I'm the Darkness, You're the Starlight

by runicmagitek

Summary

It was meant to be nothing but a means to an end; just a simple plan to catch his attention and gain safe access to Vector. Celes convinced herself of that. Though when Setzer continues to fixate upon her off stage, she can’t help but recall the fleeting, yet distinct taste he indulged her with upon her capture. Maybe it’s another game of his. Maybe this time he’ll win. Maybe she’ll even like it.

Notes

- This story follows the Game Boy Advance script. A few lines from the original SNES translation have been adapted, but nothing more.
- While there will be explicit sex, the story is heavily plot-driven. Sex and BDSM just happen to be a constant theme. Because of that, I'm keeping the M rating as opposed to an E rating. So if you're here strictly to jerk off, this might not be the story you're looking for. I've upped the rating to E, because the sex is very explicit and a prominent theme along with everything else, though still, if you're just here to jerk off and be
done, not really the story for you.

- I will add more tags as the story updates, so keep an eye out for them.
Chapter 1

The toss-up between which aggravating element, which thing, deserved to be ripped to shreds first had yet to be decided. Either the hand-sewn garment or Locke would meet a cruel fate, though not until the curtains fell and the applause died out.

Celes sighed as she placed the script back down onto the table. Her eyes pleaded for rest, unable to read another line on the paper. One day was all she was given. One day to memorize the lines, the blocking, and the cues. The remaining cast—thecians by trade and passion—had weeks to perfect their art, enough time to blunder and improve. Such a luxury didn’t exist for Celes. She was to be Maria and Maria was flawless, forever a step above her supporting ensemble. Memorizing orders and positions came naturally for the once General of the Empire, but she didn’t rise to the position overnight.

Same went for singing. In her younger days, she sang plenty. Cid arranged voice lessons for the child, not only to enrich the hallways with melodies, but to prepare Celes for her future role as a commanding officer. The activity fine-tuned her mind and loosened her vocal cords when her sheathed rune blade rested at her hip. It was only a matter of reviving her voice for the night’s performance. Mimicking Maria was near impossible, but no wasn’t an option, either. Not now. She had to.

Other options surfaced which didn’t involve her dressing up like an opera floozy to garner a man’s attention. Why they couldn’t attempt to snatch this gambler before the show was beyond Celes. Impresario was by far the most dramatic of the people within the opera house. Gods forbid if the show was ruined by an abduction of his prized soprano.

Yet no one blinked at Locke’s mention of Celes taking Maria’s place, nor questioned Celes’ feelings on the matter. Had they asked, Celes would have been sure to inform the group how absolutely stupid their impromptu plan was. A thief’s wits outweighed a trained officer’s tactics—a backhanded compliment if she ever saw one.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Celes inched to the mirror on the other side of the room. Her reflection continued to shock her every time she walked by. When exactly did she last wear a dress? Perhaps never. A team of four seamstresses executed last minute alterations. Each one worked like lightning to assure the blasted dress fit Celes. Maria stood several inches shorter with a smaller figure by equal measure. Initially, Celes failed to see how she was to squeeze into the contraption, along with doubting the one woman’s claim to bracing a foot against Celes’ back to tie the corset in proper. After five minutes of a heel jabbed into her spine, breathing evolved into a chore Celes wished to never experience again.

The seamstresses worked magic, though, much like their cosmetician counterparts. The gaudy stage face she wore left Celes appearing like a cheap whore in the back alleys of Vector. She was reassured it was so those sitting in the back of the balcony could discern her features. To that, Celes wrinkled her nose. Even when standing opposite to her reflection, her face continued to contort. This was not her. Lace and ribbons and silk were not meant for Celes Chère. Underneath she wore her civilian attire: a faded yellow one-piece suit that draped off her shoulders and white boots.

The only aesthetic missing was the blue ribbon for her hair. Artists attempted to touch her hair, yet Celes dismissed them with flailing arms, claiming she could finish the deed. In their absence, Celes savored the silence and solitude, yet her hair stayed untouched.
Celes slipped the blue ribbon into her hands as she shuffled towards the mirror, carefully pulling her wavy, pale blonde hair back to tie it up properly. Any other woman would have found the task a simple one. Celes didn’t have the privilege to pinpoint the last time she slaved over a mirror to perfect her looks. She left her hair natural and unstyled, the most effort involving the strands pulled into a tight bun, not a wisp out of place.

Blue eyes fell from her reflection, hands working over the ribbon. *It feels silly to be doing this for no one special.*

Upon departing Kohlingen, Celes knew better than to deem herself special. The solemn weight in Locke’s voice when they left Rachel’s house continued to ring through Celes’ ears.

“I failed her,” was what he said, unable to meet Celes’ gaze. She called out to him, each attempt met with silence. The struggle to reach out to Locke vanished, for their path lied south. She couldn’t fret over the events in Kohlingen, not when Terra needed to be tracked down. Locke returned to smiling and cracking his typical, witty jokes as if his recollection of Rachel never took place. Celes refused to forget; how Locke’s features changed when he looked to Rachel said plenty.

The same man freed her from her imprisonment and in turn her death sentence. Celes never owed her life to a damn soul; Locke was the first to receive the honor. She admired how he didn’t think twice before helping her, an Imperial General, albeit a traitor in the eyes of the Empire. He could have expedited the deed: slit her throat and leave her to suffocate on her blood. Instead, he offered a helping hand and a second chance at life. Celes couldn’t admit to possessing his strength. Not recently, if ever. She mentally repeated the promise he made to her; Locke was to protect and stay by her side, despite having just met. When he was with Terra, though, that identical bravery continued to flourish.

And then there was Rachel.

Locke spoke of heartfelt oaths and Celes doubted his sincerity and compassion. Now she questioned if his sentiments were only reserved for the woman he daydreamed of Celes being and not Celes herself. If he ever cared about Celes, genuinely and completely, she had yet to experience it.

Celes finished tying the ribbon, hands falling to her side. The pitiful attempt at the ponytail didn’t bother Celes, but the feminine body standing opposite of her did. Lean muscles comprised her tall form. Celes struggled to hide her pronounced curves under her military uniform and armor, let alone a damn dress. The garment called attention to her waist and flared out with her hips. The court neckline revealed more than Celes was comfortable with, her constricted breasts borderline spilling out. She glared at the woman in the mirror; she did not know this trite image.

The former General turned rebel member turned stage whore. At a time, she had been praised. Back then, Celes garnered plenty of reasons to persevere. With her title and pride stripped away, she was but a lost ship drifting on the stormy sea. Celes planned to aid the Returners and in exchange, she hoped to unearth a new purpose in the failure of a life she lived.

But *this*?

*How could Locke possibly care,* Celes shot through her mind as she stomped back to the table, *if he didn’t think twice to throw me at this selfish, rotten, worthless, ignoble bastard?*

Beside the script was a folded piece of stationary holding the slightest hint of incense, cinnamon, and cloves. Fingertips pressed into the quality paper before flipping it open to read over the rather remarkable calligraphy.
Dearest Maria,

I’ve decided to take you as my wife, so I’ll be coming to kidnap you.

-The Wandering Gambler

A man of little morals with the only pair of wings in the entire world. They required passage to Vector under the pretense of saving what Espers they could—and in turn, saving Terra—and an airship did the trick. It was only a matter of convincing Setzer Gabbiani to work with them. Though considering he was planning on kidnapping a woman—without a doubt against her own wishes—it was questionable as to whether or not he’d pause long enough to hear the group out. His antics rang through the opera house, proving he was no stranger to the establishment. Impresario’s remarks on Setzer’s love for the dramatic came to mind.

Swap out for the double, save the real star, and let the show go on. That was the plan. A laughable, disgusting, crapshoot of a plan. The Returners were lucky she could sing, let alone agree to wear a dress.

Celes read over the note to Maria multiple times and each time she restrained herself from ripping it in a blind rage. Picturing who this Setzer was, however, swapped her anger for nausea. Celes pictured an older man—a truly pathetic sight for sore eyes—unable to win any woman over with charisma and chivalry, thus instead relied on desperate tactics. No wonder this Maria didn’t dare to step foot onto the stage.

While Setzer’s name was new to her ears, mentions of his airship, the Blackjack, were but whispers in her memories. Word of a flying casino made its way to Vector. Officers snuck out to visit the airship when it frequented the outskirts of the continent. It never dared to draw close to Vector itself. Emperor Gestahl would have devised a way to monetize the Blackjack. Until then, it was but a myth as far as Celes was concerned.

With an irritated sigh, she readied herself to tear the note up into a million pieces. The creak of the door halted her actions. The note fell to the table and Celes spun on her heels to investigate the intruder. No one else was to bother her before the performance, not even the stagehands. Unless, of course, the wandering gambler himself opted to arrive early.

Entering the room was the last person she expected: Locke Cole himself.

If Celes hadn’t known better, she would have guessed he carefully picked the locks himself; he tiptoed in, checking the hallway outside before closing the door. Clad in his layers of mismatched attire, Locke peered over his shoulder, the beads from his bandana swaying with the movement. A light gasp jutted out while his eyes widened at Celes. Caught in the act, his illusion of stealth shattered.

“What are you doing here?” Celes demanded in an instant. “I thought you were supposed to be with Edgar and Cyan in—”

“Hey hey!” He threw his hands up. “Relax, we got it under control. Everything is taken care of.”

Celes raised an eyebrow, wishing to discuss further what their versions of under control truly entailed. Instead, she allowed him to approach her and speak for himself.
“Show’s already started,” Locke commented. “Wanted to check up on you.”

“There’s nothing to check up on,” Celes insisted and turned away to busy herself with the script. The worn edges of the pages dangled on threads after Celes tirelessly flipped over them. Come morning, the memorized lines and songs would vanish and she’d never have to recall another opera again. “I’m fine.”

Of course, her answer wouldn’t suffice for Locke. She didn’t need to glance behind her to know Locke hovered over her shoulder. “You sure?”

Celes almost slammed her fists on the table, though with what patience she had left, she maintained partial composure. “Yes, I’m rather sure.” She shook her head. “Why are you here again?”

“Like I said, to check up on you.”

_I find that hard to believe_, Celes withheld.

Releasing the script, she faced Locke again, only to realize what little distance sat between them. A foot away, Locke stood tall before her, arms crossed against his chest. An arrangement of knives peeked out from the folds of his jacket while his prized daggers and boomerang hung from his belt. How Locke—or any of them, for that matter—sauntered into the opera house armed without a single complaint was a mystery.

“Well,” Celes spoke with a shrug. “Here I am. I’m okay. Make-up is done, as is the hair, and this dress is going to be burned the moment I—”

“Have you....”

Celes blinked. “What?”

The color in his cheeks turned to a hint of pink. His brown eyes twitched over her. “Have you... always been that pretty?”

A similar blush bubbled to the surface of her face. There they were, alone in the dressing room with no one to interrupt. Not even Edgar or Cyan would barge through the door to check up on her. Maybe they would search for Locke if his absence persisted, but Celes didn’t entertain the possibility. For now they were alone, his words hanging in what space was left between them. Celes swallowed hard and resisted the urge to bite at her lower lip. Somewhere a make-up artist would gut her if she did so much as smudge the red lip stain.

Shock might have gobbled her up, but Celes reined herself back. Before her was the man who recently paid a visit to his dear love, wishing to revive and reunite with her. The glint in his eyes then matched the look that fell upon her back in South Figaro. The same gleam flashed to Terra; Celes took note, whether Locke or Terra paid attention. She outright refused to be played for a fool.

One hand on her hip, Celes did well not to glare at him. “Are you finished?”

He breathed out a laugh. “I’m sorry, I....” Locke rubbed the back of his neck and averted his gaze. “You look great and I know you’ll do better. That’s all.”

Celes inhaled deeply while flicking loose strands of hair out of her face. “This... isn’t exactly the most ideal time, Locke.”

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed. “I’ve never been one for timing. Working on it.” She swore those coy eyes of his flicked over her body. “But I mean it, though.”
High praise of one’s beauty was enough for any lady to blush down to her toes. Instead, it produced more butterflies in Celes’ sunken stomach and replaced whatever hint of stage fright lived there moments ago. Bad timing wasn’t endearing—it was asinine. It didn’t excuse Locke, either, from the verbal beating she wished to submit him to once the show was over. All of it had to wait; she now embodied Maria, about to be swiped away from center stage for an elopement only the gods were privy to.

Yet the image of Locke’s expression when they walked into the basement and laid eyes upon Rachel burned into Celes.

Unladylike hands twitched over one another. “Locke?”

He perked up to his name and waited for Celes to speak. Hesitation on her behalf stirred curiosity within his face, but she suspected his attentiveness would disappear once the words passed her lips. Maybe even Locke himself would disappear.

“Why did you stand up for me when you did? Back in Narshe.” Her gaze fell heavy. She commanded armies and stood before foes without flinching, but this? A single man shouldn’t have rendered her dumb-stricken. “Or when you found me, why did you—”

“Because I’m tired,” Locke began, catching himself to recompose his thoughts. “Tired of standing by and not doing a damn thing while I lose the ones I care for.”

The mixture of spite and regret coating his tongue stung. She craned her head back to face him, not a stutter in her movements. Whatever excuse for comfort he offered backfired.

“So am I just a replacement then? For her?”

Locke didn’t respond, yet answered her at the same time. A smile crept onto his lips and his eyes softened in her direction.

“That ribbon looks nice on you.”

A slap across the face would have done well to ensure his words were indeed a poor choice. Of all the times to rouse fury within Celes, Locke opted to do so before her grand entrance within the opera. She would be needed soon for her cue. Through the back door and down narrow corridors was the backstage. In the distance, the tech crew hurried about with set pieces and bustling chocobos. Actors interwove with the chaos to prepare for the next scene.

Her scene. The most beloved part of any opera. It served as the reason why the show sold out, every seat filled with keen eyes. All would be watching Celes. Setzer would be watching.

“I have to go on stage soon,” Celes attempted to divert the conversation elsewhere. “This next scene’s an important one.” A finger tapped along her jaw as she recalled the correct blocking and proper flow of lyrics. “Maria starts to worry about Draco’s fate and pours her feelings into song, no different from everyone else.” The question remained if Celes could, in fact, emulate heartbreak and longing for one night. Just one night and never again.

Locke cocked his head. “Uh... shouldn’t you check the score one last time?”

_I am going to take this score, crumble it up, and—_”I’ve been slaving over it all day since first thing this morning.” Celes did her best not to throw him a sarcastic glance. “I’ve had to memorize military layouts in shorter time, Locke.”
“Doesn’t hurt to double check is all.” Tense shoulders rolled away from his neck before he leaned in to better inspect the script. “You nervous at all?” This time Celes didn’t hold back the look she skewered him with. “Yeah yeah, I get it. Not helping, right?”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Celes muttered under her breath.

She snatched the script and glossed over it. All the while, Locke circled around to examine the lovely stationary left behind. By the time Celes finished skimming several pages, she caught Locke reading over the note.

He scoffed while narrowing his eyes onto the words. “Can you believe this guy? Who the hell writes this kind of crap?”

“At least he has good penmanship,” Celes noted.

Locke stifled a laugh. “Please, did you not see Jidoor? He could have hired anyone to write that for him.” Locke shook his head before slipping fingers beneath his bandana to rub his temple. “You don’t just... do that. A girl deserves more than that. Gods, kidnapping. It’s ridiculous. How low do you have to stoop before you’re outright forcing yourself onto a victim?”

His daggers were dull in correlation to his words. Celes held her breath longer than needed along with grinding her teeth. The man Locke spoke ill of was their one-way ticket to Vector with Celes as the bait. You’re not helping, Locke.

Discarding the script, Celes silently turned to march to the back door and head to the busy backstage. Echoes of activity bounced along the narrow hallway and grew in intensity. As Celes took a corner, a wall of sound struck her as she wove through stagehands and show extras. An assistant stage manager instructed people for the dance number immediately following her aria, his voice lost to the stable hands containing the chocobos from the previous scenes. Dozens upon dozens of bodies donned vivid masquerade outfits, the fashion suitable for the likes of Jidoor, though too lurid for Vector. Only one person from Vector came to mind when she spied upon the chromatic fabrics. A chill rushed down her spine. The enemy deserved no place in her mind now, for she had another challenge to tackle.

“Good luck, Celes,” Locke whispered from behind. He followed without a word and a quick peek over her shoulder confirmed as much. While he smiled, Celes couldn’t muster one in return. “Not that you need any,” Locke jested, “but... that’s what you say, right?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Saying that is actually bad luck in stage performances.”

Locke tripped over his tongue. “W-what?! I-I didn’t mean—”

“You say break a leg.”

He blinked, then grimaced. “Okay, now you’re just making this up.”

Celes chuckled at him while shaking her head. A backstage assistant called out to her—as Maria, nonetheless—and informed her she would be needed on stage in five minutes. “I should be going.”

“Yeah,” Locke agreed. “Shouldn’t hold you up any longer.” His hand settled upon her shoulder, his thumb almost brushing over what exposed skin was there. “You’ll do well. I know you will.”

The hand fell and Locke stepped away. Celes expected him to retrace his path until he returned to his seat by Edgar and Cyan. Instead, Locke hung back with several of the stagehands, asking if it was alright if he stuck around during the aria. He claimed he wanted the best seats in the house and did so
with the grin Celes forever admired from afar. Unable to look away, Celes kept her sights on him, but the assistant’s voice demanded otherwise.

Before long she stood in position, ready to take to the stage upon given her cue. Celes sucked in steady breaths, easier said than done with the tight lacing of her dress. The scene replayed infinitely in her head: sing along the edge of the castle set, head up the stairs, perform a dance number, grab the flowers, go to the balcony, toss the bouquet, finish the aria, and dart backstage to prep for the next scene. Her eyes peeked past the curtains and onto the stage and out into the audience. Impresario held true to his word—not a seat in the opera house was unoccupied.

She wondered, only for a moment, where Setzer sat within the sea of people.

The lines of the aria echoed in her mind and she mouthed the lyrics. Celes cleared her throat in hopes to carry the tune well enough to pass as Maria. The assistant signaled a last minute warning. Stage lights died out and thunderous applause boomed at the end of the scene. Actors rushed off as props and settings zoomed around.

Past all of it, sitting on one of the crates and somehow fitting in with the rugged stagehands, was Locke, his eyes fixated on the stage.

“This is it,” the assistant whispered with a massive smile. “Break a leg, Maria!”

This was part of the plan. This was the only way they could meet with Setzer Gabbiani. This was how they would reach Vector. For now, Celes was Maria and she still couldn’t find the proper emotions to pour into the Aria di Mezzo Carattere.

The floor lights colored the stage a dark blue. The backdrop behind the castle painted a starry night with a full moon. The harp played from the pit and a spotlight shone upon Celes. Her hands braced along the castle wall, waiting for her cue. When the music paused, Celes drew a deep breath and sang.

Heartache and longing filled the aria. At the height of act one, Maria sang of her hopes to be reunited with her Draco. While she was no opera star, Celes refused to accept failure as an option. Reasonably so, a patron in the audience must have noticed the difference in her voice. Impresario could dismiss it as Maria recovering from an illness.

Though she needed to fool only one individual. Within the audience, Setzer paid attention with keen eyes. At a distance, Celes misled everyone, but if one was to sense the subtleties in her voice, it was Setzer. She buried the thoughts of the man’s intentions and ignored the impulse to gag; for now, Celes had to play along.

The spotlight blinded Celes, no more than five feet visible before her. Music swelled up throughout the progression of the song. Celes matched the scene blocking as best she could. The intricate costume was to blame for obstructing her performance with the occasional attempt to trip her, though nothing prevented Celes from singing. During her rehearsal, Impresario had accentuated the need to feel the music, to become one with it. Celes wrote it off as melodramatic crap only Jidoor could cook up. It wasn’t until halfway through the aria she discovered the truth in his wisdom.

Truth be damned, Celes couldn’t pinpoint the confusing sentiment of pure, true love. Any time she sang before was done so out of free will and in private. She had no one to sing to outside of her own
stage character. The fuzzy account of Locke’s backstage arrival ebbed and flowed from Celes’ mind; she wished he never showed up to begin with.

With her brief dance routine complete and Maria’s figment gone, Celes scooped up the bouquet of red roses. In a split second, she inhaled the sweet scent of the fresh flowers. They brought her back to Vector and the flower garden Cid kept. With her absence, the roses would wilt away and die without proper attention. She frowned while clinging onto the bouquet, the first authentic emotion she portrayed upon taking to the stage.

As the final act of the aria, Celes tossed the roses off the balcony, forsaking both them and her character’s heart to the night. She completed the aria and waited for the chancellor to step in from behind to utter his lines. The music diminished to an end while Celes exited stage left. Silence followed the orchestra and the lights flickered off. Before Celes drifted offstage, the overwhelming applause exploded from the audience, complete with a few whistles.

Extras filed in line to emerge onto the stage for the next scene as Celes made her descent from the makeshift staircase. A set of artists rushed to her; they examined her dress for any snags and tears while touching up her hair and make-up. One of them made a face over Celes’ pitiful effort at styling her own hair, but Celes waved them away before anyone could correct it.

She peered past the entourage of artists and to the crates by the entrance to the stage. Locke vanished from his perch, nowhere to be seen. Celes almost asked about him—a bandana-wearing rogue couldn’t be a tall order to find—but thought better of it. Maybe he rejoined Edgar and Cyan.

Music gushed to life again from the orchestra pit and lights spilled in from outside. Celes took a breath, running nervous hands over one another. She recalled the proper dance steps for the upcoming scene, her feet moving on their own. At least her lines were limited in this portion of the opera.

“What is this? Maria? Nervous?”

Coming face to face with Celes was the man playing as Prince Ralse and in turn her dance partner for the upcoming scene. Celes jerked her hands to her side. “I’ll be fine,” she insisted. “Don’t worry.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to,” he tittered, “though if someone here were to be nervous, it’d be you.” His eyes flicked from side to side before he eased in and murmured. “Come now, you think none of us heard about that note lover boy sent to you?”

Beneath the layers of make-up, Celes managed to blush. “Everyone knows about that?”

“Word of that not getting around? That would be a first. You know what they say about the opera house—how it rivals with the gossip of Jidoor’s nobility. Not to worry, though.” He extended a hand to pat her arm. “Impresario claims it’s all taken care of and we are not to worry.” As he flashed a grin, Celes questioned whether or not Impresario informed the cast of the leading lady’s swap. “I did tell you not to get involved with Gabbiani. A man like him is bad news for any well-established lady.”

You’re not exactly helping in the endeavor to subdue my anxiety and nausea, Celes managed to swallow back, though the waver in her eyes said plenty; the more she discovered about Setzer, the more she wished she hadn’t agreed to this plan.

Prince Ralse looped an arm around hers, rapidly guiding Celes towards the stage. “Come. We mustn’t be late for our cue.”
For now, Setzer temporarily vanished from her mind the moment she and Prince Ralse emerged from stage left. The production quality of the performance mimicked a Jidoorian masquerade, sparing no difference in the two. Upon reaching their position, Celes and Prince Ralse faced one another, bowed, and danced.

Elaborate balls didn’t exist within the Imperial military. Celes and her fellow officers prioritized battle strategies and tactics over silly outfits and dance partners for festivities. As for Vectorian nobles, they found little reason to host such involved events. It was a blessing and surprise for Celes when she executed the dance sequence without sinking a heel into Price Ralse’s toes.

“Maria,” he whispered to her at one point. “Smile.”

Plunging into inconvenient thoughts hardened Celes’ features, thus her blue eyes met his and she flashed a soft smile. Far from genuine, but it fit within a crowd of thespians. Unlike them, she played more than one role that evening and Celes hid her ulterior motives beneath the layers she wore like armor.

Celes breathed a sigh of relief when the dancing ended. In time with the sudden change of music, Draco appeared for the plot twist within act one. Celes stumbled to the side, uttered what few lines she had, and allowed Ralse and Draco to unsheathe blades. They declared a duel to the death for Maria’s heart. Like any sequence in an opera, the fight alone was to take a solid five minutes.

One of the directors reminded her to always be alive and in character whenever she set foot on stage despite the spotlight being elsewhere. Now was the ultimate test of the advice, though Celes struggled; Maria was witnessing her lover fighting with her fiancé. No real life comparison inspired Celes to muster the true emotions of conflicted desire and distress. While Celes preferred to step in and fight for her own heart, she wondered if Locke would ever stand up for her as Draco was.

Halfway through the fight, a rumbling spurred from the rafters. She ignored the movements, eyes glued on the drawn out duel. A stagehand earlier stated a rat infestation had been dealt with a month ago, though now Celes doubted the authenticity of that claim. Rats were the least of her worries when she was well aware of what followed after act one. The plan involved her to be kidnapped and from there? Celes hadn’t thought that far ahead. A portion of her wished to steal a sword on set to brandish before Setzer. Surely he wouldn’t be prepared for the notion of his precious Maria fighting back.

The passing consideration faded away when distant yells blared from above. Familiar voices. Determination to stay in character shattered the moment the rafters snapped and collapsed; Celes evoked her reflexes obtained from her military days to clear the falling mess. Other actors followed her lead to avoid the disaster, though despite their on-stage dexterity, neither Prince Ralse nor Draco could avoid the massive, purple octopus plummeting on top of them.

The orchestra ceased playing. The audience drew in terrified breaths. Three bodies also descended and crashed into the squishy creature occupying the stage, breaking their fall before colliding into the wooden floor. Celes flicked her blinking eyes over the three, only to glare and ball up her hands into tight fists. As the audience murmured, Celes settled her sights onto Locke, who rolled over and smiled in contempt of his nervousness.

“That… didn’t go as planned,” Locke muttered.

“What are you doing?” Celes mouthed to him, enunciating each word.

Impresario’s sudden entrance wasn’t a part of the plan either. His eyes held the raw wrath of a Firaga, though when he turned to the audience to express his distraught, his voice stuttered. Without
question, Draco and Prince Ralse were not walking anytime soon. It would be a miracle if they could stand now. What would prove to be an even greater miracle was that the abrupt appearance of Locke, Cyan, Edgar, and… whatever the hell that thing was didn’t deter Setzer. If even an ounce of logic swam in his head, the nuances in the performance were plenty to tip Setzer off. While Celes didn’t blame him, she also was in no mood to chase after the airship pilot.

Locke forced himself onto his feet, brushing off cobwebs and sawdust from his attire. After realigning the bandana on his head, he took to Celes’ side and spun to meet the audience. “Neither Draco nor Ralse will win Maria’s hand!”

Whatever plan he hatched now on the fly wasn’t a ploy she wished to be a part of. After his exclamation, Locke hooked an arm through Celes’. Considering the rafters disintegrated and unveiled an octopus and three men, none of whom were a part of the performance, any chances of saving the opera point was rendered as a lost cause.

“It is I, Locke!” He grinned, the least of his worries with the ridiculous overacting. “The world’s premier adventurer, who shall take her as my wife!”

Murmurs turned into exclamations from the audience while Locke eyed Celes. His smile persisted despite her death glare.

“What do you think?” Locke whispered to Celes. “New and improved version of Maria and Draco?”

“I think you’re an absolute ass,” Celes growled.

“Oh, don’t be rude.”

“This was your idea.”

He blinked, then motioned to the octopus. “I can assure you that none of this was my—”

“Silence, knave!” Ultros cried out. Both faced the purple octopus, who had one tentacle lurched up to shake violently. “You stand in the presence of octopus royalty! A lowborn thief like you could never defeat me!”

Locke twitched against Celes. “What did you call me?”

Though she was too preoccupied with other implications. “Octopus royalty? And it talks?”

“Edgar can explain it—”

“I challenge you to a duel!” Ultros pointed a tentacle at Locke, not caring if he interrupted.

Meanwhile, Impresario balanced between a breakdown or hysterical laughter. Shaking his head with a sigh, he faced the audience once more. “Hmm... might as well make the most of this.” He tossed his hands to the ceiling. “Music!”

A different tune played from the orchestra. By then, Edgar and Cyan stumbled to standing, armed with weapons. Locke grinned as they established a formation. He squeezed Celes tight before releasing her.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, my dear lady, I must—”

“Shut up and go kill it,” Celes snapped while stepping back, arms folded and eyes wide.

“Plan on it!” He twirled his daggers about his fingers before he formed a solid grip and dashed off.
Celes wanted to help, wanted to rip the dress off and wield her rune blade and magic. Her place was at the front of the battlefield, not downstage in front of an audience. *I’m a former General, not some opera floozy* was what she had yelled at Locke the other day. She meant every word of it. However, if the odds weren’t in their favor, being kidnapped by an octopus suddenly sounded better than being swept away by some creepy, lecherous old man who wished to make her his bride. Celes shivered at the speculation.

Movement creaked from above. Disregarding all stage presence etiquette—not like they hadn’t already—Celes broke her eyes away from the fight to investigate above. The lights blinded her, leaving outlines of the broken rafters. When she brought her sights back to the battle, the grind of metal and wood returned. Once more, she spotted nothing.

The pincer ambush upon Ultros overwhelmed the octopus. Edgar left the creature crying out upon delivering the final blow. Tentacles flailed everywhere in the wake of Ultros’ retreat, scurrying offstage. Not dead, but close enough. The three men stood as victorious and sheathed their weapons. The crowd cheered as the orchestra ended the bout of battle music, but once the applause died down, a single instance of clapping rang through the opera house.

Just as Celes suspected, it came from above.

“My compliments on a most impressive performance!”

A body stepped before a light, nothing but a lithe silhouette. Before long, the figure grabbed hold of a spare rope and rode it down for a safe descent. Landing beside her was a man dressed in the finest fabrics Jidoor had to offer; an impressive black jacket covered most of his body, highlighted by shades of purple, white, and gold. Standing upright, the heels of his white boots added enough height to stand several inches, if that, taller than Celes. The sharp angles of his long face were only overwhelmed by the arresting scars carved into his skin. Without the spotlights, his skin still would have been paler than Celes’, though nowhere near the same complexion of his silvery-white, windblown hair.

His eyes went to no one else but Celes, lips twitching up into a half smirk. Such a stare was meant for a predator closing in on its prey, yet marked with fascination. No one, not a damn soul, had ever dared to look upon her the way he was now.

Once again, the audience whispered concern. From stage right, Impresario stumbled back into sight, nearly tripping over the fallen Prince Ralse and Draco.

“Setzer!” he cried out to the man near Celes.

She almost echoed those words herself, instead choking on her shock. Her eyes darted between Impresario and the man he was calling Setzer. *The Setzer*. The man who she had painted in her head to be a disgusting low-life with absolutely no tact at all.

A slight chuckle came from his closed lips as he stepped towards Celes. “I’m a man of my word, Impresario.”

His voice matched the elegance found in the calligraphy within the note, laced with a faded Jidoorian accent. Celes’ astonishment froze her, enabling Setzer to sneak up. A rough hand slipped into hers to twirl Celes in place. He chuckled again before releasing her, only to clutch onto her waist and snap her into him. Celes squeaked into his chest.

“I’m taking Maria!” Setzer announced, lifting a free hand up to say his farewells.
“Oh, like hell you are!”

The disapproval boomed from Locke. One dagger in hand, Locke rushed towards them. Celes’ eyes widened. *This isn’t part of the plan. I’m supposed to go with him. Why are you—*

Setzer clicked a tongue against her ear. “You have quite the admirers this season,” he said. Keeping Celes close, Setzer guided her not too far to the side and took hold onto another length of rope. With a firm tug, he eyed the ceiling. “Hang on.”

Breaking character on stage was one instance, though Celes couldn’t afford to break it for Setzer. She was his Maria, regardless where the stage was set. For now, she clung onto Setzer, who kicked at the latches along the floor. In a flash, the rope snapped upward, taking both Setzer and Celes with it. Shrieks bellowed from the audience while the iron safety curtain plunged towards the stage at an alarming rate. Stagehands bolted out to pull fallen actors to safety. Celes spotted Edgar grabbing Locke by the back of his jacket and jerking him away. The curtain crashed into the wooden panels with a tremendous boom, separating Celes from the rest of the party and leaving her with Setzer.
Chapter 2

Setzer offered Celes support until she touched onto the catwalk looming above the stage. It ran one direction, perhaps to an exit. The mystery of how he slipped in unnoticed was as undetermined as the next step in his plot.

She panicked, though, when Setzer landed beside her and snaked his arms around her figure. A light gasp jutted out of Celes. Her forehead pressed into his, palms resting on his chest. The distinct heartbeats thumped into her hand and matched her own. A unique blend of incense, cinnamon, and cloves pricked Celes’ senses. His nose poked at hers and Celes held her breath. She swore Setzer inched forward.

*I wasn’t prepared for this part. I didn’t sign up to do this. Locke, this is all your —

“My dear,” Setzer breathed out, “did I frighten you?”

Oh, how she longed to reprimand him. The lecture forming in her mind dissolved when Setzer cupped her cheek and smoothed a thumb over the goosebumps. Against her best efforts, Celes trembled in his arms thanks to shot nerves than fear itself. Celes grasped for a proper response, unsure of what the real Maria would tell Setzer.

“You know what to say to end it all,” he whispered.

Celes’ eyes widened. What?

Setzer drank in her features as if gauging her reaction. Celes chose silence and in turn, Setzer smirked, stepped into her, and kissed between her eyes. A hand stroked through the loose blonde strands within her ponytail. She shuddered once more; this time she had Setzer to blame.

“But for now, the show must go on. Isn’t that how the saying goes?” His lips widened into a grin. “And the climax before the end of act one is always the best part.”

Before either could utter another word, Setzer repositioned his grasp on her, keeping one arm looped around her waist. He guided Celes down the catwalk and towards one of the exits. The sheer lack of security enraged Celes’ military mind. Had even a simple guard been on watch, none of the travesties would have unfolded. Though Setzer demonstrated a firm understanding of where all the hidden exits resided, enough to rival Locke’s penchant for stealth.

A burst of fresh air enveloped Celes once Setzer opened the door. Against the twilight sky of the horizon was a noticeable silhouette—a sight not present early that morning—of none other than the Blackjack. For now, it was docked at the open field, not too far from the opera house. Setzer accompanied her down emergency rails, not once leaving her side as they headed for the airship. A solid hand pushed into the small of her back to force her to maintain his brisk pace. His other hand clutched her forearm, not caring if it brought discomfort. Celes displayed no protest, though her mind swore up a storm the entirety of their walk.

“I don’t know what the commotion was all about with the rafters,” Setzer commented, an air of annoyance in his voice. “Simply rude. You’d think they’d send in pest control after the show.” Celes glimpsed a roll of his eyes. “Was a shame they ruined an excellent scene.” His steps slowed down as they neared the boarding ramp. Setzer tilted his head to catch sight of Celes. “Though you, my dear. You were incredible.”

His fingers drew random shapes along the curve of her body. The idle action flooded Celes with
chills. And the way he looked at her... Celes bit her lower lip and focused on boarding the Blackjack with him, ignoring the eyes that continued to wander back to her.

Once inside, Celes nearly drew in a breath of awe. The Blackjack was far more exquisite than her expectations painted for her. Rich wood filled the walls with marble tiles supporting her feet. An assortment of sculptures, flowers, and paintings from various cultures decorated the entrance, hinting at what possibly dwelled within. Two guards stood at the doorway and straightened before Setzer.

“Bienvenue chez vous, Monsieur!” the two guards exclaimed in unison, speaking perfect Jidoorian. Then they removed their hats to bow before Celes. Or Maria. No one had yet to tell the difference. “Quel plaisir de vous revoir, mademoiselle,” one of them said. “Bon retour.”

Setzer responded in kind. “Merci, Messieurs. Au repos.”

The luxurious interior of the floating casino was enough to garner the attention of anyone from Jidoor and perhaps the wealthier sections of Vector. The appeal of the fantasy was evident; some folk were easily enticed by sin and Setzer supplied a plethora to choose from.

Nobody filling up by the poker tables was the sole unfortunate downside. Those who did roam about wore matching uniforms and performed either maintenance tasks or patrolled the premise. It had been a possibility that Setzer cleared out the airship for Maria’s arrival, thus Celes kept quiet.

Before she absorbed any more details, Setzer brought Celes through a winding hallway and past several locked doors. The roaring motors of the airship blasted into her ears as they walked through the engine room. Eyes widened at the machinery, the technology a faint reminder of Magitek armors, yet magic didn’t course through the bustling metal. Nothing short of amazing. Celes was certain Edgar would love it.

The last locked door resided at the end, leading to a personal room Celes assumed to be Setzer’s own quarters. The familiar aroma of smooth spices saturated the premise. Off to the side, a bed dressed in silk sheets had a bouquet of red roses lying on top. Lit candles scattered around the nightstands with folded sections of blue silk stacked by the bed.

Setzer abruptly captured her attention by spinning Celes around and slamming her back into a wall. Celes gasped, attempting to recompose herself and ignore the beats of her heart now pulsing behind her eyes. Setzer fully stepped into her and clasped her wrists, securing them above her head. The grip was tight, almost warranting the question of whether or not he intended to inflict harm upon her. Instinct told Celes to struggle, but his weight crushing her snuffed out any hope for freedom. He pushed his face into hers, just in time for Celes to snap her head to the side.

*I swear if you touch me,* she kept to herself, *I will find a way to kill you. I don’t care if I have to stop being your Maria. This isn’t—*

“So coy this evening.”

Those words came out as a moan from Setzer. Warm lips hovered over the nook of her neck and his breath tickled exposed skin. Celes hitched her breath, ignoring whatever signals he sent to her body. She refused to want this. How could anyone want this?

“And you’ve been surprisingly quiet.”

And she continued to do so.

Lips ghosted up her neck and stopped at her ear. Celes swallowed and closed her eyes, hoping it would all be over soon. “You honestly,” he barely whispered into her ear, “truly do know how to set
me off, you fucking sex kitten.”

One hand loosened at her wrist, fingers dancing down her arm. Setzer traced over her jaw before forcing her to face him. As Celes opened her eyes, she discerned his features with the aid of better lighting. Vibrant violet eyes gazed back at her while colorful piercings dangled from each of his ears. The scars were more off-putting up close than from a distance. Celes pegged him to be older than herself by no more than a decade, though by no means an old, disgusting man. Without the hideous scars, he would have been quite the fetching man. With them, however, it would take an open mind to regard them with eccentric charm.

Setzer’s thumb poked up to run over her lower lip. A slight, subtle noise squeezed out of Celes beyond her own control. It enthralled him to the point of humming with more esteem than he spoke of with her performance. His thumb pulled away, dragging her lip with it.

“Don’t worry,” he reassured her with a low voice, “I’ll give you plenty of attention later.”

Setzer released her other wrist while backing away to leave. The door slammed shut by the time Celes rushed over to it, gears twisting to lock the structure in place. Her inclination was to pound on the door and yell out for him. Perhaps Maria would have done so. Maybe Setzer would have enjoyed her struggle, seeing he had relished forcing her against a wall. Such a sick man; Celes didn’t want to know his plans for her upon returning.

Each fist slamming into the door was met with silence. Celes quieted herself and pressed an ear into the structure. Nothing but the engine room echoed through the thick wood. Perfect. Setzer’s whereabouts might have been unclear, but Celes planned on not wasting a second of her solitude.

Celes spun on her heels and tore out the ribbon from her hair first. Long locks cascaded past her shoulders as the ribbon floated to the floor. The rich jewelry followed suit, snapping to a single jerk. A few swift yanks at the ties holding her dress together wasn’t enough to loosen the garment, though; with a fierce growl, Celes latched on the front of the gown and ripped straight through the fabric until it slipped off her body to pool to her feet. Celes stepped out of the material and darted to the basin of water set to the side. She diligently rubbed off whatever stage make-up she could with a nearby towel, then glanced up at her reflection. Finally, she recognized herself. The missing pieces to her usual attire were her sashes and rune blade. Once she retrieved them, Celes would breathe easy again.

All the while, she recalled the discussion she had with the other three from the previous night. Edgar insisted once she was inside the Blackjack, she was to find an opening where the rest of them could sneak in. He passed off a gadget to her, which he claimed worked as a flare, and instructed Celes to use it to indicate where they could enter.

“But how will you get in?” Celes asked before they retired for the evening.

Edgar could only smile. “You’ll see. I have my ways, you forget that.”

Splashing more cool water onto her face, Celes inhaled deeply before glancing around for an opening. The locked windows held no signs of budging, though Celes settled onto an aperture—now wasn’t the time to question why Setzer opted for said opening in his quarters—within the middle of the room. Approaching the railings, she peered down past the machinery of the airship to spot lush greenery. Celes plucked out the flare from a belt pouch, cracked it open, and tossed it down.

A trail of smoke followed as the bright red light illuminated the descent. The flare thumped onto the ground and rolled to a standstill. Minutes passed with no new development. She sighed while searching, only to grow alert when the flare snuffed out. Then Celes squinted at the outlines of a few
shadowy figures below. A distant voice instructed her to step back. Upon obeying the suggestion, a grappling hook shot through the opening and pierced the ceiling with a tremendous force, blooming open to anchor itself into place. It was enough commotion to warrant Setzer’s concern, wherever he was.

Edgar whizzed up the chain on a pulley device, no doubt an invention of his own. Once situated at the top, Edgar hauled himself over the railing and sent the pulley back down.

“Just hold on tight, Cyan!” he called down to the poor technophobe. “It won’t bite, I promise!” With a deep breath, Edgar stood up and practically stumbled back as he examined the space. “Well, well. Someone knows how to live in style.” He smirked at the bed. “Amongst other things.”

“You have something of mine,” Celes reminded him, arms crossed against her body.

“Ah, that I do. Wouldn’t forget for the lady.” Edgar retrieved her rune blade from his own side and plucked out the bunched up sashes from the inside of a vast pouch he kept on him. “And what of the dress?”

Celes busied herself with reattaching the scabbard to her belt. “What of it?”

“Tell me you kept it.”

With a roll of her eyes, she motioned over to the floor where the tattered garment resided. “Now’s not the time to be making comments about how it looks better on the floor, either.” She swiped her sashes from him.

Edgar perked his eyebrows up. “You said it, not me.”

While she fluffed her hair back over her shoulders, Cyan slunk up the pulley, white-knuckled and pale-faced. During Edgar’s stifled laughter, Celes offered a hand to help Cyan. The older warrior refused her aid and touched down on his own, albeit grumbling. His bitterness towards her continued to stay evident. Honestly, Celes didn’t blame him.

Cyan stepped away with a cold glare at the pulley. “‘Tis foolish that we must use such a contraption,” he muttered.

“The front door wasn’t exactly an option.” Edgar sent the pulley back down. “Not to mention the airship is slowly moving.”

Thus Setzer’s whereabouts were answered, unless he had someone else pilot the Blackjack. Celes leaned into one of the nearby dressers for support. “Should I even bother asking what the hell happened back at the opera house?”

Edgar blinked. “Which part?”

“Locke said that you’d—” She shook her head. “Never mind. You’re all here now. That’s all that should matter.”

“Art thou alright?” Cyan questioned, the words more hollow than necessary. “This gambler didn’t....” The words trailed off, though his gaze fell upon the silk bed with more disgust than over Edgar’s grappling hook device.

“No,” Celes breathed out, hands rubbing at her arms. “Nothing happened.” But her body said otherwise. Prickles washed over with each reminiscence. How was she to forget the way his eyes did more to her than a thousand caresses could, let alone how he went from holding her prisoner against
the wall to placing feather light touches along her neck?

The pulley sped back up for a final round, revealing the last passenger sneaking aboard the Blackjack. Locke let out an exasperated sigh as he kicked his feet to swing over the edge and onto the floor. His landing had him stumbling towards Celes. Upon noticing her, his entire face lit up.

“What a performance!” he exclaimed, then chuckled. “You’re a great fake actress, Celes.”

She impaled him with a livid stare. “Enough!”

The snap of her voice brought all three of them to attention. It was but a taste of the lecture she wished to subject them all to, Locke included. For it was his stupid plan and thus it was all his fault that any of this happened. Locke had much to explain, starting with sneaking into her dressing room to the whole fiasco near the end of act one. It didn’t even make for a good bar story to tell down the road; who the hell was to believe an octopus fell from the rafters and onto the stage with the three of them?

Edgar busied himself with retrieving his mechanical device, Cyan stood at attention with a hand by his katana, and Locke approached Celes with an apologetic face. Whatever the hell he had to say to try and make it up to her could wait. Even Celes’ rage had to be put on hold, for they had more on their plate to address.

“But the real show starts now,” Locke offered instead to humor them all. With a smile, he stretched out his limbs. “It’s time for act two!”

A line like that, however, supported Impresario’s claim of Locke’s terrible acting skills. Celes almost smacked an open hand against her forehead.

Locke peered about the room with a mix of confusion and curiosity strung about his face. “Where’s Setzer?”

*Good question.* “He should be right back,” Celes replied.

Though her mind wandered away, his last words echoing in her ears. Had the three of them never arrived and Setzer returned, Celes didn’t dare imagine what would unfold. His morbid idea of marrying Maria wasn’t an ideal wedding and if what he showed Celes was a mere sample of things to come? Celes shivered again, enough to catch Locke’s attention.

“You okay?”

Before Celes could answer, the locks from the door clicked and the handle turned. All of them held their breaths, though Celes dared to step forward. A hand rested on the hilt of her rune blade and Cyan shared a similar mindset with his katana.

The door opened and Setzer emerged back into the room. First his eyes scanned around to find his Maria, then his movements ceased upon spotting the group standing before him. Shock tightened the muscles in his face, jaw clenching with every deep breath. He glimpsed over each one of them, his violet eyes coming to Celes last.

“You’re not truly Maria, are you?” he slowly spoke, his voice no longer the smooth, alluring tone he purred to Celes not long ago. The destroyed dress, ribbon, and jewels scattered on the floor answered his rhetorical question. Setzer sighed, perhaps upset it wasn’t his doing.

“Setzer,” Celes said and proceeded with resolute caution, “we need—”
“And what the hell are you doing here?” he snapped, staring past Celes. “The three of you went out of your way to ruin a completely solid performance.”

Edgar cleared his throat “It wasn’t exactly a part of the plan. You see—”

Setzer resisted the need to roll his eyes. “And then you all have the audacity to show your faces on *my* airship.”

