable effect on him. The despair that he had been trying not to acknowledge had become more palpable. He could no longer ignore the fact that something was wrong with him.

He felt like he was twenty again, like he'd just carried Rachel to the old man's house for the first time and begged him to do something. The rage and desperation from that time were back; the sickening underlying hopelessness. Edgar had helped him then, but they'd grown apart now. Celes hated him, Setzer didn't care: there was nobody he could share his burden with.

The next few days were a blur. On the occasions where he made it out of bed, he returned to the library and struggled through a couple more newspapers. He attended a few meals with the others; the food tasted like ash. Sometimes he didn't manage to get up at all, but just lay there hating himself as the room gradually brightened and darkened, and another day was wasted.

He thought about Rachel, and Celes, and Edgar, and Setzer, and Terra, and Cyan. He thought about how he hadn't been able to help any of them. He thought until he couldn't bear thinking a moment more, and then used the sleeping potion to knock himself out, and woke up hours later with his head pounding, ready to do it all over again.

The roof called out to him, but he reckoned he was too drowsy from the potion to even make it up there.

It was the potion that would be his way out, in the end. He was already drinking it at a rate that far exceeded the usual recommendation. He'd used up most of the large bottle that had been left for him when he'd arrived, but there was certainly still several days' worth in there.

He uncorked the bottle and stared down at the liquid inside. His heart was racing. Drinking all of it would be so gloriously simple: such an easy way of putting a stop to his misery. At last it would all be over, and his waste of a life would just fizzle out. Finally he could be at peace.

He raised the bottle to his lips and drank until it was empty.

There was a moment of serenity. Utter bliss, as if all his troubles had vanished. He felt sleep beginning to overtake him. And then, abruptly, he became lucid. Everything felt very real all of a sudden.

What the fuck have I done, he thought.

He staggered to the sink in the corner of the room, shoved two fingers down his throat, and emptied the contents of his stomach. He did it twice more for good measure, until there seemed to be nothing left to come out. The sleepiness had dissipated now, which was probably a good sign. He considered going to the infirmary; maybe they'd have something they could give him to make sure the stuff really was out of his system. He threw on his jacket and shoes, and then decided to head for Edgar's quarters instead: the careful, professional concern of trained nurses would just agitate him.

He let himself into the king's bedroom – Edgar was asleep. Locke reached through the mass of thick blond hair until he located a shoulder, and gave it a shake. “Edgar,” he hissed. “Wake up. I need to talk to you.”

Edgar's eyes slowly opened, and he regarded Locke with sudden alertness. “Locke! What is it?” Beside him, something stirred in the bed, and Locke drew back in alarm.

Edgar cast his eyes back towards the source of the motion. “Oh, I forgot about her,” he mumbled. “Just one of my maidservants. Don't start on me, I needed the distraction.”

Locke had had a fleeting, hideous thought that the woman

was Celes. He did his best to hold himself together while Edgar carefully got out of bed and waved Locke into the antechamber that served as his private living room.

“What’s wrong?” said Edgar as he knotted his dressing gown.

Locke hesitated before responding; the abrupt clarity of thought that the experience had afforded him was already beginning to recede. “I – I’m a danger to myself,” he said. “You were right. I’m about to do something stupid, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself this time.”

“This time,” Edgar echoed.

“Yes,” said Locke. “I already tried it.”

Edgar closed his eyes, let out a slow breath, and opened them again. “What did you do?” he asked quietly.

Locke told him. “I had second thoughts,” he concluded. “Just as it started to take effect – I managed to get it all out. But I don’t know if that’ll always be possible. I’m – I’m afraid of what I might do to myself.”

Edgar looked too upset to respond, so Locke went on. “You need to secure the roof,” he said, trying not to pay attention to the tremble in his voice. “Close the exits, and don’t just lock them with a key, you know I could get past that –”

“Of course,” Edgar murmured. “Oh, Locke. Talk to me. Tell me about it. Please.”

“There’s nothing to say,” said Locke. “You know the main part, and the rest is stuff that’s too hard to explain. I’m just –

so *tired*. I feel like I'll never be able to do anything good, ever again."

There was a noise at the door, and a young woman peered in. Locke stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Your majesty," she said, giving Edgar a brief, inelegant curtsey, "are you having trouble sleeping? I can help –"

The intimacy she had shared with the king seemed to have made her bold, but not quite bold enough to pull it off. Locke felt embarrassed on her behalf.

"No, you've done enough, thank you," said Edgar brusquely. "If you're up, you may as well go back to your quarters."

"Oh, but I had such fun tonight," she said, and turned to wink at Locke. "Or maybe your friend would enjoy –"

"That's *enough*," Edgar roared. "May I remind you that I am your king, and defying my orders is considered a serious infraction –"

She paled and disappeared, and Locke found himself, incredibly, laughing.

"Don't laugh," said Edgar irritably. "Or do, I suppose, if it helps. I don't know, I'm out of ideas. But let's at least talk through the practicalities."

