

IT wasn't meant to be a victory tour. It wasn't meant to be an apology tour either, although it was hard not to apologise when they saw the state everywhere was in. Things were generally better than before, yes, and they were the ones who had put a stop to it, of course, but they had been the ones to let the evil bastard take control in the first place too, and then had spent at least the first year of it – well, focusing on other things, in Locke's case. Fighting for her life, in Celes'. Perhaps she had the better excuse.

Edgar had been the one to send the two of them off together so they could get a sense of the lie of the land. Somebody needed to do it, it was too dangerous for a solo traveller even with everybody's finely honed physical combat skills, et cetera. His majesty was too busy, his highness apparently tethered to Figaro in some kind of innovative experiment in the delegation of royal duties, Setzer and (implausibly) Cyan were raking it in operating a casino in (almost as implausibly) Narshe, seeing it as their moral duty to provide some entertainment while things got back on their feet. And so Celes and Locke had been designated the investigators. Nobody had acknowledged it out loud, but it was clear that their partnership was also a way to give them plenty of time alone together.

Because – yes, they had made some efforts at defining their relationship, but – Locke had tried explaining this to Edgar several times, usually with the help of at least one bottle of wine, which was in fact never very much help at all. He and Celes

had kissed; done more than kissed, several times, undeniably. They had used the terms “boyfriend” and “girlfriend”. They had held hands when they went to meet the provincial officials, and Celes had rested her head on Locke’s shoulder, and he had lazily twisted her hair between his fingers while the same officials had given them indulgent looks, won over by the story of their romance. And yet, there was still something ... off. There was still the spectre of Rachel, and the creeping worry that the two of them had drifted together because there had really been nobody else available at the time, and the fact that it had certainly been a while now and they had still never discussed everything that needed discussing.

So their tour, really, was an attempt to help with that, in the roundabout way that Edgar sometimes specialised in. Nights sharing ships’ cabins, days on chocoboback punctuated by brief refreshment stops in the shadows of ruined buildings. Plenty of time to talk. Except they never really talked, beyond “Which way was it from here?” “What time are we expected?” “Did you bring the sandwiches?”

Zozo, at least, wasn’t so different from how they remembered it. It had been a hole even before the skies turned red, a hole while the clown held court, and, with admirable consistency, a hole now. It was raining; it always rained. Locke, who knew the place better, confirmed as much to Celes as they walked up twenty rusty flights of stairs to greet the town council, which was, as he additionally explained, more of an organ-

ised crime syndicate.

“Perhaps it didn’t affect them too much here,” she said hopefully.

He placed a hand on her back and hummed in agreement.

On eventually reaching their destination, they were ushered into some frankly disgusting chairs and made to listen to the mayor’s recitation of everything that had gone wrong under Kefka. Locke would rather have been anywhere else. He held Celes’ hand and spotted the familiar indulgent looks on the town councillors’ faces, an odd accompaniment to their various gang tattoos. The mayor’s speech was supposed to be a way of telling them how grateful Zozo was for their having put a stop to it all, but as usual, it failed to have that effect when Locke knew they had also caused it all in the first place. At last, when the subject turned to the end of Kefka’s reign of terror, things became easier to bear. They both sat up straighter, having fallen into increasingly slouched positions, and applied smiles to their faces and shook everyone’s hands, and then went down the twenty rusty flights of stairs again and shook the hands of all the townspeople who had gathered at the bottom, and exchanged shy smiles and nods with those who no longer had hands to shake, and kissed a few babies and accepted a small number of mostly wilted flowers from the elderly. Locke’s stomach hurt, worse with every grateful expression he spotted, but he tried not to let it show.

Zozo had no accommodation fit for those any less than in-

timately acquainted with its charms; they were to spend the night at a roadside inn. They took their leave of the council and began making their way towards where they had left the chocobos, tied to a post in a side street with a hastily scrawled sign hung around the neck of the larger one reading PROPERTY OF FIGARO CASTLE, DO NOT STEAL.

Whoever had encountered the chocobos had been a master of literal interpretation, because the other one was missing, the only trace of its presence half a harness lying on the ground, having been cut quite cleanly away from the post it was attached to.

It wasn't important; they had shared before. There were other things to worry about.

"Well, that was awful," said Celes, gently removing the sign from the remaining chocobo's neck.

"Yeah," said Locke. "As usual. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible," she said.

He nodded. "Me too."

Getting away from Zozo seemed appealing, but neither really had the strength to ride yet. They slumped onto the ground instead, leaning against a low wall and each other. The chocobo let out a soft, somewhat baffled *wark*; Celes reached for its foot and patted it.

"I'm going to tell Edgar this was a really bad idea," said Locke.

"Yeah," said Celes. "He can come himself next time."

“A hundred percent,” said Locke fervently. He paused. “Think you were right, though. Shit was so bad here in the first place, none of it made that much difference.”

“You think?” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Poor sods don’t know any better. Must have been raining all that time, too.”

“Yeah, probably,” said Celes. “Right through it. They probably didn’t even notice when the sky turned.”

“Cloud cover,” Locke mumbled.

“Talking of which,” she said, prodding at his bandanna, “you’re soaking.”

“So are you,” he pointed out.

“Mm, yeah,” she said. “We really should leave.”

They made no move to stand for a long time, until Locke eventually murmured, “Come on,” and scrambled to his feet, and took Celes by both cold, wet hands to help draw her up too. She stumbled forward into his arms, looking grim and exhausted. He drew her into an embrace, and let her bury her head in his neck, and pretended not to notice her few, quiet sobs.

And then, as they stood there – a smell. And a feeling in the air. And Locke looked up, and realised: the sky was as grey as ever, but a faint multicoloured arc ran across it on one side. And the rain: the rain had stopped.

“Celes,” he said.

She raised her head, sniffing. “Hm?”

He couldn't help smiling. "Look, sweetie." She would forgive him the term on this occasion, surely. "It's not raining."

Celes said nothing for a very long time, and then eventually, in a small, strained voice, "What the *fuck*."

Locke giggled. It was most unbecoming; Edgar would have loudly drawn attention to it. He giggled, and then he reached for Celes and kissed her, just a swift, jubilant touch of his lips to hers, but then – it was never enough, was it? He moved in again, and the second kiss was slow and soft. He could feel her eyelashes brushing his face. He clung to her firmly. This was what mattered.

They drew apart. Celes took a deep breath, and then said, "I suppose there is hope." She grimaced. "Oh, that sounded –"

"No," he said. "You're right. I think so, anyway. There is – there has to be."

"Yes," she said.

There was a strange atmosphere between them. The rain's absence seemed almost inconvenient. Who would ever have guessed that air could be so empty? It was time, Locke knew: time to be honest, and to work out where they stood. They probably could have done it in warm, dry Figaro Castle without the need for all this traipsing about, but they were here now.

"Celes," said Locke. "I think we need to have a chat."

"About us?" she said.

"You guessed it."

She reached for his hand, and said, "All right."