“Setzer, please!” Celes dared to step closer. “We need your help.” She thought he scoffed, but she still pressed the matter. “We need to get to Vector and your airship is the only—”

“If you’re not Maria,” he interjected calmly while turning his back to her, “then we have nothing to talk about. You can leave immediately and I’ll do my best to pretend this never happened.”

Her heart plummeted into her stomach, where it turned over multiple times. The Empire controlled every ship going to and from the continent and such a task was a suicide mission. The only option they had left was by air and no other airships existed but the Blackjack. The entire night was a prime example of a hot mess, but Celes refused to admit defeat.

“Wait!” Celes called to him, thankful Setzer stopped.

Celes circled to face the man, yet he went out of his way to avoid her stare. Not long ago he couldn’t keep his eyes off of her. The present tension within his body reminded Celes to tread lightly. She witnessed what happened when he was enamored with a woman. What he’d do with rage pulsing through his blood was not an occurrence Celes wished to endure.

“Please don’t waste your breath,” Setzer sighed out. “The night’s already been full of disappointments.”

“If you’d just *listen*, perhaps we can prove you wrong.”

His eyes twitched over to Celes. She waited for him to respond, but all he offered was silence. With his undivided, yet brief attention, Celes refused to let her words go to waste.

“You’re not exactly an easy man to get in touch with,” Celes started with, keeping her voice low and steady. “This was the only way we could contact you. This... could have gone better, I know, but you must hear us out. We seek passage to Vector and you must know better than all of us together that travel to and from the Empire is tighter than it ever has been.” Celes waited and eventually Setzer gave a slight nod. “And the Empire has full control over all sea transportation, but the Empire can’t tame the skies. *You* possess the only airship in the world, the finest vessel one could ask for.”

There was a snort from behind Setzer. “Yeah, and that you were the world’s most notorious gambler.”

Celes glared past Setzer and at Locke. The added commentary wasn’t working in their favor.

“Is that *all* they say about me?” Setzer asked dryly, eyes drifting towards Locke. And then sighed. “And put that back.”

Locke blinked; he held onto a golden candlestick holder. “What? I was just looking at—”

“I don’t take kindly to petty crimes, so if you’ll *please* have some respect.” Setzer faced Celes once more. “Your bodyguard is as bad of a thief as he is an actor.”

Celes fluttered her eyes. “He’s not my—” Past Setzer, she spied Locke puffing up while Edgar held
him back. At the rate their false progress was making, no one was walking away happy. “Never mind him. You’re in good company and not amongst thieves, I can assure you of that.”

To that, Setzer raised an eyebrow, not the least bit amused. “Really?”

Once Edgar calmed down Locke from whatever reckless behavior he could have exploded into—even the candlestick holder returned to its origin—he stepped forward and addressed the matter. “I’m Edgar Roni Figaro, king of Figaro. You’ll be in good hands if you can assist us. I can assure you’ll be well rewarded on my behalf.”

Bribery wasn’t a part of the plan, nor was falling down from the rafters and onto the stage. Improvisation was key to swaying Setzer now. The mention of a reward, at least, perked up his interest enough to stay further, turning to face the others.

“I’ve witnessed the evil the Empire has spread,” Cyan piped up. “Thine assistance would be for the good of the people.”

Setzer held back his laughter. “The good of the people,” he murmured. “And what of you?” Eyes back to Celes, she froze in place. “Wanting to sneak into Vector with a king, noble warrior, and thief—”

“Uh, excuse me,” Locked tried to butt in, “it’s treasure—”

“—is hardly a role suited for a lady.” Setzer ignored the commotion behind him, eyes and ears set on no one else but Celes. “So who are you, my dear?”

The softness returned to his voice by the end of his sentence. Was it another attempt to seduce her? Celes pushed away the fresh memories lingering and composed a proper response for him.

“Celes Chère,” she said. “Former General of the Empire.”

A subtle glint flared in his eyes and a smirk quirked up his lips. “Do they teach their Generals how to sing now?”

Before Celes could entertain him with an answer, Setzer walked past her and towards the door. A hand lifted to beckon for them. “Come with me,” was all Setzer offered.

Celes brought her attention briefly to the other three with hope swimming in her eyes. “Then you’ll—”

“Don’t misunderstand,” Setzer corrected her while peering over his shoulder. “I still haven’t agreed to help you.”

With that said, Setzer exited. Celes didn’t think twice to follow and upon quick inspection, the rest of the team trailed behind to tread on thin ice with Setzer.

All we need is passage to Vector, Celes thought as they retraced their steps through the engine room. We don’t need him to get back or for anything else. This is a one-way trip as far as I’m concerned. Edgar marveled at the machinery while Celes glared through the back of Setzer’s elaborate, sweeping coat. Why won’t you accept our terms? We’re already offering payment at this point. Are you... truly distraught over being fooled about Maria?

Setzer led them into the main gambling hall and off to a corner alcove. Within it was a private blackjack table, which Setzer braced himself against, his back to the four of them. One of the workers rushed over to see if any of the guests needed tending to, but was dismissed with a wave of
Setzer’s hand.

He took his time with pouring himself a glass of scotch from one of the cabinets. Not extending a drop of hospitality, Setzer took a slow sip before leaning into the table to face all of them. An unnerving calm washed over his face, eyes to the floor and his lips curled downward.

“Business has been awfully slow lately,” Setzer remarked with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I have the Empire to thank for that. They would sooner find a way to profit from my establishment than to grant me safe passage through their territories. I’ve stayed on the outskirts of the continent—Albrook, Tzen, Maranda—but never dared to flirt with the Empire’s horizon. Even now, I’m lucky if I find a dozen willing Imperial citizens—” His gaze flicked up to Celes. “—who aren’t affiliated directly to the Emperor himself.”

His true colors brightened before them; Setzer may have been a man of questionable morals, but if there was a chance to persuade him to act against the Empire, then perhaps he could provide them with the wings they needed. A shot in the dark, but a risk they needed to take. If one of them was to utilize diplomacy with Setzer now, it had to be Celes.

She stepped towards him, head held high. “You’re not the only one suffering.”

Setzer prevented himself from laughing. “Says the former Imperial General?”

“Says someone who has seen firsthand the evil that has poisoned the Empire,” Celes snapped back. The Empire believed to possess sound reason to imprison and sentence her to death, just as Celes believed she had plenty of reason to stand up and speak the truth. Setzer’s amusement evaporated and left partial intrigue behind. “The Empire has been toppling towns and villages left and right.”

“They’re abusing their Magitek power,” Locke piped up to support Celes. “It won’t be long before they check off world domination from their to-do list.”

“My kingdom was allied with the Empire until recently,” Edgar added. “And for good reason. I don’t wish to add fuel to that particular fire.”

She didn’t expect Cyan to contribute, though after a pause, he spoke. “Doma Castle fell to the Empire, as did my wife and child. No good will come from the Empire. Not now.”

Setzer’s eyes went to each of them to judge and weigh the magnitude of their brief words. Amber liquid swirled in his glass before he consumed a larger mouthful. “And remind me again what this has to do with me exactly.” An eyebrow raised up as he licked his lips.

“You can’t fly forever,” Celes reminded him. “You may be the only one to claim the skies as yours to roam, but it’s only a matter of time before they challenge you on that. Everyone will suffer. Sadly, I can assure that. And you’ve already said it yourself. The Empire has been bad for business, right? Then what are you waiting for? Why not help us go against them? If you help us, then this is a step in the right direction for not just the greater good—” She nearly stopped to smack him when Setzer rolled his eyes at that. “—but also to ensure your freedom. Edgar has promised payment on top of all of this.” Celes paused, released her breath, and softened her voice. You’re sounding like a General all over again. “We’re at least together in hating the Empire, right? So, Setzer, please....”

She said her piece and hoped Setzer valued her argument more so than the others. The trickery running through this plan wasn’t Celes’ style; it was nearly disgraceful to the point even Cyan would agree with her. None of them, however, had the privilege to second guess a damn thing.

Knocking back the rest of the scotch, Setzer set the glass down with a thud. “I’m not sure if I should
be applauding your efforts to confront me on this matter or writing you all off as crazed lunatics with a death wish grander than the sad sobs insisting on a game of Narshian Roulette under my roof.”
Arms widened to gesture at the interior of the Blackjack. “I’m a man of business and run a tight ship, so to speak. I don’t take well to underhanded trickery. Cards up sleeves and pocketing extra chips are grounds for being tossed overboard while we’re still flying.”

“Okay,” Locke said, “so let me get this straight. You—the infamous, wandering gambler—have a thing against trickery?”

Setzer aimed his sights to Locke. “Do you wish to discuss the nuances in our careers, thief?”

Celes could hear Locke snarl. “Then tell me to my face that you’ve never used cheap tactics to win any of your gambles.”

“Ah, but there’s the difference. Playing in someone else’s house means I’m obliged to do whatever it takes to benefit myself, no? Gamblers are masters of diversion; it’s not our fault if an opponent can’t keep up with us. Under my roof, however, I make the rules and continue to do what benefits me.”
Setzer flashed a sarcastic, yet cocky smile. “I’m not in the business of being fucked with, to put it lightly, so I’m sure you can all understand my lack of enthusiasm over the smoke and mirrors you managed to accomplish.”

Hands settled back to the edge of the table, where Setzer pushed himself up to standing. Long, yet slow strides brought him closer to the woman he set his sights upon. “Though to find someone uncanny enough to pass as Maria’s double.” He chuckled as he pushed silvery hair over his shoulders. “Now that is a feat not many can say they’ve witnessed. I’m almost honored to have been a part of this, despite my obvious discontent on some details.”

“Oh please,” Locke breathed out, “you were kidnapping a girl. You should be happy you’re not locked away for that crap.” Celes barely made out the mutter Locke kept to himself after. “And you call me the thief….”

Thankfully for all of them, Setzer didn’t twitch at the commentary. “Think of it as you wish,” was all he said to Locke, “but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t impressed by the real star of the night.” Setzer stopped a full foot away from Celes, lips curved up a touch. “I can’t remember the last time someone had me fooled to that extent.” He drew in a breath and continued on his exhale. “It’s almost exhilarating. And you, my dear.”

He reached out to her and Celes caught whatever breath she had left in her lungs. Pale, thin fingers brushed away wisps of blonde hair. A single fingertip dared to gloss over her cheek. Her heart skipped a beat before returning to normal.

“How do I even begin to describe you,” Setzer drew out in a whisper. His head tilted as his hand fell. “You know,” he said a bit louder, “I think you may be even lovelier than Maria. A woman strong enough to stand her ground with such composure and grace is a rare sight these days.” He smiled. “And beautiful, as well? I’d need to be blind or stupid, my dear.”

No amount of control stopped the blush burning through her cheeks. She couldn’t hide behind the question of what would Maria do, for Celes didn’t know what she would do herself in the moment. Setzer had to have noticed, for his small purr when Celes averted her eyes was enough to send another chill through her body.

“Alright then,” he declared, stepping past her to address the group as a whole.. “I’ll help you.”
Before the excitement fully registered with everyone, Setzer spun on his heels and motioned to Celes. “But only if Celes becomes my wife. Otherwise....”
Muscles tensed, nerves tightened, and the color vanished from Celes’ face. What transpired now and what was supposed to unfold weren’t remotely in the same realm of possibility. As for the rest of the group, they appeared to be taking the ultimatum worse than Celes ever could.

One in particular was about to blow up like a Bomb. “What?!?” Locke bellowed. “Is this a joke?! Are you crazy?!?”

While Locke spewed out a string of garbled words and Cyan furrowed his brow at the whole ordeal, Edgar stood quietly off to the side. His deep blue eyes met with Celes’, silently conveying his thoughts. If the flirtatious king didn’t agree with this deal, then something was amiss, but they required an airship. No other choice presented itself to the group.

Though upon focusing on Edgar, an idea sprouted and from that sapling blossomed a plan. Celes would have slit someone’s throat if they suggested it to her. Never would she use herself as a pawn and apply cunning wit to the scenario, but there lied the beauty of it; no one would suspect her to do so much as suggest it.

Swallowing back whatever pride remained, she confronted Setzer and nodded. “Fine.”

The unanimous alarm shook through the structure of the Blackjack. All the while, Setzer couldn’t hold back the grinned sweeping over him. “Excellent!” He clapped his hands together. “Great! Then it’s settled! We—”

“But I have some conditions,” Celes interrupted. Moving towards Edgar, she ignored the sheer horror engrossing Locke. “Would you be so kind as to spare me a gil?”

Edgar cocked his head. “Come again?”

“A gil,” Celes repeated. “I gave you all my belongings before the performance, so I’m without coin. Spare me at least a piece? Mine were of Figaroan gold.”

This time Edgar raised an eyebrow, not understanding her request. Once she flicked her eyes to Setzer and back to him, the sudden realization settled in as he responded with a grave nod. “Ah! My apologies! I nearly forgot!” Edgar made quick work out of pulling at a personal pouch of his and plucking out a single coin. “How terrible of me to deprive a lady of her necessities.”

With a smile, he placed a hand over Celes’ open palm. Edgar squeezed tight before releasing. Upon quick inspection, the Figaroan gold of the gil shone before her, as did the engraving of the king’s face. Closing her hand over it, she flashed a brief smile of thanks to Edgar and returned to Setzer.

“You claim to be a fan of games,” Celes continued, “are you not? Then it would only be fitting if we shared a game together. My conditions are plain: we flip this coin. If it’s heads, you help us. No marriage, none of that. But if it’s tails?” Celes steadied herself with a deep breath. “Then I’m yours and we can forget about the Empire and everything else together.” Eyebrows perked up at the grinning Setzer. “Well, Mr. Gambler? Shall we see who luck favors?”

Setzer almost doubled over in laughter, though not over the absolute absurdity of the game at hand. “Ha! I love it! Just when I think I have you figured out, you continue to surprise me.” Setzer contained his amusement while straightening out his long coat. “I accept.”

Before anything else could be done, a hand latched onto Celes’ arm and spun her around. She restrained herself from gasping at the immediate action until she faced Locke. Never before had she witnessed someone else peak in various emotional states, holding more worry than the collective group.
“Celes,” he almost chuckled out, lips possessed by a nervous twitch, “are you serious? If you... if you marry that guy—”

“Thou must reconsider,” Cyan butted in, of all people. “What terrible acts will he subject thee to?”

Setzer snickered. “Only one way to find out.”

“Oh for the love of—” Locke snapped his head at the gambler. “Will you shut up?!”

Talking only delayed the deed and Celes possessed finite patience. Her hand fell upon Locke’s shoulder in hopes of easing his fraying nerves. Once more his concerned eyes found hers.

“Celes, please,” he quietly pleaded.

She ignored Locke to face Setzer, coin prepped in her hands. “Ready?”

Setzer held his tongue, though offered a nod. It was all she needed before flicking the gil with her thumb to send it into the air in a spinning blaze. The chime of the gold against her fingernail filled the room before it flipped along the floor and rolled to a pause. Everyone crowded around for the results. Everyone but Edgar.

It took all her power to not smirk at the outcome. “Heads,” Celes declared, in case it wasn’t obvious enough. Locke and Cyan continued to stare at the coin while Celes lifted her gaze, blonde hair spilling over her shoulder. “I win.”

Locke’s laughter shot through the alcove while he performed his own victory dance. Cyan merely smiled beneath his bushy mustache and huffed with approval. And then there was Setzer, smile gone as he continued to stare at the coin. Curiosity danced about his face, bending down to retrieve the bit of gil.

“Now it’s time to uphold your end of the bargain,” Celes reminded Setzer. If he backed out now, plan B would involve more improvising than the stint at the opera house.

Setzer made the coin dance and float between his fingers while he rose. Upon further scrutiny, he hummed through closed lips and grinned again. “A valuable trinket indeed,” he remarked, spinning the coin over in his palm. Celes caught both sides, each one sharing similar portraits of the Figaro twins. “I’ve never seen a double-headed coin before.”

Celes didn’t need to check to know Edgar also grinned from behind her. “A family heirloom,” he noted. “I’m almost shocked to hear you’ve never had an instance of that here.”

“They’re rare,” Setzer replied, still in awe of the coin. “Rare enough to not bother worrying over.” That said, Setzer took aim and flicked the coin back in Edgar’s direction. The gil cleared over Locke’s head and landed perfectly in Edgar’s hands, despite him not being prepared to receive his item in such fashion.

Even Celes found herself smiling, albeit a small one. “I’m afraid you’ve been hustled, Mr. Gambler.”

Upon being reminded, Setzer sighed. “Yes, it appears that way.”

“Do you plan on throwing us overboard?”

To her delight, Setzer shook his head with a chuckle. “These were your rules, my dear, not mine. I have no one to blame but myself for being foolish enough to agree to them.”
“But that’s part of the game now, isn’t it?”

Celes’ comment had Setzer roaring in laughter. “Ha! How low can you stoop? I love it! Alright, I’ll
help you.”

The moment he voiced those words, the entire group was able to rest easy. Even Celes’ tight
shoulders melted away from her neck. Mission accomplished and airship acquired. Safe passage to
the Empire was in their grasp. What started as a disaster beyond repair ended for the best.

“The lot of you are free to settle in then,” Setzer declared while making an exit from the alcove.
“Guest quarters are on the second floor. I’ll have my men assist you. We’ll depart come morning,
but for now I have an airship to move.”

Edgar couldn’t help but snort. “That’s awfully generous of you on a moment’s notice. You’re truly
committed to this now? All because of a cheap gamble?”

Had the king been closer, Celes wouldn’t have hesitated to jab him in the ribs. Now wasn’t the time
to test Setzer’s new loyalties. Though instead, the gambler laughed it off and wiggled a finger in the
air at Edgar before turning around.

“Gambling against the Empire? I’ve nothing to lose but my life at this point. You fail to see it from
my eyes; I haven’t felt this excited in years!”

“Well then,” Edgar breathed to himself, “good to see his allegiance can be won so readily.”

Celes glanced over her shoulder and hissed, “Will you cut it out?”

“Though to be fair,” Edgar went on, “if you approached me with that offer, I don’t think I could say
—” Nothing stopped Celes from taking two steps towards Edgar and whacking him in the arm. He
feigned tremendous pain as she shook her head.

“The lady won,” Setzer called out. “Fair and square. Fool me once, shame on me. But fool me
twice?” He full on applauded Celes. “Color me impressed, my dear.”

“It’s Celes,” she coldly reminded him.

“And it’s Setzer, not Mr. Gambler, though I suppose I can make an exception for you.” He flashed a
smile. “Rest easy tonight, Celes. My life is a chip in your pile, so ante up. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

With another turn, Setzer headed off, the train of his black coat hovering above the floor. Before
long, attendants on the Blackjack would come to escort them to the guest quarters. Soon after that,
they would be on their way to Vector.

“It worked,” Celes said with a soft sigh. “It actually worked.”
Chapter 3

Sleep was a welcomed happening, more so after the day they all slogged through. The voyage to Imperial lands—however long such a task took—required being awake and rested. Fluffy beds and warm comforters further encouraged rest aboard the Blackjack, despite the distant whirr of the machinery keeping the airship afloat along with the strange surroundings.

Instead, Celes stared at the ceiling with a million thoughts competing for her attention.

The events within the opera house should have faded until forgotten. Regardless, Celes replayed Locke’s unexpected visit to the dressing room. Not a single, straight answer left his lips. He flustered her with remarks he never dared to utter if she hadn’t been dolled up for the opera. Despite her rage over the unmanageable situation they signed themselves up for, the group agreed what befell upon the opera house was best kept in the past.

But Celes couldn’t shake off the implications of Locke’s visit. His combined silence and aversion spoke louder than his screams—Celes was nothing but a replacement to him. As she shifted beneath the covers, the reminder of Rachel flashed through her memory. I shouldn’t have fooled myself into thinking otherwise.

Her mind relapsed further until the weight of cold shackles rubbed her wrists raw. The guards took turns beating her until she collapsed. They mocked her, laughed at her, threatened her with ideas of torture and rape. All to see if she would flinch. Death would have been kinder to her than the disgusting guards claiming to be men. Celes didn’t fear taking her own life and gladly would have obtained the sleeping guard’s dagger if it meant relieving herself of the misery and humiliation. The title of General was no longer hers to keep. All her efforts and advances crumbled to ash. She failed more than the Empire; she failed herself.

No one was to come in and save her. She didn’t live in a melodramatic fairy tale where the white knight rushed in to defend the damsel in distress. Celes refused to play the role, clinging onto whatever dignity she had left. All of her life had been spent without a man’s aid; she undoubtedly didn’t need it now.

But without Locke sneaking in and freeing her from her confines, Celes would have been dead. He provided more than a second chance at life; he gave Celes something to believe in. Never blinking an eye, he rushed to her aid with zero expectations of a reward. In their travels to Narshe, Celes convinced herself his exemplary kindness was unique to her; maybe he saw more than a damsel needing a hero.

Though her mind meandered away from Locke as a phantom touch brushed over her cheek. Celes hitched her breath while the memory bubbled up into her mind. She didn’t wish to think of the way Setzer had eyed her while she dressed as Maria or how he pinned her to the wall and teased her with a taste of what he had planned for her. Even when he uncovered Celes’ identity, he still remained intrigued by her.

How do I even begin to describe you, was what he had said. You know, I think you may be even lovelier than Maria.

Such words had never been spoken to her face before. Nor had anyone handled her with an
assertive, carnal behavior. The few and forgotten who dared to touch her before had been forward, yet chaste. Nothing deemed memorable, all of it lost come morning. Setzer’s actions, however, sickened her. Whatever he had laid out upon his arrival, the one intended for Maria, was better left to the abyss of his mind and nowhere else.

In spite of it all, Celes’ body shivered when she recalled him clutching her wrists and almost kissing her neck. The thought of it now, regardless of her anger, brought a familiar heat to her face.

With a groan, Celes flung the covers off and swung her legs off the bed. Worn hands clutched into fists as she stared at her dangling, bare feet. She couldn’t rid herself of the memories, couldn’t erase the touches her skin retained.

_I need to stop thinking. I need fresh air, perhaps some water._ Her feet met the cool floor and her hair spilled down over her bare chest. _Maybe a walk. I can’t sit still now._

Once standing, Celes rummaged through the closets to uncover a plush bathrobe to wear for her midnight excursion. She ignored the idea of Setzer receiving a small amount of satisfaction in her enjoying one of the many gratis gifts for those who could afford a stay upon the Blackjack. Nestling into the robe, Celes purred over the ultra-plush fabric. With it snug against her body, she slipped out to brave the rest of the lower deck.

Small, outside gaslights illuminated each room number in the hallway, though provided little assistance in her walk. She grasped for a wall and guided herself down it until reaching a corner and thus a set of stairs. Celes’ decision to travel downward proved to be a good one, for the passageways now lined with circular windows offering the distant light of the stars and moon.

Celes paused to peer out a window, borderline terrified of the extreme altitude. The Blackjack hovered above a vast field with a mountain view and no opera house in sight. Past the peaks somewhere was Jidoor and even further lied Zozo, where Terra awaited their return from Vector. The spectacle of the various dazzling lights filling up the night sky brought forth a content sigh from Celes. Growing up, Vector’s city lights prevented the stars from visiting the evening sky.

_This is beautiful_, she thought.

Curiosity struck a chord with her and Celes pawed at the edges of the window. Whether or not it could open was uncertain until she tried. Inhaling the crisp air from high up had to be divine. At the very least, the cold breeze trickling in would pacify her mind.

“They’re locked.”

Celes recoiled from the voice. Resisting the urge to yelp, she whipped to the side to peer down the black hallway, unable to discern who was there. Though a small ember lit up and moved through the dark space towards the window. The moonlight unveiled a hand flicking away ashes from a rolled cigarette.

“A master key opens them up, though if you’re looking for a cracked window, you best come down here.” The lit cigarette traveled to the figure’s face, the inhale brightening the embers—enough to outline the features of a particular scarred face. “I don’t wish to freeze this place over.”

Smoke flowed out the window as remorse for stepping past the confines of her room swept over Celes. Though despite her annoyances, she took her time in closing the distance between herself and Setzer. Once more they were alone, sooner than Celes intended. This time, she refused to let him have his way with her. Celes had no reason to trust him, thus it was only fair for the feeling to be mutual.
Setzer leaned into the wall and out of the moonlight, though when he nudged forward to indulge on the breeze sifting through, the faint light brought him into view. The black coat was gone, leaving him with his dress shirt, tight black pants with a purple sash draped from his hips, and white boots. His sleeves rolled up to his elbow, revealing numerous scars akin to those presented on his face. Setzer indulged in his cigarette before Celes confronted him.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked, his head resting along the wall as his eyes settled on her.

She crossed her arms and leaned in towards the cracked open window. “I’m certainly not sleep walking,” Celes muttered. The wind caught her hair and Celes released a content sigh.

Setzer chuckled. “Fair enough.” He raised the cigarette up to flick at it, ashes fluttering out the window. “Accommodations at least up to your standards?”

The room was better than what she grew up with during her training in Vector. It wasn’t until she achieved ranks as General that she received a proper room within the military. Enlightening Setzer with any specific information, however, wasn’t high on her priority list.

“It’s nice,” Celes admitted at a bare minimum. “And what of you?” She turned from the view to Setzer. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping? Or even manning the airship?”

“Sleep and I aren’t always on speaking terms,” Setzer confessed after a pause. “More so tonight, I’m afraid. Don’t you worry; I’ll be fine. And she’s fine on her own, too, once she’s stalled properly.” A loose fist knocked at the walls while referring to the airship. “Trust me when I say you’re in good hands.”

Celes couldn’t help but lightly scoff at that. In turn, Setzer raised an eyebrow and shifted his weight, daring to advance to her.

“I suppose now would be a good time to extend an apology to you, Celes.”

Holding her breath, she stared at him. You’re... what? “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what you and the rest of your group were exactly thinking, but had I known you were not Maria....” The lack of quality lighting made it far too difficult to discern where his eyes fell to.

Celes tightened her arms around her form like armor. “We had no choice,” Celes explained.

Violet eyes snapped back up to meet hers. “We had no choice,” Celes explained.

Violet eyes snapped back up to meet hers. “Did you now?”

“Would you have heard us out if we approached you elsewhere?” Instead of answering, he sucked on his cigarette. “You have far more to make up than offer an apology, though.”

He slowly released the smoke out the window. “How so?”

“Oh please.” Celes shook her head and outright stared him down. “You planned to kidnap a woman against her own will. The whole opera house was in an uproar over it. Is that how you go about winning a woman’s heart? I wouldn’t be surprised if she fled the opera house because of that letter you wrote to her.” She cringed at the recollection. “You don’t just waltz in and do that to people, though I suppose I shouldn’t expect any standards from a man who operates a flying casino.”

She didn’t contain the ire laced in her words. What was once bottled up within Celes trickled out and dared to shatter its confines. Some were saved for Locke, some for Setzer; she just so happened to discover the latter first. Celes’ expectations of a man of insufficient morals—the same one who piloted a haven of sin—were low. A sheer game of dumb, rigged luck, not bribery, won Setzer’s so-
called, paper-thin allegiance. Celes was elated over the prospect of ridding herself of him the second they touched Imperial soil.

In spite of the hateful words spat out, Setzer persisted with silent composure. Smoke swirled away from the tip of his cigarette, only a few puffs left. He exhaled a tremendous sigh.

“You don’t know anything, do you?”

Blindsided, Celes swallowed hard. “What?”

“Typical,” Setzer chuckled softly with a shake of his head. “Just typical.”

He looked back out the window, a smile present on his lips along with a string of muttered words in a foreign tongue. With the tone he chose, there was no doubt each one was a curse. Celes’ face contorted as her tilted head throbbed in the process of discerning the truth in his words. Every story had a side, one being Setzer’s, but Celes failed to see his version erasing the notion of kidnapping a seemingly innocent woman. He hadn’t been gentle with Celes and the reminder dissolved her to shudders. The breeze unfortunately wasn’t enough to blame for such a reaction.

“So you see nothing wrong in what you did?” Celes inquired, still receiving no immediate reply. “How could you—”

“And why are you here?” Setzer interrupted, eyes narrowing down onto her. The sudden change in his once cushy, casual voice snapped Celes to attention. “A former General of the Empire,” he recalled. “And now you’re with a group of revolutionaries called... the what again?”

“The Returners.”

“And you expect me to believe that this motley crew is completely fine with the likes of you showing up? They don’t fear that perhaps you’re leading them into a trap? Or that you’re using them for your own selfish needs?”

She wished to throw him off the airship for no other reason than to put him in his place. Doubts circulated in the group, predominantly on Cyan’s behalf, but they trusted her. Or gave the impression they did. She had yet to offer a reason for them not to; if there ever was a chance to bail out on the Returners, the opera house stint was her opportunity.

Celes barked back with a seething rage. “What the hell are you trying to suggest?”

All he did was shrug. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I’m not one of you, merely an outsider and nothing more. It’s an observation I’ve made.”

“You don’t understand a damn thing,” Celes growled. “You don’t know what—”

“No, I don’t,” he agreed. “And the same can be said about you in regards to myself.”

Setzer deserved a firm shake, a fist in the face, anything to release the pent up rage stirring within Celes. Though she stood silenced, casting her gaze back out the window, and inhaled fresh air in hopes for relief.

“Though I still stand by my apology,” Setzer repeated. “It wasn’t in our... agreement. Maria and myself. You weren’t supposed to be subjected to that.”

“I don’t believe she was—” Celes stopped when Setzer launched a glare in her direction. Right. I don’t know anything. I’m not sure if I even want to.
“I do hope you won’t think less of me because of it.” A tongue ran over his lip before he sucked his cigarette. The mixture of cloves and cinnamon finally pricked at Celes’ nose. “Perhaps we can start over. Start on the right foot this time.”

“Does it involve kidnapping?”

His stern face gradually morphed into intrigue. “Is that a request?” Setzer laughed while Celes stumbled over her words. “I’m teasing, Celes. Has no one ever done that to you before? Hard to resist; you are quite ravishing when you’re upset.”

Sucking down the last of his cigarette, Setzer lolled his head back, rolled smoke around in his mouth, and gradually released it. He stepped back upon flicking the snuffed cigarette out the window and motioned to the space for Celes to enjoy. Her ginger steps towards the window were met with a steady, cold wind combing through her hair.

“Though for what it’s worth,” Setzer spoke while leaning back into the wall a couple feet away from her, “I’d never judge you.”

Celes didn’t bother looking at him. “For what?”

“For what?” He snickered. “Would everything be a proper response?” After a beat, he extended on his train of thought. “I don’t care if you are currently or formerly an Imperial General. I don’t care if you’re using the Returners or are truly standing by them with all due sincerity. I don’t dare to judge others upon appearances or past actions. All that matters is this moment, past and future be damned.”

“And what do you find in this moment?”

The substantial silence between them thickened before Setzer entertained an answer. Celes pictured him grinning the whole time. “I find myself graced with the presence of a woman who composes herself within the eye of a storm and I’m not complaining.”

No amount of cold air could cool the heat emerging onto her face.

“And I know that I’m yours. You’ve won that much and you’ve colored me impressed. You have my airship at your disposal and my good word, if you’ll even take that.”

“What good is the word of a gambler?” Celes uttered beneath her breath.

To her dismay, Setzer heard her. “I’m not a liar, Celes. I’d rather hold my tongue and not speak the truth than spout out lies to hear myself talk.” The sharp heels of his boots clicked against the floor. “It takes a lot to catch my eye. I don’t hand out compliments and praise like cheap, Albrookish wine. Few are worthy of that.”

“Are you saying I should be flattered?”

The clicking stopped and Celes dared to turn her head. Setzer stood a mere foot away from her, if that. The moonlight washed over his scarred face.

“I’m saying that if you fool me a third time, I’ll be convinced you’re sharing a bed with Lady Luck herself.” He extended a hand to Celes, simple bands decorating select fingers. “Can we at least entertain the notion of starting over? I’d hate for there to be animosity between the two of us over a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding? Is that what we’re calling it now?” Setzer only blinked, his hand motionless. Celes chewed at her lower lip before breathing life to a single thought. “You and Maria. Was there
something more between the two of you?”

The sharp inhale and the retracted arm from Setzer had Celes second guessing her question. “And why exactly would you need to know?” He tilted his head with an unamused expression. “Does this aid you in your quest to Vector?”

“No, but—”

“Then I see no reason to further discuss it, unless you’re wishing to exchange your loose ties with the Empire.”

No one deserved the pathetic story spun by Celes involving her imprisonment and shame. Not even Locke, her own savior. Though if Setzer was willing to accept her for who she was, no questions asked, there was little left to offer than allowing the sentiment to be mutual.

After a beat, Setzer extended his hand to Celes once more, albeit slowly. With utmost caution, she slipped a hand into his. Cold, calloused skin met with worn, scarred flesh. His thumb ever so slightly caressed her as they tightened grips and shook on the matter. Though when Celes loosened her hand, Setzer didn’t budge.

“You know,” he said, voice low enough for the wind to almost drown out, “I meant it when I said I’m more impressed with you than with Maria. I should have noticed something was off during the performance with the nuances in the aria, but it’s easy to gloss over with such a sight center stage. But—” Setzer turned her hand over in his. “—you are far more beautiful up close than from afar.”

Setzer drew the back of her hand to his lips to place a tender kiss along her soft skin. The chill returned to her body along with the rush of heat to her face, but Celes still had her wits about her. Before Setzer clung a second longer, Celes yanked her hand from his grasp, wound it back, and snapped the back of it across his face. The crack shot through the hallway and overpowered the wind and distant motors churning about. Celes hoped she dislodged more than his pride with the sheer strength powering that force.

But it didn’t.

A free hand rubbed at the fresh welt along his jaw. Setzer curled his lips up and sucked in a breath. The release of air flowed out in the form of a content moan—beyond content. As his fingers lingered, he looked back at Celes with heavy eyes.

“Yes, mistress,” he chuckled out, “may I have another?” Each low word dripped off of his tongue as he massaged wounded skin. “And I didn’t even have to ask.” Setzer ran a tongue over his lips, dragging out the action. “So kitty has claws, too. Glad to see you have more tricks up your sleeves than I’ve given you credit for, Celes.”

Celes froze; she shouldn’t have left the room. The regret weighed her heart down and sent it pulsing into a panicked frenzy. With her mind torn in multiple directions, Celes regained enough control to latch onto one particular sentiment—the one telling her to leave.

“I should be going,” she insisted, pulling away from both the window and Setzer.

“Yes,” Setzer agreed, still sounding beyond pleased with the situation. “Don’t wish to overextend our little...” He waved a hand about, lost in whatever self-induced bliss he was in. “This.”

“Right.”
He managed to busy himself with properly closing and locking the window, the hallway plummeting into silence without the ambiance of the wind to provide a buffer. “You enjoy the rest of your evening,” he offered Celes. “You’ll need your energy come morning.”

With a nod, Celes backed off. “Same to you,” she replied out of courtesy.

Setzer moaned. “Oh, I know I will enjoy the rest of my evening. Sleep soundly.”

Without another word, Celes retraced her steps back to the staircase. By the time she reached the end of the hallway, she tossed her head over her shoulder and found not a trace left of Setzer. Back up the stairs and back to her room, Celes collapsed into her bed. More thoughts littered her brain, more reasons why sleep was unattainable. She wished to blame Setzer, but no one carried the burden except Celes.

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A firm knock stirred Celes out of whatever enjoyable sleep she achieved. She groaned and rolled over, tangling sheets about her form. Sunlight spilled in from the tiny window as she forced her tired eyes open. Once more a knock rattled the door and she resisted the temptation to chuck a pillow in its general direction. Despite the pounding throughout her head, more thoughts littered her brain, more reasons why sleep was unattainable. She wished to blame Setzer, but no one carried the burden except Celes.

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her features. In due time, they would reach Vector. Nothing else mattered.

Once fully dressed and groomed to the best of her ability, Celes emerged onto the upper floor with the rest of the group. Edgar hadn’t lied about the hot breakfast; the thick aroma of cooked eggs, meats, bread, and butter filtered through the air. Locke worked on cleaning off a third plate, Cyan sat in silence cradling a cup of tea, and Edgar saved a spot for Celes. And no sign of Setzer—a temporary blessing.

“Setzer said he’d be waiting up on the main deck when we’re done,” Edgar mentioned after Celes took a few bites. “Said if we leave shortly, then we should reach the continent before nightfall.” With a pause, Edgar then added, “Are you fairing well, Celes?”

More eggs were pushed around her plate than consumed. “I’m fine,” she answered straightaway. “It’s… it was a long day.”

“Can only imagine,” Edgar responded as low as possible. “For you especially. Take your time.”

Locke tossed his silverware onto a now empty plate, shoving them to the side. “Thank the gods it’s over now. The sooner we get off this hunk of metal, the better.”

She almost threw her fork at Locke. Instead, Celes closed her eyes and focused on her inhalations. Her wits and frustrations were already wasted on Setzer. Though if Locke had been as forward with her as Setzer had been, perhaps the outcome would have differed.

*I thought I’d prefer that, Celes thought. But now? I…*

Edgar scoffed at the other man while rising. “I will have you know that this fine structure is up to my own standards. Even exceeds some of them.”

“Not exactly a winning argument,” Locke mumbled while circling around the table in search for the top deck.

The king could only shake his head. “I swear, the day we agree on something….” He patted a light hand on Celes’ upper back. “See you upstairs.”

Left alone with Cyan, Celes shared uncomfortable silence with him. Cyan finished his tea in haste and quietly excused himself to join the others. In the solitude, Celes ate several more bites, her stomach twisting in protest as her throbbing head begged for rest. She was inclined to humor an attempt at napping, but instead Celes rose from her seat and followed the path the others had taken to above. With the entire group present, Setzer would have been dumb to pull any of his antics on her.

One of the attendants guided her up the narrow staircase leading to the top deck. The gust of wind overwhelmed her the second the door cracked up and left Celes with no choice but to push blonde hair out of her face. The outer structure of the airship was magnificent, but it was the view that rendered Celes speechless. Mountains scaled on one side while endless plains ran opposite of the peaks. The sun sat on top of them and somewhere beyond the fields was the ocean separating them from the Empire.

At the helm of the airship was Setzer himself. Donning his large coat again, his hair was tamed into a low ponytail to spite the wind and his gloved hands manned the airship. He caught her eye and offered a kind smile.

“Oh, glad to see you could join us. Sleep well?”

It was as if their conversation had never occurred from the night before. “Well enough, all things
considered,” Celes replied, stuck between being thankful or insulted.

He nodded. “Good. Then we’ll be taking off shortly. Your entourage was in the middle of discussing the course of action.”

“I still can’t believe this clunky old thing can fly,” Locke commented from a sweep distance. He braced himself against the railing to marvel at the view before turning to address Setzer. “You sure it’ll stay in the air?”

A gloved finger tapped along the spoke of the wheel. A sharp line made up his lips as Setzer glanced to Locke. His hand tightened at the various levers beside him, prepping the airship for its departure. A solid, superb poker face if Celes ever saw one.

“When things fall,” Setzer explained, not bothering to acknowledge Locke, “they fall. Life’s a game of chance. You play your cards and fate plays hers.”

Locke blinked, eyebrows twitching with his mouth ajar. “Not exactly the reassuring answer I was looking for,” Locke mumbled. “Thanks for nothing.”

“We’ll be fine,” she tried to offer him, not so sure if she believed those words herself.

“Really?” Locke brought his sights to Celes. “You trust him?”

“As much as I trusted your plan from yesterday to go without a hitch.”

The slap to Setzer’s face the other night had been kinder, softer. “Ouch,” Locke said after a moment. “Alright, touché.”

Of course Setzer took it upon himself to join their conversation. “Oh, I see now. So it was your master scheme in the works from last night.”

Locke crossed his arms. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Only because you had a magnificent actress to star in the leading role. Don’t even get me started on your lackluster performance.”

“Excuse me, but your plan wasn’t exactly all it was cracked up to be, either.” Locke clicked his tongue. “At least ours didn’t involve committing crimes.”

“No,” Setzer agreed, “yours involved trickery. A blurry line between the two, but it’s there. And I can assure you there was none of either on my behalf.”

Locke’s eyes flared up over the nonchalant comment. Any additional tension between the two would result in a disastrous explosion. Before Locke could sling more words of distaste, Celes rested a hand on his shoulder. The empathy in her blue eyes did well to calm Locke down enough to drop the topic.

Instead, Locke focused on another matter altogether. “They’ll spot us in the air from miles away if we try to fly this thing into Vector. We’d better land a safe distance away.”

For once, Locke proved a legitimate point. Only Imperial drones flew through the skies to patrol the vicinity, nothing the size of the Blackjack, either. Subtlety wasn’t in their favor.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Setzer replied, hand pushing forward one final lever. “Albrook is south of Vector. The Blackjack has ventured there before and I imagine there will be no harm in
docking close by for a brief instance. I’ll stay on board and keep the airship ready to take off at a moment’s notice.”

Celes tossed her head over to Setzer and fluttered her eyes. “You’re sticking around?”

Hands back onto the wheel, Setzer glimpsed Celes while the engine of the airship fired up and roared from below. “Unless you like the idea of not having a getaway plan. I do believe I said I was at your disposal, did I not? Or are you having second thoughts about yesterday’s—”

“No.” She closed her eyes and absorbed all the information. “Your cooperation is much appreciated.”

Upon opening her eyes, she found Setzer smirking in her direction before bowing. “My pleasure.”

His attention went to the front of the ship, taking command of the vessel piercing through the sky. Celes held her breath and braced herself along the railing. The scenery all around floated by as the wind played with her hair. Surreal didn’t begin to capture the moment. Never in all her life did she think she’d walk on board an airship, let alone be present to see it in action. Setzer had a daft hand at navigating the Blackjack. Each turn of the wheel or pull of a lever, he did so with utmost ease. He didn’t bumble about and force the devices to do his bidding; he glided over each implement like an intricate dance with a mindfulness Celes never experienced before.

Sheer relaxation washed over his entranced face. The wind never forced him to flinch, the sensation blowing by him like a breeze beneath a bird’s wing. Not a care in the world existed, save for the zest of flying.

Celes almost smiled over the spectacle. Almost.

“You doing alright?”

Locke’s quiet tone pulled Celes’ eyes back onto him. A simple question with a far too complicated answer, thus leaving Celes torn and silent.

It didn’t sit well with him. “I’m sorry about how everything turned out,” he blurted out, eyes cast away from Celes. “I should have known better than to think—”

“Locke, it’s okay.” Celes leaned in, hoping to catch his eye. “It’s done now. Nothing we can do to change it. Besides, we got the airship, didn’t we?”

“Wasn’t expecting to gain a passenger along the way.”

Eyes flicked to Setzer, then back to Locke. “And what would you rather do? Try to figure out how to fly this thing on your own?”

That at least wheedled a nervous laugh out of him. “Okay, you have a point, but... no, it’s fine. I’ll get over myself.” Finally, he faced Celes. “I’m just happy you’re doing well.”

As well as I can be. Now wasn’t the time to be admitting more to Locke. Each time her frustrations and curiosities bubbled up, Celes shot herself down with the swift reminder of who truly held Locke’s attention, who she couldn’t compete with.

Celes gave him a small smile as an answer before marveling over the view. Plains rolled into a shoreline until every direction was covered in ocean. It glistened within the sun’s reflection, constant waves dancing about. Past all of it lied Vector, someplace not as gorgeous as the view surrounding them.
“You nervous?” Locke asked at one point.

She cocked her head. “I don’t know what I am right now.”

The group relied on her past experiences in Vector to navigate the Magitek Research Facility. Old memories once lodged back in the crevasses of her mind stirred forward at the thought of Vector and the dark shadows lingering about. Her last visit to the facility had not been a recent venture and Celes feared the unknown resided there now.

Shortly after, Celes excused herself back to the lower decks. No one questioned her absence and thus Celes dipped into her room to curl up in bed. The airship motors vibrated through the walls, though didn’t bother her now.

As she nestled into her pillow, she almost wished Locke was beside her.

She wanted him close, his arms embracing her form before she settled into a sound sleep. His words of comfort—if they were even that—were all he provided. Nothing more. Locke had done well to stir unforgettable emotions within Celes. Oh, how she desired it had been him, not Setzer, who pinned her against the wall.

The scene replayed in her head, followed by the late night conversation she shared with Setzer. Celes ran fingers over the back of her hand, swearing she could still smell traces of his scent. But Setzer was no different, no better. Another girl circulated in his life, as well, as thin as the connection was. A soft sigh left Celes upon closing her eyes. I bet he would discard the thought of me as well if Maria floated back into his life. Steady breaths filtered through her until one last thought surfaced forth before surrendering to sleep. Or did he genuinely discard her for me?

Chapter End Notes

Two songs helped me bring this chapter together: Elizabeth by Garry Schyman for the first half and Arrival of the Birds and Transformation by The Cinematic Orchestra for the second half.
No one knew what became of the Espers once the Empire deemed them useless, including Celes. She couldn’t answer all the questions the group bombarded her with in relation to the Magitek Research Facility. They were lucky Celes navigated the twisting halls with a better sense of direction than the three men combined.

The metal-covered facility—along with all of Vector—was as Celes remembered it, though a darker haze now swept over the thriving city. It took recent events for Celes to not only acknowledge the wrongdoings of the Empire, but to step forward and speak out against the Emperor. *Had it always been this bad?* Celes thought, spying upon conveyor belts assembling new Magitek equipment. *Or was I blinded by my own selfishness?* The Empire indeed had provided her with a proper lifestyle, but it didn’t silence her.

Of course, the others had select words to say on the matter. Edgar was beyond thankful to no longer be aligned with the Empire. Cyan’s eyes never ceased glaring at his surroundings, astounded by further proof of the Empire harboring more sinister plans to rival the events in Doma, though his distaste for technology easily colored his opinion. As for Locke, he stuck close to Celes in silence and insisted on protecting her.

Even Setzer provided his commentary to her before departure.

"Be careful," was what he said.

Celes stopped and faced him. She didn’t wish to delay the party, but his unexpected caution disconcerted her. "What makes you think I won’t? I’m aware of the risks of stepping foot back onto Vector."