There followed a long and tedious conversation about how Locke's safety might best be assured. He tried his best to remain focused on the discussion, even as the lucidity that had overtaken him after drinking the potion gradually ebbed away. Edgar was being almost unreasonably objective; Locke would

have accused his friend of callousness if he hadn't known this was his particular way of coping with such matters. He was thankful, in fact, for Edgar's reluctance to discuss emotions openly: normally Locke would have preferred quite the opposite approach, but on this occasion he was all too keen not to call attention to the utter hopelessness that threatened to overtake him.

Edgar decided on various arrangements, with Locke providing minimal input. The roof was to be secured, as Locke had suggested. The sleeping potion would be rationed out, with a small dose left for him every few days. A member of the castle staff would be put to work following Locke at a distance, ready to intervene if it was believed he was about to do something reckless. Locke protested at that one, but the alternative, according to Edgar, was for Locke to join him in his own study every day and listen to Edgar complaining about taxation policies for hours on end.

He was to attend all meals with the others, or send advance notice if he wasn't feeling well. After dinner, he and Edgar would play chess.

"I don't know the first thing about chess," Locke pointed out.

"Excellent," said Edgar. "I'll teach you."



It was about two in the morning by the time the discussion finished. Edgar wouldn't let Locke out of his sight, so after a lot of halfhearted protesting Locke got into Edgar's bed, leaving the usual occupant to arrange himself in an armchair. The bed had an unappealing fruity sort of smell – Locke didn't want to think about what had been happening in it shortly before he arrived – but at least it was soft and warm. He was worn out enough to sleep, for once.

In the following days, he resumed most of his former activities, with the sole difference that he was now under constant surveillance from the castle staff. He didn't know if whichever servant was guarding him at a given time knew *why*, and he didn't like to ask. But they were discreet, at least, as discreet as they could be in performing their task. He could almost forget they were there if he looked in the right direction.

Edgar would probably have had something to say about the material Locke was consulting in the library, but fortunately his guards didn't get close enough to see it, so he continued working his way backwards through the newspapers, trying not to show visible distress. He joined the others for meals as agreed, despite his continuing lack of appetite. Edgar seemed to have taken it upon himself to start a sniping match with Setzer nearly every dinnertime for Locke's entertainment, which could have been fairly amusing if not for the fact that most of them seemed to be about the merits of certain small elements of a gear shaft, and it was less fun when you didn't understand.

Still, he appreciated the effort.

Then there were Edgar's attempts to teach Locke chess. Locke thought it complicated and pointless, but he did his best to humour his friend for both their sakes. He did find it appropriate, and darkly amusing, that the king was only allowed to move one space at a time. Edgar tried to go easy on him, but still ended up trouncing him in every match, because he was good at that kind of thing and Locke wasn't.

He assumed Edgar hadn't said anything to the others. Setzer's attitude towards Locke still seemed to waver between blokey cordiality and suspicion, and Celes was clearly trying not to make eye contact with him, but that was old news. They had probably noticed something was up, even if they hadn't been told, from the fact that there was always someone escorting Locke to dinner and taking him back to his room afterwards. He didn't think he would really care if they knew, anyway.

He remained thoroughly miserable, but taking less of the sleeping potion at least made things seem a little more sharply defined: he finally lacked the constant drowsiness that had gradually settled over him as his reliance on the potion had increased. He still yearned for everything to come to an end, and sometimes found himself looking for opportunities to make that happen, but with Edgar's various precautions it was unlikely he would get anywhere with any of them. So he continued to read through the papers and watch the others fighting

and listen to Edgar saying stupid things in an attempt to make him laugh.

He began to recognise the guards assigned to him on rotation, and started nodding a greeting to them when they began their shifts, but they mostly tried to act as if they hadn't noticed. If Edgar had told them to be discreet, they were certainly succeeding at following his instruction.

One morning, on Locke's usual walk to breakfast, he was greeted by a sight he had never dared expect: Sabin was back, and he was furious. He marched down the corridor and strode straight past Locke, his rage clearly blinding him to the latter's presence. He continued on his way until he reached a man Locke vaguely recognised as one of Edgar's private secretaries, and all but backed him against the wall.

"Where the fuck's my brother?" he snarled. "You tell that bastard I need to see him right now –"

Locke could barely believe it. He'd given up all hope of seeing any more of their companions again, and had long been expecting that he would eventually come across news of their deaths in the paper, just as he had with Cyan. But now it was suddenly, almost brashly obvious that Sabin was more resilient than that. He had rarely been so relieved to be wrong. His friend's sudden entrance seemed like something from another life, a life that hadn't been quite as hopeless as the one he was living now.

He steeled himself and continued on his way to breakfast.

After a few tense minutes there with Setzer and Celes, another servant dropped in briefly and informed them in no uncertain terms that his majesty would not be joining them that morning.