"Yes." Setzer flashed a brief smile. "Of course you are. Forgive me, I had forgotten I was in the good graces of a General."

*Former General,* she almost reminded him. "I will be fine. You don't need to worry."

"Never said I worried."

She huffed out a sigh. "Then what?"

But he only nodded. "You best be on your way." Setzer waved as she touched the ground. "I'd wish you good luck, but I already know luck favors you."

She didn't respond, instead catching up with the group to depart Albrook proper.

More than sheer luck was required to delve deep into the facility. Said luck happened to run out the instant Celes detected bright colors within the dark, muted interior.

But it was the raving laughter which confirmed Celes’ suspicions.

Before Celes had even been considered for magical infusion, there was *him.* The decorated soldier—spoken highly of amongst his superiors—had received a unanimous offer to be the first to undergo the process. Or so rumor told. Even Cid spoke of the lack of perfection within the infusion, how it
damaged the subject’s mind and called for keen observation over the years to ensure death wasn’t an outcome. As a child, she never questioned Cid’s word, but her days of believing his fairy tales were as dead as the stories themselves. Where was the truth, she wondered, for all she saw in the painted man was not a role model or a fellow Magitek knight, but an individual hungry for power and destruction.

Celes witnessed it firsthand upon overhearing him discuss his supposedly covert plans to wipe out all of Doma through alchemical means. Emperor Gestahl called *her* the mad one upon unveiling the truth, but the only madman Celes saw within the throne room that day was First Mage Kefka Palazzo, chief adviser to the Emperor himself.

And fate had been cruel enough to lead them straight to Kefka.

Celes hitched her breath, jerking backwards. Instinct snapped her arm upward to signal the group to halt. A series of confused whispers slipped past them, but Celes glared back with wide eyes.

“What the hell is going on?” Edgar mouthed to her.

Dense heartbeats thrummed in her ears and drowned out her thoughts. “Wait,” she mouthed back. After several deep breaths, Celes dared to peek around the corner and spy upon Kefka.

He spoke of madness. Absolute madness. He deemed himself a god and his intentions to assume control, all while ripping weak Espers from their confines.

"I don't need *you* anymore! You useless beasts are all dried up!" Kefka snatched one of them by the ankle and flung the Esper like a rag doll. "Begone!" The near lifeless body spun in midair until it flopped down a chute, banging against walls in its descent.

Unable to tear her eyes away, Celes sorted through a cluster of thoughts to produce a plan. To take on Kefka required the element of surprise, which they possessed at present. Yet Celes couldn't muster an ounce of strength after witnessing the cruelty Kefka displayed. No one else offered ideas and when the whispers returned behind her, Celes flailed a hand to silence the group.

More so when Kefka sauntered down in their direction.

Dropping down to her knees with her back scrunched into the wall, Celes waited for the prominent, stomping feet to stroll by and disappear into a distant hallway. The echoes of each step rang through the walls for an eternity. When only the systematic vibrations of the machinery hummed, Celes still swore the sound persisted.

"He's gone," Locke remarked through a sigh.

The reassurance brought forth a breath of relief from Celes, though their chance to ambush Kefka faded along with his presence. It became a memory while Celes jolted upwards. "The Espers."

"What about them?"

"We need to find them."

Without any further explanation, Celes darted towards the chute. It was the Espers they sought out upon Ramuh’s request, for they would offer to help not only Terra, but their efforts against the Empire. But the ones Kefka discarded strained through their last breaths; Celes refused to let them die without cause.

Tumbling down the chute, Celes forced herself into a roll to break the fall. Scrapes and potential
bruises lining her exposed skin were the least of her concern. The rest of the team followed, also varying in their stability upon reaching the bottom. Locke made an effort to extend a hand to Celes. She contemplated swatted him away out of spite, but Celes reached back. With their palms resting into one another’s, a fierce roar bellowed through the area. Before Celes could assess the situation, an Esper lashed out at the group.

The red beast released a pained howl between blind attacks. The group readied their weapons with a defense in mind; none of them were willing to strike down the dying Esper. Sharp claws met with steel blades, though the strength within the Esper didn’t rival its colossal cry flowing out. After several more careless attacks, the creature cowered.

"I sense a kindred spirit," its voice rumbled. "You... have Ramuh's power?"

The magicite of the elder Esper resided within Edgar’s pouches and he retrieved it to bear proof of Ramuh’s presence. In his palm, the crystallized form shone a pale yellow light. After several pulses, the other two Espers resonated with the magicite with a similar glow.

But a voice chimed in Celes' head. "Child? Child, is that you?" A voice she heard before.

As her eyes flicked to the others, she confirmed none of them heard the chilling tone addressing her. Celes turned away from the one called Ifrit and ignored his explanation to the others in regards to the facility. The reveal of other Espers residing within the facility was no surprise to her. The details served to be fuzzy, but what comprehension Celes garnered was but a scratch on the surface; they were the ones responsible for her creation as a Magitek knight. It so happened the Esper paired with Celes laid in the sweep distance within a pile of trashed Magitek gear and corpses.

Shiva no longer bore the flawless, ice-like skin, replaced instead with heavy bruises and scars. A state far worse than Celes’ faded memories ever painted of the once ferocious Esper. Dropping to her knees, Celes laid ginger hands upon her.

A violent cough sputtered out of Shiva as she recoiled from the obvious pain a mere touch sent through her. "It is you, after all these years." Her lips never moved, yet the voice chimed in Celes’ mind. Dark eyes like deep gems settled upon Celes. "You've grown, child."

"What the hell happened?" Celes demanded, struggling to maintain composure.

The Esper shook her head. "It doesn't matter now. It'll all be over soon enough. What does matter—" She coughed again. "—is that you are well. They haven't... harmed you."

Celes rested a heavy hand upon Shiva's shoulder, the only comfort she could extend to the dying creature. Touching her once had been akin to holding ice, but Celes never flinched, never noticed the difference.

Shiva sucked in a long breath, then parted her lips to address them all. "We haven't much time left," she explained, the ice in her voice lost long ago. "Ifrit and I... we were siblings to Ramuh, each of us born with a different elemental power. If Ramuh was willing to give you his strength, then we shall do the same...."

Both Shiva and Ifrit glowed with a gentle hum before dissolving into floating magicite. The burning ruby glided to Cyan while the dark sapphire fell into Celes' hands. It pulsed a bright blue glow several more times before fading to stillness.

Celes stared at the gem, fingers curling up to clutch it close. The Esper deserved a more worthy death than to wilt away after submitting to Kefka’s torture, though Celes quietly honored Shiva’s former
strength via the magicite. With a shaky inhale, Celes stood and found a safe home for the magicite in a belt pouch.

Locke tilted his head to her. “You okay?” She forced herself to nod. "You don't happen to know the way past here, do you?"

"No," Celes reluctantly said. “I've never been past here. We'd be lucky if we can find a way out now."

As if he timed it himself, Edgar beamed upon discovering a seamless doorway within the wall. "Aha! Not sure where this leads to, but it's better than sticking around in here."

None of them, though, were prepared for what lurked within the depths of the Magitek Research Facility.

Bodies resembling corpses more so than Espers suspended within capsules lining the halls. Death teased them, though each cell supported enough life for the sake of research alone—the same research that lined Celes’ veins with ice magic. They walked in silence down the vast hallway, eyes meeting each Esper.

“Celes?” It had been Cyan speaking out to her. “Did… thou know of this horror?”

“The Espers,” she drawled out, “were used to fuel Magitek. We knew that much. But this?” She averted her eyes to the floor. “I wouldn’t have guessed this to be the true nature lying below.”

“It’s terrible,” Edgar added.

“Hmph,” Cyan mumbled. “I expect no less from the Empire.”

“I can assure you not even the highest ranking officers held special privileges to come this far,” Celes said.

“And had thou known? What would have been done?”

Her silence served as Cyan’s answer, for Celes knew too well what happened the first time she spoke out to the Emperor.

Upon reaching the end of the hallway, the creatures twitched within their capsules and their telepathic voices reached out to the four of them. Every Esper agreed to lend their strength in the effort to stop the Empire and end the suffering.

“We shall follow Ifrit and Shiva's example,” one Esper mentioned.

Like before, the suspended bodies within each capsule glowed. One by one, they dissolved into pure magic, seeping through the cracks and swirling in the air above the group. As magic solidified into magicite, the glittering crystals floated down into reach.

"This is surreal," Locke uttered.

“And more aid than we imagined to receive,” Cyan said.

As they gathered up the magicite, Edgar turned to Celes. “Suppose it wouldn’t be asking too much for a way out? Afraid I can’t work my magic again.”

Before Celes answered, the clatter of metal fired off in the distance. The group stood at attention to discern the unwieldy feet hurrying towards them. A figure peeked through the gaps between
"What are you doing over there?!” the voice demanded through the space, exasperated as ever. Celes narrowed her sights onto the body. "W-what are those?!"

"We got company," Edgar grumbled, hand pawing for his spear.

Celes raised hers in protest. "No, wait.

While Edgar raised an eyebrow, Celes confronted the newcomer to the space. Draped in a yellow hazmat suit, the older man removed his breathing apparatus. Celes suspected none other than Cid Del Norte Marquez to be present. inching closer, nothing but awe lived in his face, sights locked onto the magicite within the group’s clutches. He mumbled over the newfound realization of an Esper's power in this new form proved to be more powerful than any of his years of research provided.

It didn’t stop Celes from approaching him. "Professor Cid?"

Snapping out of his reverie, Cid blinked at Celes before gasping. "General Celes!" Cid stumbled while rushing to her, then paused midway. "But... what are you doing here?! You were taken away from Vector. You were to—"

"It's a long story," she insisted. "But if you'd please—"

"And who are these shady characters?!" Cid peeked around Celes to eye the remaining party as they pocketed the magicite. "Are they your underlings?"

"What? No," Celes shook her head. "Cid, it's not like that. You see, I—"

"Then is it true?" Cid snapped his attention back to the taller woman. "That you worked your way in amongst the rebels as a spy?"

The sheer absurdity of the question was plenty to knock Celes off balance. Whether or not an actual rumor circulated within the military was beyond her, nor was now the proper time to be investigating. Sadly, it didn't prevent her body from hollowing out upon Cid mentioning it, for once it left his lips, it was gone.

Whipping her head around and preparing to defend herself against Cid’s claims, she met Locke's eyes and froze. She knew the storm brewing in him all too well. Back when she led the assault against Maranda for unwilling volunteers to fill the military, she was met with outrage. It belonged to the faces of those who despised her, who wanted to spit in her direction and call her the Emperor's personal bitch, for Celes had gutted both the village and townspeople apart over their lack of cooperation, literally and figuratively. They had every reason to hate her, to want her dead, to see the rune knight made of ice burn up in flames.

Locke had no reason to feel otherwise now.

If only time had been in her favor, Celes would have spent it pleading for his attention. He knew better than all of them. He had witnessed Celes at her lowest, prepared more for death than his aid. Locke saved her. He gave her a reason to keep living. The hope and trust he extended to Celes, a complete stranger who had every right to be his enemy, left an impression on her. Celes prayed his trust hadn’t shattered.

But Cid wasn’t the only one eavesdropping on the group.

"Excellent work, Cid!"
The familiar voice tore Celes’ attention away from Locke and the rumble further down the hall didn’t help. Nearly prancing on over to them was Kefka, flanked by two mechanical, beast-like structures known throughout the military as Magitek armor. Kefka grinned, as if mocking Celes for not seizing the opportunity to strike him earlier. Then, Celes had the support of her allies. Though when she glanced back to them, their current loyalty remained questionable and fear deprived her of effortless breaths.

But Kefka had also witnessed the marvel that was the magicite. He cackled over the discovery. “Superb, as always, Cid! Truly!” He clapped his hands while child-like amusement lit up his features. “To think all we had to do was let these pathetic subjects die. Easy! Too easy! I love it!” His eyes settled on Celes and his painted lips perked up into a massive grin. "And General Celes! What an absolute surprise to see you here! We had been so worried about your disappearance, but that's nothing to worry about now." Kefka waved a hand. "Nor do we need to keep up the charade any longer. Bring me the magicite crystals, if you'd be so kind."

This time, Locke snapped. "What?! How could you.... You tricked us? This whole time you... you...." She couldn't bear to face Locke, but still she peered over her shoulder. He stood as appalled as he sounded. "So you led us on!" Fists shook by his side. "You lied to us! After everything, you just—"

"Locke, it's not like that!" The strength wavered from her lips, her voice diminished to a pathetic squeak unworthy of speaking his name.

He staggered back, eyes fluttering until he found his voice again. "Then what is it like?!!" Stomping towards her, his complexion colored red. "You were plotting to bring us here all along!"

"Of course not! Please, trust me!"

Kefka’s hysterical laughter boomed over their banter. "The sweet taste of betrayal! Oh, Celes!" He shook his head while regaining composure. "How typical of you. Job well done! Couldn't ask for a better performance."

Those words stung more than they needed to. Even Locke flinched. Fixated with him, Celes attempted once more to change his mind. "Locke, please believe me. This isn't—"

But he shook his head, jaw clenched as he backed away. The damage had been done and minds swayed with ease over a lunatic’s ramblings. If Locke didn’t trust her, then none of them would.

Cyan had spewed out his own opinions, stating he knew she was nothing but untrustworthy, Imperial filth. In an instant, the Returners once accepted her, but they chewed Celes up and spat her out.

Kefka rolled his eyes. "Ugh, the dramatics. Such a bore. Time for something more interesting." Drawing in a breath, he flailed at the two Magitek armors. "Now! Kill them all!"

Before she could gasp and protest at the order, both mechanical structures bolted towards the group. Celes parried to the side, her timing not a second too late. The thunderous boom from the technology shook the floor panels and swept Celes off her feet. She struggled to lift her head, though her eyes didn’t lie to her as the Magitek armors pinned the Returners into a wall. Kefka laughed and Cid suspended his actions on the sidelines. The Magitek armors churned and whizzed: the sound of preparations for beam attacks. Locke, Cyan, and Edgar were to be slaughtered.

Like fucking hell you’re going to win.

Celes lolled her head back to spot Kefka. With a sharp breath, she forced herself onto her feet and staggered towards him. With Kefka distracted—off guard as he would ever be—Celes had one shot.
Locke.

Palms opened to the ceiling. Celes lowered her head and whispered the incantation. It had been years since she last used the spell. She refused to accept failure.

*Let me protect you for once.*

Fingers twitched and traced symbols in the air. A foreign wind circled around her body as energy pulsed in her palms.

*And maybe ….*

Hair danced with the wind which lifted off of the ground, finally garnering Kefka's attention. Her head snapped up skyward upon completing the chant, arms splayed out as the magic rushed over her. Ice chilled her body and numbed her of all the other elements trying to rip her apart.

*Maybe then you'll believe me.*

"Celes!" Kefka stammered out with wide eyes. "What are you doing?! What are you.... No! Stop! Don't—"

With both palms slammed together, the Teleport spell took hold. The energy released from her as the blast of wind exploded. By the time the wind died down, all who remained were the Returners and Cid.

The Magitek Research Facility faded from view and was replaced by one of the many vast hallways within the Emperor’s fortress. Familiar sights and scents of the rich decor surrounded Celes. Stumbling back onto solid ground, she caught her breath. Though the completion of the spell didn’t promise victory; she snapped her head upward and confirmed both Kefka and the Magitek armors teleported with her. Celes dropped to her knees, fists bracing against the floor. Soldiers yelled in the distance over the unusual appearance of the Magitek armors and the Empire’s own Magitek knights—the only ones—standing against one another.

Had the incident not brought unwarranted attention their way, then Kefka's scream did. "What the hell did you do?!!" He jumped up and down, fury energizing each movement. "What did you do?!! We were so close and then you." His twitching eyes attempted to strangle Celes. "You had to mess it up! This is all your fault!"

She sat back on her heels and eyed the front of the Magitek armors, each cannon aiming at their target—herself.

"You lied," Celes yelled back, ignoring the soldiers flooding into the space. "You know very well that—"

Kefka rolled his eyes. "You're not making a winning case for yourself! I saved you back there! I had given you another chance! Who else would have??"

The delusion Kefka danced with was worrisome, though the imminent danger the Magitek armors posed won as the top priority. Black gears churned within in preparation for offensive beams. One of the soldiers operating the structure smirked down at Celes.
She almost pitied them. The stories detailing a child, barely ten, single-handedly taking down one of the very structures they commanded must have never been told to the two pilots. Or the notion Celes didn’t hesitate to do it again. This time, it wasn’t an exercise; it would be an execution.

Celes unsheathed her rune blade and jolted back into a defensive position in one fluid motion. One energy beam fired at her while a gleam traveled up her blade. As rapid as the Magitek armor attacked her, the energy swirled around the rune blade and vanished; Runic fully absorbed the force of the attack. She lined up for another one, blade parallel to her face before thrusting it to the ceiling in time with the second beam rushing at her. Runes lit up along the flat edge of the blade, thrumming with magic. With another successful Runic, Celes’ inhale trembled over the magic and mental clarity surging through her and tingling beneath her skin.

A growl wriggled past her tightened jaw. "It would be in your best interest to back down!" Celes whipped her blade to the side, ready to take to the offensive. "And I will not repeat myself!"

The bystanders whispered Celes' name, marveling at her return. Whether or not the talk of her as an Imperial spy was true, they had something new to speak of: General Celes Chère was back and she wanted blood.

Kefka tip-toed away from her. A nervous laugh trickled out of his smiling lips while he waved a hand at Celes. "Now now! No need to be like that, Celes! Why don't we just—"

"You," Celes pointed the tip of her rune blade at Kefka, "better hold your tongue unless you wish to have it removed." Blue eyes narrowed onto her target. "I can arrange that."

"And now you wish to threaten me?!" Kefka whipped his head about, eyeing various soldiers. "Well?! What are you all standing there for?! Can you stop staring and do something?!

Though despite the numbers being in their favor, not a single soldier dared to raise a weapon at Celes. Instead, they trapped her within a circle of bodies, eyes settled onto her and nothing else. She was pleased with the fear she struck into them, though still beyond livid with her current predicament.

*I need to stall them long enough to ensure the others can escape.* Celes drew in a deep breath. *Cid would help them, right? He has to. He's one of the few sane people left in this—*

Gears twisted as one of the Magitek armors bolted for Celes. With her wits still about her, Celes parried to her opponent's side. She outran even the newer, sleeker models, but the beastly structures pursued their prey. A metal claw lashed out at her upon circling around. Celes stabilized her breaths and shot a glance over her shoulder; the other Magitek armor lined up its cannon at her. Whipping her head back to center, she gasped and ducked in time to clear another claw attack.

Her hand sparkled with a blue glow. For years, she perfected the incantations and gestures down to a science and with Shiva’s magicite by her side, casting the spell accelerated threefold. Before the Magitek armor in the distance released its beam, Celes flung her hand up and the Blizzara erupted in front. The pilot cried out as ice encased half of the Magitek armor, desperate to break free from the frozen prison.

Magic flowed wildly in Celes and thus through her blade. She spun around in time to eye another claw lashing out. Celes bellowed out a battle cry and runes lit up the length of her blade. With magic channeled through the rune blade, she carved through the arm of the structure. The collapse of the metal arm to the floor overpowered the yells and gasps from the surrounding soldiers.

The pilot was anything but pleased. “*You bitch!*” He flailed his hands at the control panel to better
position the Magitek armor against Celes. “You’ll pay for that with your worthless life!”

But she scaled up the Magitek armor, sinking her blade into metal for additional support and leverage. She yanked her rune blade out as the pilot’s eyes widened; she was a magical blur before, but now a cruel angel of death hovering above. He scrambled to grasp his rifle, the only means of defense while Celes stabilized herself on the rocking Magitek armor. His feeble hands pawed the weapon, but Celes’ horizontal slice tore him from neck to hip. He gasped for air, gargling and coughing up blood. The rifle fell and his body followed suit.

With the pilot removed, Celes sunk her rune blade deep into the console. The Magitek armor twitched while sparks flew. Its convulsion dropped it to the floor, soldiers running away to clear the space in time to avoid its collapse. Celes jumped away to safety. Twirling the blade with utmost ease in her hands, she pointed it once more to the remaining Magitek armor pilot.


Instead, the pilot fussed over the console, flipping switches and smashing buttons to work the machine into the ground. Gears spun out of control as the mouth of the cannon glowed through the ice. It melted away and Celes prepared for another defensive pose with time to spare. Didn’t the idiots realize they were feeding her mental energy with each successful Runic?

She marched towards the Magitek armor and the pilot panicked. In the time he tried to prepare a second attack, Celes flicked her wrist and murmured under her breath. The gold light emitting beneath her feet was similar to the face of a ticking clock, fading after a quick burst upon completion. When she darted to her remaining target, her newfound dexterity blinded those observing.

Once again, Celes scaled the armor. The pilot squealed and begged for mercy, unable to pry his eyes away from the rune blade held above. Celes never entertained his pleas, cleaving through armor with a downward swing. Blood and organs alike seeped out of his gaping torso, leaving the man doubling over and praying for a swifter death. A simple Blizzard directed at the console rendered the Magitek armor useless and it too collapsed next to its defeated ally.

Touching back down to firm ground, Celes rid her rune blade of excess blood with a flick of her wrist. Her blood-splattered attire, however, was beyond saving. Unable to dwell on it, she brought her sights upon the last foe blocking her path. The tip of the rune blade followed, angled at Kefka.

Only his face twitched, examining the damage perpetrated by a single woman. His jaw and fists clenched before his voice resounded through the castle. “Do you even remotely know how long it took to make those models?! Do you?!” Even the whispers of the surrounding soldiers silenced before Kefka. “Was this really necessary?! Gods! And you had to be such a pretentious brat about it! And you!” He flailed at the audience circling them. “What good are any of you just standing there and not helping?!”

No one answered Kefka. Celes tightened her blade while he spun about. Hate seethed in his beady eyes until they settled back onto her. Kefka narrowed his sights and his anger simmered down into something more refined and potent.

“No I must take care of you myself then?!” Kefka hissed. “Fine. So be it.”

He was already untying his cloak, chucking it to the side. Other layers of vibrant, puffy fabric stripped away from his body until the tight base of his outfit remained. From his hip dangled a simple rapier, a weapon Celes rarely witnessed him clutching. Kefka unsheathed it, directing it to the floor as he ambled over to Celes.
She blinked and three more Kefkas walked towards her. Perfect mirror images, each one charging forward to skewer Celes. The first one she struck vanished. So did the second. Parrying out of harm’s way, Celes eyed the remaining two to discern the true Kefka. She blinked again and one remained. Celes took aim before slashing at the arm of the figure closing in.

The scream was genuine, as was the blood, but the illusion flickered out of existence. When it faded, an amused snicker crept in from behind.

Even with the added bonus from the Haste spell, Celes spun around in time to slam her blade into Kefka’s. Both staggered from the blow and recovered in unison. Again they charged at one another, Kefka nicking Celes’ upper arm. Adrenaline masked the pain and Haste fueled her body, but the blood trickling down her arm was undeniable.

Celes prepared a spell to launch at Kefka, refusing to be distracted. He was too quick, though, and his illusions and trickery were far too advanced for her own magical prowess. There had been a reason why he was appointed First Mage, just as there had been a reason why she was promoted to General. Celes wouldn’t cave in and surrender, not when she desired nothing else but to smash the grin off of Kefka’s face.

“Why don’t you drop this little act of yours, hmm?” Kefka snarled through their struggle for the upper hand amidst locked blades. “We both know you won’t win, so why bother trying? I promise to go easy on you if you succumb to me.” The sick smirk on his lips proved otherwise.

“Like I’d give up to the likes of you.” With the remainder of the Haste spell, she sunk a heel into Kefka’s gut to knock him away.

Despite staggering and straining to breathe, Kefka had enough composure to cast a spell. Lightning crackled out from his palm and temporarily deafened the room, but was absorbed into her rune blade. The only act Celes couldn’t keep up forever was the battle against Kefka. Her exhausted muscles throbbed and her depleted lungs cracked dry. As for Kefka, he demonstrated no signs of weariness. She wasn’t quick enough to land a spell on him, nor did she wish to risk the chance of leaving herself vulnerable. Thus Celes hardened herself into a firm defense as Kefka darted towards her with the intent to drive his rapier through her chest.

Another cry mixed into the room. It didn’t belong to Kefka. Celes focused on the man before her, unable to avert her gaze to inspect the commotion rustling through the ring of soldiers. She braced herself for Kefka’s attack, but another sword thrust between the two of their blades and brought them to a standstill.

“Kefka! Stand down!”

Celes recognized the voice. Struggling for power, she glanced to her side to catch a man donning partial plate armor and chainmail intermixed with the regulated green uniform within the military. The dark skin and eyes contrasted with the blond mohawk running down his skull. His sheer strength overpowered both of them, though such a feat didn’t faze Celes.

It was only a matter of time before it came to General Leo’s attention that magic brought forth not only Kefka and the Magitek armors into the fortress, but also the former General once sentenced to death.

Leo held his sword high, eyeing Kefka first upon breaking up the two. “What in the gods’ names is the meaning of this?!” he yelled out. “The fortress isn’t your playground to parade about in while—”

Then his eyes caught Celes. The empathy within them was the closest hint of a welcome Celes had
received upon returning to Vector.

Like the others, he too was astounded. "Celes?!

"General Leo." She maintained her guard while addressing him with the respect he deserved. "You must heed my words—"

"Don't listen to a thing she says!" Kefka stepped towards Leo as he snarled. "I had found her with the Returners infiltrating the Magitek Research Facility! She should be—"

Leo sucked in a breath before bellowing, "Silence! Both of you! I am not in the mood for games and trickery and I certainly don't have the wits to stomach you this very moment." Celes' shoulders relaxed when Leo gestured to Kefka. "I will deal with you later, but as for you, Celes." Both their eyes met and neither wavered before the other. "You are to come with me."

Able to breathe again, Celes sheathed her rune blade and nodded. He was one of the few left she trusted. Perhaps she could talk sense into him. Leo had to understand she was as much a spy as she was a puppet to the Empire. She took a chance with fate in buying time for the Returners, hoping it would prove where her loyalties lied now. Still, she doubted the Returners would believe her anymore. As she gazed at Leo, the fresh images of Locke’s face—the look in his eyes—flashed before Celes. She failed not to wince and prayed Leo hadn’t noticed.

In that instance, she recalled Setzer’s words upon departing the Blackjack—luck favored her. Now, more than ever, she hoped the gambler was right.

"Well then," Kefka let out with a loud scoff and sheathed his blade, "if I may be excused, you two can have a delightful reunion over tea and overlook the fact the Returners are in Vector and all of this is stalling us from finding them!" Leo didn't acknowledge a word he said. "Bleh! Be that way! I'll take care of this myself!"

Kefka demanded the assistance of several soldiers from the sidelines and distributed orders as he recovered his stripped layers of clothing. He mumbled to himself about the fallen, smoking Magitek armors, walking away from the scene. However, he tripped over his feet and abruptly dashed to one of the vast windows overlooking Vector.

"What the hell is that doing there?!" he shrilled out.

As others flocked to the windows to inspect the commotion, Celes approached a lone window not far down the hall. Leo called out to her, but curiosity tugged her astray. The sun broke over the horizon, flooding Vector with an orange glow, and the silhouette of the Blackjack hung in the skies.

Celes’ eyes widened and her mouth hung open. Setzer, what are you doing here? You're going to get yourself killed.

She could picture him piloting the vessel towards Vector, growing impatient with waiting for the group. They had left at sunset and never returned. Setzer had no reason to worry, let alone stick around; if there was ever an opportunity to high tail out, it was then.

Or perhaps he was more inclined to experience the thrill of racing out of Vector with whatever Kefka threw at him hot on his trail. Celes couldn't decide, but her breath fell short as the realization hit her. Were you actually worried about me? Was that why you came?

Kefka screamed out instructions in a frenzy to the soldiers, who rushed about to follow them through. Eventually, he ran in the opposite direction, explaining how they needed to lock down the Magitek Research Facility before it was too late. Amongst the chaos, General Leo eased in to
approach Celes, several soldiers of his own sticking close behind. She stood at attention, or at least as best as she could; shot nerves wore her body down more than she wished to let on. Rest was required. Gods knew she needed it, but she doubted Leo would offer any hospitality in the scenario at hand.

"You have much to explain for yourself," he remarked with tight lips.

"Leo, I can—"

"But for now." With one more step forward, Leo planted a bulky hand upon her shoulder and squeezed. A brief smile flashed across his face. "It's good to see you."

Whatever Leo held as an opinion in regards to her treason against the Empire, a genuine air weighed within his words. Quite the contrary in regards to what had unfolded in the Magitek Research Facility. Flashbacks blurred her vision as Locke's voice rang in her ears. The mixture of rage and disbelief pulsing through his tongue and stare ripped through Celes. She yearned to impart her side of the story and erase Kefka’s lies. She feared she’d never see him again to tell him. Even so, she doubted Locke would give her the chance.

"Same to you," Celes breathed out after a pause, her voice not as determined as it was a moment ago.

With a nod, General Leo gestured down the hall. "Walk with me." More of a demand than a suggestion, but Leo softened from his initial state upon intervening. Celes didn't hesitate to meet his stride; she knew their destination.

At first, she wove an explanation for herself and the situation, which required returning to the beginning, back to her time spent confined as a traitor. An unsavory memory—the one where she had met Locke—though a necessary narrative. Before she could unravel her story, Leo lifted a hand and cut her short.

"Now is not the time to be discussing this."

She blinked, eyebrows knitting together. "But you said yourself I had much to explain—"

"Celes." Leo’s eyes met hers before looking to the other soldiers accompanying them. "Not now."

He didn’t need to repeat himself, his actions making it clear privacy wasn’t in their favor. The anticipation left more questions than answers in Celes’ mind. She prayed to whichever gods would listen that Leo sided with her, that together they could convince the Emperor to change the tides of war.

Leo brought her to a lone room at the center of the fortress. She knew all too well of the waiting room meant for those seeking an audience with Emperor Gestahl. Never before had she been confined there, always bypassing the necessity thanks to her privilege as General. However, the title was stripped from her and left an enemy to the Empire in its wake. She half expected the soldiers to accompany her inside, but Leo motioned for them to guard the outer entrance.

"You are to wait here until one of the Emperor's attendants summons you," Leo explained leisurely. His body fidgeted, perhaps sharing Celes’ awkward sentiment while lecturing the former General. "I'll inform Emperor Gestahl of the... circumstances as best as I can. I'm sure there is much he wishes to speak of with you."

With words rendered useless, Celes sucked in a breath and nodded. No other choice was present; she had to accept this fate. For the sake of the Returners’ safety, she gladly sacrificed herself in this manner. Anything to prove she was no Imperial spy.
"And Celes." This time when Leo stepped forward, he leaned in and kept his voice to a whisper. "You will not be thrown into prison again. I will see to it that mistake is never repeated."

He knew. Finally, someone in the Empire trusted her instinct. "You mean...."

Leo nodded when words escaped her. "I was in Doma when it happened. I saw it myself." Eyes fell from Celes'. "I couldn't stop it. I'm sorry, we should have listened to you."

Not another word was uttered as Leo abandoned her. The chance to further discuss matters evaporated. Another time would come for them to speak and Celes planned to join forces with Leo.

The door locked and Celes stood alone in the exquisite room. Extravagant rugs lined the floors, neoclassic oil paintings hung from the walls, and plush couches sat untouched. Celes couldn’t bring herself to recline in one of them. Each erratic breath raced as brisk as her thoughts. The events in the Magitek Research Facility played on a vicious, mental loop. Muscles knotted up her upper back and the beginning of a headache pulsed forward. All the while, Locke's distrustful words stabbed at her hollow body with no end in sight.

Celes Chère didn’t cry. She refused to succumb to petty tears, for they were reserved for those who couldn't plow through the hardships of life. It was the sign of ultimate weakness. She ignored the sentiment, head hung high and posture poised. Gradually, the immense shock dripped away and left a boiling rage behind. Her palm tingled with a chill begging to be released. And she did have the extra mental capacity from her recent battle.

The ice came easily to her. It always had. With no preparation required, Celes whipped around and released the Blizzard with a resentful roar. A frozen shell encased a quarter of the room, sparkling in the nearby candlelight. Mere Fire wouldn’t suffice with melting the layers and without a doubt, it wouldn’t salvage a damn thing underneath.

Not a soul stirred outside over Celes’ unleashed rage.

With the spell completed, Celes dropped to her knees, clutching at her hair. She concentrated on more mindful breaths, the task proving to be easier said than done. Locke poisoned her thoughts along with the notion of losing the connection with him and the Returners. The other day, Celes almost lashed out at him over the idiotic plan involving the opera house. I don't understand you. Why can't you just tell me how you feel? Why is that so hard? Or do you actually not know what it is you want? Is that why you treat Terra the same way? Do you truly not care?

Celes doubled over and curled up into herself, nausea plaguing her displaying no mercy. A warm embrace and soothing voice could put her mind at ease. Celes doubted Locke would even entertain the idea of sharing space with her again. Perhaps no one would. Though the longer she dwelt on it, the more her mind returned back to the events on the Blackjack and its forward pilot, who had yet to keep his eyes to himself.

Another door opened. Celes shot up, emerging from her dark thoughts to peer past her shoulder. One of the Emperor’s attendants gawked at the ice formation glistening on the opposite end before recognizing Celes.

"Emperor Gestahl will see you now."

Forcing herself to her feet, Celes followed through a short series of halls before opening up into the throne room. Standing in the middle was an elder man dressed in dark, bold robes with a beard hiding a majority of his face. Celes recognized Cid by the man’s side, his words rushed and forceful. Her heart picked up knowing Cid had indeed escaped.
Then all eyes fell onto Celes.

His beard twitched, perhaps from the movement of his lips. Maybe a smile hid underneath or maybe a grimace. "Celes Chère. What a delightful surprise to have this morning. I wasn't expecting to be roused out of bed at such an hour to find you here."

Confronting Leo required nothing short of respect, though before the likes of the man who refused to listen to her so-called lies and slander, proper respect was negated. Celes shifted all her weight to one leg while crossing loose arms across her torso.

Emperor Gestahl waved a hand at Cid. "You're dismissed. Please do try to be careful next time."

"Y-yes, sir." After several bows, Cid scurried away from Gestahl and towards Celes. His steps slowed down as he caught her eye. "Your friends are safe, Celes," he whispered in a hurry. "Showed them the shortcut out." He smiled at her, like he always had when she was a child. "Everything will be alright."

While she questioned the validity of his comment, Celes did know someone like Cid was easier to sway than Emperor Gestahl. The twinkle in Cid's eyes assured her his mind changed in her brief absence from his facility.

By the time Cid was escorted out, Emperor Gestahl dove at Celes with his questioning. "You better have a good explanation as to why you thought returning to Vector was a brilliant idea, Celes."

She matched his brazen demeanor. "Because I know better than anyone that this Empire of yours is filled with more nefarious realities than imaginable."

"Don't be dramatic."

"I speak the truth. You know that. Everyone knows that." Celes dared to close in on him. "I have been nothing but faithful and loyal to you and this nation. All my life, this is all I've known. It's been nothing but waking up for testing until my training was completed. You think the sadistic cruelty that goes on underneath the layers would go unnoticed?"

"Celes—"

"And in case you have gone blind, one of your two, precious, magically-infused knights has gone to terrifying levels of insanity. And if you don't put a stop to this power trip right now, more than the Empire will fall."

The silence tasted like victory. To Celes' dismay, the Emperor didn't consider her argument for a second, instead filtering the information to form his own retort. "Treason isn't taken lightly around here. You nearly stirred a rebellion within the Imperial forces yourself. You spouted lies against those who took care of you after all of this time. Had you stayed in our ranks, we would have crumbled from within, simply by your doing, your poison—"

"I believe you're forgetting who's been using the real poison around here." Had Emperor Gestahl been uninformed of Kefka's inhumane ploys? Did it even matter to him now?

"Says the one who defected to the Returners. Don't you know they wish to drag us down the streets and publicly sentence us to death by prolonged torture? You wish to ally yourself with these wretched scum that claims to be fighting for freedom? I'm sure your new friends found your information useful. How convenient that Kefka sniffed you all out."

Friends. That was what Emperor Gestahl referred to them as. So did Cid. Yet Celes couldn't stomach
to say the word out loud. What they were now, she didn’t know, but not friends. Not anymore.

"What other choice have you left me?!" Celes tried to calm herself, but could no longer contain the booming rage punctuating each word. “For some time I’ve noticed the wrinkles in this Empire of yours, which everyone else has ignored. I believed it all to be a means to an end, that sometimes force was needed to drive a point, but poisoning an entire city? Torturing helpless creatures in the name of research? If I were to list every subtle obscurity that has further twisted this nation, I wouldn’t even know where to begin. I had sought you out to inform you of what your chief adviser and beloved First Mage was concocting behind your back for his own purposes. And not too long ago in the Magitek Research Facility, he spoke of ascending to godhood and total domination. Is that what you desire? Do you wish for the world to end in the wrath of magic itself? You’ve played with demons and laughed at the gods when you conducted your tests and created me, your delusional idea of perfection. Kefka has gone insane and I don’t know what fate has planned for me, but you’d be a fool to continue following him so blindly, as you have all this time."

Celes had more to say. She reckoned Gestahl did, too. All of it was deferred the instant sirens blared from the distance. Both of them perked up, confusion washing over their features. Though once the realization hit her, she darted towards the nearest window to further assess the situation. The sun almost blinded her as she searched the skies for the familiar silhouette. Flying drones emerged from the rooftops and darted towards their target—the Blackjack. The airship’s propellers spun before it accelerated forward to launch away from Vector with gun-wielding drones on its tail.

She pictured Setzer laughing at the pitiful attempts to strike him down, the wind whipping through his hair and bullets whizzing by. Hopefully, somewhere on the airship were Locke, Edgar, and Cyan. *Fly swiftly and safely. You need more luck than I do right now.*

Backing away from the window, she turned to the Emperor by her side. His eyes gazed at the mess unfolding outside, one of the drones plummeting from the skies into a midair explosion. All of it was Kefka’s doing, Celes was beyond certain. It was only a matter of time before he took chase and tracked down the Returners himself.

"Emperor Gestahl," Celes addressed him with rigid caution, "please cease all of this nonsense. So much damage has already been done. The choice is yours as to whether or not it all stops. It would be in everyone’s best interest if we laid down our weapons and came to terms with those such as the Returners."

She waited for him to scoff and lash back before ordering her arrest. The familiar weight of the shackles ran over her wrists. This time, Celes didn’t expect to be saved. Nor did she expect the Empire to be quick and merciful with her execution. The Emperor judged her in the quiet air sitting between them.

"You have always been one of the Empire’s most prized officers," he began slowly. "Always striving for perfection and always inspiring Imperial forces with utmost pride. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t torn by the decision of locking you up. When word circulated back of your escape, I half expected you to return to Vector and beg for forgiveness. What I didn’t expect was for you to offer your aid to the Returners."

Not for a second did Celes believe a damn word he uttered. She held her tongue and in turn swallowed down the violent words she had for him.

"I will offer you one choice, Celes. One opportunity to make up for your disloyalty." He shifted to face her properly and Celes' spine stiffened at his piercing gaze. "Come back to the Empire. I can bestow your rank back to you. It'll be as if you never left. In exchange, you will provide us with what information you know about the Returners. Surely you must have acquired some vital tidbits
along the way."

She knew what he was about to add on top of that. Celes couldn't stop herself from cutting him off. "You will not harm them."

Gestahl feigned ignorance. "Why would you ever think of that?"

"If I return to you as your General, I will give you what information you desire, but you will not bring harm to any of them." Celes' jaw tightened. "I won't allow it."

"Or what? Will you strike at the Empire again? How am I to trust you if your allegiance is still with the Returners?"

Celes closed her eyes, but only for a second. This was to protect them all. It was for the best. Perhaps they would understand why, for no other choice presented itself to Celes.

"I swear my allegiance to you, Emperor Gestahl." The words pained her, though she didn’t flinch.

"Then promise me to never question my authority again, to stand by the Empire forevermore, and never defect to rebels again. In exchange, I will ensure no harm will come to the Returners."

Hesitation was unacceptable now. Or another compromise. Celes either had to willingly accept or face a fate worse than what he initially planned for her when she was dragged out of Vector in chains.

Celes unsheathed her rune blade from its scabbard and nestled the tip into the floor. Falling to one knee, her palms rested on the hilt of the blade as she lowered her head before the Emperor. Each breath she spent recollecting what remained of her wits.

"I swear on behalf of the Empire," she uttered the oath, "to protect and serve you with nothing but the best intentions. I am yours to command. I am your loyal servant."

Celes stared at the floor and held her breath. Blonde hair shielded her face upon waiting for Emperor Gestahl's response. Perhaps he tricked her further than she imagined and was busy eyeing his attendants to fetch the guards. When the light hand rested on top of her head, Celes restrained herself from sucking in air. Though what stung her more than his touch was the gluttonous satisfaction seeping from his lips.

"Welcome back, General Celes Chère."

Chapter End Notes

Some more songs which helped flesh out this chapter: Posthuman by Marilyn Manson for the fight with Kefka and The Hand That Feeds by Nine Inch Nails for the general second half.
Chapter 5

Her room remained untouched, though the familiar offered little comfort to Celes. Imperial trinkets and gifts—nothing but the best for the military’s finest—furnished the space, each one bearing another reason why she spoke out against the Emperor to begin with.

The newly acquired solitude proved to be more overwhelming than she was prepared for. A plush bed beckoned her to sleep—a reasonable option—despite it being mid-morning, but whatever nightmarish visions her dreams would welcome her with could wait. Thus she inquired for a bath.

Once the attendants bowed out of her room, Celes locked herself inside the personal bathroom. She stripped from the bloodied garments, happy to no longer don the civilian clothes. Lavender and vanilla sifted from the water and saturated the air with its scent. The mirrors fogged up as the bathroom morphed into a sauna. Such heat was deemed unbearable, but Celes welcomed it now and submerged into the bathtub. The warmth soothed the cold prickling her senses and sobered Celes from the haze of the week’s events.

Water lapped at her neck and pale hair floated in the bath water like an ethereal web. Celes closed her eyes, the Emperor’s words to her upon her departure echoing in her head. Gestahl promised to speak to Kefka about reevaluating his priorities. Nothing in regards to striking the man down from his high horse. The reassurance was better suited as a sardonic afterthought. He was better off biting his tongue.

Celes had crossed paths with General Leo before returning to her quarters. The fellow General smiled in her direction, as if privy to the outcome. Before long, the two officers would require a private discussion, but the life of a General was nothing short of hectic. Regardless, Celes intended to track down Leo; if Emperor Gestahl refused to cease his antics, she needed someone by her side to weather the storm.

Though the most puzzling uncertainty was if the opportunity presented itself, would the Returners ever accept her again? Their whereabouts and plans were veiled, but it was their loyalties which resulted in Celes curling up into herself. The original idea was to acquire the assistance of the Espers and return to Zozo for Terra. From there, they would have obtained a better sense of direction in terms of formulating a new plan. Celes wondered if Terra fared well now along with the rest of the Returners.

In the middle of her thoughts, something sidetracked her: Would Setzer even continue helping them without my presence?

Locke might have come up with the swap for Maria, but Celes was the one who improvised and reaped the rewards—his allegiance to them. Had it not been for her hasty scheming, they would have never arrived in Vector. Setzer helped out or Celes went with him. There was no compromise.

Setzer’s intentions during their gamble still puzzled Celes. Either he perfected his poker face for the sake of shock value or truly wished to marry her. The notion of him possessing the ability to love anyone enough to stay with them for a lifetime was laughable. And instantaneous, too; one moment he swooned over Maria and the next he fawned for Celes.

Maybe Celes indeed left an impression on him, but she refused to admit he had left one on her.

Eyes stuck on the ceiling, Celes ran fingers over her wrists. She thought of him clutching onto her, forcing her into the wall, and holding her in place. Time and time again, Celes denied anything but
rage stirring within during that moment. She wasn’t his prey, but her body tricked her into believing otherwise. Celes released a long exhale as the warmth bundled up in her body, knotting into her stomach. Through the meander of her thoughts, she silently speculated over the possibilities if Setzer had his way with her.

She bit her lip, recalling the words he whispered into her ear before he locked her away. No one had ever dared to utter lewd remarks to her. No one had ever been so bold and confident. In one fleeting moment, Setzer burned into her memory far more than Locke ever had in all of his time spent with her. Celes swallowed down the part of her which relished the brush of physical attention.

But before he ever clutched onto her wrists, the weight of cold shackles resided there.

It took four men to drag her out of the throne room, none of them bothering to muffle Celes’ raging screams against the Emperor. They called her a traitor, deemed her words to be lies. No one bothered to listen to the once respected General. She pleaded to anyone who bothered to acknowledge her in hopes for help. Instead, the guards schlepped her through the castle while the Emperor’s death sentence thrummed in her ears.

She struggled the first day, convinced she could acquire freedom. The guards snickered at her attempts. They exchanged news of her sentence, delighted it would be a public execution. Each time, Celes denounced them, said they were as vile as the Emperor for blindly following orders. She hoped to seep into one of their minds, crack through whatever mental defenses they possessed, and obtain the aid she needed to flee. But they laughed and spat out derogatory comments to further fuel her anger. Celes lashed out like a caged animal, the metal restraints tearing into her wrists and rubbing them raw. Blood trickled down her forearms, but she never winced. To show weakness now meant she accepted defeat.

“I know twenty men back in Vector who would kill to have this opportunity,” one of the guards snarled. Three days passed and while Celes stayed motionless, the hatred burned in her blue eyes. “The mighty General Celes Chère held prisoner. What a sight to behold. You hate this, don’t you?” He bent to eye level with her. “Power went straight to your head and now we’re the ones keeping you in line.” His bare hand brushed along her jaw as his thumb pressed into her lower lip. “I’d love to put you in your place.”

With what strength she stored in reserve, Celes snapped at him, teeth sinking down around the digit until the blistering yelp consumed the jail cell. The guard jerked, but Celes maintained her vice grip on him. Eventually, he thrust his heel into her stomach and freed his thumb. A fist slammed into her face and left Celes doubling over to dangle from her chains.