Locke ate as little of the meal as he could get away with, left as soon as he was able, and went to the library. He considered excusing himself from lunch as a precaution – another meal with just the two of them would be like pulling teeth – but he could hardly pretend to be unwell when he'd been observed at his usual habits otherwise, and the coincidence of his and Edgar's absences would be cause for suspicion. Instead, he went up there at the usual time, and found he needn't have worried: Edgar had returned, flushed and practically bouncing with excitement, his brother by his side.

Sabin, as friendly as ever, grasped Locke in a warm hug with no apparent sign of the anger he had shown earlier: clearly, spending the morning with Edgar had allowed him to sort out whatever that problem was. Locke sat down with the strange feeling that at last, he had an ally in this. He was no longer the only person at the table to whom the entire population of the world didn't owe their safety.

While they ate, Sabin enlightened them all on what he'd been up to. "I've been patching things up with Vargas recently," he told them between mouthfuls. "Turns out he didn't kill Master Duncan – didn't even try. We both misunderstood about as much as each other about that situation. It was just a silly

argument that got out of hand.”

“He might not have killed Duncan, but he did try to kill us,” Edgar pointed out, unable nonetheless to stop grinning.

Sabin shrugged. “Eh, not really. He’s all talk. Those bears of his are much more dangerous than he is. That reminds me, I thought Terra would be here.”

“She’s in Mobliz,” said Celes tonelessly. “She’s fine.”

“That’s right,” said Edgar, with an enthusiasm that contrasted almost comically with Celes’ listlessness. “She’s doing splendidly – we’ve been exchanging letters. So you were with Vargas before coming here?”

“Not right before,” said Sabin. “Saw him first, then I went over to the Veldt to look for Gau. I was over there when the world changed back. Guess that means it was the same time that you guys were destroying Kefka.”

“Did you find him?” Locke asked.

“Course I did,” said Sabin. “You know Gau, he’s indestructible. He was living out there like nothing had changed. Seemed pretty happy, actually. I said I’d go and see him again in a few months and he was pleased enough with that.”

Locke nodded in relief, but he couldn’t help thinking of Cyan. The guy had always got on best with Sabin, and Locke was probably the only one at the table who knew he was dead. He almost felt like telling them all there and then, although it would be incredibly insensitive to do it just after Sabin had

reunited with them all. He'd just have to keep feeling guilty about it on his own.

"Anyway, the sky went back to normal," Sabin was saying, "but it took me a while to realise that meant something had happened to Kefka. I mean, there was no civilisation for miles, it wasn't like I was gonna read it in the paper. Wasn't until I made it over to Nikeah for a pit stop that I realised he was actually gone. Couldn't really believe it. But I knew it had to be you guys."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't me," said Locke. Sabin's return had suddenly become too much for him to deal with. "But I'm sure you realised that." He stood up, more dramatically than he intended, and said, "I'm done. See you at dinner."

An hour or so later, he was trying to concentrate on the newspaper archive when Sabin slipped into the seat next to him. "Hey," he said. "Is this a good time to talk?"

"Apart from the fact that this is a library," said Locke, "sure."

"Great," said Sabin cheerfully. He peered down at the newspaper Locke was studying. "What is this, anyway? News from last year? Why are you looking at this stuff?"

"I want to know what happened," said Locke defensively, and he closed the paper and folded his arms over the top of it to indicate that he was not open to further questions. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I just wanted to say," said Sabin, "that Edgar told me about you. About the, um, trouble you've been having." He glanced

towards the guard standing by the wall.

“Oh,” Locke replied. “Nice of him to keep a secret. Especially one that’s extremely personal and embarrassing.”

“He’s my twin brother,” said Sabin. “Gotta share his worries with someone.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Anyway,” Sabin continued, “thought I should tell you. Not much point in you thinking you need to hide things from me. I know we’re not really as close, but if you ever need to talk to someone who’s a bit less, well, *Edgar*, I’m happy to listen.”

“Right,” said Locke. “Thanks.” He turned to meet Sabin’s eyes. “Just tell me this. Why aren’t you angry with him?”

“Huh?”

“About not looking for you. About going straight after Kefka, just the three of them, without even bothering to try and find *any* of us. Never mind that we could have helped them. We could have got the chance to make up for all the shit we ended up getting the world into. Instead of doing *nothing*.” He forced himself to be silent – otherwise he was going to end up either crying or shouting, and this was a library, for heaven’s sake. Setzer and his decorum would be mortified.

“I *was* angry,” said Sabin. “When I first read about it in Nikeah, I was more relieved than anything – weren’t you? I thought everyone else was dead, and then to find out at least two of them were alive, and Edgar especially – you must’ve thought the same about Celes. But you’re right, while I was

travelling back to Figaro, I did start thinking about how it seemed kind of reckless of them. And then when I got there and the castle wasn't there –" He broke off and let out a bitter laugh. "See, I tried to find it before, back when everything first went to shit. I thought Edgar might be there – it was unlikely, but I had to try, didn't I. Went to Figaro, no sign of it there, so I came up here and it wasn't here either. Then I thought I might've missed it as it was moving, so I went down to Figaro again, but still nothing."