“You fucking, crazy bitch!” He cradled his hand while his peer muffled a laugh. “You think you’re still in control now?! Tch, just wait until they’re sharpening that sword meant just for your fucking head.”

Celes spat out a mixture of both his and her own blood at the idiot’s feet. “You think I’m afraid? Is that what you’re trying to do? Strike fear into me? A shitty job, if you ask me.”

But by the end of the week, the anger disappeared and something worse than fear lingered behind. The apathy sank into her bones, not wincing when they struck her repeatedly and brought up the inevitable execution. She dangled from the chains as she slumped to the floor after a vicious beating. The cold metal, colder than her own blood, reminded Celes of her fate.

The bath water wrinkled the tips of her fingers and lost its warmth long ago. Celes didn’t bother to step out and dry off; she lied in the tub, switching between reality and memory as the tightness around her wrists remained. A waking nightmare she couldn’t shake herself free from encompassed
her. The images flashed over her with the associated sensations flooding her skin. The cold couldn’t even comfort Celes.

Her numb body slipped further into the cool water. With an inhale, Celes submerged herself and closed her eyes. The subtle sounds of the castle fell silent under the surface, but it didn’t quiet the millions of thoughts howling in her aching head. Her arms wrapped around her sinking form. Knees pulled into her chest. Unable to bear the overwhelming emotional weight pounding in her heart, Celes screeched. Air bubbles broke past the surface, but the water muffled the panic, as well.

Weeks passed by without a word from the Returners. Nothing had surfaced from within the Empire, but Cid assured Celes of their safety.

“I made certain no one could have followed them,” Cid had spoken to her back in the flower garden. Celes sat before the vast collection of roses while he recounted the incident for her. “I can’t say much more, but it appeared the airship was in their favor, no?”

Celes rolled a rose petal between her fingertips. “That was the plan.”

Cid hesitated. “The Emperor... wishes to know more of the Returners. He’d be looking to you for information.” Celes nodded. “Are you willing to cooperate?”

“I don’t exactly have another option, now do I?”

“I-I didn’t wish to insult you, Celes,” he stammered while holding open palms up. “I worry about your well-being. Always have, always will.” Cid straightened up. “It was my duty to ensure you were a success. You never fell short.”

She released the rose and glanced to him. “Just another experiment to perfect?”

“Celes, don’t say it like that.” He paused before rattling on. “I know the core of the Magitek Research Facility wasn’t... ideal, but it was effective. I take pride in my work. I care.” Then his voice dropped to a whisper. “It says a lot more than half the idiots running around here, that’s for sure. Had I not cared about you, I wouldn’t have offered to help the Returners. I could have turned them in to the Emperor, but... no. My scope of the world was limited to what was immediate before my hands. I never bothered to see the ripple effect my workings had on the world. And I trust you, Celes. Whatever it is that’s going on, know I’ll be by your side.”

The thought prickled into her mind and the words followed. “Even if it means standing against the Emperor himself?”

Cid was visibly taken aback by Celes’ question, though she didn’t blink. Once he settled down and understood the severity of her question, he nodded. “Even that,” he said. “I... don’t know what use I’ll be, but I’ll try.” He smiled. “For you, I will.”

The havoc within the Magitek Research Facility changed Cid’s mind for the better. While his reassurance of aiding the Returners was appreciated, Kefka’s absence immediately following the departure of the Blackjack left more speculation. Though more jarring than his disappearance was the surreal sensation of returning to the Imperial halls as a General.
It was as if Celes’ absence never existed. No one questioned her reappearance. Everyone stood at attention when she passed by. Her old uniform had been recovered: white thigh high boots, opaque white and black striped leggings, green tunic, white gloves, blue waist sash, white cloak, an assortment of decorative, armored plating, and an intricate string of metals and beads looping around her hair, laced into a blue headband. All familiar clothing fit for a General and yet Celes’ stomach twisted upon dressing herself. But she had sworn herself to Gestahl—even gave him what information he desired to hear of the Returners—in exchange for the safety of those who had once trusted her.

Whatever it was the Returners plotted, Celes hoped they made progress with assisting Terra. Walking within the Imperial fortress without the other woman around was an awkward occurrence. Celes longed to hear her voice, to see her otherworldly curiosity spark to life upon her face. If they had succeeded with aiding Terra, there was no doubt that she would be a valuable ally in putting an end to the Empire’s cruelty. Like Celes, Terra experienced it first hand and Celes feared the crown sapped her memory enough to deplete Terra of the recollections altogether.

Confronting Gestahl, however, head on after returning wasn’t in Celes’ favor. She and Leo had to settle on a strategy. With new duties piling up, the time to track down General Leo and discuss the chaos undergoing behind the scenes proved to be tricky. Both Generals continued to carry out their promises to Gestahl, though with a little luck, perhaps the Emperor could be persuaded to bring an amicable end the brewing war.

Though a new threat had to be dealt with before then.

Celes had been on her way back to her room after a grueling day when the rumbling sent vibrations through the walls. She dismissed it as Magitek armor training in session. It sounded off a second time, then a third. Sculptures lining the halls trembled. Flames from torches flickered and soon the entire building shook from the commotion. The distant scream of a soldier brought Celes to a halt. Another cry, this time from civilians, broke out from outside. On instinct, Celes gripped her rune blade and rushed to a window to investigate.

She refused to believe the sights at first, though as the enraged Espers advanced to the core of Vector, Celes held her breath and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Magic tore the city apart. Roars of misery bellowed from each of the creatures laying havoc onto buildings and people alike. It made no difference to them. Explosions boomed from the edges of Vector, daring to annihilate all opposing their path; the Espers wouldn’t discriminate in their destruction.

Celes bolted. She screamed out to anyone who bothered to listen to her in the newfound chaos, issuing commands to reinforce the building and not to engage in battle under any circumstance. Celes couldn’t blame the Espers for tearing Vector apart, but any attempt to lessen the inevitable carnage and calm the rage was an effort worth making.

After addressing four groups of soldiers, Celes set her mind to tracking down General Leo. Together, hopefully, they could stand and face the turmoil heading their way.

Celes eyed another group of soldiers down the hall. Her voice attempted to reach out to them, only to be overpowered by the wall tearing apart before her. Staggering away, another explosion crashed into the side of the building. A gaping hole remained, the rubble restricting all passage across. She sprinted in the opposite direction to pursue another path. The cacophonous screams of both dying men and furious Espers rang through her ears like a rolling storm threatening to sweep her away.

Gulping down air, Celes skid around a corner as an Esper crashed down through the ceiling. A
squeal jolted out of her before she collapsed. Celes eyed several more Espers pouring in, their glowing eyes scanning for victims to rip apart with razor sharp claws and teeth. They wouldn’t stop until nothing but rubble and corpses were left.

A more serpentine Esper slithered towards her. It bore slim, yet elongated fangs in her direction. Shallow breaths pulsed through Celes’ frozen body. The creature coiled back in preparation to lunge. Celes braced herself for the agonizing pain to accompany the attack, though it never settled in. Fluttering her eyes, Celes witnessed the Esper pause and examine her. It hissed, more cautious than hostile. Curious enough, the creature bowed its head before her.

Its telepathic voice boomed through her mind. “Shiva has marked you.”

Celes forgot the magicite still on her person. The crystal no longer glowed or hinted at life lingering within, better suited as an urn. The Espers sensed more than the magicite amidst their rage; Celes’ connection ran deeper than the rest of the Imperial military combined.

Only two other people would have been similar. One was hell bent on sucking out the powers hidden within the Espers and the other happened to be half Esper herself. Terra, did you have a hand at this... this slaughter? Or was it—

“What are you doing here?” Celes managed to utter, her dry throat cracking while she attempted to push herself upright. “What has happened?”

The Esper recoiled and prepared to locate a new target; Celes no longer interested the creature. Without another word, the Esper launched toward another direction and disappeared. The shriek erupted shortly after, confirming the torture the Esper bestowed upon a soldier.

Though she didn’t need an answer from the Espers, not when she had an inclination as to why they were here to begin with.

Stumbling forward on jittery legs, Celes’ mind spun about as she strained to assess the situation. A haze of dust from the fallen debris crowded the air while fighting and struggling echoed off the enduring walls. The Esper confirmed her safety, though there were others who didn’t deserve to die. As much as Emperor Gestahl warranted to be ripped apart from the creatures he enslaved and experimented upon, Celes still needed to prove to him and everyone else she continued to be worthy of her title.

Adrenaline propelled her forward to shout out for survivors. On and off the floor shook violently from an Esper’s attack, tripping Celes each instance. Artwork knocked off of walls and pedestals while isolated fires sparked from fallen torches. Celes whipped her head about in hopes to find a familiar face. She cried again, but the floor trembling beneath her feet interrupted her. Celes sucked in air and the foundation collapsed. Resisting the urge to scream, Celes focused what energies she had on a Protect spell.

The magic barely went off by the time she collided into rubble on the lower level. Celes forced herself to stand with a sharp groan, then a pained cry. No broken bones or torn ligaments, thank the gods. Only stunned from the impact. When time proved to be a luxury again, she was sure to mend her wounds with a few Cures. Until then, she had to press forward.

“General Celes!”

She almost doubted the voice. It wasn’t until General Leo came into view, rushing towards, that joy overwhelmed pain within Celes. A few men stuck by him with weapons blazing. Even Leo held his sword up high.
“Are you hurt?” he asked upon catching up. “We can—”

“You need to lower your weapons,” she barked out, eyes fearful. “Now.”

While his eyes demanded more, he didn’t make Celes repeat herself. Leo sheathed his blade and the men behind him followed his lead. Celes breathed easier for the time being, though her inhales and exhales kept trembling.

“We need to either evacuate or find a place to hole up and fortify our defenses,” Celes explained.

The resistance in Leo’s face swelled up. “There are people dying who need our aid—”

“And we will die with them if we don’t fall back and pray to the gods that the Espers are not insatiable in their blood lust.”

The silence was brief. It had to be; there was no more time to waste. “The Emperor is secured in his throne room.” Leo pointed down a hall. “We take the back entrance and fortify our defenses there.” His hand motioned to his followers. “Alert whoever you can find and inform them of this plan. If there are any still living and have a chance for survival, bring them, but do not risk your lives over those about to greet death.”

Each soldier stood at attention, saluted both Generals, and broke away to carry out their assignment. Shortly after, Celes and Leo ran down the path leading to the throne room. With any luck, their plan of fortification would be successful and the Espers would grow weary and leave.

The throne room persisted as their last defense. Others grouped up there and looked to both Leo and Celes for hope. All they had to offer were orders to stabilize the defense. From there, they waited out the storm. Celes could only cast so many Protect spells, for such precautions wouldn’t make or break the defense, though it brought a peace of mind to the Emperor.

“This is madness,” Gestahl uttered, cowering in a corner as the building shook. “They’re nothing but vicious, mindless monsters trying to kill us.”

Celes paused and did her best not to outright glare. “Do you ever wonder why?” The Emperor was struck silent by her icy words. “If you ask me, they’re more justified for their actions than yours lately.”

He could reprimand her later if he pleased to do so. If we even make out of this alive. Celes situated herself by General Leo as the remaining soldiers filtered in with what survivors they could find. To Celes’ relief, Cid happened to be one of them. If he hadn’t already made up his mind about forsaking the experiments conducted, then perhaps the travesty convinced him.

Muffled screams and vibrations continued to course through the structure of the building. Both Celes and Leo braced themselves in defensive postures with their attentive eyes twitching about. Not a soul whispered a damn thing throughout the endless wait; time suspended on a thread and Celes dreaded the passing seconds.

Though the cries turned distant and the floors stilled. True silence washed over the room. Scouts slipped out to secure the perimeter and returned moments later. They bore good news—the Espers were gone. Celes held her breath, about to demand where they had gone off to and why they didn’t finish the deed. It didn’t matter; what mattered now was not all of Vector was destroyed.

Everyone walked outside to assess the residual damage done by Espers. Celes overlooked the city from a balcony, wrapping her arms around her form as the thick scent of smoke mixed with blood invaded her nostrils. The once glorious establishment lied in absolute ruins. The Emperor’s fortress
received minimum damage in comparison to the miles of carnage and debris.

She shook her head, refusing to accept the outcome. “This is horrific,” she murmured.

“The city.” The Emperor stood beside her, eyes widened while his jaw dropped. “I can’t even begin to comprehend how many lives have been lost because of this. Everything—all of it—is nothing but rubble.”

“This could have been prevented,” Celes assured Gestahl with a hint of a growl. “I would imagine the Magitek Research Facility had something to do with this.”

Her comment placed no dent into Gestahl’s mind. “But how did they get here? Something must have happened.”

The cough interrupting them sought out attention instead of clearing lungs from the smoke. Celes peered over to Cid, who shrunk before her once the Emperor and General Leo also brought their attention onto him.

“I do know,” Cid began, doing his best not to fumble over his words, “that Kefka wanted to follow the Returners and mumbled something about Espers. I mean, I don’t know if that has anything to do with this, but—” His gaze plummeted to the floor. “He was upset about the facility. Furious, even. I don’t know where he planned on acquiring more Espers, if that was even what he wanted.”

Celes clenched her teeth. “And you are just informing us of this now?” When Cid failed to respond, she turned to Emperor Gestahl. “And what of you? Were you informed of Kefka’s whereabouts?”

With a sigh, Emperor Gestahl spoke. “I trust Kefka’s judgment, just as I trust both you and Leo to carry out your duties. I doubt either of you would appreciate constant vigilance on my behalf.”

The lack of an answer had Celes more frustrated than she wished to be in the wake of destruction. A piercing glare back to Cid had the man shaking his head with empty eyes. None of it made sense. Regardless, Celes was under the impression that Kefka was capable of a ridiculous, outlandish scheme to piss off a massive handful of Espers. Somehow, he would have tracked down more. Kefka could answer any and all questions they had upon returning; it was simply a matter of knowing when he’d return.

“I don’t doubt Kefka is behind this,” Leo piped up. He faced Emperor Gestahl, spine straight and face stern. “And this wouldn’t be the first time Kefka’s gone behind our backs to fulfill his own crazed desires.”

While Doma specifically wasn’t cited, he didn’t need to. From the intense emotion swirling in the Emperor’s eyes, progressively persuading Gestahl into thinking otherwise of Kefka sparked into a possibility.

Some time passed before Gestahl responded. “Then what are you suggesting we do?”

Leo managed to beat Celes to the answer. “We must place Kefka under arrest until we can verify what is going on. It would be in the Empire’s best interest to do so. Please, Emperor Gestahl, you must have a change of heart. This—” He gestured to the chaos that was now Vector. “—is what happens when we try to wage war in search for power. Do you truly wish to see the Empire fall because of it? I know I do not desire to see any more lives sacrificed, whether it be from battle or whatever has transpired in the Magitek Research Facility. This needs to end if we want to preserve the Empire.”

Celes hid the smile wanting to overwhelm her face, though her eyes softened to comfort Leo when
he looked to her for support. “Kefka is a danger,” she added. “He’s only grown worse with time. You mustn’t let him treat you like a puppet. Please, let us help you prevent this from happening again. For if we continue down this path? I cannot say what will happen, though we can all agree it would be unfathomable.”

Gestahl turned away and stared out over the balcony. A breeze sifted through and brought ashes and dirt with it. “We should tend to the city,” he said. “Work on the outer layers of the fortress and find whatever survivors we can. The structure can be rebuilt, not lives.” He looked to both Leo and Celes. “That’s all for now.”

With their orders issued, Celes and Leo stood at attention to salute Emperor Gestahl before breaking away. If they could all agree on one sentiment, it was to salvage Vector. A step in the right direction. Celes glanced to Leo before they split up with their separate groups, the older General nodding with a brief lapse of tension. It reassured Celes.

Along the eastern wing of the fortress, Celes aided her men in scouting for survivors. More corpses paved their path than living bodies. She walked over mounds of rubble until her boots stepped along flower petals. Diverting from her group, Celes arrived at the demolished garden, once home to Cid’s flora specimens. She followed him there as a child, beyond eager to help whenever possible. The roses she had once cared for and nurtured were but blackened coals, wilting to ash with every breeze picking up. She frowned, unable to spot a seed worth recovering.

The sun loomed above through patches of clouds and smoke when they began. It dared to touch the horizon by the time a scout shouted from the distance; Imperial forces returned from the east. Celes scrunched her face up in confusion, but then it all clicked. Not saying a word to her group, she rushed to the main entrance of the fortress, avoiding what debris she could. The large double doors of the entrance stood open, one of them blown off from its hinges. Joining her were both Emperor Gestahl and General Leo, sharing similar expressions to her own.

And standing there was none other than Kefka himself with a military troop backing him up.

“Bleck! What a disaster this place is!” He wrinkled his nose up while stepping over rubble. “We’re going to need more than the usual cleaning to fix all of—”

Celes stomped forward, hand clutched to the hilt of her rune blade. “Where the hell have you been?”

Kefka snapped to attention. “What do you ever mean? While all of you have been mucking around the fortress, I’ve been off hunting down the Returners.” The smile he bore for Celes had her resisting the urge to cringe. “Or have you forgotten all about that already?”

“The Espers,” Celes said loud and clear. “Did you have anything to do with the Espers?”

He blinked. “What Espers?! I come back here to find Vector a mess and you throwing slander at me!” Kefka peered past Celes to spot Gestahl. “How are you letting this happen?!”

Ignoring Kefka, Celes circled around him to face the soldiers lined up behind him. For if he was to play this game with her, Celes intended that he lost. “The first one of you to tell me the truth will be properly rewarded of such efforts.”

Her command didn’t sit well with Kefka. Not even a little bit. “What?! What do you think you’re doing?! These men have nothing to tell you!” Kefka bounced over to Celes and caught her eye. “And I’ve told you enough! This isn’t necessary—”

“Silence!” Emperor Gestahl bellowed out the command himself, a shock to all present.
But Kefka cowered away and the hate burning in his face centered onto Celes.

Focusing on the soldiers, Celes established concrete eye contact with each one in hopes someone would spill the details. Eventually, one did crack. He spoke of how they snuck into the mountains, followed the Returners, and witnessed the gateway to the Espers’ home world torn open. It hadn’t entirely been Kefka’s doing, but he wasn’t innocent either. Though Kefka’s ploy the moment he grasped onto even one Esper was clear as day. He desired the pure essence of magic they left behind upon death—magicite.

Celes needed to guarantee he would never obtain such power.

First she looked to Leo, who offered a nod, then to Emperor Gestahl. Whatever the consequences were, Celes was to carry them out. All she could do while waiting was hope he made the right decision.

The Emperor drew in a breath. “Imprison him. We’ll decide what to do with him later.”

A shocked shriek burst out of Kefka, demanding to know what was going on. He wasn’t going to receive the privilege of an explanation. Celes ordered the surrounding soldiers to arrest the man. Some hesitated, but most followed the General’s command. While Kefka wasn’t as physically strong as he thought he was, he still thrashed and flailed. He intended on struggling the entirety of his escort into the fortress and down to the prison cells. Kefka disappeared down the hall, his hysterical pleas bouncing off the shattered walls and echoing throughout the building.

Along with the screams of the Espers dancing about in Celes’ head, she could no longer differentiate between the two.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I do deeply apologize for the radio silence/lack of an update on my part. I've been busy with life, a combination of good (cosplaying and attending PAX East) and bad (decline of my own health and my boyfriend being in and out of the hospital). I hope to get back on track with updating this, so hoping for more scheduled posts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There will be a banquet tonight, General Celes, and the Returners shall be joining, as well.”

Celes almost choked on her own saliva over the announcement. The lack of a smirk on the attendant confirmed it was no joke.

“Excuse me?”

“They had come not long ago to Vector and Emperor Gestahl wishes to speak with them. Your presence has been requested.”

Half of the week was lost in a blink of an eye. Espers tore Vector apart and the Empire imprisoned Kefka. Now the Returners surfaced and sought an audience with the Emperor. Bare minimum, the group indeed escaped Vector unharmed weeks ago and Celes heaved out a sigh.

The matter of the dinner, however, had Celes struggling to breathe. The thought of sitting across from Locke, let alone everyone else, made her lose any appetite present. Without a doubt, they’d wish to converse with Celes, if not outright demand for answers. What was she to offer when her servitude belonged to Gestahl by oath? She swore her undying fealty and he promised the Returners’ safety.

The banquet wouldn’t be a trap. Not when he allowed Kefka to be locked away. Perhaps it was his way of demonstrating a change of heart, as odd as it was; more than half of the city was destroyed and Emperor Gestahl desired to hold a banquet and accommodate those who wished him dead. Morale amongst the soldiers since the attack wavered at best and plummeted at worst. Half wished to fight back and seek revenge against the Espers for what they did. The others were silenced by fear or completely lost the ability to fight any further. Conversing with the Empire’s sworn enemies didn’t boost spirits.

Upon realizing the attendant still awaited an answer from Celes, she snapped back to reality. “I will do my best to attend,” was all she said. The attendant bowed out and left Celes to fret over the upcoming dinner.

It was an ordeal beyond her control. Celes had yet to pester Emperor Gestahl in their sparse conversations. Doing so, no doubt, would result in him questioning her once more. She didn’t wish to offer him a reason to fashion a jail cell for her beside Kefka’s.

Yet the thought of appearing at the banquet ate up Celes from within and stripped her of the pride she held onto.
Dressed in her General’s attire sans decorative armor, Celes braced herself for the storm she deemed the event to be. She aimed to preserve her military presence as she headed to the dining hall, curious of the extensive preparations taken to warrant guests and a lavish meal. Celes glanced out the passing windows overlooking the newly ruined city. She winced. The Emperor and she could have their disagreements in regards to the path of the Empire, but no one deserved the catastrophe that rained hellfire upon them.

Celes opted for back hallways to avoid holes and other debris. The pleasant scent of the evening’s meals imbued the air, followed by voices conversing on idle matters. Celes paused behind the thick curtains blocking off the back entrance she planned to emerge from. More than one recognizable voice filtered in from the dining hall. Edgar’s laugh shot through and she swore Locke’s voice mixed in with it.

All of it rushed back to her. The incident in the Magitek Research Facility rendered Celes speechless, followed by plenty of sleepless nights. Nothing could erase the agony left in the wake of the events. Resentment wouldn’t win over the situation in her favor, but the time for peaceful negotiations had departed. Nonetheless, Locke deserved both an apology and aggression.

“Good to see you were able to join us.”

Celes caught sight of Leo coming up along her side and nodded. “This was rather....”

He perked up. “Last notice?”

Celes grimaced. “Uncalled for, more like it.”

“If Emperor Gestahl is going to make up for the wrongdoings of the past, then coming to terms with the Returners is a step in the right direction.”

As right as Leo was, Celes’ instincts said otherwise. “But why now?”

Leo narrowed his eyes onto her. “You know why now. We must make amends with our enemies. This is the best we can do.”

“There are people dead, Leo.” Celes kept her voice below a whisper. “The city is lost as far as I’m concerned and the Emperor is sitting down and talking with his previous enemies as if none of this has ever happened.” She averted her gaze briefly. “After all this time he’s listened to Kefka. That psychopath has done nothing but poison Gestahl’s mind... but did this really convince the Emperor to lock Kefka up?”

Leo tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

He didn’t write her off as disillusioned this time around and the weight of a potential, second imprisonment slid off of Celes’ shoulders. “Something else is going on. I’m happy to know Kefka is behind bars, but I find it hard to believe that Gestahl tossed him away with absolute ease.”

“And yet he was quick to reinstate you to your former position.”

Celes couldn’t distinguish if that was an insult or not. “He gave me an ultimatum,” she quietly hissed at Leo. “I had no other choice.”

“And if you had a choice? What would you do then?” A dark hand gestured toward the dining hall. “Would you be sitting with your friends, still one of them?”

As always, General Leo had a way with words, managing to balance in the middle of any topic.
Nothing harmful, though he asked the more difficult, yet borderline painful questions. To hear the Returners as her friends twisted her insides and constricted her throat. Any other sensation would have sufficed.

“I don’t know,” she told Leo.

“Are you alright, Celes?”

She damned herself for the undeniable waver in her voice. “I’ve been better,” she grumbled. “We all have.”

“If you do not wish to join the banquet, that is fine by me. I’m sure Emperor Gestahl will understand. I can take care of whatever pleasantries are required from a General.” He offered a small smile. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

Her lips curled up slightly. “Thank you.” Genuine and pure. Celes couldn’t have lied right then if she tried.

Before he entered the dining hall, Leo’s features sparked to life again as he stepped towards Celes. “One more thing. We’ve already been formulating a plan to track down the Espers.” Leo raised a hand the moment Celes’ mouth opened to protest. “We are not planning to fight them. We are hoping to track them down and discuss a truce. It’s the most civilized way to go about it and Emperor Gestahl agrees this plan should be implemented. You and I will be leading the group. An outside mercenary has been hired, as well. I’m sure a couple of the Returners will offer a hand, too.”

Upon hearing the next plan of attack, Celes’ face went white. Something had to be done about the Espers, but would they ever listen to a truce? A suicide mission sounded more appropriate than whatever plan Leo spoke of. Combined with the Returners’ involvement forced Celes to confront them sooner than later. She would be an Imperial General yet again before them: an ally, but not them.

Celes nodded in agreement and Leo smiled. “We plan to leave in the morning and regroup in Albrook. Gather supplies, assess tactics, and so forth. Now if you’ll excuse me.” With a quick bow, Leo headed on out to join the dinner.

Once alone, Celes sighed with relief over her dismissal from the evening’s events, though it didn’t kill her curiosity. Cautious steps brought her towards the edge of the curtain. Holding her breath, she peeked around, just enough to glimpse at the scenario.

All of them sat at the long table. Not only had Locke, Edgar, and Cyan escaped, but they had also gathered Gau and Sabin from Narshe. In the middle was Terra, appearing her usual self. No visible tufts of pink fur or sharpened claws. Celes intended to speak with Terra in due time. The Empire left brands on them both, albeit different ones, but it served as a bond between the two. Despite staying away from the banquet, Celes smiled upon confirmation Terra was indeed safe and healthy.

Beside Terra was Locke. With Celes removed from the picture, his attention locked solely onto Terra, parallel to the treatment once bestowed upon Celes. She gripped at the curtains while spying. Terra was hardly at fault, too oblivious to register Locke’s actions as more than an amicable gesture. Still, Celes wished to not witness the other woman fall victim to the allure in Locke’s words. Terra deserved better. *Does he even realize he’s doing it?* she thought.

Much to Celes’ surprise, at the end of the table sat someone she didn’t expect to see at all. Setzer leaned back, a slight slouch to his posture and a glass of wine cupped in his hand. The black coat he donned now differed from what he wore before, the finer fabrics better suited to impressing nobility
than insulating the body during flight. While all eyes were on General Leo as Emperor Gestahl introduced him, Setzer glanced away. He heaved out a sigh with impatient fingers tapping at his glass.

About to nurse his drink, he froze and for good reason; he caught her peeking from behind the curtain.

Half of his face hid behind the wine glass, but there was no denying his violet eyes. Her heart fluttered as Setzer casually sipped his wine. Pulling the glass away, Setzer licked his lips clean of the alcohol. From a distance, she swore he smirked in her direction, but by then she jolted backwards to conceal herself.

The flustered state introduced into her body had nothing to do with anyone else discovering her whereabouts. With what little she knew of Setzer, she imagined he prided in keeping that bit of information all to himself. What bothered Celes more was the look in his eyes, as if he had rediscovered a delicacy he wished to have.

Convincing herself it was nothing to worry about, Celes exited the dining hall. Though Setzer’s presence did prove one other notion; he survived and continued to stick with the Returners, albeit lacking much of the enthusiasm exhibited in the remainder of the group.

The thoughts drifted away the further she separated herself from the dining hall. A good night’s sleep was in order, for the morning would prove to be productive. Celes hesitated to head in the direction of her bedroom. Leo’s impromptu plan had yet to settle within Celes. The slim success rate didn’t raise apprehension—Gestahl’s alacrity did. The same man who desired to drain the Espers of their magical essence now hoped for a truce.

*Something’s not right.*

She had no sound reason to head into the lower levels of the fortress. The last time Celes overthought a process and jumped to conclusions, it earned her a jail cell. In light of that, if there was one person to provide an inkling of truth, then it was the crazed man imprisoned below. Whether or not Kefka would entertain her with the truth was another question.

Padding down to the prison section, Celes cracked the door open for voices to trickle out from down the hall. She paused and peeked around the corner. There before Kefka’s cell was an attendant, the specific robes exclusive to the Emperor’s personal men. Celes savored her current covertness and opted to eavesdrop.

“He knows well enough that what we seek is within the Crescent Island!” Kefka’s familiar tone shot through first.

That left the more timid voice to the attendant. “Yes, the Emperor is aware, but he insists that if we wait a little longer—”

“And what? Carry out this charade? You have to be kidding me.”

“The Emperor says it must be done.”

There was a snort. “Of course he does. It wouldn’t be fun for him if it wasn’t like that.” Then a sigh. “So when does he plan on getting me out of here?”

“Come morning, right when General Leo’s group leaves.”

Celes clamped a hand over her mouth to silence her audible gasp.
Kefka’s chuckle rang down the hall. “Good! Excellent! Then we can carry out the mission from there. You tell him I give him my thanks. That’s all.”

Footsteps trudged towards Celes. This time, she didn’t hesitate to hide and swung the door open. As they passed each other, the attendant kept his eyes ahead, never flinching. Whatever the hell was going on, the answer evidently lied in Kefka.

At the end was a corner cell, complete with half of the bare essentials. Dingy walls made the rubble upstairs appealing. Behind thick bars was the colorful man himself. Though Kefka had his back to Celes, as if he didn’t notice her arrival. He hunched over the stiff, pathetic excuse of a mattress and fumbled with what had to be his own dinner.

When he didn’t acknowledge her, Celes cleared her throat. “Enjoying your stay?”

Kefka’s head snapped in her direction. The make-up masking his face had faded, blurry smears circling his eyes and lining the corners of his lips. The short term of his imprisonment took a grave toll on him, more akin to those who spent decades behind the Empire’s bars. At one point, Kefka had been a proud knight, magically infused like Celes herself. The state before her now was far from proud, far from admirable.

His lips quirked into a frown. “Does it look like I’m enjoying my stay?” He scoffed. “This coming from the General who saw it fit to have me locked up. Tell me, Celes.” Stepping away from the bed, Kefka approached the bars. “Are you pleased with yourself? Are you happy with what you’ve done?”

“That’s not what I’m here for.”

“Ohoho! Of course it’s not. Oh silly me for thinking such a thing. So what do I owe to this great pleasure, hmm?” The frown turned upside down into a vast grin. “Did you come to say hello? Did you miss me?”

“What nonsense are you planting into the Emperor’s head?”

He fluttered his eyes. “Why, what do you ever mean by that?”

Daring to step closer, Celes glared at him. “Don’t play me as a fool, Kefka. I know one of his attendants was just in here.”

“Yes,” Kefka replied, unenthusiastic as ever. A free hand motioned to the tray on the mattress. “To bring me food or whatever sustenance they find fit for prisoners.” He spat the last word out, though she refused to recoil. “After all this time, after all we’ve been through, this is how—”

“You spoke of leaving, Kefka. To go on some mission regarding the Crescent Island? Did I hear that right?”

She hoped to catch him in his lies and crack his shell to ooze out the information she needed. It wasn’t that simple; with enough complex layers to drive everyone around him insane, Kefka had never been simple. Celes rejected succumbing to the madness and in turn becoming something like him. She couldn’t. The magic within her would never drive her wild.

Head tilted to the side, Kefka’s smeared lips twitched up. “What is this foolishness you speak of, Celes? Now, why would I ever do something like that?”

Her tolerance for his usual dance around the topic disappeared. Bolting headlong, she thrust a hand past the bars, latched onto the first bit of clothing she could paw at, and yanked Kefka towards her.
His eyes widened before he collided into cold metal bars. A cry of protest squeaked out of Kefka and Celes held him in place.

“I am not in the mood to be fucking around, Kefka,” Celes snarled. “What the hell is going on?! More than half of Vector is gone and dead thanks to those Espers and you know why they were so hell bent to kill us off? Because you are beyond power hungry and convinced the Emperor that walking down this path is the glorious one. This is your fault!”

It hadn’t been the first time a heated confrontation turned to a demonstration of brute force for Celes; it simply had been overdue. As a General, she evaded scrutiny for demonstrating power before soldiers and Celes was more than happy to indulge Kefka. Sometimes force was necessary.

Though her frustrations didn’t strike fear into Kefka. Instead, a low, slow, rumbling amusement washed over him. Face crushed into the bars, his beady eyes locked onto her. “It’s all my fault. Is it now? Do you truly believe that, Celes? That I’m the one to blame for all that is wrong with the Empire? With the world? Because if that’s so, may I remind you of where you came from.”

Kefka shifted, both hands gripping at the bars. His voice dropped to a lush whisper as the words oozed out of him. “You were one of many, my dear. You could have been another failure, another tally to the death count. We gave you a chance and you passed.” Another chuckle reverberated from him. “Ohoho, did you pass. I recall the joy that day when I discovered there was another success. Another Magitek knight.”

Her hand shook while holding Kefka in place, but Celes did not submit to instability. Though when his hand cupped over hers, boney fingers stroking up the back of her palm, Celes couldn’t help but gasp. Before she could withdraw, Kefka latched on and pinned Celes to him.

“And you, my lovely, are no different from me. You and I? We surpass humans and Espers alike. We are elite. Absolute perfection. So if you are to judge me, then may I remind you that every time you glance at me, I am but a mirror of yourself.” Kefka flashed a wide, toothy grin. “You cannot deny that sort of fate.” A finger caressed the sensitive skin of her wrist, his nail daring to sink hard into her flesh. “Oh, look at you. You’re a mess now.” His face pressed between two bars, closer. “Do I scare you, my dear?”

Celes filled her lungs with air before screaming. “Stop it!”

The sharp yank of her hand freed herself from Kefka, though not without his nail tearing away at her skin. Celes hitched her breath while examining the damage; fresh, crimson blood spilled from her wrist. A quick Cure tended to the wound and closed it up.

Kefka still snickered. “Say what you wish, Celes, but you can’t deny the magic that courses through you. Without it, you are nothing. The Empire only values you for such gifts, don’t you know?”

The illusions he crafted with his tongue matched, if not exceeded, the ones conjured from magic. This time, Celes couldn’t swing her blade to vanquish them.

“Will you shut up!”

“My my! Aren’t we angry this evening.” Kefka leaned back from the bars, swinging from them with his head lolling around. A burst of laughter jutted from his smiling lips. “Such a range of emotions! I wonder what it must be like to see those who were once your friends now walking the halls of this building. Do they still hate you for what you’ve done?”

*He knows of the Returners being here?* Celes almost scoffed at herself. *Of course he does.* “What
I've done? Don’t confuse me with yourself.”

“Oh, but it was your fault.” Kefka yanked himself upright, shaking his head while clicking his tongue. “Shame on you for thinking you didn’t have a part in this mess. Simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. Almost like a textbook example. Truly remarkable. It’s a pity that they still don’t trust you—”

“You don’t know that.”

“And you do?” Her silence was enough of an answer to Kefka. It had him laughing. “You truly are a mess this evening! I expected better from you, Celes.”

She refused to have him taunt her. Though no amount of physical or verbal threats persuaded Kefka otherwise. The longer she stayed in the prison, the more fruitless her efforts became.

“But do you know what’s absolutely pathetic?” The laughter ceased to exist. A straight line formed Kefka’s mouth as he perked up an eyebrow. ‘Do you? Entertain a guess at all?” While she didn’t wish to play his game, Celes shook her head in response. “Well, aren’t you bursting with excitement.” He sighed. “That pitiful excuse for a thief, the one that helped you out of your own jail cell?”

The vague mention of Locke captured Celes’ attention, more so than she wished to acknowledge. First he smiled, beyond delighted. “He hates you. Nothing but pure, searing hot hate. All he had to know was the possibility of you being with the Empire. That’s all it took and poof! No more trust! Gone! Just floated away! And the best part is that you are back with the Empire. Now he truly does have a reason to hate you for the rest of his life. And don’t you think you can fool me. I saw the way you tripped over your words and how you looked at him. Tch, I expected more from you, Celes. You? Fawning over a boy?” His tongue flicked out while his face contorted, all morphed by disgust. “Makes me sick! But alas! I fixed that for you. Nothing for you to worry—”

Celes hurried away from Kefka’s cell, determined to flee the premise. Her mind tore in two, stuck between locking herself up in her bedroom and hunting down General Leo to inform him of the new development. Though the sliver of information she received wasn’t enough, just like the plots to poison Doma. Even with Leo’s newfound trust, Celes doubted he’d accept her word without further insight.

“Oh, why are you leaving now?!” Kefka called out. “Don’t be such a sore sport! Come right back over here! Hey! Hey!” The hysteria in his tone morphed into something violent. Fists banged into the bars, the heavy sound ricocheting through Celes’ head. “Hey! Where the hell do you think you’re going?! I’m not finished with you! You can’t walk away from me, you stupid brat! Don’t think you’re above me simply because you’ve regained your General status! Pfft, you spoiled fucking brat! We’re not different, you and I! Don’t think otherwise!”

All she had to do was prop the door open, walk out, and slam it behind her. Kefka’s voice would be locked away and long forgotten into the rest of the night.

Though he seduced her enough to hesitate. “Oh,” he purred out, “and one more thing.”

Celes peered back down the hall. A fraction of his face poked out around the corner, squished between the bars once more. From what she could make out, a frenzied grin stretched across his face.

“Won’t you be a doll and not discuss this little conversation of ours with others? I would much appreciate that.” His voice deepened and transitioned from humored to psychotic. “I know you have
a tendency to overreact and run to Emperor Gestahl to tell him what’s going on, like you’re keeping
the peace and upholding justice and blah blah blah. So sick of you doing that. Just like I’m sick of
you eavesdropping on every damn conversation I have. Don’t think I don’t know. I know you
overheard what I said to the Emperor’s attendant. I’m not stupid, Celes, so don’t treat me like I am.
Because if you do tell? If you tell him or General Leo or anyone else what happened here? I’ll be
sure to kill off all those dear, dear friends you’re still hung up on. One by one. Starting with that
pretty thief of yours. Something slow and dirty. Can’t spoil him with a clean death.”

Nausea overturned her stomach and boiled through her throat. Muscles twitched beneath her skin as
Kefka’s deep chuckle echoed from his cell. Just leave, she tried commanding herself. Open the door
and leave. Just leave. Just—

“I’ll take one of those daggers of his,” Kefka continued, “and see how well it fits in his throat. And
then take the other and drive it straight through his navel. Drag it up his body and slowly—oh so
slowly—split him open. But not before we give him the same treatment the soldiers gave you during
your time locked up. I heard they beat you to a pulp until you couldn’t stand. I bet that was a sight to
behold. You know... I’m more than acquainted with a few soldiers who would give anything to
break you even further. I’m sure they still—”

Her hand found the door handle. The wooden structure flung open and Celes made haste to depart
the prison. As it creaked back to shut tight, Kefka’s hysterical, terrifying laughter burst from within
and traveled through the walls, rebounding past the prison and trickling into Celes’ mind. Even when
she left the floor, his hideous amusement pounded in her head.

Sleep wouldn’t relieve her that evening, not when Kefka haunted her enough to instill a nightmare
into her conscious mind. Celes’ instinct was to tell someone. Anyone. Again his words hissed in her
ears and the mental images of his promise for Locke almost doubled Celes over. The fate of Doma
had been his doing and the Returners would not receive as gentle of a treatment. Even with Emperor
Gestahl’s oath of protection, it didn’t matter. The promise was as good as the iron bars restraining
Kefka.

The overwhelming thoughts brought Celes to an eventual halt, bracing herself along the wall. What
pounded in her head blinded and deafened Celes to her surroundings. With a deep inhale, she tried to
recompose herself, unaware of who was approaching her.

“So you are alive.”

The voice jolted through her. As Celes sucked in a breath, she identified locks of silvery hair before
settling upon the face. The absolute last person she desired to run into in the middle of the night stood
before her, regal as ever. Not that any of the other Returners were a better fit; Celes had little to say,
more so when Kefka sealed her lips. Her lack of a response to Setzer had him knotting up his face
with a sense of concern she had yet to witness.

“Is something the matter?” he asked. When he dared to move to her, Celes inched away.

“Forgive me,” Celes coughed up the words, losing focus on the moment. “It’s been....” She sighed.
“The past few days have—”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Setzer offered. “Nor do you need to explain yourself.” He walked
towards the wall, maintaining distance from her as he leaned into it. Dressed in his finest while standing amongst the wrecked interior of the Empire’s castle was a sight to behold. “If anything, I’m glad to see you’re still around.”

Though the flicker in his eyes back when he spotted her surpassed content or joy. Now the allure simmered down. She straightened up and pushed her hair over her shoulder. “I find that a bit hard to believe.”

“Do you?” He chuckled lowly. “Well, then I suppose I should be the one apologizing.” Setzer cocked his head to better catch her eyes with. “Believe me when I say it’s good to see you.”

Celes averted her stare, arms crossing around her form. So long as Setzer didn’t make their meeting as awkward as their last time spent alone, Celes had a chance of parting ways shortly and heading to bed.

When he spoke again, his voice softened to a whisper. “Celes, are you well?”

The answer could have been written on her face. Providing Setzer with insight wouldn’t have made a bit of difference, or so Celes believed. The rest of the group stayed with a purpose, though Celes doubted Setzer stuck around with Edgar’s bribe in mind alone.

“No, it’s nothing,” she tried saying, though the words slipping off her tongue were gag-inducing. Setzer raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “I... no. Nothing is well right now. It’s...” A breath passed through her, the exhale accompanied by a tremble. “The past couple of weeks have been a mess and now...” She shook her head. “I don’t know anymore. I don’t—”

“Celes,” Setzer squeezed in. He inched closer and this time, Celes didn’t flee, albeit her eyes refused to acknowledge him. “You don’t have to tell me anything. I wish I could help in some way, but it’s none of my business. Truly, it isn’t. Knowing you’re still alive after all that’s happened is good enough for me.”

A light scoff left Celes. “Is it?”

The bout of silence forced her to eye his face hardening. “The four of you left for Vector and took far too long for my liking. When I showed up in hopes to find out what the hell was going on, you weren’t there. And your oh-so-faithful bodyguard wasn’t keen on telling me what had happened either.”

He meant Locke. He had to. With that sarcastic, apathetic tone mixed with the roll of his eyes, she imagined Locke wasn’t as faithful as Setzer claimed him to be. Regardless, Celes’ curiosity piqued.

“Did they tell you anything?” Celes questioned gently.

Setzer shrugged his shoulders. “Edgar eventually spoke of the Magitek Research Facility and something about dead creatures making up those bits of crystal you’re all carrying around now and some guy named Kefka showed up and that you were a spy the whole time.” He droned on with a wave of his hand in the air. “And in the end, you disappeared with the Magitek armor along with what’s-his-face. I don’t know, honestly, nor do I truly care. You’re safe now, right? That’s all that matters.”

“And what of after the events in Vector?”

A short-lived grin pulled at his lips. “Showed those idiots not to send a team of half-assed drones after my airship, that’s what. Once we squared that threat off, well... we picked up that girl everyone was worried about. Terra, I believe it was? I simply flew where we needed to go and didn’t ask
many questions. Asking about you was enough to get me lynched, so I wasn’t going to pry for anything else.” Setzer sighed heavily. “I could have lived without the incident where we visited the Esper cave to the east and rightfully pissed them off. Glad we got the Blackjack to land before it crashed into a mountain range.” With a clap of his hands, Setzer chuckled. “And now we’re here.”

Setzer’s reaction to the ordeal served as the polar opposite to Locke’s. Where Locke shined with brilliant resolve, Setzer’s indifference somehow kept him interested in the series of events he tangled himself up in. Somehow he continued to stay true and adamant to his word, the one Celes acquired over their little bet. Such a trait was almost admirable for any gambler. For Celes, it proved to be refreshing; she expected Setzer to snake his way out in his favor. Instead, he eyed Celes as if she were to pull the rug out from under his feet again. The glimmer in his eyes hinted at the thrill of enjoyment from it.

Unsure of a response, Celes turned away from Setzer, leaning into the wall. All of it—the state of Vector and Setzer’s recounting of the Returners’ ventures—was an absolute, certified mess. She wished she possessed the energy to laugh it off as a joke, but instead every emotion dared to drain Celes.

“Would you believe me if I said I missed you?”

The smug tone returned—the one usually accompanied by a smirk—and she didn’t bother to acknowledge any of it. Clinging onto her body, the only answer she presented to Setzer was silence.

He let out a soft laugh at himself. “No, of course you wouldn’t. You still have no reason to trust me. I don’t blame you. But if you are to believe one thing, it’s this—the rest of the Returners may be questioning your loyalty and whether or not you’re considered an ally to them, but that doesn’t matter to me. Spy or not, you’re still Celes. You’re the lady who snuck under my radar and tricked me. Twice, might I add. Whatever your motive is, I won’t question it. I don’t judge you based on that alone.”

Her eyes closed as she absorbed his words. “Then what do you judge me on?”

Setzer was quick to respond, as if storing a plethora of reasons off the top of his head. “Your strength, your perseverance, your wits, your will, your drive.” The words droned off and a light chuckle fluttered out of him. “Your beauty.”

*I can still put you in your place,* Celes wished to say, but she recalled how she struck him on the Blackjack. It was a warning and yet he relished the pain, almost begged for more. A chill coursed through her spine, unsure of whether or not the sensation was pleasant.

“Look at you,” Setzer continued. “So modest. You could look yourself in the mirror and not even see what I see. Must say I admire that as well.”

The mention of mirrors plummeted Celes back to a grim place, back to where she conversed with Kefka. “Can you stop?”

She half expected Setzer to tease her further, but he honored her request, much to her surprise.

“Forgive me,” was what he said instead. “I can’t help but be intrigued by you.” After a moment of silence, Setzer prodded her for another answer. “So... is this what they have Generals wear?”

Celes snapped her eyes to him. “What did I just tell you?”