Locke nodded. He'd had a similar experience looking for the castle himself. He and Sabin might even have been wandering the deserts at the same time, not that they had ever come across each other.

"So then when I came over this time, I was sure it would be back in Figaro. I knew Edgar was alive, so I was pretty sure he'd have sorted it out. And when it wasn't there, it just felt like the same thing all over again. I was sure I was about to find my brother, I was sure I knew exactly where he was, and then suddenly that was all gone. He could have been *anywhere*."

He sighed. "Felt like I was back at square one. But I thought, maybe it really was up here this time, and guess what, it was. And you know what, I was furious. Not only because they didn't come looking for me, they didn't let me help them, but because the castle wasn't even where it should have been. It belongs in Figaro. It's *Figaro fucking Castle*. It just felt like – a slap in the face. It felt like my brother was

hiding from me.”

Locke knew the feeling. He nodded, fists clenched tight.

“But you know what?” Sabin went on. “As soon as I saw him, none of that mattered anymore. Just – seeing he was alive –” He tossed his head back with a grin. “Even though I knew he’d be here, I wasn’t totally prepared for actually seeing him. I’d have forgiven him *anything*.”

He turned to Locke again. “You do know why they did it that way, right? They wanted to get rid of him as soon as they could. If they’d looked for everyone first, he’d have kept killing innocent people. He might still have been doing it now. And it’s not like they were, I dunno, disowning us or something. We weren’t there, but they did it *for* us. All that time they’d spent with us before, that wasn’t for nothing. They took that with them.”

Locke shook his head. “They’re not ... they don’t have that kind of relationship with us anymore. Maybe it’s different for you and Edgar, but otherwise – they haven’t got that bond with us now. Only with each other. You must have seen the way they were all looking at each other at lunch, like they don’t even need words to communicate. We’re never gonna understand that. They’ve made that clear.”

He was shaking, pulsating with rage, and Sabin laid a hesitant hand on his arm. “Wanna let off some steam?” he said. “Fancy a fight?”



They headed outside, trailed by the guard as always. Locke would have fought with knives by preference, but Edgar was looking after those for the time being. Using weapons seemed unfair against a bare knuckle fighter anyway, so he didn't mind not having his usual equipment. Sabin was obviously much stronger than he was and knew all the proper techniques of hand-to-hand combat, but Locke was more agile and could depend on the element of surprise.

He'd forgotten how it felt to fight. The last time he'd done it was on the way out of the Phoenix Cave, which felt an age ago. It was longer still since he'd been in combat with any of his former companions. Fighting with Sabin reminded him of the times he used to team up with the others – the feeling of exhilaration when there were as many as four of them in formation, ready to use their complementary skills. That wouldn't happen again. Celes and Setzer were probably sparring at this very moment, but their skills were vastly superior now. Edgar had been one of the most proficient in combat out of all of them, but had never really *liked* it; now, renowned as the one leader of any nation who had bothered to try doing anything to stop Kefka, he would never have to fight again. All Locke had was this imitation of battle, a meaningless exchange of blows with whoever happened to take pity on him. Not even this was real anymore.

He circled Sabin, intermittently catching the eye of his guard, who stood watching with a sombre expression. He stared into Sabin's face, and was reminded, inevitably, of Edgar's: the way Edgar had looked at him that night in his bedroom, after Locke took the potion; the expression Edgar had worn at lunch that very day, reunited with his brother, overcome with joy. Now that Sabin was back, Edgar had pretty much everything he could have wanted, other than being rid of the charity case he'd promised to play chess with every evening.

They all seemed to be able to move on except him – well, that was the story of his life. If he'd moved on seven years ago after the attack on Kohlingen, none of this would have happened.

He'd thought fighting might help him take his mind off things, but all it did was remind him of how inadequate he was, how nothing he could engage in would make the slightest bit of difference. A fake fight to try and pretend he was still any use on the battlefield. Obsessively reading old obituaries to engage in retrospective mourning, as if that meant anything to the thousands of people who had lost loved ones. He couldn't give Celes the love she deserved, because he still hadn't resolved things regarding Rachel, and now he never would – and quite apart from that, Celes had clearly lost interest.

Dodging the blows wasn't worth it. He stopped defending himself.

Sabin took a swing that he had clearly expected Locke to evade: a conspicuous, by-the-book punch at full power. Locke stayed still. Inches away from smashing his fist right into Locke's face, Sabin managed to stop just in time.

"What the hell?" he panted. "You could have been seriously injured –"

"Yeah," said Locke. His own heartbeat seemed incredibly loud. "I guess I could."

He had a vague awareness of the guard drawing closer to them. "Maybe that's enough, sir," the guard said to Sabin. "I'll escort Mr Cole back to his quarters."

"Yes," said Sabin, looking shaken. "That's probably best."

"You should have gone through with it," Locke told him.

"Locke –"

"Let's go inside," said the guard, and reached for Locke's shoulder; Locke twisted away from him. "Don't manhandle me," he spat, and turned his attention back to Sabin. "You should have fucking done it. Made this fight something more than a charade. Given me what I deserved."

"Locke, you don't deserve –"

"I just wish everyone would stop pretending," said Locke, "that everything's fine and now that Kefka's gone nobody has a care in the world –"

"No one's saying that –"

"All this fake fighting, playing chess, having a nice lunch together every day – it's like you've all forgotten people *died*,

the world was destroyed, and it'll *never* go back to how it was –
”

His raised voice had clearly attracted the attention of Celes and Setzer, who had emerged from behind one of the castle walls with looks of agitation. Celes moved forward as if she were about to run to him; Setzer took hold of her by the upper arms, and she stayed still, not resisting.

“I think it’s time to go inside, sir,” the guard said, and he tried to put his hand on Locke’s shoulder again. Locke shoved it off impatiently, and the guard staggered backwards.

“Hey, watch it,” said Sabin, but his voice was all but drowned out by Setzer, who called out, “Lay off him. He’s just doing his job.”

Locke whirled around to face him; a stream of sand spurted out from under his feet. “Fuck you,” he yelled. “Don’t tell me what to do. You come over here for some entertainment? Wanted to watch me losing it?”

“Locke,” Celes pleaded.

He ignored her, and continued to address Setzer. “I bet you’re loving this. Wondering when I’m gonna flip completely? Found a bookmaker to give you the odds on when I finally manage to top myself?”

“You shut the fuck up,” said Setzer furiously. “Acting like you’re the only person around here who has any problems. If you took your head even slightly out of your own ass you

might notice we're all dealing with things too. We've all lost people –"

"Then why am I the only one who cares about it?" Locke protested. "Why am I the only one bothering to find out what happened? None of you even have the slightest bit of interest – you have no *idea* how many people were lost, because you thought getting rid of Kefka was some easy solution. As if those lives weren't just as important. You don't even know – you didn't even bother to find out." He looked at them all. "Cyan *died*. He attacked Kefka on his own, and he *died*."

Celes gasped audibly; Sabin's eyes immediately brimmed with tears in a surprisingly expedient reaction. Setzer merely furrowed his brow and kept a tight hold on Celes.

Locke turned back to the guard. "Better follow me to my room now," he said viciously. "Make sure I don't slit my wrists on the way there."

He began to head inside, just as Celes managed to extract herself from Setzer's grip; it was Sabin that she ran to.

4

THE door creaked open. “Go away,” Locke mumbled.
“Sorry, I don’t take orders in my own castle,” said the intruder, and Locke reluctantly emerged from under his blanket.

Edgar made his way across the room, sat by Locke’s bed, and looked down at him gravely. “You’ve missed our last three meals,” he said, “and I haven’t heard from you, which you know is in contravention of our agreement.”

“So?” Locke said.

“So I thought you might be hungry,” said Edgar. “Here.” He held up a large sandwich.

Locke grimaced, sat up, and took it. He *was* hungry.

“Anyway,” Edgar continued warily, “Sabin told me what

happened yesterday.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And about Cyan. How long had you known?”

Locke shrugged. “A few weeks.”

“How did you –”

“I read it in the paper,” he said. “I’ve been reading all the old newspapers to find out about everyone who died.”

“Why?” asked Edgar, frowning.

“Because somebody has to care.”

Edgar nodded slowly, dawning comprehension evident on his face. “Locke,” he said. “You can’t protect everyone. You can’t protect people who are already dead. And you certainly can’t do it all by yourself.”

Locke said nothing. He had no greater desire than to retreat back under the blanket.

“Tell me about Cyan,” Edgar went on gently.

Locke shook his head. “There wasn’t much in the article. It wasn’t that long before you guys did it. He went to the tower on his own, broke in somehow, and he just didn’t make it – didn’t get far enough to even *see* Kefka –”

Suddenly, without warning, he was crying, noisily and angrily. “He shouldn’t have died like that,” he choked out. “If any of us had found him –”

Edgar laid a hand on his shoulder. “I know, Locke. I know. It’s awful.”

“So many lives wasted,” Locke moaned.

“Yes,” said Edgar solemnly. “Let’s be sure not to waste any more.”



Locke continued to work through the newspapers. He wasn’t sure what would happen when he made it all the way back to Kefka’s initial rise to power, but he knew it was important to continue until he got there. Edgar visited him in the library when he could spare the time, and asked Locke to tell him some of the things he’d been reading about, in a way that seemed to suggest genuine interest. Locke would share some highlights from the more interesting obituaries and they’d speculate for a while about what the person might have been like.

Mealtimes had got easier with five of them. Sabin had ceased to be quite as friendly with Locke since the fight, but at least it no longer felt like Locke was the odd one out. He even managed to join in with the banter between Edgar and Setzer on a few occasions.

There were still days when Locke couldn’t bring himself to get out of bed, but they were less frequent.