“Not aiming to be fresh, Celes.” He motioned to her garb with his chin. “One can admire craftsmanship and beauty in fashion, no?”
After a thorough look over, his eyes met hers and Setzer smiled, or at least attempted to. More so than before, Celes was conscious of what she wore before him. It wasn’t lace, silk, and a corset, but the tunic clung plenty well to her torso and had she opted to go without leggings, patches of her thighs would have been on display. She steadied her breaths and wished the heat rising within her cheeks would vanish.

Setzer nodded. “You look well.” Then he smirked. “What is it that they address you as again?”

“General Celes Chère.”

“Ah! Such a proper title for such a marvelous woman. You’re worthy of every word, I’m sure.” He tilted his head, still refusing to part his eyes from hers. “I’ll have you know that the few I’ve spoken to here speak highly of you. I bumped into this older man, one everyone kept calling Professor, and he claimed to know you since you were a child.”

Celes swallowed hard. “Professor Cid?”

Setzer glowed. “Yes! That’s him. He’s going to be aiding me with fixing up the Blackjack. As much as I’d like to tend to it by myself, it would be in all of our best interests to have a helping hand in the matter. Might be a chance for me to ask him some more about you.”

“Don’t you even dare.”

“Why not? He’s already told me the important parts: you do know how to sing, you wield magic as well as your blade, and you enjoyed spending time in his garden. The only part I didn’t believe was that you were… how old when you became a General?” Celes didn’t respond. “Doesn’t matter now, I guess. Years of experience does anyone good.”

Celes raised an eyebrow. “I’m eighteen.”

Had her mind been in a better place, she would have roared over Setzer’s silent bewilderment.

“You’re joking.”

“Do you now?”

After a long, hard stare, Setzer sighed with a smile. “Of course. My mistake to think profound achievements couldn’t take place at such a young age. You’ve done more in your years than others have in the entirety of their life. And here I was fooled into believing you appeared youthful.” He chuckled. “You’ve impressed me again, Celes.” But the smile faded and the seriousness returned. “So does that mean you’ve regained your status here in the Empire? No longer fighting against them, I take it?” Once more Celes averted her blushing face. “No need to worry, Celes. I meant what I said; I’m not going to judge you for it. Besides,” he lowered his voice and leaned in closer to her. Almost close enough for her to feel his breath against her neck. “I half expect you to trick the Empire with whatever plans you have up your sleeves.”

Celes stared into his eyes, before analyzing his face, only to find deep scars and a softened mouth. Maybe it was a bluff to warm up to her, but Celes recalled what he once said of lies. She found comfort in that reassurance, even if she never expected to find it in the likes of Setzer.

A response formed in her head, though once her lips parted, a distant voice seeped in from the opposite hallway. Both she and Setzer glanced down. Nobody was in sight, but the majestic quality rang with a Figaroan accent. Celes halted, her insides twisting while fear stitched upon her face; confronting another Returner so soon was more than she could stomach.
Setzer whispered her name before his hand settled onto her shoulder. The warmth of his skin against her cold body broke Celes out of her trance.

“This way,” he said.

Guiding Celes backwards, Setzer brought her into an alcove. The light of the torches didn’t touch the area, nor did the moonlight spilling in from the windows. Celes’ back crushed into the wall as Setzer shielded her with his dark coat. He shushed her before peering over his shoulder. While he scouted the perimeter, Celes held her own breath, fearing it was loud enough to warrant attention.

Though a new concern presented itself to Celes upon comprehending how close Setzer was. Not enough to crush Celes, but enough to justify the additional beats in her heart. The heat from his body radiated off of him and the familiar scent of his clung to his clothes. She watched the steady rise and fall of his chest. Both of his arms braced the wall alongside her to protect her instead of pursuing her. When the voice took the corner and crept towards their direction, Setzer inched in further to ensure Celes’ concealment.

Edgar walked by, accompanied by Terra; the glimpse of ash blonde hair with a hue of green belonged only to her. Despite her silence, Edgar chatted up a storm over the finer details of a gala once held in Figaro, unaware of who stood in the alcove several feet away from them. Their steps faded as they continued down the hall, turning again and venturing off until the silence returned.

Both of them released their breaths, though Setzer lingered in his position. “Well that was close,” he muttered, only to look over to her. “Are you okay?”

A mixture of embarrassment and frustration bubbled up onto her features, which in turn earned her a chuckle from Setzer. Slowly, he backed off. His eyes remained on her.

“I figured you weren’t keen on meeting with them any time soon. I know I wouldn’t be. I don’t think any of them even realize you’re here and acting as a General once more.” Setzer exited the alcove and beckoned for Celes. “Don’t you worry; your secret is safe with me.”

Celes reemerged into the hallway, unsure of what to say. One moment he drove her into a furious rage and the next he provided hospitality exceeding the expectations of any man with little morals. It confused her, yet in an odd way also intrigued her. It shouldn’t have. He wasn’t the sort of man she was supposed to be remotely interested in. Nor was she the type to intrigue him and yet Setzer insisted otherwise.

“Thank you,” Celes murmured, her head bowing to him in the process.

Astonishment glowed upon his face. “For what?”

You know for what. Why are you asking? Celes sighed. “For trusting me,” she admitted. “For whatever it’s worth, anyways. You of all people have no reason to trust me.”

“Oh, come now, don’t say that,” Setzer scolded her. “You need to have a little more faith.”

A miracle was needed far more than mere faith, more so in regards to the hell which would befall upon the group once they reached the Crescent Island. Again, Setzer eyed Celes with concern. She did her best to soften her features, only to tighten enough muscles to threaten herself with a headache. Any sleep obtained would be as much a blessing as it would be futile.

She faced Setzer straight on, eyes matching his, and reeled in a deep breath. “Setzer... something is going on. I... it’s complicated, but I know it’s not good. I can’t... I just can’t....” Her gaze faltered to the floor. No amount of clutching onto her arms helped ease the shot nerves snapping.
Silence hung between them. Eventually, a timid hand reached out and his fingertips brushed over the back of her hand, as if asking for permission. Regardless of his attempt to comfort her, Celes winced away, happy he ceased his actions. Such discipline was hard pressed to find and deserved respect. And to think he was the same individual who slammed her into the wall not long ago. How baffling. That particular recollection had yet to leave Celes’ memory, much to her dismay.

“You can’t speak of it,” Setzer filled in the blank space she left. “I understand.” Hands returned to his side as he looked away. “The Emperor spoke of ending this war and restoring peace. I’ve seen many men say anything under pressure, even more so when all of their money and possessions were on the line and their life relied on a firm poker face with a bluff to fool anyone into believing they held more than a two of a kind. They either lost everything or convinced everyone.”

“You think he’s lying?”

“Obviously,” Setzer spat out. “By the gods, it was painful to sit through that sad excuse of a dinner. The wine wasn’t as good as everyone said it was, either. You don’t have to tell me what is going on, Celes. I believe you without you needing to do that. You do what you must do. I know some people are heading out with General Leo come morning and the rest of us are planning to stay here. If anything is to happen,” Setzer motioned to himself, “I’ll be sure to react.”

Celes blinked. “You’d do that?” And he nodded. “So you trust me?”

His chuckle was his first response. “You don’t exactly leave me any other choice, my dear.” His choice in pet name had Celes twitching. He took note with a sly smirk. “But you have a long day tomorrow. You best be getting whatever rest you can.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “I doubt sleep would be so kind to me this evening.”

“Yes that so?”

She didn’t expect him to draw near. She didn’t expect him to lean in to bring his lips to her ear. She didn’t expect his light breath on her skin to raise tiny hairs. She didn’t want to acknowledge any signs her body set off in response to his actions.

“If you were more open to the idea,” Setzer spoke below a whisper, “I’d suggest I could help you get some sleep. Put your mind to ease and relax your body.”

The fire returned to her face, then traveled down the front of her torso before sinking to the pit of her stomach. Celes hitched her breath as Setzer pulled away. A pleased smile flashed across his face. She could have screamed at him for pulling a lewd trick on her. But once again, she knew better than to lash out at him.

You’re so adorable when you’re angry, he told her back on the Blackjack.

With a grave bow, Setzer walked away. “Good night, Celes, and safe travels. We’ll meet again soon enough.”

She swore he winked at her, though the torchlight didn’t illuminate his features. Before either uttered another word, Setzer turned away and sauntered off. The shadows and his black coat mixed with one another, and even his silvery-white hair blended with the occasional moonlight splashing over him. He left Celes alone with the reminder that he still toyed with whatever fantasies he kept of her, that she indeed left more of an impression than Maria ever had.

Sleep never embraced Celes upon slipping into her bed, though Kefka’s words no longer sat in the forefront of her mind. Tossing and turning, the sheets twisted over Celes’ body. She failed to calm
the inner fire roused in her until the skies shifted to a deep blue. Seated in the depths of her mind, she almost wanted to welcome Setzer’s offer. Almost. But not enough to vocalize and give life to it.

*You make me sick,* she thought instead.

Chapter End Notes

Two songs really helped flesh this chapter together. For the first half, *The Way He Looks At Me* from the Gone Girl soundtrack perfectly fits for an ambience when Celes visits Kefka. And as for bumping into a certain airship pilot, *Just Like You* was on repeat while I was editing.
Chapter 7

General Leo introduced her as another Imperial General. Celes boarded the ship, following Leo’s lead and stopped dead in her tracks when she spotted who was to be accompanying them to the Crescent Island. Locke stood with Terra not far from his side. Both were caught off guard, interrupted by Celes’ presence instead of Leo’s voice. Locke’s glare pierced Celes as Leo continued. The distrust etched into Locke’s face lingered from their last meeting; he hadn’t forgotten what had transpired. No explanation would satisfy him. Not when Celes wore the Empire's colors again along with full armor.

She hadn’t forgotten Kefka’s threat, either. The image of Locke suffering by Kefka’s hand was a brief one, though had Celes sucking in air. If only Locke could believe and trust her for a second. Setzer had done so and more without blinking an eye.

Leo noted the thick tension. He glanced at each of them and settled upon Celes. "Is something the matter?"

"No," Locke butted in through a tight jaw, "it's nothing."

Nothing. His words, not hers. Celes held her breath and matched Locke’s gaze. Is that what I am now? Is that what happened between us? Absolutely nothing?

"Very well," Leo sighed out.

He announced a change of plans; due to poor sea conditions, they were to depart the following morning. The delay festered anxiety inside Celes, though she didn’t argue with sound logic over avoiding a potential shipwreck. It meant staying a night at the inn and another day around Locke and Terra. She longed for a heart-to-heart talk with both of them for separate reasons, though neither Locke or Terra met her stare with warmth.

Upon departing the ship, Locke called to her. Her name on his tongue pulsed an overwhelming wave of unease through her. His tone softened from when she last heard it in Vector. The subtlety didn’t go unnoticed, nor did the doubt laced in her name.

His heavy footsteps crawled towards her. "Celes, wait."

Not bothering to acknowledge him, Celes marched onto the docks and headed for the center of Albrook. By the time the busy, midday crowds consumed Celes, no signs of Locke, Terra, or Leo were in sight. Even then, her heart raced and her breaths grew shallow.

The port city of Albrook was always hectic, but many from Vector fled for refuge in the smaller city, rapidly overcrowding the cobblestone streets. Strangers bundled together for warmth, crying on each other's shoulders. Some begged her for spare gil and food. The few who recognized Celes’ Imperial garb spat out their distaste.

"Why did you have to live?! Why couldn't the Espers kill you?!"

"After what you did to Maranda, you deserve to die!"

"I bet you hid away like the coward you are while the rest of Vector was torn apart. You pathetic, Imperial wench!"

No matter where she went, Albrook offered no solace for Celes. The sooner they departed for the
Crescent Island, the better. It also meant the possibility of Kefka making a grand entrance to sabotage the mission. Bearing the burden of the truth alone crushed Celes, yet confronting anyone on the matter was no better. Celes could not allow anyone to fall prey to Kefka and his treacherous schemes.

Setzer, however, had half a clue. He and the others stayed behind in Vector and for what it was worth, he promised to keep an eye out for suspicious activity. In turn, Celes had to reciprocate their now mutual trust. The last individual she wished to bestow her faith to was a man like Setzer. The detested the very notion. No one else, however, approached Celes without a judgmental eye. Locke and Terra’s silence upon brushing paths with Celes again only cemented the notion.

She retreated to her single room in the inn early. The jovial voices from below sifted through the floorboards and increased in volume into the night. A bar maiden provided dinner for Celes—one she tipped generously—to ensure she mingled with no one else. Next door was the hired mercenary, the one called Shadow, who also refused to waste his breath before strangers, more interested in money than socializing. She half expected a knock on her door, perhaps from Locke. Maybe he’d wish to speak with her in private to hash out their silent frustrations, but it never happened. No one bothered Celes.

The food on her plate vanished and the voices below died out. The sun set through her window, replaced by the moon and stars. Celes lied in bed, staring at the ceiling as thoughts roused her awake. Nothing vibrated through the inn, save for the occasional wind, and it wasn’t enough to coax Celes into a deep slumber.

Fed up, Celes threw the covers off and slipped her cloak on. She grabbed her rune blade out of habit; being deprived of the phantom limb was as unwelcoming as the lack of sleep. While she had no destination in mind, lying in bed wasn’t doing Celes any favors. Perhaps the midnight hour within the port city would offer comfort. Sneaking down the stairs, the innkeeper manned the front lobby with sleepy eyes and yawns. He acknowledged Celes with a brief glimpse before she set foot outside. If someone required her attention now, it would have to wait until morning.

Salt air accosted her first, the rolling ocean waves second. A constant breeze danced within Albrook and shifted through her pale blonde hair. The sea air called for thicker layers, though Celes stood comfortable in her cloak. If the numbness in her body wasn’t proof of what she was, the Shiva magicite back in her room within a pouch served as a constant reminder: a Magitek knight, a product of the Empire, and a fine-tuned weapon.

Kefka was right. Little separated the two of them in regards to their gifts.

Nobody else walked the streets of Albrook as she strolled down to the parapet overlooking the docks. The fractured moonlight and starlight illuminated the water with a soft glow, swaying in and out of the waves. She inhaled the strong, ocean air. The wind once more combed her hair and calmed her muscles. A soft, content exhale fell from her lips.

Her bare arms folded on top of the parapet, eyes cast out to the ocean. Boats bobbed as black silhouettes in the water while the occasional gull called out. Come morning, the ocean would stretch to the horizon in every direction. General Leo’s plan once they reached the shore had yet to be revealed to even Celes. They set out to discuss peace with the Espers, but they had to track them down first. She hoped he briefed her on the way to the Crescent Island, perhaps serving as a secondary purpose of somehow informing him of Kefka’s plots. Though Celes already hung her head in defeat upon focusing on the topic. One of the soldiers could have been working as Kefka’s eyes and ears. Anything less than careful wasn’t acceptable for Celes, not when the consequences resulted in death.
"Fuck," Celes breathed out, slumping over the stone structure.

The rolling ocean and breeze fuzzed out the rest of the world. The footsteps were lost on her ears, but she did recognize the quiet voice speaking her name.

Locke stood behind her sans bandana and jacket. A loose, striped tank top and fitted, black pants summed up his attire for the night. The breeze tousled his dark, dirty blonde hair as his eyes fell onto her. He wrapped lean arms around his shivering body. Celes glanced at Locke before returning her eyes to the ocean.

*Why are you here? Why now? What the hell do you even have to say to me? It's nothing, right? All of this. Everything between us. Nothing. You said it yourself.*

Locke approached her like prey investigating a sleeping predator. "I didn't think I'd find you out here," he mentioned with a chuckle and chattering teeth. "You having trouble sleeping, too, huh? I've slept on worse beds, but these are still pretty bad. Guess when your usual customers are sailors, they'll take anything that's not the deck." He released an agitated sigh. "Oh boy, I am *not* looking forward to this ocean voyage. I'll be lucky if I can keep my stomach in one piece."

*Then why are you coming?* Celes wished to ask. Not because of her, she knew as much. Her only guess lay in Terra. Typical Locke. Always swearing his undying devotion to whoever he could protect next. She almost scoffed, but decided to save her breath.

Her eyes stayed on the dark horizon, ignoring Locke. Celes didn't wish to scream at him. Not now. Anger wouldn't do either of them justice when the mission required a tranquil mind to focus on the task at hand. Locke presenting himself to her now was a distraction and Celes was no better for him, either.

Yet he pursued the topic. "Celes," he pleaded, "please, why won't you speak to me?"

Unable to ignore his asinine question, Celes fired a vicious glare his way. Locke had done his damage in multiple ways to Celes and yet he couldn't fathom her silence. *You're unbelievable.*

A heavy sigh left him. "Look, Celes," he began, his tone a mixture of frustration and resentment, "I know this isn't exactly easy. Back at the Magitek Research Facility?" His voice broke and his gaze diverted from her. Locke jumped up to perch on the parapet, one leg dangling with the other pulled tight into his chest. "That... that was a mess. I— " Celes thought he mumbled a string of curses to himself before raising his voice again. "I didn't know what to think and I was torn apart by the thought of you doing *that.* And here you are, an Imperial General again." His laughter tensed Celes up. "But things are different now, right? The Empire is having a change of heart and all? Or supposedly are?"

Her eyes fell to the cobblestone by her feet. The train of thought Locke navigated did little to impress Celes, instead driving her to unreached heights with her irritation.

Locke accepted her silence as an answer regardless. "Celes, I know. I get it. I doubted you, though only for a moment. But... we can look past that, right? Regardless if you're with the Empire again and we're not... we can still be friends, right?"

That was his desire. For the two of them to be *friends.* Not enemies or a hint of surpassing companionship. Just *friends.* The exact opposite of what Celes ached for. Oh, how the word disgusted her now.

For so long, Celes had caught herself daydreaming about him. She knew better; love wasn't an
emotion welcomed in the stratosphere of her mindset. More important instances required her attention, yet she couldn’t rid Locke from her thoughts.

Then with what had transpired over the recent weeks, Celes doubted herself, doubted him. What was worse than his facade of emotions was his ignorance to her own sentiments towards him. That same ignorance drove him to share the same disposition with Terra. Celes could never bring herself to hate Terra for it; she detested Locke for subjecting her to what Celes once believed was unique to herself.

The thoughts swirled into a storm. Celes gripped at the stone wall until her knuckles whitened. Before she further lost herself, Celes released her death grip. All she could offer Locke were searing hot words stemmed from endless frustration. Even then, he still didn’t deserve to be verbally slashed apart. So Celes opted to walk away.

Locke called to Celes, begging her to return. Not once did she look over her shoulder, unable to bear the sight of him now. She convinced herself she was protecting him: from herself and from Kefka’s threat. But her silence didn’t dull the sharp pain prickling through her chest, the sensation resounding the notion that she couldn’t deal with her heart being carelessly dragged around by him anymore.

She fled to the center of Albrook, away from the inn and Locke. She opted to welcome any sleep once on the boat come morning, for it wouldn’t be kind to her in the evening. With her arms wrapped around her body, Celes berated herself mentally for allowing any feelings to surface for Locke. People didn’t swoon for a savior who helped them escape certain death. Those tales were mere fantasies meant for a child’s bedtime story. Celes had always laughed at the ridiculous tales; she was above pathetic excuses for love.

For Celes had clutched her rune blade, inches away from a horde of enemies, ready to duel with death, but when she confronted someone over deeply harbored affection, she sooner admitted defeat than the thrill of the challenge.

She said his name only once. A last attempt to reach through to him. Celes expected him to not answer her, similar to her disregard back in Albrook. Locke cast a listless gaze to her and set off on his way with Shadow and Terra. Not a word uttered.

"Is something troubling you?" General Leo inquired by midday during a pause in their search. Their group ventured west while Locke’s party went east. The plan was to rendezvous back at the ship within a couple of days to report any discoveries. All Celes and Leo’s group had found was indigenous wildlife—no signs of Espers.

She reclined upon a low-hanging tree branch, eyes set to the clouds with a distant glaze in them. As Leo called out to her, Celes almost ignored him, though eventually brought her blue eyes to him.

"You haven’t said as much as a word since we’ve landed on the shore," he noted. "Surely something is brewing in that mind of yours."

And there was. If only it had been so simple as cracking her head open to spill the contents troubling her. Celes held her tongue, unable to vocalize of the plague living inside. First Kefka, then Locke. The men in her life did well to keep her busy.

"It’s been a strange week," she admitted instead. "Too much has unraveled in too little time. It's tiring, to say the least."
Leo nodded. "I imagined as much. Rejoining the Imperial ranks is no simple request, nor has been all that you've been through outside of Vector. You must stand strong, Celes. Soon this will be all over and we can return to Vector to start anew."

The comfort he offered was tough for Celes to swallow down. "I'm aware of that. I don't need to be told how to play my role in all of this."

"No need to be hostile, Celes. I only worry about your well-being."

She sighed. "Do you truly believe that we'll return to Vector with everything according to plan?"

The hesitation from Leo wasn't expected. "We must believe that. How else will it come to fruition? More than the Empire relies on us, Celes. If the Emperor is to continue this promise of peace, we must ensure peace with the Espers first. I will do whatever it takes to see to it that the war is over for good." Leo approached her, bracing himself along the tree branch. "What is it that you worry about?"

She had already been picking and plucking the correct words to present to Leo. It was now a matter of gathering the strength to utter them. "It's not Emperor Gestahl that I worry about," Celes confessed.

"Then what?"

A breath filtered through her lungs. "Who else might be influencing the Emperor that isn't already here?"

His eyes lit up after a pause. "You think that—"

"Please," Celes hissed, "be quiet."

"Then what are you worried about?" Leo contorted his face. "You know that he is locked up within the castle. There isn't a thing to worry about."

But there is. "Leo, you told me that you would never doubt my words again, did you not? Then believe me when I say that something is bound to happen while we are here. I don't know what, but—"

"There is only so much that is within our control. You know that. We do what we can and the rest? Well, we'll deal with it when the time comes."

It wasn't the answer she desired, though with what little she offered Leo, his ambiguity on the topic was to be expected. Had she known more of what Kefka planned out, Leo would have been the first to know. Speculations carried her only so far, regardless of what her intuition screamed throughout every fiber of her soul. Celes half suspected Emperor Gestahl behind the madness as well, toyed by Kefka every step of the way. That exact corruption rooted the precise evil Celes craved to destroy.

"I want Vector to return to normal," Celes found herself saying. "Whatever that normal is." Ideally, it involved no city in ruins and no civilians dead. Vector had been a thriving metropolis, a pinnacle of humanity, setting an example for the rest of the world. But with light came the darkness and even she wasn’t disillusioned by an image of perfection. The back alleys of Vector were as treacherous as the contents of the Magitek Research Facility. No one could rid the world of crime and sin, regardless of how noble the intention was.

"That's the plan," Leo echoed. "Stay strong, Celes. We'll figure something out. We have to."
A breeze passed by and the soldiers in the distance grew restless. They would resume their search with no guarantee of success. Leo looked out to the others, flashed a small smile in their direction.

"I remember when the Emperor first decided that you were to become a General," Leo said out of the blue.

Her eyebrow bunched together. Celes sat upright. "Do you?"

"He had come to me first, asking if it was appropriate to reward you with the position. Your growth was phenomenal within the ranks of the Imperial military. From a young age, you flourished better than any of us could have imagined. You were able to take on many as a child when the other soldiers were well into their adulthood. I have never witnessed anything like it. Despite your age, I knew you were suited for the role as a General. If I had to pick anyone else to be by my side, I wanted it to be you."

Any other time, the reassurance of success within her life would have comforted Celes, more so after her time branded as a traitor, both by the Empire and the Returners. Instead, the weight of his praise rolled over Celes and her face never lit up.

"It's because I was experimented on," she began, eyes turning back to the clouds. "If it wasn't for the magic that had been injected into me, I wouldn't... be like this. I would be a normal human with nothing special to claim as my own. I'd be useless to the Empire and you know that."

"It had nothing to do with the magical infusion," Leo insisted. "You were subjected to it, yes, but the Empire never catered to you. If anything, everyone kept an eye on you, making sure you didn’t slip up. And you never did. Your drive was all you, not the magic. You can’t instill that into a person, not through magic or teaching; one must strive for it. There was a reason why you excelled above your peers and superiors." Leo paused. "And not everyone passed the experimentation, you know."

"No, they all died," she said, void of emotion, “didn't they?"

Leo's face tensed. "But you survived. There must be a reason why you succeeded amongst many. That is something to be worthy of. At least I see it as such."

Yet Celes disagreed. Over time, the true intentions of the Empire rose to the surface, little by little, until Celes thought herself no different from the wretched creatures begging for death in the Magitek Research Facility. Each bout of cold, whether in the wind or in a chilled drink, reminded Celes of the ice traveling in her own blood. A reminder of what she was. One other survived the process and shared her fate before Celes was ever selected as a possibility.

Celes refused to become Kefka, teetering on the edge of sanity with a lust for power. Unfortunately, she harnessed minimal control over how the magic affected her mental state. The prospect of becoming the monster he transformed into—worse than the Espers laying Vector to rubble—wasn’t a fate she desired.

But Celes had already done her own share of damage to the world.

“It was because of Maranda,” she said after a brief bout of silence.

“Hmm?”

Celes slid down from the tree branch and onto the grass-covered ground to approach Leo. “One of my first major assignments after I was promoted to General. Gestahl commanded me to march with troops to the west to gather recruits. I was only seventeen.”
Leo’s eyes flickered upon recalling the memory. “He wished for you to inspire men to join.”

On instinct, her hand drifted to the hilt of her rune blade, as if to evoke the entire scene in greater detail. “Did he know everyone in the village was prepared to riot against us? Was he blind to what animosity swelled within each civilian from Maranda?”

“You did what you had to. You—”

“They attacked us, Leo,” she interrupted, doing her best to maintain quiet composure. “They were ready to hang us all if they could have. I was told to trust my judgment if anything were to fall out of place, but Emperor Gestahl gave me the specific order to not be afraid to enforce power to remind the people the Empire had a backbone.” She lowered her head. “There were women and children. There were elder folk. Everyone lined the streets in protest. They refused to be herded out like sheep to do the Emperor’s bidding.”

"Celes—"

“I killed them, Leo. I’ve forced myself to block out the memories, but I’ll always remember the fire scorching the village and the screams flooding the area. There was so much blood. I wasn’t swift or merciful. I was an avatar of destruction. I gave them a reason to fear the Empire. And when we returned with the men to fill the infantry ranks, Emperor Gestahl praised me, rewarded me. Were your first instances as a General like that, too?” Not a word was uttered. "I didn't think so. This is what I was supposed to be. I was groomed to be this... weapon controlled by the Empire. Kefka plays with his magic and I continue to mimic the old skill of a rune knight. I'm sick of following the rules and being led blindly by whatever the hell is going on."

"Celes, calm—"

"I tried to stop this from spiraling out of control. Look at what good it did for me. I don't doubt he brought me back into Imperial ranks for his own selfish desires."

"Stop!” His hands latched at her pauldrons. “Are you not listening to yourself? Celes, you mustn't give into the madness. You must persevere despite the magic coursing through your body. Don't succumb to the lunacy like Kefka. I agree, he has gone insane because of it, but you don't have to. There is more than one path in life and you have always been the one to forge your own way. Others admire you for it. Continue to do so and surely the Empire will be led to brighter days. Only you can do that."

In time, Vector would be rebuilt and with any luck, peace would spread across all of the Imperial lands. Celes had difficulty imagining the elusive goal when other concerns competed for her attention. Now wasn’t the place to be dreaming of a future when the scenario called for caution.

"If I told you,” Celes whispered, "Kefka was to escape and come after us, would you believe me?"

She would deal with the consequences of breaking Kefka’s promise later, if it was more than a venomous threat. General Leo needed to be as alert. Celes couldn’t do it without him.

Upon hearing her, his dark eyes widened. "What?"

"You heard me." Celes scanned over the premise. None of the soldiers were in earshot. The disbelief almost flared up in his eyes yet again. "How... do you know this?"

"I can't say much more than that, Leo, I'm sorry, but please believe me."
The silence dragged on while Leo weighed in the revelation. "I don't know what to believe anymore, Celes. I can only hope that you're right, that—" He shook his head. "No, I hope you're wrong, that he does stay back in Vector, but—" Leo released his grip on Celes and turned away. "Regardless, we shall be on our guard. We cannot falter. We're Imperial Generals; we must stand strong."

So it was done. General Leo was officially aware of the possibility, though his hesitance had Celes second-guess her intuition. Had Kefka spouted lies to play tricks with her mind? She could no longer tell the difference between his threats and his illusions.

The plains held nothing of use to them. No sign of the Espers or any evidence to assist the search party. Though they didn’t forsake their quest.

Come nightfall, tents lined the plains for each individual, though Celes lied outside to gaze up at the stars. Millions of them hung overhead, no different from when she was aboard the Blackjack. The city lights of Vector blocked them out and veiled the beauty in the darkness. The wind brushed over the grass and trees along with the distant chirps of the nocturnal creatures. It lulled Celes to sleep for the first time in a while and hazy dreams formed from the persistent thoughts stirring within.

She had been walking, the images of her surroundings drifting in fractured slow motion. Voices echoed on the wind. Smoke loomed above, the thick scent choking her until she collapsed to her knees. A burst of laughter shot through the air, one she recognized all too well. She parted her mouth to scream, but not a peep surge forth. Bare hands clawed at the ground. Black clouds blotted out her vision. The fires inched to her, daring to consume her just as they had with Vector and Maranda.

With a blink, the flames vanished, yet the heat remained. The subtle aroma of incense replaced the stench of smoke.

Arms embraced her from behind and she gasped. A tenderness lingered in the touch, hands wandering over her form to comfort her. Lips pressed into her neck and a coo fluttered past her mouth. The fire lived inside of her now and each subtle action burned through her. Celes grasped at the body behind her, biting her lower lip to quiet herself. She muffled whimpers at best.

She turned to see who cradled her, but by then, she jolted out of the dream world and back into reality. Celes fluttered her eyes open, facing the still burning fire as her blankets tangled up her body. She forced out a frustrated sigh and rolled back over. The tricks her mind teased her with left her body tingling; she doubted she’d plummet back into a deep slumber.

But it didn’t stop Celes from tracing her lower lip with her fingertips. She inhaled, hoping to pick up the scent again, but it hadn’t carried over from the dream.

“Can’t sleep?”

Gasping, Celes shot upright to seated. What light the fire provided revealed Leo sitting on the opposite side of the fire.

Celes exhaled. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“I promise it wasn’t my intention,” he said. “Are you alright?”

_I wish I knew._ “I’ve been better.”
“Dreams can be cruel to us. Sometimes I preferred to stay awake and avoid whatever it was they held for me on a particular evening, but without it, we’d be weak.” He tilted his head back. “Though tonight? I think I can forgo sleep to witness a sight like this.”

Celes followed his gaze up to the starry night glittering above. Never before did she believe so many stars existed. Had she decided to count them, she doubted she would have finished that evening, if ever.

“You don’t get a view like this from Vector,” Leo commented softly. “I grew up used to the noises the city offered along with his own lights. I always thought the sky was black and nothing lingered above. It wasn’t until I ventured past the city and made camp with my troops before we neared our destination that I proved myself wrong. I didn’t sleep that night. I don’t think I have slept most nights where I had the option to watch the stars. To think we’ve been blind to this sort of natural beauty all our lives. Simply takes a different perspective to appreciate it for what it is.”

“You’ll need to sleep eventually. We both do.”

Leo hummed. “If only it were so easy.”

Celes stared at the stars some more before she spoke again. “If Vector were to be rebuilt, we’d block out the stars again.”

“Only if it was rebuilt exactly how it was before.”

She lowered her gaze onto him. “Are you suggesting you’d prefer it redone a different way?”

“Of course. Change is how we progress. We must learn from our successes and losses in order to better ourselves. Whatever comes of Vector, I wish for it to be better; I wish for us to be better. I don’t know what’s in store for us, but so long as we travel down a road that doesn’t require manipulation and bloodshed.”

“Are you saying you’d forsake your role as General?”

A sputter of laughter came and went like the sparks flickering from the fire before them. “It does sound like that, doesn’t it?” Leo brought his sights back down to Celes. “I want what’s best for the people. My intentions are just and as long as I can help the greater good, then I will do what must be done. I’ve witnessed too many atrocities to stay on the sidelines any further.” He paused. “I understand how you feel, Celes. My only regrets are that I didn’t support you back when you first asked for it. I shouldn’t have allowed Emperor Gestahl to drag you off and mark you a traitor.”

Celes closed her eyes, trying not to remember the hardened stare Leo shot her when she was hauled out of the throne room. “It’s done. No sense in changing it now.”

“But I’ve learned from it and I know better than to repeat my mistakes. You taught me that, Celes. If only you gave yourself the credit you actually deserved.”

She breathed out a chuckle. The only credit she gave herself was surviving as long as she had. Even then, she wallowed in the self-induced doubt over her efforts and so-called accomplishments. Perhaps she failed to demonstrate the traits of a true General.

“Would you still be a General after all of this?”

Celes fluttered her eyes. She hoped whatever flames illuminated her face masked the shock washing over her features. The fire crackled and popped as she mulled over the idea.
“I don’t know,” she said.

“Don’t you too desire good to spread over the lands?”

“No, I do.” Celes sighed. “It’s not that simple.”

“It can be if you allow it to be.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Easier said than done.”

“I suppose it is. And it is late. Not the best time to be prompting these types of questions.” Leo yawned briefly. “Sometimes I wonder if the lack of sleep instills moments of genius within us instead of ridiculous thoughts. Whatever the case, we best be sleeping.” Leo rose from his position to head back to his tent. A tired hand fell onto her shoulder in his passing. “Rest well, Celes. Whatever we face tomorrow, we’ll do so together. I promise.”

With Leo retiring for the evening, Celes lied back and tugged her blankets over her body. She stayed awake long after the fire burned down to smoldering ashes, her eyes fixated upon the sky. She thought of Leo’s words, realizing she didn’t, in fact, know what she wished to become afterwards, just as she was still unsure of what to feel of the phantom memory of the dream still haunting her.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter is why there’s a graphic depictions of violence warning. That is all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The initial agreement was to return to the ship after several days. While the lack of Espers was disheartening, finding no trace of Locke, Terra, or Shadow was worrisome. General Leo desired to wait for their arrival, but Celes convinced him that if the other group hadn’t returned by now, perhaps they had indeed tracked down something. Thus the Imperial group marched eastward.

Something indeed lied to the east. At the border of the Crescent Island was the small, quaint village of Thamasa, an unheard of location by everyone approaching the settlement. Aloof townspeople greeted the Imperial troops and after asking about their missing party, one of the citizens perked up. Locke, Terra, and Shadow headed to the mountains, accompanied by a village elder. Word had it the Espers hid in the rocky range.

“So they are here,” Leo murmured. “I knew it.”

“And now we wait?” Celes asked.

“No point in chasing them down. We shall hold our position here and await their arrival.” A slight smile came to his lips. “Excellent. We are one step closer to our objective. Soon enough we’ll discuss new terms with the Espers.”

Yet Celes couldn’t match his smile.

While all the troops wandered around the town, Celes stumbled across a surreal sight. A home had burned to the ground, the ashes crisp with the fresh scent of burnt wood. She recalled the fire sparking to life in her dreams a few nights ago.

One of the children in the village approached Celes and spoke of a fire from the other night, along with how the mages doused it with water magic. She hitched her breath while the little one unfolded the tale, unable to believe a word of it. Others possessed magic. Not by assistance from the Espers, whether by magite or infusion, but by natural means. What the child spoke of was reserved for legends in a storybook, not for casual conversation to explain ashes of a fallen home. A whole town comprised of mages; not even Emperor Gestahl would have fathomed their existence. And here they were, living out normal lives without the worry of insanity dooming them. Celes wanted nothing more than to ask the people of Thamasa questions - the ones she never received answers for back in Vector.

All of it had to wait, though. Soldiers called out in the sweep distance about incoming forces. Celes returned to Leo’s side and set her eyes to the horizon. A slew of Espers traveled to the village with Locke and Terra leading the pack along, with the elder mage the villagers spoke of and a young girl by his side. Celes smiled at the sight of the Espers no longer in a blind rage. Perhaps they could discuss peace after all.

The Espers spoke of losing control the moment they stepped into the human world and thus attacked
Vector. Celes recalled the red eyes staring her down back in Vector and how none of them possessed that gaze now—the madness was over. From there, they fled to the mountains. They profusely apologized for the travesty they laid upon Vector. The Espers found themselves no better than the Empire. General Leo refused to accept their apology—not when the Empire had wronged the Espers first. Together, they could settle on peaceful terms instead of accusing one side of being more sinister than the other.

Standing at attention far behind Leo, Celes’ gaze shifted to Locke. He caught her eyes, as well. She swallowed hard, her stare wavering as he approached her. Whatever he had to say, Celes hoped it didn’t snap the remnants of their companionship.

He flashed a weak smile. “We got the Espers to come with us,” Locke said, “and it seems like they’re willing to work with the Empire. Sounds like a win-win situation to me.”

There was still the matter of Kefka at hand, but Celes dared not to utter the man’s name.

“So,” Locke dragged out while tilting his head, “that’s a good thing, right? Our work here is done and all of that? Before you know it, we won’t have to worry about fighting against the Empire or worrying about a war breaking out. All that can be behind us.” He paused to stretch, his hands settled on the back of his head. “Are you not going to say—”

“Let’s just go back to Vector,” Celes offered. “The sooner we return, the better.” Although the devastation hadn’t been her doing, she accepted the responsibility of rebuilding the ruined city. Celes hadn’t forgotten it and hopefully the weight of the task didn’t crush her.

Locke extended a gloved hand, searching for hers. “Celes,” he whispered.

His voice was heavenly; the way he said her name had once produced shivers along her skin. In the past, she mimicked the sound in her mind. She longed to surpass friendship itself with Locke, though as she looked him over, Celes wasn’t sure what it was she wanted anymore. What was certain was Celes had hurt herself once over the likes of Locke and she wasn’t keen on making the same mistake twice.

Celes balked at him, eyes cast to the ground. “Please, don’t say anything,” she quietly begged.

To her relief, Locke heeded her words. When she dared to face him again, his smile for her softened into a more genuine gesture. Perhaps it was a sign they could start fresh with no risk of being the other’s enemy. The past was behind them and the future opened ahead. Celes didn’t know what it had to offer, if anything, but there was only one way to find out.

Though not all of the past could be forgotten; the issue of Rachel was unresolved. Locke’s general treatment of herself and Terra was proof Locke hadn’t let go of his past. Maybe his true feelings in regards to Celes would never surface. Maybe they never existed to begin with.

A burst of childish laughter interrupted both Celes and Locke. They spied upon the young girl everyone else called Relm and her grandfather, Strago, chuckling together. Strago muttered how Relm was too young to understand the bond between the two. A hint of blush splashed over Celes’ cheeks as she looked away, almost whacking Locke for snickering. The irritation settled down the instant she flicked her eyes back to Locke. He still smiled for her. For the first time, life returned to a sense of normalcy. Celes slowly cracked a smile over the realization.

But another round of laughter came forth and silenced the rest. The smile vanished from Celes’ lips. A slew of Magitek armors accompanied Kefka, who strolled into Thamasa, practically skipping. The
exuberant grin on his face pulled his muscles taut while he absorbed his surroundings. Several Magitek armors poised as no threat for Celes, but the sheer quantity of the mechanical structures marching in had her second guessing the situation. But she wasn’t alone. This time, she had allies, all of them prepared to fight and put an end to whatever treachery Kefka brought. Together, they had a shot at winning. Celes searched for General Leo in the group, one hand on her rune blade. Leo froze before Kefka, staring in disbelief. Her previous warnings made no impact.

“Kefka!” Leo boomed. “What is this meaning of this?! What are you doing here?”

Until the laughter died down, Kefka gave no comprehensible answer. “Emperor’s orders!” he answered in a sing-song tone. “Special delivery requested and it involves turning these Espers you so kindly found for me into magicite.”

Celes didn’t blink. She charged towards Kefka, brandishing her blade at him. Hot on her trail was Locke, preparing for supportive fire with his boomerang. One of the Magitek armors pivoted to face them. Celes held her breath, feet skidding on the dirt ground. Sliding into a defensive position, Celes prepared for Runic. Locke took aim at their target while the Magitek armor shot a beam. The power of the attack echoed in the air before Celes absorbed the energy into her rune blade.

With Runic executed, three more Magitek armors prepared for beam attacks. Even if she had enough time to set up another defense, she couldn’t have taken on three of them. By the time she processed the odds stacked against them, she sucked in a breath to cry out to Locke. Multiple beams fired, all of them striking Celes. Any lesser humans would have been knocked out, if not killed outright. Her magically infused body kept her from dropping unconscious, but it didn’t numb the pain. Celes shrieked as the attack flung her back into Locke. The two connected with a resounding force before colliding into the ground face first. Her rune blade flew out of her clutches and landed far beyond her reach.

She struggled to keep her eyes open while the agony seduced her to surrender. Close by, Locke lied motionless. With one hand planted down, Celes pushed herself up, only to collapse onto her stomach. A whimper seeped out of her as she craned her head back. Terra rushed into the offensive with soldiers behind her. Even she fell from the overwhelming force and fought to keep her head up. More blasts from the Magitek armors fired off, each one striking soldiers dead to the ground. One by one, she witnessed her men die. When the Imperial forces were taken out, the villagers were targeted next. Kefka’s laugh filled the space in between every cannon firing and every villager screaming. Fire crackled from all angles and the smoke blotted out the skies.

But there was one they couldn’t strike down. Leo charged in, brandishing his sword with a mighty roar amidst the Magitek armors. Not a drop of magic laced his blood, though he never required the infusion. Through his innate physical prowess and sound mind, Leo stood mighty. With each Magitek armor disposed of in the wake of Leo’s fury, he once again proved why he was worthy of his role as General. He was justice personified, nothing but pure fire burning through his enemies to cleanse the world from their wrongdoings.

Celes needed to be by his side to assist him and not on the ground with her energy sapped. She imagined Leo would have told her to not worry. He could handle it. Always a beacon of optimism and goodness—exactly what Vector needed to be guided back on a better path. If Celes couldn’t confront Kefka, then Leo would without a doubt. Countless people died, but Leo persevered without flinching. The world fell into a dark haze for Celes, but she still held onto the proud image of Leo charging towards Kefka.
Get up.

Her vision blurred. Not a muscle twitched.

This whole world will burn if you don’t do something.

Celes groaned and tried again, but every attempt was met with utter failure. Her head spun and her heavy eyelids fought to stay open.

She thought she heard General Leo’s commanding voice. Blonde hair matted over her face as she lolled her head. Past the Magitek armors and the relentless fires, her obstructed view centered on her comrade and fellow Magitek knight. Leo pointed his sword at Kefka, demanding that justice be brought down upon him for the atrocities he committed.

“I’ve had enough of you!” Leo declared before attacking.

It was an exchange of magic and swordplay fit for the military elite. Celes held her breath; her sole option was to watch and pray Leo walked away victorious. And he did. Kefka dropped to his knees and slumped over. Celes swore she witnessed his defeat with her own eyes. Her vision continued to blur. Emperor Gestahl was there, speaking to Leo. The crackling flames muffled the distant words, though Leo’s body language was undeniable. He tensed and clutched his sword, no different from Celes’ defiance before her imprisonment.

Then the image of the Emperor faded and Kefka took his place.

Celes had tried to warn Leo. Time and time again, she stepped up to prevent the inevitable in hopes someone would finally listen to her. Her sore muscles writhed and rendered her useless; strength had been sapped from her. She couldn’t shriek out to him, couldn’t protect him, couldn’t save him from what unfolded before her terrified eyes.

Kefka toyed with the knife he hid in the folds of his attire and darted at Leo. Not a lick of mercy pumped through his soul. The blade drove deep into Leo’s gut. He doubled over, coughing up blood before falling onto his back. A scream knotted up into a thick, hard lump in Celes’ throat and threatened to choke her if she did so much as whimper.

Grinning, Kefka ripped the knife out of Leo and sunk it back into his flesh. Again and again, Kefka stabbed the General. Blood sputtered from Leo’s mouth as he convulsed from the onslaught. A fierce roar of laughter exploded out of Kefka; he relished the violence. When his laughs boiled down to rolling chuckles, Kefka tossed the knife aside and pried Leo’s sword out of his clutches. He weighed the blade in his clumsy hands, tested his grip, and dragged the tip up along Leo’s torso. The screams of her ally overpowered the fires tearing apart Thamasa while Kefka split open the barely living man at his own leisure.

“You pathetic heap of trash!” Kefka spat out. “All this time, you’ve been nothing but a thorn in my side! Always in the way, always needing to be better than the rest! I hate you!” A mixture of amusement and rage bubbled up from his hysterical laughs. “Hate hate hate hate hate hate hate! You!” He lifted the sword up to what was left of the skies. “I fucking hate you so much!”

The sword swung down with a mighty, unclean cut. A gurgle of blood splashed out and splattered along Kefka’s face and clothing. Once more he raised the sword and repeated the motion like a lumberjack chopping wood. Kefka hacked off Leo’s head bit by bit, blood dousing the vicinity. Eventually, he severed the head from the spine. Kefka laughed, using the flat of the sword to bash
the petrified face of Leo into a pulp.

Thamasa burned, Espers turned into magicite, and now General Leo died at the hands of Kefka. He deserved an honorable death, preferably on the battlefield against a noble opponent. The disgusting torture Kefka subjected him to was only a taste of what his mind was capable of. Discarding the sword, Kefka trickled out gleeful giggles before stomping on top of the bloodied corpse. He was like a child splashing about in puddles during a rainstorm.

No matter how desperately she tried, Celes couldn’t tear her sights away from the horror.

Her stomach churned while Kefka leaped off and punctured Leo’s head around with utmost joy. He frolicked about with his newfound toy while homes collapsed from the surrounding flames.

Then he kicked the head in her direction. She didn’t possess the ability to scream when it nailed her in the face, blood smearing her skin as the deformed, unrecognizable face of Leo stared back at her with tormented eyes. Celes sucked in frantic breaths before cowering away. Vomit tickled in the back of her throat, but the shock was all that kept her from unraveling into a traumatized mess.