He’d got through a decent amount of the newspaper archive now, and was making good progress on the rest: processing it all was quicker when he didn’t feel quite so unrelentingly miserable. He had worked his way back to the editions from about a year after the Blackjack had gone down

when he eventually came across a second familiar name.

Clyde “Shadow” Arrowny

Clyde Arrowny, former conman who recently achieved notoriety as the masked assassin “Shadow”, was found dead this week in a cave on the Veldt. Arrowny first rose to prominence as a member of the Shadow Bandits, best known for their high-profile train robbery some fifteen years ago, and later masterminded the failed heist that led to the death of his business partner. After serving a brief sentence, Arrowny settled in Thamasa, but disappeared after the death of his wife and was assumed to have been killed by vigilantes.

The assassin “Shadow”, whose true identity was hitherto unknown, was a mercenary famed for his expertise with numerous weapons. Hired by a range of nefarious individuals and organisations including the former Gestahlian Empire, he became infamous for his ruthless nature, showing concern only for his dog, Intersector.

Locke frowned. Interceptor, that’s what the dog was called. The only living thing the guy had cared for, and they hadn’t even bothered to get its name right.

On the inspection of Shadow’s body, the true identity of the man who had eluded the authorities for so long was revealed. The corpse bore multiple injuries, but the cause of death has been confirmed as a self-inflicted stab wound. The legendary Ichigeki dagger, formerly believed to have been lost, was found in Arrowny’s hand.

Arrowny leaves one estranged daughter.

Locke read back over the article a few more times, trying to piece together what he now knew about his erstwhile comrade. So Shadow had formerly been a well-known criminal – one of the best known. You didn't get far without hearing about Clyde Arrowny in Locke's line of work, even though the man had vanished years before Locke had started out. He knew the name Arrowny from somewhere else too, but couldn't think where – probably some scheme he'd been dragged into.

He looked over the last part again. He'd heard of the Ichigeki, too: in fact, it was Shadow who had mentioned it to him, when they were staying in Albrook before the ill-fated trip to talk to the espers with General Leo. It had been a rare moment of bonding with the assassin: Locke had made some flippant remark about looking for treasure in the caves on Crescent Island, and Shadow had started talking about this dagger, how it had some special property and how he'd been searching for it for years. Locke could relate, and had said as much.

So Shadow had finally found the Ichigeki, and then – Locke's breath hitched as he thought it over – he'd just killed himself. Had that been his plan all along? Shadow had always been a strange guy, but Locke had got on with him as well as anyone could have. There had always been similarities between them, and the obituary had revealed more that Locke couldn't have anticipated: Shadow, too, had lost people in his

past. He'd dealt with it by walking away and assuming a new identity, refusing to form any more true bonds with anyone. He'd deliberately concealed his emotions, but even that hadn't stopped him eventually succumbing to despair.

Locke rested his chin on his hands and looked up at the ceiling. He would have to share this news with the others, there was no doubt about that.



Locke waited until everyone had finished their dinner to let them know. "I need to tell you all something," he said, before anyone could get up to leave. "It's about Shadow."

They all turned to him curiously, but without a great deal of concern. Shadow hadn't been a friend in the same way Cyan had, just an occasional collaborator – they all owed him a great debt after what happened on the Floating Continent, but nobody had ever seemed to have any particular personal feelings about him. It made the news easier to deliver.

"I found his obituary today," Locke continued. "He died a few months ago on the Veldt. He was out there looking for a famous weapon of some kind, and when he found it –" He made eye contact with Edgar. "He used it to kill himself."

Nobody responded immediately.

"Good of you to tell us," Edgar eventually said. He looked at the others. "No point keeping these things to ourselves, is

there? Makes them harder to deal with.”

Locke nodded. He could feel himself tearing up, but he managed not to let it come to anything. Next to Edgar, Celes and Setzer exchanged a look and a nod, and she gave his arm a brief, reassuring touch. Locke pretended not to notice.

“Locke,” said Celes, and he reluctantly looked back towards her. “I need to discuss something with you. Do you want to take a walk outside?”

He nodded, with a little trepidation, and they headed out.

Locke’s guard for the evening was by the door, and made to follow them, but Celes turned to him and said firmly, “Thank you. You don’t need to come.”

“But he –” said the guard.

“I can handle this,” she said. “Speak to the king if you’ve got a problem.”

They made for the nearest balcony. It was dark, but not cold – the desert settled at a pleasant temperature in the evenings.

“Actually, I have two things to tell you,” said Celes as she shut the door behind them. “First – I tried to do it as well.”

He stared at her in confusion.

“To – kill myself. When I first woke up, after the Blackjack crashed – no, Locke, it’s OK, just let me tell you –”

He had begun to move towards her – he just wanted to hold her and comfort her. He forced himself to be still.