A hand snatched her cloak and yanked Celes backwards. She squeaked out a yelp before crashing onto her back. Kefka stood over her, one leg on either side as he bent at the hip. His profound grin had yet to diminish and his beady eyes staring into hers brought her body into tremors. He chuckled lowly at Celes.

“Were you a good girl and kept your mouth shut?” Blood dripped from his face and plopped onto hers. “Were you?” The silence almost amused him. “Did you not believe me when I said I’d get you?” He clicked his tongue at Celes. “Oh, my poor dear, you mustn’t underestimate me now. The Emperor was never going to believe anything you or Leo said. He was on my side all along. Such a pity that you tried to sway him. Turns out that it was a charade! Far better than your Imperial spy stint, that’s for sure.”

Blooded hands latched onto Celes’ cheeks and shook her violently, eliciting another yelp from her. “Oh, why the sad face, Celes?! Are you upset I killed off your fellow comrade? Do cheer up, why don’t you! You’ll have nothing to worry about soon enough! He’s out of the way and the others will be, too. Not a thing to worry about. Shhhhh, there there, my dear.” The thumb stroking her cheek left Celes shuddering uncontrollably and shutting her eyes. “I’ll let you live for now and as long as you continue being a precious little puppet, you have nothing to fear. Shhh, don’t you worry.” Kefka leaned in, far too close for her liking “I promise it will all be over soon. You’ll see.”

Finally, he released her and stepped away. Celes gasped for air, eyes shooting open to catch sight of the smoke mixing with the clouds. The hefty Magitek armors marched away with Kefka leading them with a twisted laugh. His voice died out and the crackle of fire on wood remained. Her head twitched to check on Locke or anyone else in sight, though the glimpse of Leo’s decapitated head had Celes gasp. She swallowed back the bile bubbling upward in her throat and shut her eyes.

Either shock or exhaustion rendered Celes unconscious, but when she came to, the residual smoke scorched her eyes. Cries surrounded her as an overcast haze hung in Thamasa. Celes propped herself up onto her elbow despite every muscle throbbing. A tremble in her abdomen forced her to double over and empty her stomach. She spat out the remaining saliva, detesting the residue in her mouth, and gasped for air.
Like Vector, all of Thamasa was destroyed. Those who survived wept over lost homes and loved ones. Espers and humans alike were victims to Kefka’s cruel hand. No one was left unaccounted for.

A thought twitched in her mind and Celes forced herself to peer behind her. Leo’s head still sat there, blood dried up over the skin with flies circulating above. In the distance, his bloodied pulp of a corpse sprawled out for all to see. Her emotions swelled up within her chest and prickled behind her eyes. Celes blinked it all back and lowered her gaze.

*I’m so sorry, Leo. I wish this had never happened. I wish so many things never happened. I tried. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.*

The silent apology repeated on a vicious cycle. Celes bowed her head out of respect. At one point, Leo prompted Celes to stand strong, for all would be well soon enough. She required the courage he spoke of now more than ever.

A body stirred to the side, followed by a groan. Locke heaved himself upward into a slouch and bore witness to the horrors of the aftermath. The sight of Leo alone sobered him with a jolt. “What the—” Locke’s head whipped about to make sense of the scene, but he too groaned over sore muscles protesting. “What the fuck happened here? Did... where’s Kefka?! Is he—”

The question was lost when his eyes fell onto Celes. Whatever strength she held onto was channeled into maintaining composure. She refused to accept any other alternative now. If Leo wasn’t there to inspire others into fighting for the future, then Celes had to fill his place. He trusted her, respected her. It was what he would have wanted.

“Celes?”

Locke spoke and moved in closer, but Celes kept silent. The events replayed in her head and the shock dripped away. Each time she attempted to anchor herself back into the moment, the recent memories of Kefka slaughtering her ally looped before her eyes. Celes sunk her teeth into her lower lip hard and clenched her muscles to prevent herself from wincing.

She barely registered the arm slipping around her form. Locke pulled her in close and Celes didn’t protest. Instead, she turned into Locke, burying her face into his neck, hands seizing his shirt. It didn’t matter where the hell their friendship stood. None of it mattered now. What *did* matter was what was left—of him, the others, Thamasa, and the whole world.

Locke was alive, as was Terra and the newfound members who were beyond enthusiastic with aiding them in their efforts to stop the Empire. Not all of Thamasa’s citizens died, either, despite most of the town diminished to black ash. A sliver of hope shone before them all, yet Celes couldn’t comprehend it, dissolving into Locke’s embrace.

He stroked the back of her head, not caring if she was bruised and splattered with blood, yet Celes focused elsewhere. As Locke cradled her, his touch didn’t mirror the figments from her dream of fire, smoke, and laughter. She inhaled and found no incense soaked in his clothes. Celes shut her eyes and mentally lashed over the intangible imprints lingering.

Part of her wished Locke had never saved her. He could have left her in the prison to be subjected to the torture the soldiers planned for her. Maybe she would have died there instead of at her planned execution. The possibilities of walking down separate paths in life circulated in Celes’ head. In another life, she wouldn’t have bore witness to the atrocities unfolding in quick succession. It meant sacrificing her familiarity with Locke and the Returners, never once aiding them with their efforts.

It meant never stepping foot into the opera house to be used as bait for *him* and it meant never being
introduced to the so-called wandering gambler.

When she wrapped her arms around Locke, he squeezed her back and she felt nothing. It wasn’t what she wanted. No sound logic sat behind the subtle desire yearning for a pleasant chill completely and utterly consuming her.

In time, those alive returned to their feet. The rest were buried, soldiers and civilians alike. In the absence of the Imperial military’s commanding officer, Celes assumed leadership. The eyes of a dozen soldiers fell upon her, awaiting their orders. Leo’s burial ranked as the primary task along with their fallen allies. They all deserved a proper funeral. With the help of Leo’s men, Celes gathered the remains of the body to transport to the quick grave being dug for him.

The detached head had been terrifying on its own, but the body was no better upon better inspection. Celes held back a second round of vomit, her stomach fairing better than some others as they moved the corpse. His ripped-up cloak covered his body before it was lowered into the earth. Other holes littered the ground and fallen men filled them. Tears flowed down faces of those watching with only more to come with the brief funeral procession conducted for the dearly departed.

Once the dirt covered Leo’s grave, Celes approached the top of the site with his sword. A sturdy, yet cumbersome weapon in Celes’ hand, but in Leo’s it served as an extension of his body and ideals. She always recalled the same sword by his side, much like the rune blade by hers, for as long as she knew him. That very blade had been used to end his life.

But Leo did not die in vain. They promised to restore Vector together, but Celes settled for his spirit guiding her actions. Quietly, she promised to avenge him, to carry out the hopes and dreams he had for Vector. The sword struck the head of the grave site, serving as a tombstone for the late General Leo.

“He deserved better,” Terra spoke through a sniffle.

Celes nodded. “That he did. All of Thamasa deserved better.” She surveyed the ruined village once more. The townspeople reacted far better to the trauma than the citizens of Vector did. Their strength could inspire those from Vector and drive them to do more than survive.

As Leo was remembered by them all, a distant hum rumbled from the skies. Celes tilted her head up and blocked the sun out with her hand. A familiar shape sailed on the winds and headed straight to them. The silhouette of the Blackjack cast a shadow over Thamasa and the corners of Celes’ tired lips curled up.

So you came. Just as you promised.

Chapter End Notes

Please Take Your Hand Away helped perfect the horror and sorrow within this chapter.
Boarding the airship once more meant being in the presence of the Returners. Silence fell as heads turned to Celes. She claimed to be joining them and meant it. After what happened in Thamasa, Celes wasn’t one to sit by quietly for the next events to unfold. They understood her need to aid them, not once mentioning potential ulterior motives. Celes didn’t expect a warm welcome with smiles, but the lack of response spoke louder than any slander could.

Thus when she hid down in one of the guest quarters, Celes wasn’t prepared for anyone to seek her out. Edgar at least bothered to knock.

“It’s good to see you again.”

The king himself had claimed a female attendant within the castle tipped him off—after pleasantries, of course, according to Edgar—of the Emperor’s true scheme. None of the attendants Celes was acquainted with in Vector were meek enough to divulge in well-guarded information. Only one other person had a reason to side with caution while in Vector and it wasn’t Edgar.

Celes lifted her head to spot the sun-kissed blond leaning in the open doorway. “Is it now?” she asked.

“Well, I haven’t seen you since the Magitek Research Facility and... yes.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know what happened to you in between then and now, but I’m glad you’re well.”

“As well as I can be,” Celes muttered.

The sorrow in her tone served as an invitation for Edgar to enter, though he didn’t dare sit beside her on the bed. “I’m sorry about what happened to General Leo.” She didn’t answer and thankfully, Edgar didn’t press her to do so. “My time with the Empire was brief in comparison to what you’ve been through, but I know that not everyone was as horrible as Gestahl himself. Leo was one of those few. Good man. It’s a shame he had to leave so soon.”

Beyond his horrific death were fonder memories. Celes clung onto them, yet she struggled to focus when her mind relapsed back to Thamasa. How Kefka sent him off wasn’t meant for anyone, especially Leo. She swallowed down the thoughts and lowered her head, unable to remove the trauma burned into her fiber.

Edgar sighed softly when she held onto her silence. “I know we didn’t start on the right foot—the two of us.” He knelt down and met with Celes’ gaze. “And I know I’m not your favorite person in the world, but know that we were worried about you.”

“I find that hard to believe,” she said, managing to not roll her eyes.

“I can’t speak for everyone,” Edgar reworded his comment, “but I do know everyone wanted to know what had happened. I feared the Empire would have imprisoned you again.” He snickered. “Locke would need to free you once more.”

“That wouldn’t be necessary.”

The amusement vanished from Edgar’s face. “No, no it wouldn’t be.” He cleared his voice. “You’re... quite capable on your own, that much is evident.”

A short-lived smirk quirked Celes’ lips up and a thought killed it. “Did he... was he truly livid while I
was gone? Locke, that is.”

She didn’t need to remind Edgar of the torrent of emotions surging through Locke back in Vector, for Edgar not only witnessed the man’s reactions then, but he also was present in the aftermath.

“I’m not sure if livid is the correct descriptor,” Edgar started slowly, taking his time with choosing his words. “You know how he is; always worrying about anyone for whatever reason he makes up in his head. To be honest, out of everyone, he was the most vocal about your... um, situation. Pounding on the walls one minute and falling silent the next. I think even he didn’t know how to feel about everything. It wasn’t exactly the smoothest visit to Vector. We were all on the last nerve, but I don’t believe Locke wished to accept that. His frustrations were short-lived, all things considered. Soon enough he was focused on wanting to make sure Terra was alright—”

“Of course he was.” Celes meant to hold her tongue, but the words flew out like poisonous darts with Edgar on the receiving end. She sighed over her poorly chosen comment. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No, you’re more than free to voice your opinions on the matter,” Edgar shot back with a stern tone. “We were all worried about Terra, just as we were all worried about you. I don’t think Locke’s intentions were malicious; I’d be surprised if he even realized how you felt about it all. We couldn’t go back to save you, but we could press forward and help Terra. Locke was simply more... adamant about it.” Edgar paused, a smile crawling across his face. “For what it’s worth, Locke wasn’t the only one affected by your absence.”

“No, you said you were, too.”

“I said I was concerned, as were the others, but I wasn’t affected the way a select few were.”

Her face scrunched up. “What do you mean?”

Edgar chuckled. “How does the saying going? A fool will speak and think he is a wise man, but the wise man says nothing and thinks himself to be a fool? Sometimes silence says more than all the words ever to exist could possibly portray.”

Still unable to discern his intentions, Celes parted her lips to interrogate Edgar. By then, he rose from his spot and bowed before her.

“It’s good to have you back, Celes,” he said before exiting the room.

Which left Celes alone to ponder over what Edgar spoke of, further perplexed by whatever meaning hid in them. The time to mull over the intricacy of words was nonexistent. Confronting the Empire took priority, thus marking it as the group’s destination. Though Celes’ mind went blank when she peered out the tiny window and overlooked the same view of Thamasa. She knitted her eyebrows together, unable to hear the motors of the airship at all.

An annoyed sigh slipped out of her lips as she jumped to her feet and marched out into the hallway. Maybe someone upstairs had a better clue as to why they weren’t airbound yet. Halfway down the hall, Celes crossed with a set of doors propped open, leading to a small corridor with a spiral staircase. She paused and peered in. A series of bangs intertwined with an angered voice from below, but the floors muffled the distant sounds.

Curiosity tugged her in the direction of the staircase and led her down to a separate level she had yet to lay eyes upon.

Multiple mechanical contraptions occupied the space, all of them beyond her level of expertise. Celes half expected Edgar to pop out from a corner, gleefully tinkering with the airship’s structure. Such
child-like joy was better reserved elsewhere; catwalks replaced floors in the open vicinity, providing a view of the earth below as the next level down. Celes gripped the railings and set her sights ahead while navigating the engine room.

Again the banging of metal erupted from around the corner. Celes closed in on the sound’s origin, spotting a black coat draped over one of the machines with a purple sash not far away. Turning the corner, she stumbled upon the airship’s pilot in a rare state. Setzer’s hair resided in a high, messy bun. The top buttons of his white shirt were left undone and the sleeves rolled up to his biceps. A thick pair of leather gloves covered his forearms while he tinkered with the machinery, a worthy enough distraction to bestow the element of surprise to Celes.

She stared briefly. Setzer made it a point to clean up well for any occasion, rather sophisticated for the gambling type, and there he was, dressed down and keen on getting his hands dirty. Celes hadn’t initially pegged him to possess enough talent to double as a mechanic, instead relying on paying others to handle complicated tasks. The proof was in the fluid movement of his hands; he trusted few—if anyone—to touch his prized airship. The exact flow was evident while piloting the Blackjack or idly shuffling his cards or rolling a pair of dice.

It was intoxicating.

“Enjoying the view?”

Fluttering her eyes, Celes’ tongue twisted as a splash of blush colored her cheeks. “I... didn’t expect... what are you doing down here?”

He chuckled, pushing the few loose strands of hair out of his face. “Fixing the ship? Isn’t it obvious?” His attention returned to manipulate tools. “Did you forget the part where the airship crashed back when the Espers went crazy?” Setzer scoffed. “And I thought I had everything figured out, but just when you think you know everything, you really don’t. Cid and his men were a great help, but I’m never keen on having strangers touch her. Probably helped knowing the man was on good terms with the likes of you.” Setzer smiled, but Celes didn’t twitch her lips. “Happy she made it all the way out to the Crescent Island in one piece. Just need to do... one last thing....” An object snapped loudly into place and Setzer grinned. “Aha! Done! Should be good.”

Setzer tugged his gloves off before releasing the tie from his hair. All the while, he approached Celes. More scars littered what was exposed of his chest, far more severe than the ones slashed along his face. Celes followed the edges of the wounds, each one darting beneath his shirt and teasing her with the idea of where else he could be scarred.

“You can do more than look, you know,” he purred.

She snapped her eyes up to meet his. “That’s not what I—” She groaned and shook her head. “Never mind. I’ll leave you be to fix your damn airship.”

“Please, no need to be that way. I was finishing up here.” With the sleeves done, Setzer worked on buttoning up his shirt. Celes looked elsewhere and Setzer chuckled. “You’re so easy to tease. Do you even realize that?”

Refusing to match his stare, Celes headed to the catwalk and wrapped her arms around her body. “Quit it.”

Like always, he couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m glad to see you haven’t changed. Good to know someone in the Empire has their shit together. Did anyone tell you what happened back in Vector once you all left?”
“Edgar mentioned a girl had tipped him off and—”

Setzer snorted. She could almost hear him rolling his eyes. “He’s still telling that sad excuse for a story? Well, I suppose he has an active imagination. I’ll give him that.”

Celes blinked and gazed down through the open floor to the plains below. “So it didn’t happen?”

“What, him fooling around with—”

“Him being tipped off by her,” she muttered, stopping herself from smacking her face.

“Hell if I know. What I do know is that only one of us was tipped off and it wasn’t Edgar, exactly. He might have been the one to stand up and rally us together to figure out what the hell was going on, but he didn’t have the inside information I had.” The shuffle of fabric, most likely his coat and sash, came and went. “But don’t worry. Your secret is still safe with me.”

From what little was said to her upon returning to the Blackjack, no one spoke of the night of the banquet in Vector, particularly Edgar. So Setzer kept his word. A rather noble deed coming from the man operating the flying casino turned rebel vessel.

“And Celes?”

When he didn’t add onto that sentence, she brought her eyes up to find him. Behind her, Setzer stood as the image Celes always remembered, albeit softer as he leaned over the railing and steadied his gaze onto her.

“Thank you for letting me know.” One corner of his lips twitched up. “You had no reason to tell me, but I appreciate your trust.”

At a loss for words, her eyes peeled away and fell to the scenery below. Informing Setzer hadn’t been enough; Kefka still reached Thamasa and devastation lied in his wake. But she couldn’t second-guess her past actions, same with how she couldn’t allow herself to grieve for General Leo now. Her body had been programmed to march forward, unsure of how to actually release the tears. A defense mechanism of sorts. Thus was the nature of war and the life of a soldier.

Booted feet flitted onto the catwalk. “May I ask what’s troubling you?”

A simple question, yet Celes couldn’t vocalize an answer. His profound sigh overwhelmed her silence. Celes expected Setzer to walk down the catwalk, past her, and head off to man the Blackjack. They didn’t have time to fuss over emotions. Not when Kefka and the Empire needed to be stopped. Until then, Celes bottled her emotions up and stowed them in a corner.

But instead, Setzer stopped behind her and braced his hands on either side of her on the railing. He didn’t touch her or pin her against her own will, but the proximity of his body sent Celes’ heart racing out of control. Deep breaths cycled through him as she froze. The warmth of his body radiated onto her while she watched scarred hands grip hard onto the catwalk.

“I’m not saying I know what you’re going through,” he began softly, “nor do you need to explain anything to me, but know that you’re not going to go through this alone. We’re all in this together.”

Her eyes widened. “And when did you suddenly become concerned with what the Empire does? I thought you said yourself you didn’t care? What ever happened to this being a game to you?”

Setzer almost chuckled into her ear. “I’m not as simple as you think I am. I might be here for different reasons than the rest of you, but I’m here, am I not? I haven’t stranded you all yet, so we
might as well stick this out together.”

Her gaze lowered to her feet. “But why? Why do you even bother?”

One step was all it took for his chest to connect with her back. Celes inhaled audibly, tilting her head up to center. The subtle weight of his body against hers clouded her mind and immobilized her. Fingers clawed into her arms to surpass the fire washing over her entire body; what had once been an inkling of curiosity in the back of her mind now rocketed forward and exploded.

She closed her eyes, drawing a long inhale. The touch, the scent, all of it matched what her mind concocted in her sleep. For an instance, she longed for his hands to release the railing and embrace her. Anything to experience the elation again. *I shouldn’t want this,* she managed to think past the sinful fantasies. A single touch alone rekindled the dying flame.

“Must I repeat myself?” Setzer murmured. “Do you forget on purpose to drive me crazy? Or do you enjoy having me remind you over and over?”

She opened her eyes, hoping to find herself in bed and free from the dream. Oh, how wrong she was. “Setzer,” she exhaled out.

“Mmm?”

Though she banished the thoughts plaguing her and gulped down a breath of air. “We should head back up and check on everyone.”

A second of hesitation passed through Setzer before he stepped backwards. Celes stopped herself from leaning back into him to claim the warmth as her own, but she bottled up the pathetic notion with the rest of her silly daydreams and worries and deemed herself done with it.

“You’re right,” he agreed, albeit with a light scoff. “We should.”

As she peered over her shoulder, Setzer motioned for Celes to take the lead. She ignored him while retracing her steps back to the spiral staircase, thankful that Setzer kept to himself. But it was in his silence where Celes recalled Edgar’s words from earlier. She halted on the stairs. Setzer had no choice but to stop behind her, raising a perplexed eyebrow when she glanced back down to him.

“I’m glad you’ve stuck around,” Celes found herself saying.

He cocked his head. “Come again?”

“You heard me.” Her grip on the banister proved to be more for mental stability than actual balance. “That’s not to say you’re a saint, but you’ve proved to be above the likes of someone like Emperor Gestahl in terms of lying for the sake of power.”

Setzer’s lips twitched up. “Power doesn’t do it for me. Not in the same sense Gestahl sees it.”

Celes blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Why do I even bother asking.” Celes mumbled. But power didn’t suit Setzer; more gil to fatten his pockets was a more likely route for him to take.

“But lying doesn’t do it for me, either,” he added.

That reminder brought forth hesitation in Celes. “Then tell me, what will you do when this is all
over? When we’ve stopped the Empire.”

“When? That’s rather certain of you.”

“I have no other choice but to think that. Will you not answer me?”

Setzer perked his eyebrows up while shaking his head slowly. “I don’t know, flip a coin and see what happens? That seems to be doing well for me lately.”

But his answer boiled up a familiar batch of frustration within Celes. “You gamble for everything, don’t you? Your life? Your future? Is there anything you wouldn’t hand over for luck to decide for you? Is nothing precious enough to hold onto?” You almost make me as sick as Locke does, I swear. The two of you together just—

“What is it with you and the others believing that you have me figured out? That I view your ambitions to make the world a better place as a joke and am only here for my own amusement.”

Setzer ascended the stairs until he leveled himself with Celes. He narrowed his eyes and kept a tight hand on the railing behind him. Celes didn’t dare entertain the rhetorical question and instead matched his stare.

“May I remind you,” Setzer continued, “that you sought me out for assistance. Now I am doing just that. Shouldn’t your worries about my interests end there? Let me gamble as I please. This is my life at hand, not yours.”

“A little more enthusiasm wouldn’t hurt, let alone be appreciated.”

He paused. “Enthusiasm? For what? Are my efforts not good enough? I’m sorry if I’m not a battle-worn soldier such as yourself, Celes, and do not relish rushing into battle head first to solve all of my problems. I have better matters to place my focus into.”

“And your airship won’t be of any good if the Empire wins. You can’t simply fly away from the problem forever.”

She managed to silence him, though his features softened as he looked her over. “Celes, what’s wrong?”

The sheer audacity of the question sucker punched Celes. “What is… what?! Can you honestly be so oblivious and ask that?! I’m sorry if I care about the outcome of all of this, for in case you’ve forgotten, I once stood beside our enemy. I know what they’ve done, Setzer, and I wish to end it, because unlike some of us, I don’t drown myself in frivolous delights to erase the past.”

After a moment, he responded. “Then perhaps it would do you some good in trying it out.”

“Excuse me?”

“Please, you forget where you are. I profit from those wishing to escape the reality that is this cruel world. Sometimes a taste of indulgence does the mind good. Or did they forbid Generals the luxury of putting their minds at ease?”

Every muscle burned while her thoughts overflowed. Celes blinked rapidly as her anger boiled up and gushed out before she could control herself. “Don’t speak as if you actually understand what I’m going through! Don’t act like you genuinely care when a second ago you couldn’t even care about what your future would hold for you!”
“Then enlighten me, Celes: what are you going—”

“I’ve had to stand by as nothing but a witness to the horrors of those I once gave my trust to! My fellow Magitek knight, my only kin, has fallen to insanity. My superior, my Emperor, has been blinded by power. And my peer and comrade was tortured, murdered, and slaughtered before my own eyes! And you want me to distract myself with what? One of your stupid games? Is that how this works? I’m sorry, but my mind isn’t focused on diversions! I can’t sit still and not do something about the terrors that have taken place. Or maybe you’d even remotely understand that if you too had a friend lacerated before your own eyes.”

A single step forward on Setzer’s behalf left inches between the two. Their eyes latched onto each other’s, his face hardening while his hand clung to the railing behind her. Celes didn’t flinch at his relocation, but her heart sped up and leapt into her throat.

His voice dipped into a deep whisper, hissed through clenched teeth. “I’m sincerely sorry for what you have been exposed to, but do not speak to me as if I don’t understand what you’re going through, either.”

Celes fumbled with her words, lips trembling before parting. “And what exactly do you know of trauma?”

“Enough to stay afloat. Different tastes for different people. Would be boring if we were all the same, no?”

She blinked to hide both the images sparking to life before her and the prickling of tears daring to crumble her to nothing. “I don’t need distractions.”

“You wouldn’t know until you tried.”

Lowering her head, Celes bit her lower lip. The initial bout of anger simmered down. She almost preferred the rage over the weakness. “I doubt anything will replace this feeling.”

A gentle hand cupped her chin and brought her face back up. She met with Setzer’s eyes, unable to turn away from them. He looked her over as his fingers brushed along her jawline.

“Are you frightened?” he purred.

Celes drew in a jittery breath. “I have better things to do than submit to fear.”

He chuckled quietly. “Then wouldn’t you rather submit to a moment of indulgence? The world won’t end if you pause to breathe for a mere minute.”

“Breathing? That’s what you’re suggesting I do?”

“I’m suggesting you relax and enjoy yourself for a change of pace.” His hand parted away to tuck blonde hair behind her ear. “You’ve always been so tense, so persistent, so serious. I can’t help but wonder if the Imperial General knows of anything outside of combat and order.”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

Setzer smirked and shifted weight to realign himself closer to her. Celes never flinched. “And yet here we are, discussing the finer details of one another. I’m of the opinion that a different perspective would only benefit you.”

His hand was inches from hers, his face even closer. His last cigarette lingered on his hot breath,
which brushed over her lips. He spoke to her as if the others up above would hear if he uttered anything above a whisper. But it was the gaze he kept on her which clouded Celes’ thoughts again. The memories of Thamasa thinned out until only the imprints of the man across from her remained, no different from every meeting they shared beforehand.

Celes poked her tongue out to lick her lips. A glimmer sparked to life in Setzer’s eyes as she did so. “And you would know better?”

The curve of his lips brought a chill down her spine and knotted up into a fierce desire in the pit of her stomach. The subtle brush of his nose over hers only produced a stronger chill.

“Only if you’d allow me to.”

Setzer ceased all actions to await Celes’ permission, content with staring into her indecisive, blue eyes. All she had to do was ease into his face, cling onto his arm, and silently beg for his lips to close over hers. Just once. Just to claim she tasted him enough to satiate the desire budding inside.

What Celes feared was not being able to settle for just once.

A clatter echoed from above and both of them hitched their breaths. As the sound increased in volume, Setzer stepped away and provided breathing room for Celes, yet it did little to help her breathe easy. Each pronounced heartbeat thrummed in her head. She lifted her sights above to inspect the commotion.

“Hey! Setzer! You still down here?!”

Her heart skipped a beat over the voice calling down the staircase. A quick glance to Setzer showed he kept his eyes on her, albeit with a slight roll as he chose to ignore the shouting.

The yelling ceased, but the annoyance prevailed. “Gods, how damn long does it take to get this heap of junk running?”

Feet stomped down the stairs and Setzer gestured to Celes to take the lead. She hesitated, unable to douse the fire he built up inside of her. Like the rest of her problems, Celes shoved them aside and swallowed hard. With a quiet huff aimed at Setzer, she marched on up the staircase and converged with Locke.

“Celes?” Locke nearly collided into her, bracing himself on the railing. “What are you doing down here?”

“Same reason you’re down here, perhaps,” she offered.

Thankfully, he nodded and accepted her answer. “Oh…. So, do you know if—”

Locke’s eyes darted past Celes. She followed his gaze and spotted Setzer trudging on up. The allure once tugging at his features vanished along with the seductive glaze in his voice.

“Do I worry you now, Locke?” Setzer paused behind Celes and tilted his head. “I can assure you all is fixed and we’ll be departing shortly.”

For a moment, Locke’s eyes darted between Celes and Setzer. “Well, don’t tell me that. Save it for everyone up above. We’ve been waiting for gods know how long.”

Pivoting on his feet, Locke raced back up the stairs. Celes released her breath and took one step before pausing to eye Setzer.
“Nothing happened here,” she blurted out in a whisper.

Setzer blinked at her, the confusion brief in his eyes until a small smile appeared on his lips. “Of course,” he replied, incredulous as ever.

Unable to argue, Celes bolted up the stairs and met with Locke at the parted doors. He leaned into the open frame, sluggish with arms folded at his chest, yet perked up once Celes brushed past him. Setzer followed, locking the doors behind them, and took the lead back to the upper levels. Celes smoothed her hands over one another to calm the tingle still alive beneath her skin. She never noted Locke slowing down to match her pace.

“Hey,” he murmured. “Hey, Celes…. You doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said all too fast, keeping her eyes set ahead.

“You sure?”

She flicked her eyes to him. “Locke—”

“Just making sure.” His palms opened to her in defense. “I… he didn’t do anything, did he?”

If she closed her eyes, she could have gone back to the tiny space on the staircase, where little wiggle room was available for her and Setzer. She could still feel his breath on her, the heat of his body warming hers, and the sheer hunger consuming her in his eyes.

“No,” she lied.

Locke nodded slowly. “Okay, good. I… worried, that’s all.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” she seethed back.

“Okay, okay. I get it.” Locke sighed. “Sorry for being concerned.”

“For someone who claims to be an expert at sneaking around,” Setzer butted in with a raised voice, “I don’t quite understand how you ever stumbled upon such a title.”

Celes rolled her eyes and braced herself for the worst as Locke puffed himself up and quickened his steps to approach Setzer.

“Do you seriously pride yourself in eavesdropping?” Locke spat back.

“Hard to do so when you don’t understand the notion of subtlety.”

“Says the man who flew his damn airship into the heart of Vector.”

Setzer shot a glare to Locke over his shoulder. “Well, if you all had been quick about it, we wouldn’t be having this discussion, now wouldn’t we? As far as I’m concerned, we survived. Nothing else matters.”

“As far as I’m concerned, this contraption is a death trap for all of us.”

“If you’re so adamant about insulting my airship, then by all means, you can walk.”

Before Locke could retort, Celes rushed forward to meet the two bickering men and channeled her anger through her tongue. “Will the two of you shut up for once?! They both slowed down and blinked at Celes. “Is this honestly how you two spent your time in my absence? Do either of you
have nothing else better to do?! We have bigger matters to deal with than our relations with each other! Both of you can sort your differences out after the fact, but until then, we should focus on stopping the Empire and Kefka from seizing the entire world for malicious causes. So grow up —both of you—and move along.”

It appeared it was forgotten that they were in the presence of an Imperial General, one who obtained the rank without special pampering. Without another word, Locke and Setzer ignored one another and walked. Celes sighed, content with what minor victory she accomplished. It did little to calm the thoughts still swarming in her mind and the undeniable chills racing up and down her body.

But she ignored it all; even she had to focus on the task at hand.

The Floating Continent served as their destination. Strago spoke of the Warring Triad residing there—the petrified statues of the once living gods—forever staring at one another to nullify their energies. Gestahl and Kefka threatened the balance imbued in the Warring Triad. No one wished to witness what would unfold if the statues were thrown off alignment. The mention of the potential destruction was enough incentive to ensure it would never occur.

Celes refused to stay behind on the Blackjack. Had Leo been alive, she didn’t doubt he’d join in to stand against them. Vector could be rebuilt and the survivors helped, but first she had to rid the world of the evil which once plagued the city. Only then would she and everyone else be at peace.

Locke’s offer to join came as a surprise, but she didn’t deny his assistance. Daggers twirled in his hands as they approached the Floating Continent, prepared for what could possibly be their last fight. Terra also extended a hand and Celes smiled. Two former Imperial soldiers fighting against the two most pivotal men within the Empire. What better way to unleash pent-up resentment than to remind both Emperor Gestahl and Kefka of what she was capable of. Celes certainly wasn’t going to hold back Terra.

Their fourth member appeared upon the Floating Continent itself—the hired hand who had accompanied them to the Crescent Island. “Filthy, double-crossing Empire,” Shadow mumbled. “Tried to off me the second I had served my purpose.”

Celes was thankful the Empire hadn’t disposed of the skilled assassin, who now offered to help them, even if he had disappeared halfway through the labyrinth. Everyone had a reason to hate the Empire. The notion alone united and inspired them to strive for victory and justice. Celes held onto her rune blade with a death grip, leading the way without an ounce of fear. Sharpened blades and powerful magic struck down every opponent standing against them.

Through the winding caverns of the Floating Continent, the Warring Triad resided at the summit. Magic sputtered from the center, more formidable than any of the Espers they had encountered. Before the statues were the Emperor and Kefka, almost expecting the group to grace them with their presence.

Kefka grinned the whole while. “So, you all came to die together then?”

While Celes brandished her blade, the sparks of magic from the Warring Triad whizzed by her. No doubt Kefka held loose control over the flow of energy. Celes planned to sever him from abusing such power ever again, though her plan to attack was delayed upon witnessing the magic striking
both Terra and Locke. No physical damage was present, but the two froze within a glowing case of magic. Celes gasped and attempted to break them from their holds. Neither responded to her cries nor flinched to her abrupt shakes.

Her frantic eyes met with Locke’s. “What is this power?”

“Isn’t it incredible?” Celes clenched her jaw over the Emperor’s words. Gestahl chuckled, the shift in his beard hinting at a smile underneath. “Oh, this power. It’s decadent. Gives me goosebumps thinking about it.”

Celes was taught once to bow before the Emperor and never question his motives. He was the pinnacle within the Empire and promised to lead them all to glory. What lied before her instead was lunacy at best. His desires and intentions were unworthy for a proper Emperor. Celes refused to kneel before him anymore.

“Stop this at once!” she screamed with a violent rage. “Do you not see what you are doing?! Have you been blind to your own lust for power after all these years?” An unnatural wind—a magical occurrence—picked up and swirled around them. Celes pushed her hair out from her face and persisted. “Vector is destroyed and its people are hopeless. General Leo is dead because of your power hungry ways! Is this how you wish to rule? With a selfish mind that cares not for the good of the people? What good will this do any of us?! Please, I beg you. If you are even half of the man I grew up believing in, then you’ll do the right thing by stepping away from this.”

But even Celes had no preconceived expectations, not when Emperor Gestahl did well with surprising her time and time again with his inconsistent lies. She readied herself with her rune blade, prepared to resort to brute force if diplomacy was lost upon him.

Kefka, however, was beyond a lost cause. “Bah! Are you even listening to yourself? Do you buy that crap for even a second? Oh, you have such a sense of humor, Celes.”

She harbored select, bitter words for Kefka, but Emperor Gestahl came forward to speak loud and clear. “Celes. Dear child. You of all people should understand this power. We created you, molded you into who you are right this very moment. If it wasn’t for that magic, you wouldn’t be here. Because of that, you alone are special, one of many who survived the experiments.” He gestured over to Kefka. “The two of you have that in common. Two unique souls. Better than human. I couldn’t ask for more profound perfection.” Then his face twisted. “Why don’t I give you and Kefka the task of creating progeny to populate my new Magitek Empire?”

She preferred choking on the steel of her weapon. However long Gestahl formulated this scheme, she didn’t desire to find out. Kefka wasn’t laying a finger on her. Not after the trauma he subjected her to.

Though Kefka’s command afterwards rivaled Gestahl’s repulsive suggestion. “Kill the others and we’ll forgive your treachery.” He retrieved a longsword specially from Emperor Gestahl, running a hand along the flat edge of the blade. “You’ve misbehaved one too many times, but you’re far too precious to let go. We need you more than anything, Celes. Together we can have the world for our own.” As fingertips danced along the sword, Kefka’s eyes flicked up to Celes, bearing a devious grin. “We could create something beautiful together, you and I.” Celes refused to shudder, not wishing him to enjoy her visible discomfort. “Think of your future.” Kefka drew close and extended the hilt of the sword to her. “Our future. All you need to do is get rid of a few pests and you won’t have to worry about anything again. Take it. Unless you wish to torture them with your own means. I don’t mind.” He cocked his head to the side. “I’m sure you can put on quite the show for me.”

Subsequently, Celes retrieved the sword from the giggling Kefka. She weighed the blade in her
hand, disapproving of how it worked against her. The hefty weapon was better suited the likes of General Leo than herself. And she was to strike down her allies, just as Kefka had with Leo. Two human lives disposed of and Celes was pardoned. A simple request she was more than capable of accomplishing.

Clutching onto the sword, Celes faced her frozen allies. Both Locke and Terra pleaded to Celes with their eyes alone to rethink this offer. Celes brought her attention to Locke, his gaze not discarding her as a traitor, but imploring her to remember which side she truly belonged to. Kefka cracked up over Celes’ indecision as the constant spiral of magic from the Warring Triad chimed through the whipping wind.

Her sights fell from the sword to the ground. “Power only breeds wars,” she whispered to herself. “It’s something we’d all be better without.”

A Haste spell wasn’t necessary; Celes had always been quick on her feet. She spun around with enough speed to catch both Gestahl and Kefka off guard. Narrowing onto her target, Celes lunged at Kefka with a vicious, raw cry. His wide eyes met with hers as she closed the distance, the image on par with the satisfaction of sinking the blade deep into Kefka’s side.

She held the blade in place without a drop of sympathy. He twitched in an attempt to muffle the pain, teeth digging into his tongue. Neither of them tore their sights from the other.

“And we’d all be better off without the likes of you,” Celes spewed out.

Retracting the sword from Kefka, Celes threw it to the ground. Metal clanged along the surface while Kefka stumbled backwards and collapsed to his knees. With a glimpse to Emperor Gestahl, he stood motionless as a witness to the act. Had he forgotten what his General was capable of? *You made me like this,* Celes thought with a glower. *You have no one to blame but yourself.*

Kefka hacked out a sharp cough and clutched his side. Instead of passing out and dying from the blood loss, Kefka forced himself onto his feet. “Blood?” Releasing the hand from the wound, Kefka examined the crimson liquid coating his palm. “This is truly... *blood*?!” It trickled out from his side and crippled him to walk with a hunch, but it didn’t stop Kefka from snickering. “You brat. That’s what you’ve always been.” As he closed in on Celes, each word of his intensifying into a raving outburst. “Nothing but a pathetic, arrogant, vicious, whiny, pampered, worthless, *fucking brat!* I am so fucking sick and tired of you, *bitch*! You think you’re better than me?! You think just because you can make me *bleed* that you’ve *won* over me?! Is that how your fucking mind works?! You worthless piece of shit!”

With each stride towards her, Celes stepped two away from Kefka. Her heel teetered on the edge of the high platform. A straight drop down to the earth below loomed behind her. Celes gasped and halted, not interested in discovering how high up the Floating Continent truly was. Her sights returned to Kefka a second too late, leaving her exposed and defenseless.

He held back no petulance in his shriek. “I fucking *hate* you!”

Before she could paw for her rune blade, Kefka’s hand whipped across her face and snapped her body off kilter. She staggered toward the cliff, unable to ignore the searing pain burning in her jaw. Retaliation fell short as Kefka slammed his foot behind her knee. The force sent Celes doubling over the edge and collapsing down the incline. Celes gasped and clawed for a strong hold to prevent her inevitable fall. Her side scraped against the jagged rocks, unhooking her rune blade in the process. The prized possession slipped away and fell from the vast heights, much to her dismay.

Struggling to hold on, Celes barely made out what transpired before her, wishing she could have
dismissed it as a figment of her imagination.

The downward spiral Kefka descended to was nothing short of hysteria. He manipulated the Warring Triad, ignored Gestahl’s warnings, and caved in to his own selfish desire. Through the divine destruction of the Warring Triad, Gestahl fell with a single strike and did not stir. The once prominent leader of the Empire died like a pesky fly. Kefka grabbed hold of a limb and flung him off the Floating Continent, no different than his disposal of the dying Espers.

And that laugh. The wind gathered speed with magic crackling in the air, but it was Kefka’s twisted laugh which burned into Celes’ memory. She tried to scream to him, tried to persuade him otherwise, though it was far too late. The decision to destroy the world had been settled upon years ago and there was no convincing Kefka otherwise.

Her tight grip loosened and Celes slid further down the slope with a shriek on her behalf. She weighed the options of releasing now over being subjected to Kefka’s torment, but a firm hand grabbed onto her waist and brought her back to the surface. Sucking in a breath, Celes recognized Shadow; he returned with a burning vengeance.

“You must go,” he informed her. “Leave this to me.”

The once stable ground of the Floating Continent shook violently beneath them as Kefka moved the Warring Triad for sheer amusement. Celes regained her senses and eyed Shadow. “No! You must come with—”

“Go!” he snapped. “Now is your chance!”

He darted off to thwart Kefka’s efforts without another word. The statues continued to shift, but when two of them bumped into each other, a high pitched ring shrilled out with a flash of light. Celes spun around to discover Terra and Locke dropping to their knees and gasping for air.

Locke clutched his throat and spat out a curse. “This is bad. I can’t believe what’s going on.” He jerked his head up. “We need to get out of here!”

“But....” Terra forced herself up and spied upon Shadow and Kefka in the distance. “But what about—”

“We don’t have time for questions,” Celes stated, already bolting by the two of them. “We leave now!”

Chunks of rocks split open and plummeted from the sky; the foundation of the Floating Continent crumbled beneath their feet as they retraced their path. Celes focused on moving, not once slowing down despite every muscle demanding otherwise. Multiple times they lost their footing, but for every stumble, another was there to provide assistance. Together they pressed forward.

The Blackjack loomed by the edge of the land mass. By then, Shadow caught up with them and they all boarded in haste. As questions roused through those aboard, Celes tracked down Setzer, who remained at his usual post by the airship’s helm.

“You need to get us the hell out of here!” she demanded with a sharp tongue, unable to catch her breath. “Now!”

His eyes darted past her and onto the collapsing island in the sky. He didn’t argue, didn’t even nod. Instead, Setzer was quick to maneuver the proper devices to propel the airship forward.

Terra held onto the airship’s railing and watched the catastrophe unfold. “Can this magic even been
stopped?”

No one had an immediate response and Celes feared the silence served as an answer.

They circled around the crumbling remains of the Floating Continent while surges of raw magic jutted out of the Warring Triad. The energy moved quicker than lightning, like blazing shooting stars in a cloudless sky descending onto the world below. The vicious magic tore apart oceans, mountains, and everything else standing in its path. The horrid nightmare pouring upon civilization demonstrated no remorse.

Setzer gritted his teeth and flicked his wrist along the control panels. “Hang on!”

But the Blackjack was only so fast, despite every engine and device working to its maximum potential. Celes faced him, initially to ask if they could zip past the hell raining down onto the world, but she was blinded by the flash of light bolting towards them. The brute force of the impact knocked the entirety of the group down to the floor. When Celes regained composure, an evident split fissured through the airship, rapidly separating them in half.

Frantic to stay afloat, Celes launched out to latch onto anything to prevent herself from falling, but no matter which half she was on, the Blackjack descended at an alarming rate. She clung onto the ledge with a grunt while her eyes flashed up above.

Locke struggled to stand, the brunt of the impact sent through his shoulder. Fear overwhelmed agony and brought him scrambling towards her. He extended an arm and Celes sought to claw her way back up, stuttering in her attempts. Locke screamed out, told Celes to hold on, for he would help her. She wanted to believe him, to convince herself that everything would be alright through her panicked breaths.

Past Locke, Setzer had been one of the few who stirred. His head whipped about to witness the inevitable; his prized airship, the only contraption that dared to take to the skies, was doomed to fall and sink into the depths of the ocean. Though instead of cherishing his last moments with the Blackjack, Setzer whipped around to settle his eyes onto Celes.

Perhaps he would have said something, maybe even offer aid. It didn’t matter in the end.

Another surge of pure magic collided into the Blackjack. The overwhelming vigor knocked Celes’ grip loose. A scream echoed from the airship as she sunk midair, the airship’s annihilation overhead detonating like fireworks in the dark sky. Blonde hair whipped over her face and Celes closed her eyes while waiting for the inevitable. She prayed for unconsciousness via shock instead of meeting with the fiery earth or icy ocean.

Past the explosions and chaos throwing the world off balance, she swore she heard her name. Someone called out to her one last time. Maybe it was real or perhaps her mind played one last trick on her before death plucked her life away. The last bit of comfort vanished as she sucked in a final breath.

She wished she had known who it was.

She wanted to call out their name, too.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A quick gasp whirled into a yelp. More than the usual cold gripped tight onto her bones. It wriggled under flesh and charred her muscles.

And then Celes opened her eyes.

Where am I?

She was supposed to be dead. She belonged in a hellish realm, fit for a failure of a traitor, not in the land of the living. Fresh air filled her lungs as her surroundings blurred with each blink of her eyes. Celes frantically whipped her head about, unable to find the calm in the storm thundering in her head.

One minute she was falling. The next, she was elsewhere.

What the hell is going on?

Her body shot upright in what she discerned to be a bed. The world swayed before her while the hint of salt sifted through her nostrils. Perhaps it was all a dream. A lucid one, at that. Celes intended to investigate the premise, though upon maneuvering out of bed, her limbs were no better than dead, useless weights. Another yelp jutted out of Celes before collapsing onto the floor. Rendered motionless, Celes sucked in jagged breaths. Her blue eyes darted about in search for an explanation.

The walls twisted and bent while the wind transformed into a sea of howls. The voices of the dying pleaded for mercy. The heat of an invisible flame licked Celes’ face and melted the walls to reveal the corpses piling high. The cries escalated in volume and the scent of stale blood choked her. When the gore of the lives lost bombarded Celes, she shut her eyes, but the images remained. She thought she screamed out, but all Celes heard was the resounding laughter of a mad man while he murdered her comrade.

Managing to curl up into a ball, Celes lost track of reality and the hallucinations. A muffled voice entered the room. She spied feet from her current vantage point, the last she remembered before the world hazed over and welcomed her back to the nothingness.

When her eyes peeked open, she was back in bed. Covers tucked her in tight as the squished pillow failed to support her head. An act as simple as lolling her head about proved every drop of strength was sapped from her being. When her eyes fully opened, her vision proved to be sharper. Decrepit, wooden walls lined the interior, half of the ceiling missing with every trinket on display disheveled, burned, or broken.

The memory of the Warring Triad and the Floating Continent trickled through her mind: the vibrant magic ripping apart the skies before colliding into the continents below. It struck down the Blackjack, rendered it useless. Someone had called out her name when she lost her grip. The voice continued to echo in her mind.
“Celes?”

Her name flowing through the room was no mind trick. Celes peered through tired eyes to spot the figure approaching her with great haste. Ratty material lined his body, but it was his face Celes recognized.

“Cid,” Celes whispered.

His eyes flicked over her multiple times before locking onto her stare. “Celes! You’re awake!” His smile grew. “You’re alive!”

The revelation of her life intact was a means of celebration and joy, yet Celes couldn’t muster an expression similar to Cid’s. He retrieved her hand beneath the covers to squeeze. The warmth should have cured the numbness, yet Celes didn’t flinch.

“I had been so worried about you!” He patted the top of her hand. “I thought maybe... you wouldn’t wake up. That you’d be gone for good.”

What?

“But you’re here now! And that’s all that matters. Now that—”

The information overload brought forth a wince from Celes and Cid silenced himself. He examined her again with the distant fear of bringing her physical pain. Celes wished her mental state was as easily treatable as her physical body.

“How long have I been asleep?” Celes locked onto his eyes and stiffened her voice. “Cid, I need to know how long it’s been.”

When Cid eventually answered, all the light from his face dimmed to nothing. “It’s been a year.” Then after a beat, “A year to the day.”

While it explained the muscle atrophy, it left a bigger hole in her mind in need of filling. Cid was more than generous with indulging her the details: Kefka indeed tore the world apart as they knew it. Oceans swallowed masses of land and time worsened matters. Cid claimed they were the only two left on the Solitary Island, for over time, people lost hope and opted to end their lives.

Cid droned on and Celes stared up through the partial ceiling and to the clouds. It hadn’t been a dream. Oh, how she longed now for it all to be a twisted invention of her mind. A flash of a thought struck her eyes wide open.

“Where is everyone else?” she demanded. Everyone else had been there on the airship with her. If she had survived, surely the others had to, as well. Then with a softer tone, she spoke to herself more so than to Cid, “Where’s Locke?”

Once more he faltered. “I don’t know, Celes. I’m... I’m sorry.”

Shortly after, Cid insisted Celes was to sleep and regain her strength, convinced her magical infusion would aid with a speedy recovery. Though her well-being never scratched the surface of her thoughts, not when the possibility of the other Returners being truly dead took over her mind. Her heart plummeted down into the pits of her stomach. Cid’s voice faded into a white noise like the ocean in the background.
A week passed by before her feet touched the floor of the disheveled home. Each conscious action was her own doing, outright refusing further assistance from Cid. She hobbled over to a shattered mirror in the corner, half of the pieces missing. Her fractured reflection brought life to faded scars and a frail body. Beside the mirror, Cid kept her surviving belongings piled beside a new stack of clothing: her white boots and a couple pouches with no sight of the Shiva magicite.

*Did you save me?* she thought upon remembering the icy Esper. *Did you know I would die and lent me your remaining power? Is that why you’re gone now? Or did the ocean swallow you up, too?*

Celes examined the clothing Cid gathered for her—a mismatched collection of scraps better suited for a middle-aged mother. She slipped on the white boots, the only item left of her old General attire. Celes paused in the middle of buckling them up and allowed the memories to slam into her.

The Empire was obliterated. First Vector, then Leo, and then Gestahl. Even her rank as General. Celes braced herself against a nearby table while failing to hold back a sigh. All of it was gone now. Every last bit of it. All the time spent craving power resulted in the world collapsing into complete ruin. It no longer mattered what was salvageable or not anymore. Celes couldn’t forget the permanency of the destruction as she finished dressing.

The added weight on her hip was missing, throwing her center of gravity off. With another round of inspection, Celes recalled the fate of her rune blade. Without it, she was naked and defenseless. Magic tingled at her fingertips, but the dance of swordplay always came more naturally.

“Ah! You’re up!”

Celes was in the middle of pulling her hair back into a partial up-do when Cid came in to inspect her. Forcing a weary smile for him, she nodded. “Thank you for the clothes.”

Cid jerked his head to the side and released a cough. “Think nothing of it! I, uh… would have given you something more suitable, but it was all I could—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Celes insisted. Her eyes dropped to the basket in his clutches. “What’s this?”

“Hmm?” He blinked and glanced down. “Oh! This! Well, with all the animals and plants withering away, all that’s left is fish from the ocean and that’s if you’re lucky. I… haven’t had much luck lately. Sometimes days go by before I can eat, but I have one for tonight for us!”

Closing in on Cid, Celes examined the contents to discover a single fish still twitching. Meager scraps better served to the Imperial dogs, but Celes couldn’t complain. This was her life now.

In a day, Celes scouted the perimeter of the Solitary Island. Buildings paved along the small shoreline, each one more crippled than the one before it. Few items were left behind in the abodes, most already scavenged by those previously there or Cid himself. She scouted for food, for items of value, for signs of life. No gulls flew over the beach and no flora budded with the promise of a blossom.

When she came full circle, she sat upon a rock overlooking the ocean. In every direction, water consumed her vision. No distant lands kissing the horizon or ships sailing by. Nothing but the waves
continuously rolling onto the shore, the sound no longer holding enough peace to lull her to sleep at night. She wondered if anything dwelled in the distance. Only once did she ask Cid of life beyond the island. He never did answer.

Every morning she woke with the sun, once a reminder of a new day full of life and possibilities. Now it burned her eyes open and brought with it the cruel sign of all life and hope snuffed out.

Cid fished along the shallow water, swearing up a storm. Glimmers of silver wriggled through the ocean and away from the man. Celes insisted on helping, but Cid forever told her otherwise. With all the fish scared off, Cid strolled over to Celes.


While her stomach rumbled, she couldn’t dismiss the pity dragging down Cid’s features. “Don’t be,” she tried to soothe him. “It’s alright.”

“If only it truly was.” With a mighty sigh, Cid plopped down next to Celes. “What’s the use? It’s only a matter of time before we starve ourselves to death and we both know you’ll out-do me—”

“Cid.”

“I’m speaking the truth, Celes.” He coughed several times. “I was there for all of your tests, all of the infusions. You’re strong, a survivor. It’s in your blood. I couldn’t have asked for a better subject.” He lifted his sights to her. “You were perfect.”

Perfect. That was the descriptor he chose for her. Celes couldn’t bear to stomach the title any longer. Perfect was reserved for the best, the flawless, the pinnacle of every success imaginable. All Celes focused on were the failures, the hardships, the instances where she was anything but perfect.

Oh, how the mighty Celes has fallen!

Soldiers laughed and mocked her weakness. Their sneers returned to haunt Celes as she drew her knees into her chest. For so long, she strove for perfection. Anything short of it was a catastrophe. Celes needed to give her peers and superiors a reason to deem her worthwhile. She refused to be disposed of and replaced. Success was her only option, for the other alternatives led to death.

Including sitting on the beach beside Cid.

Celes had been jury-rigging a crude fishing net when Cid collided into a nearby table and knocked a chair down to the floor. She dropped the device to catch Cid before he collapsed himself. Violent coughs surged out of him, the same fit he had been experiencing for weeks.

“This cough,” Cid managed to sneak in between hacking up a lung, “just won’t quit.”

“You must rest,” Celes insisted. “You’ve been spending all this time looking after me and not caring for yourself. Please, let me return the favor.”

With the shake of his head, Cid continued his onslaught of coughing. “You have magic in your veins, Celes. Nothing I did ensured your recovery. You were going to be fine. You’ve always been
More coughing silenced his words and Celes led him to the vacant bed.

“You need this now more than I do.” Once he sat down on the mattress, she wore a small smile.
“You must be hungry.”

Cid didn’t argue with her. “It’s been three days since I’ve had a meal. The fish don’t seem to like me much. Maybe… maybe you will have better luck. But you don’t have to—”

As Cid rolled over into the bed after a series of coughs, Celes patted his shoulder before retrieving her new fishing net and a basket. “You stay here. I’ll see what I can do.”

The shore was only a minute walk. Water lapped at the sand, the roll of waves forever chiming through the sky. Celes pushed her hair out from her face and kicked off her boots for her fishing attempt. When she began, the sun sat high in the sky. As her energy depleted, it shone down upon her at an angle from the west. Only a few fish laid in the basket, one of them still twitching. Celes had never cooked in her life, but she was willing to try if it meant helping Cid.

She stepped foot into the small house, bringing the good word of her successful catches. Cid was sure to have a hearty chuckle over her many failed attempts at capturing the wriggling creatures, similar to his own. Not once did he stir from his bed or even hack out a cough. Celes called to him. The silence persisted. The basket fell from her hands, fish spilling out while she darted to the bed.

He didn’t breathe or twitch. Celes clung onto an arm to rattle. No response, yet again.

“Cid, wake up!” Trembling hands grabbed onto his body as if to revive him. “Please, stop it! Tell me you’re only joking!” But his head flopped over, limp like the rest of his body. An unwanted sensation prickled behind her eyes and she desperately blinked it all away. “Just wake up! Please, don’t do this to me!”

But he didn’t wake up. He didn’t laugh and pat her on the head like he had always done. The man who had treated her like his own child while she grew up in the Empire was now dead. An inevitable fate neither of them could control. Like those before him, Cid deserved better. Far better. And Celes could do nothing to change it.

She yelled out for no one to hear, begging for him to come back. Only the ocean waves responded to her in the distance. Finally releasing Cid, Celes stumbled backwards until her back hit the wall. A hand clamped over her mouth while staring at the lifeless body. The once proud and respected General of the Empire, able to confront any task, now dissolved into a sniveling child.

And she was alone. Truly alone. Celes gulped down the hard lump in her throat before deteriorating further in her hyperventilation. But there’s no one else on this island. There’s probably no one else left in this whole world. It’s all gone, because we couldn’t stop Kefka. Her arms embraced her shaking body. No, because the Empire was power hungry for more. Because... I couldn’t do anything to stop them.

Her slow descent to the floor was followed by hugging her knees into her chest. The prospects of varying outcomes bombarded her, but each time Celes reverted to the same notion—that she had done something wrong along the way and this was all her fault. Despite her efforts, she had failed. All this time, it was all she ever was—a failure.

I was never anyone special or important. I tried. So hard. But look where that got me. Look where it got the whole world.

The negative thoughts ate away at her, boiling to the forefront of her mind and bubbling away. Over
and over she replayed the events from the Floating Continent, Thamasa, and Vector, unable to solve the enigma and produce a perfect outcome. The events were beyond everyone’s control, even Celes’.

*But what about everyone else? Can they possible still be alive out there?* Celes rested her forehead on top of her knees. *But where are they? Wouldn’t they try to find me over the course of a year?* A shudder greeted her. *Do I even still matter? Would I be worth the effort?* Celes shook her head. *What good am I to them now? A former General to a fallen Empire? What would I amount to now, except for fiasco?*

A second, more sinister realization struck her and stilled her breath—perhaps Kefka killed them all. Hunted them down and slaughtered them, just as he promised he would. After all he had submitted her to, he without a doubt possessed the ability to torment her allies. Images blazed by her, ones replacing Leo’s corpse with those of the Returners. Celes clenched her jaw shut and shuddered over the wave of nausea gurgling in her stomach.

Never before did she desperately long to see those familiar faces. She wanted to see Terra and discuss anything that came to mind with the other woman. She wanted Edgar, of all people, to be there and attempt his flirting with her again, just to see how he’d handle the rejection this time. She wanted Cyan, the one who trusted her the least and had every justification to do so, beside her. She wanted Sabin’s hearty laugh and Gau’s immature antics. She wanted to fully acquaint herself with the newcomers, Relm and Strago, and ask them of the Magi, magic, and more.

And Locke. She missed him, too, despite the turmoil which passed between them. Regret settled in upon understanding she hadn’t been fully honest with him about her feelings. All she desired was proof that she wasn’t a replacement for Rachel. Maybe she could have surpassed his old love, though what she mistook to be burning love was nothing but her own need for acceptance. If Celes had a second chance, their brief, midnight meeting in Albrook would have gone differently. In the end, her silence hurt them both of them. Not that it mattered now.

But to Celes’ surprise, she longed for the one person who she told herself relentlessly to forget. The man who mistook her for his previous lover and still kept his sights on Celes. The man who was willing to agree to a ridiculous bet and in turn lost his absolute freedom. The man who promised not to say a word of her appearance in Vector. The man who found a pleasurable game in teasing her. The man who claimed she intrigued him. The man who looked at her every damn time she entered the room like she was the only one there.

And she wanted Setzer by her side. As much as she desired to lash out at him and wished their paths never crossed, she also longed to nestle into his arms. She pictured a warm embrace drawing her in and tightening around her shaking form. He alluded to her deserving a distraction from her busy thoughts, one he could give her. Celes could almost breathe in his distinct scent. What she would give now for a distraction, even a mere taste of what he could offer. Certainly, Setzer would have laughed at her plea in her current state. Whatever smart ass comment fell from his lips didn’t change Celes’ mind.

The destruction of the world offered a new perspective; life was fragile and precious, even the lives of those she barely tolerated on a good day. All the qualms and troubles vanished, leaving her with the sight of a fearless, adventurous soul manning his airship, wind blowing through his silvery-white hair. Not a care in the world with his instincts and dreams guiding him.

And he too was gone. Just like the rest of them.

Celes pulled her head back to gulp down air, tears cascading down her face. A gross sob broke out before she clamped tight palms over her mouth. Her eyes fell shut. Her body quaked.
“I am so sorry,” she said muffled words to no one, unable to hold it back. “I had been so aloof. I must’ve been ridiculous, but that never fazed you, did it?” Celes sniffled. “Would you laugh at me now? Some mighty General I am crying over my own mess. You should’ve left us. Fly away when we arrived in Vector. None of this would have happened.” Hands knotted up in her hair while she shook her head. “Why did you have to come for me? What did you ever see in me?” Sob sputtered out along with the tears; it all flowed more freely than she ever allowed herself to in her entire life. “What the fuck was I ever to you?! Why did you bother with me?! Why?! You could have whoever you wanted, but you came after me! You idiot! Now look what’s happened!”

The tears wrecked Celes. Her thoughts deformed into nothing but direct blame to herself for all of the faults in the world. No one was there to comfort her. Only despair.

Gradually, the tears subsided. Strands of blonde hair stuck to her pale, tear-stained face. By the time she quieted down to sniffs, the sun brushed over the horizon. The fish once flapping around on the floor had stopped, lifeless as Cid was. Everything relinquished the will to live and Celes didn’t fault them.

There was nothing she could do; nothing she wanted to do.

I’m useless. A pathetic waste of space. I always was. I wish I had failed the infusion and experiments long ago. I wouldn’t have experienced all the pain and misery in this life. Now that’s all there is in this world. What’s the point? Why should I try? Why did I ever bother to begin with?

Through her distorted thoughts, a sliver of information peeked out. Cid had spoken of the others living on the Solitary Island and how they gave up over time. They filed up to the northern cliff and jumped off. Lives thrown away, one by one, until all who remained was Celes.

She forced herself onto tired feet to find the same path leading to the northern cliff.

Everyone’s gone, she thought, not bothering to shield her eyes from the glaring sun. Kefka got what he wanted, I imagine. Whether or not he killed the others or they died by other circumstances… they’re gone. I’ve… never been this alone. I’ve never wanted someone else here so badly. I’m supposed to be a warrior, not a damsel in distress. All I want… is for someone to hold me. No, that’s stupid. No one would ever bother to comfort me. I’m not worth the effort. She would have laughed at herself if she harbored the necessary strength. It’ll never happen now. Nothing ever will. This is where it ends.

After a long trek up a steep incline, Celes reached the top. From such a height, the impact with the water was enough to kill someone. The jagged rocks jutting out from the water also promised death. The wind danced freely along the cliff, tousling Celes’ hair as she neglected to push it out of her eyes. From the corner of her vision, a lifeless bird splayed out on the ground.

If only she possessed the ability to fly, then she could leave the island and search for everyone. The mere thought didn’t faze Celes. It’s no use. All I would find is nothing. I’d only delay the inevitable. She shuffled towards the cliff, not bothering to peer down. I miss everyone so dearly. I wish they were all here now. But everyone’s gone. Even Locke. Even Setzer. There’s… nothing left for me here.

The tips of her boots inched over the edge as Celes inhaled. Her eyes turned to the skies, the warm colors mixing together. The salt air filled her lungs and she held onto that breath. Once more she overlooked the island and the view of destroyed homes. No echoes of children laughing down the streets or people bartering with merchants. No signs of life present—or ever again.

One foot reached out to touch the ground and found empty space. Unlike falling from the Blackjack,
dread didn’t tighten her muscles. Celes welcomed the descent from the high point. Perhaps now she could put her troubled mind at ease.

There wasn’t anything left to worry about; she wouldn’t be a burden anymore.

The echo of the ocean waves never faded out. Cool water lapped up to meet the shore before retreating. A sliver of the sun peeked out over the horizon, but its warmth lingered. A nearby bird chirped and fluttered against the calm breeze. Again the water rolled up the shore and nudged Celes awake.

With half her face pressed into the sand, she opened her eyes. Blurry surroundings greeted her. So did life. The fall from the cliff hadn’t been as fatal as she had wished it would be. Celes initially blamed the magic in her blood, only to divert her thoughts elsewhere.

*I can’t even kill myself. Death won’t accept a failure like me.*

No more tears squeezed past her eyes. Not now. Celes contemplated a second attempt with a different strategy. Fate had no reason to keep her alive, save to toy with her for the sake of cruel amusement.

The waves meet her cheek again and violently forced Celes to cough. She braced herself along the sand, salt water spewing out of her mouth, and tucked soaked hair behind her ears.

And the bird caught her attention.

The feathered creature flapped its wings while circling a small path on the beach. Exquisite cloth wrapped carefully around its body like a makeshift bandage. However, the material matched one of the many layers of a bandana someone she once knew wore.

“It can’t be,” she whispered. “Where did you come from? Is he... the one who took care of you? Is he still alive? If only you could tell me.”

The bird wriggled free from the bandana, revealing a healed body. It spread its wings and took flight to the north, leaving behind the colorful strip of fabric. Celes couldn’t bring herself to move, instead eyeing the bandana until the night deprived her of vision.

Celes didn’t stir until the sun rose from the east. She thought she had imagined the bandana—a mere delusion from her near-death experience—but it remained on the beach, caught on a dead shrub and flicking about in the wind. Even with her body rested, Celes found little reason to move, not until her stomach growled hard enough to force her onto her hands and knees. Coughing up more sea water, she sat back on her heels and focused on her breaths.

Multiple times she had defied death and yet she couldn’t make such claims to be victories. All she saw were reasons not to bother with life and its complications. Even the reminder of life—from both the bird and the scrap fabric—did little to faze Celes.
She forced herself to her feet at one point to head back to the home. Unable to eye the corpse tucked within the bed sheets, Celes focused on the dead fish at her feet and the few flies swarming around for a meal. To eat them required starting a fire, all which required more effort than Celes wished to exude. With a sigh, she left the building and headed back to the beach.

Collapsing onto the sand, she wondered how long it would take for herself to die of starvation. Or if she walked through the ocean, would the waves eventually carry her body away and comfort her with death. Her gaze shifted from the horizon to the bandana caught in the shrub. Reaching out, she untangled the cloth and smoothed it out with her fingers. She couldn’t tell if it smelt of Locke. Not even his warmth lingered along the material.

It didn’t stop her from clutching it in her hand.

Celes lost track of how many times the sun rose and set. She counted time passed by her attempts to consume food, which were all few and far between. She coughed up plenty of spoiled food, having forgotten she caught the fish several days prior. She slept outside under the stars, the glittering heavens providing little comfort, and never needed a blanket to warm her.

All the while, she clutched onto the bandana. After some time, she forgot why she did so. Every day, she looked at the limp cloth in her clutches and wondered if Locke was alive. If any of them were alive.

And she remembered Locke reaching out for her as the Blackjack deteriorated. And she remembered a voice calling out for her so desperately, as if to sacrifice everything else to ensure she lived.

But none of it mattered, for every day she convinced herself they were all dead.

Large, popped blisters encompassed Cid’s body like deep craters. Dried up fluids seeped out of his mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. Cracks ran over his body like fissures in the earth as the remaining skin sunk in around the thin skeleton. Celes stared at his corpse, no longer certain of how long she left his body to rot in bed. The foul stench didn’t make her flinch.

At one point, he had been full of life, always excited about his next project in the labs and further fueling the progress of the Empire. He never shooed Celes away when she tagged along with him, almost insisted she stayed by his side. But as she aged, Celes busied herself with training, no longer caring for the late night stories he told her or the doting attention he showered upon her. Such behavior would soften her in the long run.

“You looked out for me,” Celes murmured through her cracked lips. “And I failed you, but you insisted otherwise.”

She moved his body only so she could visit the house again without the disturbance of his corpse festering in bed. Wrapping the filthy bedsheets around his form, she dragged it with what strength she had and tossed him out into the ocean. Sitting back down on the beach, she spent the remainder of the day watching the water slowly accept him. The wrapped up body floated out to sea, bobbing a
few times before sinking. Nothing ever rolled back up along the shore.

Celes thought her mind would rest easier knowing she had done something right. Instead, she lowered her head and berated herself for taking so long and thus disrespecting his death.

The trauma of past events returned as nightmares, forcing her to view sleep as torture. In her time spent awake, Celes rifled through the old building. Even though she searched every nook and corner countless times, she found nothing else to do with her time, unable to muster the courage to end her own life and thus resigned herself to dying slowly, painfully, miserably.

A piece of parchment fell from a desk, stuck between the drawers until Celes wiggled them about. She raised an eyebrow, scooping it up and reading the contents scribbled out in shoddy ink. It had been a note from Cid, written for her. He spoke of a raft built, meant for only one person, and how he wished for it to be hers. Celes read over his encouraging words, how he always believed in her, how he always cared for her, and how he always wanted nothing but the best for her.

Over and over again she read the contents of the note, waiting for the words to morph into something else and reveal it all to be an illusion from her tired mind. It never happened.

The parchment fluttered to the ground as tears trickled down her cheeks. For the first time in weeks—or had it been months—Celes felt her heart skip a beat and the haze in her mind shifted. She clung onto the bandana she still carried around and held it close to her heart. But she convinced herself that Cid was still wrong, that she hadn’t amounted to anything and he simply didn’t understand.

Leaning into a wall, Celes tangled her fingers up in the bandana. She looked it over and brought forth new questions for herself. Was Locke truly alive? Did he miss her? If he was alive, then was the possibility of everyone else surviving in her favor?

Celes thought it over for a week—she counted this time. She convinced herself there had to be a reason why she still survived despite all the odds against her. Perhaps the gods were telling her something by leaving the bandana—his bandana—behind. At one point, Locke released her from her confines and extended a hand to her.

A second chance, another shot at life, to prove herself worthy.

All her life, she wished to be worthwhile. She fought against every odd to prove everyone wrong with their doubts against her. She never wished to be saved; she merely wanted to stand above the hardships and persist longer than anyone else. And she had.

The thoughts of death faded into a faint whisper in her head as frustration took its place. She hated the world she was in now, the one she had little control over. She desired to have a blade in her hand and armor on her body before charging her problems on head first.

What are you doing sitting here and wasting your stupid life away? Celes mentally snarled at herself. Nothing is ever going to change if you don’t do a damn thing about it.
She glanced at the bandana again, the sliver of a reminder that maybe—just maybe—someone was still alive out there. With a spark of life, regardless of how fleeting it was, it had to be enough hope to spur her forward. She promised Leo to carry out his intentions with him and promised the Returners to aid them and their efforts. Giving up now couldn’t be an option. It never was one before.

And if there was life past the Solitary Island, Celes wanted to be the one to track it down. This time, she wouldn’t play the role of a damsel. *I’ll save you this time, Locke. I’ll save everyone if I have to. Don’t you all go dying on me now.* The glimmer of hope burned through Celes, the only thing fueling her to dig up the raft Cid mentioned in his note.

The bird had flown north long ago. Celes decided to start there.

Chapter End Notes

In the game itself, the player can either save Cid and venture forth in search of others or have him die and thus set Celes' suicide attempt in motion. When I first played, the latter happened to me. It marked the first time I saw someone portrayed as essentially not weak and useless now depressed enough to end their life. As someone who was struggling with (and still am) depression and suicidal thoughts, it was a beacon of hope to me. If someone as bad ass as Celes could still be plagued by such thoughts, then maybe I wasn't such a freak after all. As I've matured since then, I've found a lot of holes in this particular plot point and tried my best to portray not only Celes' decision, but also her depression leading up until now. I didn't want to make light of a topic that means too damn much to me.

To further set this scene, I listened to *Water Night (for strings) by Eric Whitacre* on repeat.
The sight of land in the distance was a comfort. Celes never reveled in it before; she never had to. Not far from the shoreline were buildings and those faint voices from afar were no ghosts. Celes held her breath and abandoned her raft; there were survivors. Beyond the Solitary Island lay the wilted remains of the world—a hope in of itself. Not every face before Celes belonged to a fighter or believer, but there were those who were alive. For months, Celes found no reason to smile. Now she did.

Celes discovered Sabin first. Before the catastrophe, the two weren’t close, yet when she fled the collapsing house with the child and his hands were free, Sabin didn’t hesitate to pull Celes into a tight embrace. She didn’t stop him. A year ago, she would have lectured him for even thinking of approaching her. Now, the simple gesture of a hug diminished the strain in both her muscles and mind. As for Sabin, he was still his goofy self, ready to seek vengeance.

He pointed to the horizon when they left Tzen, the distorted architecture jutting into the sky. Kefka created himself a new home in the ruined world. His daunting tower served as a monument to reassure those who lived to continue to do so in fear. Sabin clenched his fist and spat a few colorful words in the direction of the tower, eager to slam a fist in Kefka’s face. For now, neither of them could approach Kefka’s Tower; it was near impossible to enter from the ground level. The likes of an airship would have been useful.

Before they could fight the destroyer himself, they had to find others. It was only fitting they crossed paths with Edgar next. Or the man who insisted he wasn’t Edgar. The Gerad cover-up was an ill-conceived plot, one even Celes saw completely through, though in time he snapped and discarded his cover. Celes grinned, unable to comprehend her joy over having the flirtatious king back in her life.

“You think I’d forget a girl like you?” Edgar smiled. “Wasn’t an easy act to pull off.”

She whacked his arm and he laughed. The last time Celes laughed, she reckoned it was before she awoke on the Solitary Island. The heartwarming chuckle from Edgar further verified not everyone opted to throw life away in favor of despair.

If someone was to fix the state of the world, it was to be them. Not just Celes with the Figaro twins, but the rest of the Returners, as well. Finish what they started and one up Kefka.

Celes thought it over while at Figaro Castle, sitting alone in a side room by a window. The possibility of finding all of them was thin, but existed, though the time needed to comb the entire world dropped an inkling of doubt into her mind. She undid the bandana laced around her belt, caressed it, and sighed.

The knock at the doorway grabbed Celes’ attention. Edgar stood before her with a neat stack of folded clothes and a curved, sheathed blade balanced on top. Celes recognize the familiar shape along with the ceremonial beads and cloth draping from the hilt.

“Thought you’d want some new clothes,” Edgar spoke before she could ask. “Something more
fitting to a traveling lady and not the scraps you’ve been wearing.” His eyes widened a bit. “N-not that what you have is bad, I simply thought—"

“I appreciate it, Edgar.” She still wore the tattered clothes Cid dug up for her, not a bit proud of her appearance thanks to them. The gold and purple clothes Edgar presented to her were colors she was fond of, but it was the weapon on top which caught Celes’ eye.

And Edgar noticed. “Found this in the depths of our armory. It’s old, but if anyone’s going to use it....” He offered it to her with open palms. “It’s you.”

Retrieving the weapon, Celes unsheathed it to fully inspect the blade. As the light glossed over it at an angle, the shallow inscriptions glittered into sight along the edge of the blade. Celes ran her fingers over them and smiled; a proper rune blade was by her side again. The cheap sword she had found back on the Solitary Island wasn’t cutting it for her.

As for the clothes he laid beside her, Celes couldn’t wait to tear off the sad excuse for an outfit she wore to slip on the new garment. The look consisted of golden pants with a matching jacket comprised of structured, voluminous shoulders, a high collar, and mixed green and blue sleeves. Intricate bead work lined the seams of both—a true Figaroan aesthetic. The rich purple of the sleeveless top contrasted the vibrant golds in the jacket and pants. Enough room for her to move about in and layer whatever armor she found. On top of it all was an elaborate blue clip lined with opals, meant to pin her hair into place and out of her eyes.

“You’re too kind,” she said as a token of gratitude.

“Well,” Edgar drew out, “I’m many things, but kind can be one of them. It’ll do better in your hands than in the back of the armory closet. Besides, we have much ground to cover if we wish to find everyone.”

“You truly believe everyone’s out there?”

He paused before nodding. “Only because I refuse to accept the other outcome.” His lips quirked into a brief smile. “‘Keep faith, Celes. We can get through this.”

She hoped he was right.

From Figaro Castle, the next dilapidated town was Kohlingen. Celes last set foot into the town with Locke, back when they were searching for Terra. They had walked down the steps of a particular house and laid eyes upon Rachel, the woman Celes could never be and thus never earn Locke’s proper attention.

But now they returned and Celes hoped to at least find information from the locals about Locke’s current location. The first few they asked answered with blank stares, for the world was a vast, endless mass and no one could pinpoint the whereabouts of anyone. Both Sabin and Edgar pressed on, eager to find other survivors. The hope hadn’t dwindled out and Celes kept her head high.

The village wasn’t any better than places like Tzen, Albrook, and Nikeah—simply a more devastated sight with the amount of rubble and debris. The buildings in better shape only possessed several windows and walls missing as the others stayed together by bare threads. Those who inhabited Kohlingen weren’t thrilled to be walking the streets.
Unable to recall where exactly Rachel’s memorial was, the group stumbled across a shoddy, yet operational tavern. Plenty of soldiers in Vector visited taverns for a stiff drink after victory in battle, but Celes doubted anyone crawled into the establishment in search for celebration.

“Perhaps there are other travelers in here,” Edgar said with a hint of optimism. “They could exchange information.”

Sabin snorted. “Or maybe there’s just a bunch of local drunks.”

“Either way,” Celes said, “we can’t leave any place untouched. We have to check it out.”

Barely two steps into the tavern and Celes halted. She blinked, refusing to believe who she spotted. Nothing else—not the amount of people or the quality of the service provided—about the tavern mattered. Edgar and Sabin could have been continuing the conversation for all she cared. Reality blurred into nothing for Celes; what mattered now was the individual sitting alone off to the side.

A bottle of scotch sat on the table within reach of the weary hand clutching a glass. Her current angle showed no face, but there was no denying the mess of silvery-white hair flowing over the particular style of black coat.

The man who had kidnapped her, teased her, annoyed her, and trusted her. It had to be him. Celes was certain of it. He was there; he was alive. Any thoughts of Locke vanished. Blue eyes settled upon Setzer. Her feet floated towards him and her heart picked up in pace.

She said his name above a whisper. Of course he didn’t hear her. Blinking her eyes, Celes tugged at her lower lip and maneuvered around a table. Perhaps the sight of her would perk up his slumped posture and brighten his face. If he even still cared.

Celes hadn’t forgotten how at her lowest point, she was willing to entertain his company than to surrender to death. *Did you… keep me in your thoughts as I had with you?* A brief bout of blush colored her cheeks.

But now death no longer loomed over her shoulder and he sat mere feet away from her. His company could be hers if she still desired it. Her hands fidgeted over one another as her eyes flicked over the room for a temporary distraction to ease the overwhelming rush of bittersweet joy.

“Setzer,” Celes called out to him, a little louder. Again, he hadn’t flinched, only moving to nurse his drink. His disregard resulted in Celes sucking in a breath and raising her voice. “Setzer!”

This time, he turned. He shot a perturbed glare over his shoulder with his glossy eyes. Celes froze and so did Setzer. The tension loosened in his scarred face, an expression screaming he didn’t simply recognize her—he remembered her. She held her breath and waited for him to speak, but she feared the silence would gobble her up at any given moment.

The last time the two of them confronted one another, he wore his signature smirk along with a devilish look in his eyes. A sly, charismatic man. Celes understood now what Maria might have seen in him, for Setzer was capable of crawling under anyone’s skin in hopes to produce a pleasant chill. Yet Celes refused to admit out loud what he had done to her upon their first meeting, though she hadn’t forgotten.

But Setzer presented none of those features, never once looking her over as he always had.

She thought his lips moved and uttered her name, but the building’s acoustics worked against her favor. As Celes closed in on him, Setzer uttered something else and she paused to listen.
“So, you survived....”

The jaded, nonchalant tone spoke like an untended fire, unable to produce more than an occasional spark. Setzer paid no attention as he knocked back the rest of his drink before reaching for the bottle. A little more than half of the contents remained.

Edgar dared to approach Celes and murmur, “Well isn’t this a sight to behold.” She snapped her head around and furrowed her brow. “Just an observation.”

“You’re not exactly contributing anything useful,” Celes breathed out in a hurry.

Unfortunately, Setzer hadn’t gone deaf. “Neither of you are being discreet,” he said, raising his voice for the entire tavern to hear. “If you have something to say to me, just fucking say it.”

The slur of words along with the lack of composure worried Celes; Setzer wasn’t himself. She stopped herself from swiping the bottle away from him, for depriving a drunk of his sustenance was never beneficial. But they found their pilot, their man who was stupid enough to take whatever risk he could, so long as it excited him. Though the odds of the Blackjack surviving? Celes feared to ask.

A hand fell upon her shoulder and Celes eyed Edgar one more time. He too had concern knitting upon his features. “You swayed him once,” he breathed out, mostly mouthing to her. “And you can do it again. Only you. Though I fear I can’t help you this time around.”

It wasn’t the opera house. She wasn’t pretending to be Maria. There wasn’t a purple octopus falling from the rafters along with Locke, Edgar, and Cyan mid-performance. This was different. Without a pre-concocted plan, it was up to Celes to improvise the entirety of the scheme. But Edgar was right; if there was anyone who could connect with Setzer, to convince him to snap out of the drunken mess he created for himself, it was Celes.

She inhaled deeply. _No pressure._

The heels of her boots clicked against the creaking floor panels. Neither the sound nor the sight of her opposite of him was enough to rouse Setzer’s attention. Celes crossed her arms and eyed both Edgar and Sabin past Setzer; they sat at another table, where Sabin made arrangements for whatever piss refreshments the tavern offered. All the while, Edgar flashed her a thumbs up.

“I thought you were dead.”

Upon hearing his words, Celes brought her attention back to Setzer. He hunched over the table, swishing the amber liquid about in his glass. Violet eyes stared at the border of the table instead of directly at Celes. A textbook definition of a drunkard and by no means acting normal. Unless _this_ now served as normal for Setzer.

“Well,” she said, rummaging for the right words, “I’m alive.”

Setzer let out a half-hearted chuckle. “Yes. Yes, you are.” His glass paused right before his lips. “Unless I’ve already drunk myself into oblivion and this is heaven.” He consumed several gulps. “Or hell. I can’t decide. It would be typical, wouldn’t it? My version of hell would involve you torturing me forever. Seems fitting. Not that I’d _mind_.”

“Regardless, you’re the last person I thought to see walking through that door.” He lifted his arm to point in the general direction of said door, though the alcohol had marred his perception. “You know how many pathetic people I’ve seen walk in through there? Way too fucking many. All of them
completely fed up with the sad as hell state this damn world has crumbled into. Not that I’m any different from them. Just waiting for the day to come until I can’t swallow another drop. Pass out and succumb to whatever lackluster death I deserve.” He sighed. “Oh, the irony. I longed to go out with a bang. Something for people to write stories of and tell their children. Not like this, though.” Setzer motioned to the scotch. “But what else am I to do?”

The pitiful drivel trickling out of his mouth warranted a bucket of ice water dumped over him to wake him up. Compassion reminded Celes of her similar depression and how long her recovery was. Back then, she longed for comfort. Setzer’s true desire—save for drinking himself into oblivion—hid within his mind, though he had yet to outright deny her company, regardless of the table placing a distinct border between them.

“What else are you to do?” Celes blinked and did her best not to tense up. “Setzer, are you listening to yourself? What happened to you?”

His glass slammed onto the table and scotch splashed out. “What happened?” She wasn’t prepared for the anger in his eyes to challenge her. “What happened? Please tell me you’re joking.”

A poor choice in words led to regret and Celes couldn’t lose him. “Setzer, please—”

“May I remind you that in an attempt to stop the idiot who thought it was brilliant to destroy the entire world, the gods weren’t exactly too pleased with that type of defiance. The whole world can burn. I don’t fucking care. I’d stay in the skies forever just to spite the gods, but of course that wasn’t going to go my way.” Setzer shook his head, rolled his eyes, and breathed out a sarcastic chuckle. “Nothing was ever going to go my way again.”

As Setzer stayed volatile, Celes subdued herself. “Setzer, I’m—”

“You’re what?” Surely the scotch was to blame for the abrupt snap in his tongue. “Don’t tell me you’re sorry. I don’t want your pity.”

She clenched her jaw before responding. “You’re not the only one who lost something dear. Do you think any of us have been enjoying our lives since what happened? I was alone before I found Sabin and Edgar. And before that, I had just woken up to all of this, completely unaware of what had happened in the past year. All I remembered was one minute I was falling. I was so willing to accept failure. Then the next minute, I was waking up in the aftermath. I pushed forward and look how far it’s gotten me.”

Bending at the hip, Celes braced her palms on the table. She wished to extend a hand to rest it over the one clutching his glass of scotch, but thought better of it. How she longed, for the first time, for Setzer to revert to his usual, tantalizing antics.

“I found you,” she said, lowering her voice for only him to hear.

Setzer’s gaze shifted elsewhere, as if he never bothered to pay attention. A finger tapped on his glass. He consumed another swig, licking up the remnants on his lips.

“I remember you... falling,” he whispered. “I convinced myself there was no possibility of you surviving.”

Celes shook her head. “But I did. I’m—”

“I remember hearing that horrible...” Setzer flinched. “Absolutely horrible scraping of metal and shrieking of the engines. I didn’t want to acknowledge the destruction of the Blackjack along with the rest of the world. But I remember when the ship tore in two and you were there.... I wanted to do
something. I couldn’t do a damn thing, even if I tried.”

Celes held her breath, the entire memory repeating in her head. *Were you the one who called out to me?*

“An entire year,” Setzer continued, slumping further into the table, chin propped upon his forearm. “My luck has truly run out. Not only have I thrown myself into this mess, but it all started because of a girl and her tricky wager. And to think I was bluffing on my end, acting like I had a full house when I held nothing better than two of a kind. I didn’t wish to go, in all honesty. I thought if I were to shock you, then you and the others would leave. I *certainly* wasn’t expecting *you* to step forward and one up me.” Finally, his eyes found hers. “I am here right now because I lost to you, because I promised to help. I thought....” He scoffed. “I don’t know what I was thinking all this time. That it was over? That there was no point in trying? And then *you* have to walk back into my life and....” Setzer’s eyes closed as he inhaled. His exhale was laced with a hint of a moan. “Seeing you again might be the first sobering moment I’ve had in quite some time.”

His confession inspired hope into Celes, for maybe—somehow—she could pull this off again. Though not with a double-sided coin; only her wits versus a reluctant drunk. The passion might have been drained from his eyes, but hiding somewhere behind them was the Setzer she once knew. Celes simply had to pull it out.

“You helped us out before,” Celes reminded him. “Help us again. We can take out Kefka together.” She cracked a smile, though her lips trembled. “Maybe we can bet on it?”

Setzer rose from his collapsed position to slump backwards in his seat. He raised an eyebrow. “Are you kidding me?”

“Quite serious.”

His silence made it seem as if he contemplated the offer. “No.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“I don’t have the drive to do that kind of bullshit anymore, Celes. I’d rather just wait for my time to leave this pathetic world. What use is it anyways?”

“You’re a *gambler*, Setzer Gabbiani.” Never in a million lifetimes did Celes believe she had to explain that to him. “Don’t you want to take the risk and see what happens? Weren’t you the one who said that you loved how crazy we were for going after the Empire? That you had nothing to lose but your *life*? I asked you once if you would gamble away everything you ever had just to taste whatever high that gets you by. You still have your life. So tell me, what do you possibly have to lose?”

His knuckles went white around the glass while Celes waited for a response.

“I lost my *wings*,” he replied, enunciating every word. “I lost the only thing that made life worth living to begin with. You think I’m happy having my wings clipped and bound? A caged bird is a cruel thing and I’m by no means a pretty creature to be held for the enjoyment of others. It’s bad enough to have always felt out of place in this world. I could never tell if I was before my time or not, but I can’t stand to live by the rules of others. I make my *own* damn rules. You know that. I’d rather escape society, fly away, and make my own sanctuary elsewhere. For me, it was the
Blackjack. Others saw it as a gateway to hell and damnation; I saw it as a place to finally be myself.

“And now it’s gone. Every last bit of it. The ruins are probably scattered all over this fucking world—half in the ocean, half lodged into the split up terrain. There’s no salvaging that.” Setzer looked away. “My world’s been one where a man’s spirit could be free. Not anymore. I feel like the weight of the world is crushing me.”

“But you fought with all of your heart before the world was ruined,” Celes said. “It wasn’t exactly in your best interest to help us, but you did so anyways. At any point, you could have stranded us. You could have turned us in to the Empire. Anything to get rid of us and be free again. Maybe make a little gil off of it in the process. Yet you didn’t.” Celes pushed herself off of the table to stand upright. “You seemed to bear that weight just fine. You—”

Glass smashed into the floor, the sound ricocheting in a thousand directions. The entire tavern fell to whispers over the shattered object. Celes gasped and stepped away. Glass shards scattered everywhere with an untouched puddle of scotch lying in the wake of the crash. Setzer stayed quiet as the others in the tavern gawked at him. Celes held her tongue, afraid she’d lose him further if she misspoke.

“That was then,” he said after the moment of silence and stood to his feet. “Now it’s different. All my dreams are gone, so if you’ll excuse me.”

Setzer snatched the bottle of scotch and staggered over to the bar proper. His words, however, proved to be more worrisome than his lack of coordination. A quick look over to Edgar and Sabin didn’t reassure Celes, either. The brothers were far easier to sway, though they had both been stone cold sober and beyond optimistic.

With a defiant sigh, Celes followed Setzer. She waited until he situated himself at the bar before approaching him from the side. The bartender fetched Setzer another glass with an air of silent caution. Better than drinking straight from the bottle, though at the rate they were progressing, Celes counted it as a possibility.

“So you’re going to give up?” Celes asked after Setzer poured himself a new glass. “Whatever happened to doing something for the thrill of it and nothing else?”

He sighed. “Did you not hear me a minute ago?”

“We all lost something, Setzer.” Celes struggled to speak under her breath. “Either we admit defeat and do nothing about it or we move on and keep going. And you, of all of us, shouldn’t give up.”

“And why is that?” He faced her, the anger lining his muscles no longer as tense.

Celes knew to tread lightly. “You said it yourself; you don’t belong in this world, so you made your own haven within it. You had the will to accomplish that at one point. Can you not achieve it again?”

No response. Instead, he looked away and ran his fingertips along the rim of his glass. Before, she longed for silence between them. Now she wished for him to say anything.

“So you like the way the world is now?” Celes continued. “It hasn’t improved over the past year, that much is true. How is it any different now? You can seize the opportunity to shape your own life again. You don’t need luck to be on your side for that either.” His eyes flicked over to her. “So tell me, do you want to keep living like this in this sad excuse for a world? No?” She leaned forward. “Then do something about it. If you say your dreams are gone, then fix it. If it’s a new dream that
“You need to chase after again, then why don’t you find yourself a new one?”

She stopped herself short from laying a hand over his. Swaying him with words she could do, as
tireless as it was becoming, but nothing more. It didn’t numb the longing she held inside. Celes
yearned to experience a fleeting moment with her skin on his and spark the reminder for herself—
and maybe for him, as well—that all would be well. Not long ago, she thought of slipping into his
arms to escape the bleak reality she lived in. To recall it now was nothing short of embarrassing, but
there was no erasing the past.

Setzer consumed more scotch before he dared to open his mouth. “And how do you suggest I go
about that?”

Differentiating between his sarcasm and jadedness was a difficult task, though Celes hoped for the
latter. Thus she entertained him with an idea. “Help us. Together we have a fighting chance against
Kefka. You can reclaim your old life and once this is all said and done, you can do whatever you
want.” Celes swallowed hard. “No more asking for your assistance, no more ploys—”

“Isn’t this the part where you challenge me to wager a bet?” Setzer interrupted while eyeing the drink
he swirled in his hand. “The part where you ask a certain someone over there for a bit of gil and say
that either you come with me or I go with you?”

Holding her breath, Celes shook her head. “No.”

“No? Then what are you trying to suggest?”

“That you come out of your own free will this time. That you’ll do this because somewhere inside,
you want to experience that thrill again. And perhaps maybe you want to do some good.” *Do this for
me,* was what Celes almost added on.

His silence dropped Celes’ heart into her stomach like a dead weight. The catastrophe changed
people, herself included, but it also changed people for the worst. Celes pivoted on her heels,
prepared to walk away and accept Setzer would never budge.

But something pulled at the corners of Setzer’s lips into a partial smirk. His eyes remained glossed
over, but a meager spark went off in them.

“Oh, Celes,” he whispered. “Leave it to you to be the voice of reason.” He chuckled. “How I’ve
missed you.”

She straightened her posture while holding back her tongue. This time, she let Setzer do the talking;
perhaps she struck a positive note within him.

Setzer licked his lips. “You know, maybe you’re right. Wouldn’t be the first time, that’s for sure.”
With the glass on the table, he fully turned to face her, running a lazy hand through his hair. “So
what will it be then?”

Even with the semblance of a confession, Celes wasn’t prepared to claim victory yet. “What’s that?”

“You’d chase after it with me then?” Setzer perked up an eyebrow. “My new dream?”