“I don’t know if the others ever told you what happened. I woke up on an island, and Cid was there – he’d been taking care of me while I was unconscious. But he was sick, and – he died. I felt so hopeless. I didn’t know if *anyone* else was alive, and the last thing I remembered was being on the Floating Continent and trying to stab Kefka and how wrong everything went. So I threw myself off a cliff.” She smiled sadly. “It was maybe a bit dramatic.”

“Shit, Celes,” said Locke.

“It didn’t do much, in the end,” she said. “I must have misjudged how high it was – I was barely even hurt. Anyway, I realised it might be a better idea to – you know, try and get on with life. See if I could make a difference. So I took this raft that Cid had built, and I managed to get to the mainland and found Edgar, and you know what happened after that.”

He nodded, still stunned.

“The other thing I have to tell you – well, ask you, I suppose.” She pushed up one of the baggy sleeves that covered her upper arms, and showed Locke what was tied there. “This is yours, right?”

He looked at it. Indeed it was – one of his own bandannas, knotted tightly above Celes’ elbow. There were a few that he’d misplaced, or had had to sacrifice to various causes, during the search for the Phoenix. “Where did you get that?” he asked quietly.

“It was tied to a bird,” she said.

He remembered, now – that wounded seagull. It had been an impulsive thing to do, bandaging it with his bandanna as if that was supposed to help. But he was good with birds.

“I’m amazed that one survived,” he said. “It wasn’t in the best way.”

“Made a full recovery,” she said, and was quiet for a moment. “Anyway, I’ve been carrying this with me ever since. Just a silly superstition, I suppose. Setzer calls it my good luck charm.”

“He knows about it, then?” said Locke, and immediately regretted it. “I mean, of course he does – you were travelling together –”

“That’s right,” she said. “Both of them know about it. We couldn’t keep many secrets from each other back then – we were all vulnerable. Although there is one thing I managed to keep to myself.”

She took a deep breath. “I didn’t tell them *when* I found it. It was – right after I jumped off the cliff. I was unharmed, but I still felt like I had nothing to live for. I just wanted to lie there and fade away. And then I saw that bird, and – that made me think you might be out there. You might have survived. That’s what kept me going: the thought that I’d see you again.”

Locke could offer no response. This time, he failed to hold the tears in; they trickled obstinately down his cheeks as he watched Celes.

“There’s always something,” she said. “Something that’ll keep you alive. You just need to find it.”

He nodded.

Celes waited for a while before speaking again. “Things have changed,” she said carefully. “For both of us. It’s not the way it was before.”

“Yeah,” he said, wiping his face. “I know.”

“Just don’t misunderstand,” she said. “I spent a lot of time with those two. Edgar – well, you know what he’s like. And Setzer – we really helped each other through some tough times. We’re so close now – he’s like a brother.”

She looked him over. “You are – I can’t even express how important you are to me, Locke. But –”

“I know,” he said. “You don’t need to say it. It’s not like that between us now. It’s fine.”

“Is it?”

She seemed genuinely doubtful, and he attempted a grin. “What would you do if it wasn’t? Just try to pretend it was what you wanted? Seriously, it’s fine, Celes. I know. It’s different now.” He was telling the truth; there might have been a time when he’d have been upset if things had ended this way, but he’d been aware for some time now that it was inevitable. He was relieved, more than anything, by the closure.

“It could have worked out,” she told him, moving closer to him. “If things had gone differently in Thamasa. Or if you’d managed to find us before we got to Kefka –”

“I don’t know,” he said, taking her hand. “You think? We’d have argued about *everything*.”

She let out a sad laugh, dropped his hand, and then slipped her arm around his back; he could feel the bulge of his own bandanna resting against his shoulder blade. They stood there, looking at the stars. He leant his head against hers. “I’m glad you’re not dead,” he said.

“Same to you,” she murmured. “I’d have missed you.”



Locke had taken to copying down the most interesting bits of the obituaries and reading them out at dinner. “This woman,” he said, “ran a chocobo stable. But get this – apparently she trained some of the chocobos to talk –”

Everyone groaned. “That can’t possibly be true,” said Setzer.

“Didn’t one of those turn up at the auction house in Jidoor?” said Celes thoughtfully.

“And you didn’t buy it?” Edgar exclaimed with mock affront. “What a wasted opportunity.”

“We’re not all as rich as you are,” she countered.

“General, if I had only twenty thousand gil to my name, I would quite happily spend all of it on a talking chocobo –”

Locke laughed. “I’m sure it’s bullshit anyway,” he said. “There’s all sorts of stuff in these obituaries that’s obviously

wrong. This guy apparently ran the flower shop in Kohlingen. Well, you can take it from me that there is definitely no flower shop in Kohlingen. I think if there was” – he glanced around the table – “I’d have kept them in business.”

There was silence, and then Setzer said, “Sounds about right.”

Locke grinned nervously at Celes; she returned the same expression. Edgar began to laugh, stopped just as quickly, said “Excuse me,” and returned to his food looking abashed.

Sabin gave Locke a cheerful slap on the back – Locke just about managed to stay upright – and said, “Hey, we ought to do *something*. We should find out what these people were really like. We could write a book about them or something.”

Edgar laughed again. “Sorry,” he said, red-faced. “Just – the thought of the two of you writing a book. Does either of you even know how to hold a pen?”

Locke threw a slice of carrot at him. Edgar caught it, popped it into his mouth, and chewed thoughtfully. “It’s a nice idea, though. Would be good to do something. You could talk to the families, maybe.”

“Yeah,” said Locke. “That could work. I’d like to do that. Get to know who all of them really were; try to keep their memory alive. I’ve gotta find something to do, anyway. Can’t mope around this place forever.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” said Edgar.

Locke hesitated, caught off guard.

“Do you two need a moment?” Setzer joked.

“I – no, it’s fine, Edgar,” said Locke, oddly flustered. “I appreciate – everything. But – I still feel like I have to make amends. And this is probably the best way of doing it.” He turned to Sabin. “You’re up for it?”

“Travelling the world with you like old times?” said Sabin. “Sure! We can drop in on Gau, too.”

He nodded in gratitude, and looked towards Celes; her expression was inscrutable. “Think about it,” he said to her. “You don’t have to decide now.”

“I’m guessing you’ll need an airship, though,” Setzer remarked.

“Might help,” said Locke. “You know what I’m like on boats.”



With help from the others, Locke devised a route, aiming to take in as much of the world as possible. Maybe they’d be able to find the three of their friends who remained unaccounted for, or at least learn what had happened to them. He’d forgotten what it was like to have a sense of purpose; at times, it was overwhelming. There were still bad days, but he knew he was with friends.

There was one thing left to do before they set off.



“I spread the word in town,” said the old man. “Might be a big crowd.”

Locke inclined his head in thanks, although he felt apprehensive. Of course, he should have expected a decent turnout – he knew there were a lot of people in Kohlingen who remembered Rachel. The problem was that most of them would also remember him, and this was the first time he’d really been in town since the attack, not counting his furtive journeys to and from the old man’s house.

He stood and looked down into the newly dug grave, trying not to worry too much. People were starting to gather; there were a number of faces he would prefer to have forgotten. He made eye contact with a certain individual, and tensed.

“You think he’ll be trouble?” Sabin murmured from behind him.

“Maybe,” said Locke. “Surely he wouldn’t start a fight at a burial, though? Would he?” The guy’s expression had said otherwise.

“Want me to take care of it?”

“It’s fine,” said Locke. “I can take him on.” It wasn’t like his own reputation could get any worse around here – the last thing anyone needed was for Sabin to get involved and for some kind of diplomatic incident to kick off.

The man approached him, and Locke's fists clenched in anticipation.

"Sorry for your loss," he said. "She was a good one."

"Thanks," Locke mumbled, and the guy stepped away again.

He let out a slow breath, and felt Sabin's hand against his back.

The burial service began. Locke managed to hold himself together to begin with, but when the coffin was lowered into the grave and began to be obscured by the soil, he could no longer bear it. He almost crumpled to the ground, but Sabin held him upright as he wept, the tears streaming unrepentantly down his face and onto Sabin's shirt, his hands shaking, his whole body heaving with each breath. His sobbing was probably making it difficult for everyone else to hear the words of the service, but there was nothing that could have made him stop.

He remained that way until the service was over and most of the mourners had departed; only then could he bring himself to stand unaided and slowly extract himself from Sabin's firm grip. Carefully, he knelt at the graveside.

Goodbye, Rachel, he thought. Thank you for making me so happy. I'm sorry I – I hope you're at peace.

Celes and Setzer had joined Sabin and Edgar behind him by the time he stood; both of them embraced him briefly in

turn. “Well done,” Celes whispered as she did so. He sniffed his thanks.

Edgar quietly suggested that the others return to the carriages that would take them back to the castle, and then turned to face Locke.

“Will you be OK?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Locke, rubbing his face with his sleeve.

“I’m sorry,” said Edgar. “That we didn’t try to find you. You know Celes wanted to. Setzer and I managed to persuade her it was better to go straight after Kefka, but – I’m not sure we were right.”

“I know why you did it,” Locke replied. “Don’t worry about it.”

Edgar grimaced. “Hard not to worry about it when it affected you so badly.”

“Oh, you know me,” said Locke, “I’m just ... I just get that way.”

“I know,” said Edgar earnestly, “and that’s why I shouldn’t have just left you to your own devices when you came to the castle. I’m sorry – I was worried because Sabin hadn’t come back to us yet, and I was so sure he’d be there as soon as you were – I started thinking something might have happened to him –”

“It’s OK, Edgar,” said Locke. “I get it. I know what you’re like too, remember.”

Edgar smiled weakly.

Locke threw his arms around him. “Thanks for looking out for me,” he said, the words muffled by Edgar’s cloak.

Edgar leant into the embrace. “We’d better get back,” he said, when a few moments had passed.

“Sure,” said Locke. “Just a bit longer. I want to make sure I don’t forget this. Having friends. Not being alone.”