For that moment, the Setzer she once knew flashed before her. The one who loved to tease her and
took a chance at anything, even if it meant his life. It was the Setzer she wanted back, annoyances
and all, instead of never having him. The realization alone surprised Celes. Somehow she was fine
with it.
Though as always, she hesitated. This wasn’t a coin toss rigged in her favor or even a normal one; it was a simple question needing a simple answer. One little word to win him over, though the underlying significance spoke louder. With an inhale and hard swallow, Celes released her remaining pride.

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “Yes, I would.”

He smiled, the softness in his face a new sight for Celes. “Thank you.”

Once more they claimed Setzer’s allegiance, but this time he tagged along willingly. The triumph brought a small smile onto Celes’ features. She peered back to the Figaro twins; Edgar also shot her a smile and Sabin let out a robust round of applause. The entirety of the group as they once knew it wasn’t present, but it was a start. Celes mentally smacked herself for falling down the train of thought that she was the sole survivor. One by one, she found others and their presence brought a sense of joy back into her life. Even Setzer.

Especially Setzer.

“And you two over there!” Setzer yelled out past Celes and motioned—more like flailed—to Edgar and Sabin. “Don’t think I didn’t see the likes of you at all! The hell are you sitting all the way over there for?!”

Thankfully, Edgar always had a way with words. “Didn’t want to impede on your reunion.”

Setzer only chuckled. “So the four of us are alive and well? None of you have seen anyone else?”

The same question had been proposed to Sabin and Edgar when she first reunited with them. Save for Cid, Celes knew of no one else. She did well not to dwell on the late-scientist, fingers fidgeting over one another as she pushed the miserable memory back into the depths of her mind.

Edgar confirmed Celes’ sentiments with a shake of his head. “But we plan on finding whoever we can. And from there? Well, we’ll reclaim the world as we once knew it and go from there.”

“Quite a daring plan if you ask me,” Setzer said. “Almost as stupid as your bright idea of going after the Empire.” He paused. “Or the opera house scheme. I think that tops the lists for many people.” The comment almost earned him a glare from Celes. “Only one way to find out how it’ll end up, right? Though I suppose that means we’ll be needing a new pair of wings.”

The delicate topic of the airship, especially with Setzer present, was one Celes hadn’t thought to bring up during their reunion. The only item of value she lost in the wake of the catastrophe was her prized rune blade she grew up with, but a new one hung from her hip. Nostalgia latched onto the familiar blade and Celes imagined Setzer was no different with his wings.

However, Celes had provided her share of negotiating for the day and her sights settled onto Edgar with the intent that he would have kinder, more diplomatic words to offer Setzer.

“Are you…?” Edgar paused and furrowed his brow. “Are you suggesting that we… I mean, I’m not saying we can’t repair whatever we can find of the—”

“Are you fucking crazy? The Blackjack is lost. I might be an impulsive, outlandish dreamer, but I’m not stupid. I know a lost cause when I see one.”

Amusement never tugged at Edgar’s face. “Do you now?”

Setzer nodded. “And I didn’t want it to come to this, because I like to think I’m a gentleman and
know my place. You don’t disrespect what isn’t yours.” He slowly rose from his seat, swaying more than before. “And you certainly don’t go grave digging to make your life easier.”

What the hell are you talking about? Celes and Edgar exchanged gazes with identical, perplexed expressions. Perhaps it was nothing more than drunken rambling or maybe Setzer was onto a stroke of genius none of them would see.

“Um,” Edgar piped up while Setzer regained balance, “care to explain what it is exactly you’re referring to?”

Edgar’s question was unacknowledged as Setzer moved forward. “Come! We must pay a visit to Darill and obtain a new pair of wings of our—”

Before long, his footing snagged on a chair. Setzer flailed to maintain composure, a lost cause which sent him falling onto the floor. The jarring commotion warranted the attention of those left in the tavern, gasping and whispering as their eyes settled onto Setzer. Celes rushed over to examine him, hoping he didn’t split his head open in the process; her Cure spell couldn’t tend to more severe wounds. Edgar stood up to calm down the witnesses while Celes knelt over Setzer.

He rolled onto his back with a drawn out groan. No visible wounds or blood, though a couple lumps were daring to form. Celes ran a hand over his scalp to confirm the lack of fatal injury. Simply a drunk idiot being a drunk idiot.

“Did I worry you?”

Celes huffed as Setzer grinned. “I’d hit you if you hadn’t actually injured yourself, idiot.”

“I wouldn’t complain, you know,” he reminded her. “Never did.”

Like a struck match, the memory sparked back to her mind. All Celes could do was pray her face didn’t morph into the complexion of a tomato. By then, Edgar stood behind her to inspect the damage, shaking his head.

“I think we need to pay a visit to the inn first,” he insisted. “Sober you up and then we can figure out a plan of attack. How does that sound?”

Setzer snorted. “Fucking boring.”

At least Edgar smiled. “Good to see you again, too, Setzer.” He offered a hand to the fallen man. “You’ve been missed, that’s for sure.”

“What, couldn’t keep yourself entertained without me?” Setzer latched onto Edgar’s arm after several attempts. With the strength and effort of both of them, Setzer stood again.

“I don’t have many friends who can say they have a flying casino.”

“Don’t exactly have that anymore.”

“Well, we’ll fix that, too, along the way! Put it on our to-do list!”

As Edgar properly positioned Setzer to lean into him, they headed on out, conversing as if time never separated them. Before long, the two would be divulging in pet projects with machines and crazy escapades in an attempt to outdo the other. The thought of the two bonding in her absence produced a giggle from Celes.
Making her way to Sabin, she patted his shoulder. “Looks like we’re on the right path. Four down, so far.”

He nodded. “You think he meant it?”

“What?”

“The part about the airship? Unless he meant something else about another pair of wings.” Sabin tossed a glance to his brother and Setzer leaving. “Either that or Setzer knows a really big bird that can take us everywhere.”

“I doubt that,” Celes sighed.

But Sabin had a point; Setzer had claimed the sole title of airship pilot and owner. Unless a new airship was in the works, the possibilities were slim, if nonexistent. Or Setzer had another trick up his sleeves. Plenty of questions to ask him once he sobered up.

Whoever this Darill was, though, apparently they had a way to make it a possibility.

For a solid hour, Setzer spoke with anyone within the inn who was willing to listen. Promptly after, he passed out and required the efforts of both Sabin and Edgar to haul him to bed. Though it wasn’t his talkative streak which kept Celes awake. The mattress did little to support her weight and the firm pillows were akin to rocks. Lingering in the room was the scent of stale mold. Finally, Celes tossed the blanket off her body and stepped outside for a moment of peace.

Nothing but the cold air greeted Celes. The skies transitioned into the dark blue before dawn. A thick fog solidified within the town. Kohlingen never stirred in its deep slumber. A heavy sigh ran through Celes before she plopped down upon a set of unbroken steps and leaned against a wooden beam.

Over the course of months, Celes went from contemplating her own death to rejoicing in the familiar faces she found. More than hope was instilled into her—a sense of empathy swelled forth. At one time, she hadn’t valued the likes of Sabin or Edgar as much as she did now.

Of course, the sentiment was extended to Setzer, more so when Celes didn’t need to convince him of anything, especially while drunk. Now she could rest easy, or try to. Her position propped up along the pole was far more comfortable than in bed and she doubted anyone would mind her dozing off there. Come morning—or afternoon, depending on when Setzer decided to roll out of bed—they would further discuss obtaining a means of flying. With any luck, the notion wasn’t drunken drivel pouring out of Setzer.

_**Drunk words, sober thoughts,**_ she thought amidst her sleepy state.

The creak of the door didn’t startle Celes, nor did the footsteps. Though when a pronounced thud landed not too far from her, she perked up and peered over to see who else was experiencing a restless night.

She didn’t, however, expect it to be Setzer.

His hair was a tangled mess and yet in a better state than the rest of his physical being. Hunched over and wearing his usual dress shirt and pants, he plucked out a freshly rolled cigarette along with a set
of matches. He groaned with each failed attempt to light one. Not once did he acknowledge Celes.

She cleared her throat lightly. “I didn’t expect to—”

A hand shot up and Celes silenced herself upon Setzer’s quiet request. After a few more attempts, a blaze of fire hissed to life. With his cigarette lit, Setzer enjoyed a long drag before slowly exhaling smoke.

“You were saying?” Setzer groaned out.

Celes braced her hands along the edge of the stairs while giving him her attention. “Thought you weren’t going to be conscious until the sun was up high in the sky.” In response, he shook his head and rubbed his temple with a free hand. “You doing okay?”

“I’m alive,” he muttered.

“And hungover.”

“Thanks for the observation, I had no idea.” He sighed before indulging on the cigarette again. “The headaches always wake me up.”

Celes raised an eyebrow. “You did it to yourself.”

In better physical condition, Setzer would have smirked. Or Celes imagined so. His lips never twitched. “Don’t I always.” His thumb flicked at the cigarette, ashes falling to the ground. “You don’t mind if I join you, do you?”

A bit late to be asking that now. “No, I don’t. Couldn’t sleep myself. Been easier to sleep under the stars than on a poor quality bed.” When he didn’t reply right away, Celes looked him over. Smoke twirled upwards from the burning end of his cigarette. “And that’s supposed to help with the hangover?”

Setzer glanced at her, bringing it to his lips. “Old habits die hard,” he said after exhaling. He looked over the lit object between his fingers, as if he was reminiscing. “Picked it up from her. Figures. Picked nearly everything up from her.”

“From who?”

He didn’t catch Celes' eye, instead staring off into the distance. “Darill.”

Darill’s a... she?

Searching through her memory bank, Celes couldn’t recall Setzer ever bringing up a woman by that name or anything of such nature. He mentioned the Blackjack and its former success along with everything which didn’t filter through his thoughts, but Setzer Gabbiani lived for the present moment. It turned out the laughter and smile he displayed for the world to see were yet another layer of his poker face.

“The same person you said who could help us out?”

Setzer barely snorted, too tired to put effort into a proper reaction. “She can’t help us out,” he informed Celes. “She simply has something that can lend us a hand.”

Celes knitted her eyebrows together. “Are you saying that we should steal from her? Isn’t that—”

“She’s dead, Celes.” The cold words dropped out of his mouth before he inhaled on his cigarette. “I
didn’t want to defile her tomb, especially now when it’s crawling with monsters that I can’t handle on my own, but we don’t appear to have another choice.”

Whatever she had to say was lost. Celes was quick to look elsewhere. As much as she wanted to inquire about the nature of his relationship with this Darill, she refrained from doing so. Whoever Darill was, she left an impact on Setzer. A strong one, at that, if Setzer’s silence said anything on the matter.

*You’re not the only one who’s lost something,* was what she told him earlier. Foolish words. Setzer was already acquainted with loss before they ever met.

“I think she’d want it this way,” he said once his cigarette was halfway done. “She’d rather see me flying than earthbound.” A flash of amusement perked up the muscles in his face before he shook his head. “We can head to her tomb come morning.” He paused. “Afternoon.” Then a sigh followed. “Whenever this headache decides to go away.”

His free hand settled along the stairs, one finger tapping along the frail wood. Celes glanced down, contemplating whether or not he’d object to her sliding over to reach for him. Even a simple enough gesture of bumping a finger with his. Setzer continued to stare out ahead, paying no attention with each drag from his cigarette.

Celes leaned back into the post, opting to not startle him. Though it didn’t stop her from fidgeting in place, nor did it do well in calming the uneasy beats of her heart. Celes filled her lungs with both cool air and Setzer’s scent; it nearly had her smiling.

“You’ll also have to forgive me for my behavior earlier,” Setzer said, only a few more puffs left on his cigarette. “It’s been... a rough year and a half.”

“It has for all of us,” Celes agreed.

“And I’m still not completely sold on this new plan of yours,” Setzer noted, “but it’s not like I have anything better to do.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Besides, it’s hard to say no to you.”

“You weren’t exactly easy to persuade this time around.”

There came a chuckle from Setzer before he sucked down the last of his cigarette, smothered the end, and flicked it to the ground. “I don’t do easy, Celes.” His head tilted back to exhale the remaining smoke from his lungs. “Then again, neither do you.”

The warmth of blush brushed over her cheeks as she fluttered her eyes. By the time Celes turned to face him, Setzer rose to standing. He stretched out his limbs and let out a yawn while turning for the door.

“I’m about to pass out any second and I doubt you want me doing so in your lap.” He waved a hand at her. “I’ll see you whenever the hell I wake up—”

“Setzer.” Celes sprung up to her feet.

As for him, his face contorted in light of her newfound energy, as if witnessing it drained him. “Yes?”

She wanted to reach out to him. Place a kind hand along his arm, maybe pull him in for a hug. The reassurance of an embrace wasn’t a sentiment Celes experienced often. With the whole world in ruin along with the collective misery they all were subjected to, a little compassion went a long way. But Celes froze, like she always did, and couldn’t compel herself to act on her emotions.
Thus she gave him a small smile and said, “You sleep well. We’ll figure everything out once you’re ready to go.

First he tilted his head to the side, then he nodded. “Yeah. That’s the plan.”

Setzer vanished back into the inn and left Celes alone. She slid down against the pole with a massive sigh. *I need to get over myself. Why am I having these thoughts? And about him.* Her arms wrapped around her body, her own touch doing little to calm herself. What she needed was the touch of another—the same craving when she cried after Cid’s death. The image of Setzer comforting her with a tender embrace left Celes longing more than she could ever admit.

Now he was back in her life and she was no longer alone, yet Celes still conjured the image to mind.

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Celes had been foolish to think Darill was a mere friend of Setzer’s. Upon asking him, he was quick to agree. A glimmer faded in Setzer’s eyes and he continued his charade. As the group made their descent down into the complex tomb, they discovered more than gruesome monsters making the underground space their home.

“Being here brings back all kinds of memories,” Setzer said during their slow travel down a vast staircase into the darkness.

And that was when he told them the truth.

While he never referred to her as a lover, the connection between the two pilots was undeniable. He painted her as a daring woman, unrestrained from societal norms and always aiming for the stars. An unusual mixture of high class and true grit. No task was too daunting and every time someone said no, she proved them wrong out of spite and for a good drinking story afterwards. Quick witted with a sharp tongue and an aesthetic capable of making any man or woman blush, she was the kind of woman who could garner the attention of a particular gambler.

Darill inspired Setzer to become the man standing before them now. He admired her, even in death. When he spoke of her, it was as if he told grand, ancient tales of a mortal who dared to walk amongst the gods. He told them of how she dreamed of touching the stars to claim them for herself, how she desired to always be a step ahead of the entire world, and how she wanted nothing more than to experience all that life had to offer.

But her dreams vanished when she pushed herself too far. Luck hadn’t been in her favor, but Setzer didn’t phrase it as so. A year later, he found the remains of her airship in a valley. Time spent restoring the Falcon to its former glory had been no easy task, especially not solo, but when Setzer flicked on the lights to illuminate the lower cellar, all of them stopped in awe.

The airship was impeccable, using advanced technology, albeit prototypes. Setzer claimed to have tweaked Darill’s errors in the machinery and laid it all to rest in her tomb.

A sigh trembled out of him. “I couldn’t bear ever looking at it again. It... makes me think of her.”

Celes tore her eyes from the magnificent airship to check on Setzer. A frown was visible, as was the sheer sadness swelling up in his eyes. He loved her. Perhaps he would never utter those exact words, but it screamed on his face alone. And not just then; he continued to do so. Against his own conduct of being a gambler by nature, he never took claim of the Falcon, preferring to respect what was once
Darill’s instead of flaunting it as his own.

None of them would have guessed someone was held so close to Setzer’s heart, Celes included. He led them to the upper deck and she hitched her breath quietly over a single realization—Setzer was no different from Locke. *But have you truly moved on, Setzer?* She lagged behind. *Am I… a replacement for her, too? Is that how you see me?*

Locke had never given her a straight answer and Setzer had yet to entertain the idea. Celes stroked the bandana still tied by her hip and reminded herself they hadn’t checked Kohlingen properly for signs of Locke. Setzer had done well to sidetrack them. In turn, a twinge of guilt bubbled up in Celes.

“So this is the Falcon?” Edgar asked after a sharp whistle. “Your friend was ahead of her time. Shame she isn’t still here today.”

Not a word was said by Setzer. He approached the wheel and levers used to operate the Falcon, a careful hand gliding over the curves and sharp edges of the devices. Celes kept her eyes on him as he reacquainted himself with every detail. Almost as if he was taking Darill herself in with his hands.

They had access to an airship once more. Engines roared up and lights raced down the extended tunnel to illuminate the exit. The design of the airship, from the aesthetics and down to the sounds, held not a drop of feminine touch, and yet a crafty fox of a woman brought it to life once. The fastest vessel in existence, or so Setzer claimed.

“She’s out there somewhere,” Setzer responded to Edgar. “Kicking back, grinning, and hoping I put on a good show.”

It wasn’t the Blackjack by any means; the Falcon was a high-tech operation demanding nothing but the daftest hands commanding her. Setzer was more than willing to accept the task.

Chapter End Notes

Back when I was in college - well over six years by now - I had this idea of a story with Celes and Setzer. I was too scared to do anything with that idea, but over time, that idea evolved into what you see now and it all started with Celes and Setzer sitting on a front deck in the middle of the night, unable to speak how they both truly felt (the same scene, more or less, shown here). Still blows my mind that a little oneshot turned into this.
Chapter 12

The Falcon was indeed the polar opposite of what the Blackjack once was. Darill’s lack of interest in entertaining guests was evident with the limited amenities and personal rooms. Sleeping arrangements were made on couches and food—or what they could scrape together to call food—was gathered up from villages before taking flight. Luxury didn’t exude from the interior. A couple dated carpets lied about to cover unsightly panels and a few, select pieces of furniture resided in the main foyer. The airship itself was her personal space with no one else invited, save for maybe Setzer.

But it could fly. And fast. The airship served her purpose.

Setzer reverted back to his usual habits with a pair of wings secured as his own again. Even then, the flicker in his eyes smoldered instead of blazed. The moment someone called his name, he perked back to life, wore a smile, and never missed a beat. It was when nobody paid attention that Setzer drifted off. When flying the Falcon, his eyes stared beyond the horizon and clouds. When sitting idle with the rest of the group and discussing the next plan of attack, his heavy lids balanced the fine line which separated sleep deprivation and mental distraction.

In those down times, something occupied his hands: a pair of dice, a deck of cards, anything he could mindlessly roll about. Off to the side, Celes kept an eye on him, fixated on the objects dancing with his fingers. Dice rolled between thin digits and cards flew back and forth within his palms. An effortless performance. Only once he caught her and Celes flicked her eyes elsewhere.

Whether he realized it or not, Celes thought too often of those exact hands working more than dice and cards.

Though Celes empathized with the need to fiddle with a tangible object. She unraveled the bandana while aboard the Falcon, her thumb smoothing out the creases. Each time, she reassured herself Locke was alive and out there somewhere. Cyan had been tracked down within a couple of weeks and now they departed for the Veldt in search for Gau. Where exactly Locke resided now was beyond any of them.

And if Cyan welcomed the former General with a smile for the first time ever, then perhaps Locke would be ecstatic over a reunion with Celes.

However, when she tied the bandana back on her hip, the recollection of Rachel surfaced along with the reminder of what Celes was—a replacement to fill the void. As she gazed along the interior of the Falcon, she couldn’t help but wonder if Setzer shared the sentiment in relation to Darill.

In the short time aboard the Falcon, Celes picked up the subtle rumbles the airship made. A steady growl indicated flight while a mild purr signified stalling. The sound of the latter distracted her from the conversation at hand, mostly Edgar teasing Cyan for his love letter sent to Lola. Presumably, Setzer manned the airship on the upper deck.

Excusing herself, Celes headed to the upper deck in hopes to spot their pilot. Instead, the deck was barren. Celes took a brisk walk along the perimeter to double check and a brief glimpse over the edge of the airship confirmed the lack of movement. With a hum vibrating along her pursed lips, she slipped back down below.
“Have any of you seen Setzer at all?” Celes called out while leaning over the railing.

The three of them—Edgar, Sabin, and Cyan—all craned their heads back to eye Celes before shrugging. At least Edgar made a brief attempt to search the main foyer.

“No,” he replied. “Why?”

Celes sighed. “It’s nothing.”

Stepping away from the railing, the men continued their conversation and Celes decided to walk about the Falcon. Setzer never gave a proper tour of the airship, unlike their time spent on the Blackjack. Though she didn’t blame him. The mental weight of possessing the Falcon took a toll, let alone allowing strangers onto the premise. They were intruders, barging into what remained of a precious memory for Setzer.

And now he was missing.

Celes doubted he ran off far while maneuvering through the narrow passageways. He could have said something to us so we’re not worrying about him. The thought had her pause. I suppose I’m the only one worried... if that’s even the right word for it.

The halls within the Falcon were not meant for multiple people passing through. The deeper Celes traveled down, the more unsightly the surroundings developed into. Either Darill hadn’t finished the areas or didn’t care enough for embellishment.

About to admit defeat, Celes caught the distant echo of music. While difficult to hear past the churning gears, the luscious melody of a piano accompanied by an orchestra played. Curious about the origins, Celes continued her trek.

At the end and around a short corner, a door stood ajar with light spilling out from within. Celes pushed it out of the way and allowed the music to wash over her. The room held a warmth not present in the hallway leading to it. On one side stood a poker table with cobwebs dangling from the feet. Opposite it was a medium bar paired with a gramophone. An opened bottle of wine sat on top, a fourth of the liquid remaining.

And leaning into the bar, back facing Celes, was Setzer.

She entered the room and circled around up to his side. The new angle revealed a wine glass clutched against his chest with his eyes locked on the gramophone and the music blaring from it. A somber expression hung from his face while his thumb stroking along his wine glass.

Straightening her posture, Celes addressed him. “It’s lovely.”

Setzer jerked his head to the side, only to relax when he spotted Celes. His free hand moved over to the gramophone to lower the volume. “Wasn’t expecting to see you turn up here,” he stated with a low chuckle. “Curiosity finally strike up within you?”

He was drunk. Again. Or he was intentionally slurring his words, but Celes wasn’t stupid.

“Was actually wondering where you ran off to,” Celes admitted.

He smiled. “Worried about me then?” Setzer clicked his tongue. “You don’t have to do that, Celes. You’re too kind. But I don’t blame you for wanting to explore. The Falcon’s not exactly fit for guests, but hopefully, when this is all said and done, I can fix that. Work on proper accommodations and restore her to surpass the Blackjack’s glory days.” He sighed before sipping on his wine. “Might
be wishful thinking. I don’t know yet.”

Then it hit Celes while he nursed his drink. “Where the hell did you acquire wine from?” Setzer claimed no proper food or drink was on the Falcon and she didn’t recall him purchasing the bottle before they headed off to the Veldt, either. Then again, Celes didn’t recall the last time she eyed a bottle of real wine.

Setzer’s smile persisted, though colored now by sadness. “A gift from Darill. It’s a surprise I didn’t unearth this back when I was repairing the airship years ago. Came down here to see what I could do about moving that—” He motioned to the poker table behind her. “—into the foyer. I bought it for her. She wasn’t as much of a fan of gambling, but she liked playing with me.” The smirk on his face lasted for seconds. “We had our bets and wagers. And this was one of them.”

The ungraceful turn towards the bottle wasn’t enough to warrant concern, but Celes still held her breath. The wine glass settled down with more force than necessary and Setzer snatched up the bottle to read over. “Aged fifty years. More so considering how much time’s passed since then.” He scoffed. “She hated this crap. Said it was too sweet for her. Always told her she was sweet enough as she was.” The bottle returned to the bar counter and Setzer braced himself against it from behind. “But I won that last game of poker and she owed me a bottle of my favorite. Just didn’t happen to give it to me when she was still alive.”

His chin motioned to the gramophone. “And she also snuck this in for good measure.”

Setzer closed his eyes as the music enveloped him. His lack of morals and questionable set of ethics clouded Celes’ view of him, for beneath it all, he was a connoisseur of the arts. But it had always been evident; it was in the aesthetics of the Blackjack, the jewels and fabrics he wore, and even his penchant for opera. Now he indulged more in the sounds than his wine, utterly serene with his fingers twitching along his side like a conductor leading an imaginary orchestra.

“What is it?” Celes was unsure if it was an opera recording or an orchestral piece. The finer delicacies of life did not grace the likes of Vector, let alone an Imperial General.

Setzer was quick to educate her. “Piano concerto number twenty-four in C minor. It’s composed of three movements, this one being the first: allegro in C minor. Sometimes the opera house would offer events focusing on music.” He hummed as the memory washed over him. “This was also one of my favorites.”

He was beyond content; Celes never witnessed him in such bliss. “Did Darill not like this either?”

“No, she didn’t hate it,” Setzer corrected her. Lolling his head upright, he peered at Celes with heavy eyes. “But she wasn’t in love with it, either. I’d take her, of course, and she’d comply, but her tastes were more... unconventional.”

Celes tilted her head. “How so?”

Setzer smirked, a steady chuckle rumbling out of him while he pawed around for his wine glass. “Oh, where to begin.” With the liquid finished off, Setzer poured himself another round. “Darill, how do I describe you? How could I possibly do you justice now?” The wine bottle landed safely onto the surface, albeit with a dangerous wobble. Setzer ran a hand through his hair and Celes swore he moaned to himself while thinking over the question. “She taught me everything I know now. She showed me the ropes when it came to flying and tending to the complex machinery. She showed me you didn’t need to attend a high-end gala in Jidoo to get your fill of entertainment.” His tongue flicked out to circle around his lips. “She showed me her rather specific tastes for the bedroom.”
Fire could have skimmed over her skin and Celes wouldn’t have known it; her face burned. With what excessive information he unveiled already and paired with loose lips, Celes feared there was no stopping the avalanche she unearthed. She stammered before him.

Thus Setzer continued. “Darill was something else. Never cared for the usual standards when it came to intimacy. She’d rather be sprawled out on a set dining table, plates and all, then have a feather bed supporting her.” Setzer took a sip of wine, then perked an eyebrow up. “I remember when I presented that poker table to her and she suggested that—”

“Stop!” Celes squeaked out. “Just... why are you telling me this?!”

It would have been easy enough if he apologized, dropped the topic, and drank away their conversation. Nothing but wishful thinking, however. “Does that make you uncomfortable?” Celes hesitated, but Setzer didn’t. “It’s okay to say yes. Besides, Darill had a reputation for intimidating others, particularly men. Myself included at first.”

Celes blinked. “That’s not what I—”

“She was more to me than a simple lover; she was my mistress and I was her pet.”

The connection didn’t click in Celes’ mind and her empty stare to Setzer was enough to convey it. Whatever explanation he could offer while intoxicated—by almost an entire bottle of wine in gods knew how little of time—would fall short of beneficial. Still, curiosity wiggled forward and past the blush burning upon her fair cheeks.

“Though there were times—plenty, actually—where I wanted to reverse the roles.” Setzer shook his head, glass tugging at his lower lip. “It wasn’t her kink. She tried, I gave her credit for that, but Darill was the type of creature who needed to be in control if she wanted to get off.” His eyes settled onto Celes. “She was a sadistic bitch and I loved every minute of it.”

The descriptor was a familiar one for Celes. Plenty had spat the name at her throughout her military career, though no one had uttered it with the same, tender fondness dripping from Setzer’s voice. It should have worried Celes, maybe even question Setzer’s sanity. After all, she was acquainted with enough insane men. But Setzer held no magic in his body, aside from what little the magicite taught him. What could one possibly enjoy from receiving pain?

Though she would have been lying if she said she wasn’t intrigued.

A grin gradually swept over him. “Did you honestly think all of these scars were from bar fights and gambling debts?”

Then it clicked.

Her blue eyes widened and her feeble lips spoke nothing. Setzer gulped down all the wine, discarding the empty glass onto the bar’s counter before it tumbled over with a great clatter.

“That’s what you enjoy?” Celes said a hair above a whisper.

“I enjoy many things,” Setzer replied. “I’m not a stranger to sin. I operated the Blackjack. What did you expect? It’s not that I don’t enjoy more vanilla acts, but—” He stepped towards her, his head cocked with a wide grin. “—life’s too short to not enjoy some of its darker delights.”

Celes’ mind shot elsewhere: the opera house and the plan to kidnap Maria. The impressions of Setzer slamming her into the wall and clutching her wrists forever thrummed through her body. Countless times she pondered of the outcome if they were never interrupted. Her skin tingled upon recollection,
the exact sensation she opted to ignore when she lingered too long on the more intimate memories the two of them shared. Now she was stuck between banishing or embracing them evermore.

A delighted gasp jutted out of Setzer as he spun around. “Ah! This is the best part!”

Celes arching an eyebrow. Despite his drunken state, Setzer paid plenty of attention to the music playing. The delicate piano mixing with the woodwinds and brass kept Setzer grinning. His hand fluttered in the space before him, keeping time with the performance.

“Second movement,” he stated. “Larghetto in E flat major. Cut time.” He swept a foot back to bow before Celes. When he rose halfway, he extended a hand. “Dance with me.”

Maybe the alcohol upped his impulsive nature or perhaps the token of gratitude from the late Darill stirred up a variety of emotions. Regardless, Celes didn’t twitch a muscle.

“Setzer, I—”

“No need to be shy, ma cherie; just follow my lead.”

Without any further warning, Setzer slipped his hand into hers and drew Celes into him. She hitched her breath as she staggered, catching her balance before colliding into him. Setzer held her one hand upright while placing the other one upon his opposite shoulder.

“And this goes there,” he informed Celes. “And then this here.”

His remaining hand fit snug along the small of her back. The touch alone shot a massive chill up her spine, pulsing out to her limbs until her fingertips trembled. Before she could protest or snap away, Setzer maneuvered his feet to dance in time with the melody to the best of his ability, guiding Celes along the way.

To Celes’ surprise, Setzer was quick and precise with his movements, even while drunk. The refinement in his actions tricked Celes’ mind into believing they were anywhere but a small room aboard a gritty airship. Had her lips not been clenched into a firm line, she would have smiled; she never indulged herself in a dance. Soldiers ventured to the taverns to find bar maidens to dance with. Not Celes. This, however, was more her style.

In lieu of the splendor, Setzer delighted her with, questions piled into her mind and gripped tight. *Why would you tell me all of this? About... you and Darill. You’re drunk, yes. I get it, but what sober thoughts are lingering up there?*

“Have you not danced before?” Setzer managed to notice as they maneuvered within the confined space.

Celes fluttered her eyes and swallowed hard. “Not like this.”

He laughed. “Of course not. No need to be tense. Relax.”

Yet tension built up in her shoulders and resonated up her neck. Setzer picked up on the stress. Before, he always offered a way to help her relax and the thought in of itself swirled up anxiety in the pit of her stomach. She once detested the notion, but with how Setzer treated her now and how his eyes occasionally skimmed over her, Celes couldn’t lie to herself forever.

Maybe she could enjoy herself.

Setzer hummed with the tune, slightly out of time with the piano parts. He smiled, his head lolling
“Why are you doing this?” Celes asked.

“Is it not obvious?” Setzer leaned his face in closer. “Wanted to dance with a pretty lady.”

Celes ignored the heat still simmering on her cheeks. “That’s not what I meant.” Setzer tilted his head and awaited more, yet she paused to collect her thoughts. “Telling me about Darill, about what you two... used to do. Why tell me?”

“Didn’t I tell you that well over a year ago, ma cherie? I trust you. I said I’d never judge you and I expect you’d do the same for me.” His smile faltered. “Do you not trust me anymore?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore.” She never meant to blurt it out, yet it flew past her lips faster than ever. “I’m... shocked, I guess. I never thought that such a... relationship was possible. Or healthy.”

“Consent is key,” Setzer explained. “We both desired the same things at the same level of intensity. It worked out for us.” He tsked and shook his head. “Well, not entirely. I had—have—the lovely disadvantage of being a switch, while she preferred her role as a dominant.”

*The hell does that even mean?* Celes had her guesses, but she couldn’t know for sure until she asked Setzer. With how loose his lips were, it wouldn’t take much to pry it out of him.

But it all evaporated when Setzer moaned out, “But there was Maria for that.”

The star of the opera house. The woman who Setzer wished to marry. The woman Celes was to impersonate for the sake of her safety, according to Impresario. Now Setzer focused on *her*.

“Oh, Maria,” Setzer purred. “Such the dramatic diva. Prim and proper, always stuck to the rules, always wished to be the center of attention, and always wound up so tight that half of opera house was convinced she had a tree stuck up her uppity ass. I loved her performances, though grew to love her outside of her characters even more so. We met at a gala supporting the opera house one day and she didn’t dismiss me as another mindless fan begging for her attention. She was the type who needed an escape from the stressful world of performance art. In time, I offered it to her. Gave her *exactly* what she desired.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, “she was such a little minx. I could sneak backstage during a dress rehearsal, tie her up and gag her, and have my way with her just in time for her to be needed on stage. She *loved* it. She always wanted more, always wanted me to make her forget about the stress in her life. She wanted someone else to take care of her and I was more than willing to undo her again and again.”

Setzer’s steps gradually slowed, yet he refused to outright cease dancing. Celes followed his lead and bit her tongue.

“But she was more a slave to the stage than she was to me,” Setzer murmured. “We argued like any couple would. Sometimes I thought she did it just to see what I’d do to appease her. I didn’t mind half the time, but the lack of honesty left little to be desired on my end. We were nearing a breaking point when I asked her what she wanted. The one sin she locked up inside of her for no one to find. I hoped it would be something to mend our relationship, spark something alive in us again. One night she finally told me how she wanted to be kidnapped against her own free will.” Setzer briefly closed his eyes, as if to relive that moment. “She begged me to do it, said the thought of it aroused her more than anything else.” His violet eyes opened to Celes. “I had to be cautious, though. I didn’t wish to
break her, physically or mentally. I told her I’d take care of her, that if at any point she wanted to stop, she had to tell me.”

Unable to grasp that concept along with a fantasy involving simulated non-consent, Celes couldn’t help but ask, “How was she supposed to tell you?”

Setzer answered immediately, seriously. “The usual—generic safe words. I was never one to think of something fancy and they always embarrassed Maria. Yellow meant to continue, but not push further, and red outright meant stop, no questions asked.”

Celes sucked in a breath of air. “And would you?”

His steps stuttered as he tossed a half-hearted glare at Celes. “Are you mocking me?”

“I-I just wanted to—”

“I never wished to hurt or scare her. I only pursued Maria because we fed off of each other. It was mutual. It always had been... but the second one of my letters to her was discovered by another cast member, it was passed up the chain of command.” Setzer heaved out a sigh. “And everyone had to panic. Impresario didn’t want anyone to lay a finger on his star performer. And that’s when you came into the picture.”

“And what of Maria?”

“What about her?”

Celes averted her gaze, unable to stand the intensity burning in Setzer’s stare. “What ever happened to her? Or did you—”

“She was furious, if that’s what you wish to know. People found out our secret and that made her disgusted with herself. Of course, I didn’t come to find this out until about nine months ago when we crossed paths again in Jidoor.” Setzer sighed. “She’s a complicated one. Absolutely fun and delightful, but not sure if she’s still worth the headache.”

She wished she had never asked or tracked down Setzer in the first place. Emotions coiled within her like a storm preparing to rip her apart. The way Setzer spoke of Darill and Maria was reminiscent of Locke with Rachel. The similar longing was present in Setzer’s face, as if nothing would ever be able to fill the void both Darill and Maria ripped out of him.

But Celes refused to be a replacement for either Locke or Setzer. When she was around Setzer, she didn’t wish for his old affairs and long gone memories to surface before him. Frustrated with herself, Celes came to a standstill and nearly throttled Setzer off balance.

“Is something the matter?”

Her hands wriggled free and her arms to wrap around her frame. Celes’ eyes widened into a glare piercing straight through him. “What am I to you, Setzer?! Am I just another venture for you? Another someone you can tell stories of to the next girl that catches your eye? Am I simply a replacement for Darill and—”

“No.”

The moment he cut her off, he closed the distance between them. In turn, Celes walked backwards, unsure of the new light in his eyes.
“Don’t you ever think that,” Setzer insisted, keeping his voice low. “You are not Darill, nor are you Maria. They each have their own, separate hold on me and no one can take their places. But you?” The music blurred out the subtle noise he made—perhaps a moan. “Oh, where do I start with you.”

Celes gasped as she bumped into the poker table behind her. With her advances stopped, she brought her head to center, just in time to meet with Setzer’s face leaning into hers.

“You,” he murmured, bracing himself against the table along either side of Celes. “You have plagued my thoughts more so than anyone else I have been interested in. You’ve entranced me with every single thing you do. You tricked me when I least expected and continued to excite me to new heights. You are the type of woman that demands respect and I’d drop down to my knees and surrender over anything I possible could to earn your attention for a spare second.” His eyes closed. His breaths grew audible. “Celes, the problem isn’t that you’re a potential replacement; it’s that I don’t know who could ever replace you.”

Her hands gripped the edge of the table, tighter than she would with her rune blade. The beats of her heart thumped all the way up to her ears. A well-acquainted fire torched through her entire body and left Celes tingling. And when he stepped closer to dispose of the pesky space lingering between them, their bodies steadily met. The heat alone had her gasp.

“I can’t ignore you even if I tried,” Setzer continued, a touch breathless. A hand eased off of the tabletop and settled at the curve of Celes’ waist. She found no reason to swat it away. “You walk into the room and I have to find something to distract myself with. I never wanted to offend you, but the way you react each time I teased you.” Setzer bit his lip while settling his forehead against hers. “It’s like you do it on purpose, like you know the effect you’ll have on me.”

Once their hips met, Celes sucked in air. He could explain the entirety of his feelings all day, but she couldn’t deny the hard bulge now pressing into her. She staggered backwards until her forearms propped her up. Setzer followed, leaning over her while stroking her side. The idle touch brought forth a shudder. This time, Celes welcomed it.

His past was revealed—albeit not a part of any plan of Celes’—and he answered the one question which plagued her. All Celes could possibly ask from Setzer was more. More of his stares, his touches, his voice in her ear. Despite his darker tastes blindsiding her, Celes still wondered what would have happened on board the Blackjack, back when he believed her to be his Maria. She desired his weight crushing her into the wall, his lips skimming over her exposed skin. Back then, Celes had every right to be disgusted, more so when her body defied her in response. She played her part in the charade in hopes to earn a means of accessing Vector.

Setzer was that man. The immoral gambler opposite of her lawful knight. Never meant to see eye to eye, never meant to form more than a truce over a vague, common goal. The same man who she wished to rid herself of; now she wanted him.

“I don’t know whether I should smack you or kiss you,” Celes whispered.

Setzer’s lips twitched. “Well, I’m not going to stop you from wanting both.”

His hand skimmed up along the side of her breast and traced over her exposed clavicle. Silvery hair spilled from his shoulders and framed his face. Celes frantically held her tongue as his hips pushed further into her. Setzer never twitched his eyes away and continued teasing Celes with feather light touches over her shoulders and neck, as if waiting for her to react.

Then he chuckled. “Is that all you want? A kiss? Don’t tell me you’d be satisfied with just that.” He shifted above her, easing his face down. “I’d be more than happy to do more,” he whispered.
His lips found a home against the crook of her neck. So warm and soft along her skin. This time, he didn’t tease. A slow, yet deep kiss was Celes’ reward, unable to ignore his tongue lapping out to further taste her. Celes squirmed underneath until a light coo squeaked out of her. Her lips quivered, waiting for him to trail up her neck and jawline and settle upon her parted mouth. The sheer frustration over the lack of instant gratification pulsed a sense of eagerness through Celes.

“You’re so quiet,” Setzer noted. He sucked at her neck one last time before pulling away. “You’re starting to make me think I’m doing something wrong.”

She had an answer for him, one which was lost the second his lips ghosted over her breasts. All she could give as a response was a soft whimper. In reply, Setzer smirked. Despite being fully clothed, his actions penetrated through the layers of fabric and shot down between her legs. Again she squirmed, arching a leg up to hug his side and Setzer met her with a steady rock from his hips.

He took careful note of how her nipples stiffened through her top. Each breath beating onto her produced another tremble and gasp from Celes. She waited for him to tug down her top enough to expose her and pick up where he left off. The possibility brought a small curve to the corner of her lips. Though instead, Setzer didn’t give her the obvious satisfaction. Lips brushed over the peak and rapidly traveled up to her ear.

"Is this what you want, ma cherie?"

That voice was enough to melt Celes—a decadent treat he was sure to spoil her with. His exact tone informed her plenty of what he wanted, but with his presence alone, Setzer could demand his intentions. It became beyond evident what appeal Maria saw in him. Celes’ mind spun out of control with her chest rising and falling deeper than before. As her breath hitched, she nuzzled into the side of his head.

And then she gave a voice to the tiny notion living in the back of her mind. “I want you to treat me as if you thought I was still Maria.”

Setzer reeled back enough to overlook her. Hair fell into his face, the straight line of his lips visible while his eyes twitched about her form. Not long after, Setzer eased into her face, noses bumping while his breath filled her ears. She could almost taste the wine on his lips and wondered if she’d also taste the smoke perpetually soaked into him. Closing her eyes, she waited for a kiss, for him to claim her as his own, for him to ravish her and not waste another damn second.

Though the more he spent not scratching her particular itch, the more Celes’ impatience bubbled into a boil. Out of sheer frustration, Celes opted to take control of the situation; tilting her head up, she sought out his lips for herself. The instant she attempted to inch closer, Setzer pulled back completely. He chuckled at her while embarrassment choked up Celes.

“Tell me,” Setzer drawled out, “have you ever let a man come close enough to have his way with you?”

The flash of humiliation colored Celes’ cheeks and stole her voice. Though Setzer waited, standing still and silent. Every second of that dreaded nothing drove Celes into madness. She couldn’t ignore any of him: the allurement in his eyes, the lush quality of his voice, the curious hand idly wandering over her body, and the stiff arousal of his pressed deep between her legs.

“Just....” The blush deepened while she turned her sights away. She wiggled briefly, the friction of their bodies bringing forth a slight whimper. “Only a few times. Before I became General. There were other soldiers my age that—”
“Did they fuck you properly?”

The first question proved to be difficult enough, let alone the second.

“I didn’t think so.” Setzer sighed, the frustration laced in his breath. “That’s a shame. I can imagine so many soldiers had their eyes on you. General Celes Chère... the ice queen no one could melt. Doubt any of them would know what to do if they got their hands on you. I bet you’d smack some sense into them, show them how it’s really done. You never struck me as the type that would be content with an amateur. Or maybe....”

He cupped Celes’ face, the softness a sharp contrast to his hips, and stroked a thumb over her cheek. Celes parted her lips to gasp, his thumb daring to brush along the corner of her mouth. The music hiccupped and skipped in the background, but Setzer didn’t flinch.

“Just maybe... you’re the type who doesn’t want authority behind closed doors. Maybe you’d like to shrug off that military facade and have someone else command you.” He paused. “Look at you; you’re trembling. Do I scare you?” Celes was quick to shake her head. “No? Nervous, perhaps? Or are you truly this coy beneath all that hardened armor you wear day in and day out?”

The fire charred her to the bone and threatened to explode. No one had ever teased her like this. Unsure of how much more she could handle, she inhaled sharply and whimpered to him. “Please, don’t hold back from me. Not now.”

A spark fired off in his eyes.

“Is that a suggestion or an order?” he asked, voice firm and low. “And don’t toy with me.”

His thumb dragged over the plump flesh of her lower lip before settling dead center.

Celes craved to ease her tongue out, lick her lips, and take him into her mouth. “The latter,” she cooed.

A deep breath filled his lungs, though the release of air left him shaking. “Is this what you want? How you want to be treated?”

Somewhere hidden in the depths of her mind, one of the few slivers left untouched by the haze consuming her with obtaining physical pleasure, was the knowledge of Setzer’s attempts to ensure a consensual accord. Nothing forced, as much as Celes once believed it to be; she knew better now. Beside that knowledge was the memory of Setzer expressing his trust in Celes, one she subconsciously shared with him. All of it echoed in between each frantic heartbeat caused by his careful execution.

And thus she nodded to Setzer.

“Say it then.”

Her throat dried up and itched raw as she struggled to speak. “I... I want—”

“Louder.”

The music skipped, her heart raced out of control, and the aroma of wine filled the limited space. And there was Setzer, issuing his first command to Celes. Toying with such kinks should have twisted her stomach; only those with distorted minds wished to share pain and pleasure together, both physically and mentally. Yet to say Setzer’s demeanor and offer was an instant turn off would have been an outright lie on Celes’ behalf.
But what would happen if she disobeyed him? She almost wanted to see the outcome. Almost.

Neither paid attention to the constant, heavy thuds inching towards the door, almost in time with the skipping record. Celes dismissed it as part of the music until someone else carelessly wandered in.

“Think your gramophone is broken! Can hear it half way down the hall. Is this even where you’re hiding—”

By the time Celes registered Edgar’s voice, he had already spotted the two tangled up in each other against the poker table. Any other time she would have relished the sight of Edgar, of all people, turning a shade of red reserved for utmost embarrassment. Instead, Celes sat up and shoved Setzer away, much to her annoyance. While he resisted at first, Setzer followed Celes’ gaze and opted to back further away.

Edgar sought out words and found nothing but a squeaky apology before bolting out. A tad unnecessary, in Celes’ eyes, when he already ruined the moment. Setzer braced himself along the poker table, boxing Celes in with his head hanging low. She thought of holding his face in her palms and kissing him to ease the tension; one second he wielded total control and the next it all slipped through his fingers.

“Setzer,” she said as gently as possible, her hand reaching out to him.

Before she could touch him, Setzer pulled away. He returned to the opposite side of the room, stopped the music, and rearranged the rest of the items on the bar counter. His silence turned Celes’ stomach over. As he plodded over to the door, Setzer paused and glanced in her direction.

“Thank you for keeping me company, ma cherie.” Not another word as he slipped out.

The pet name he suddenly insisted on calling her would have infuriated Celes well over a year ago. Now it sent her heart fluttering. Her newfound solitude was not welcomed, either. Celes wanted to drag him back into the room and demand he continued. She would scream anything he wished for her to say louder, simply to appease him and bring forth the plans he had in mind for her. Squirming against the poker table, Celes simultaneously released a breath and whimper.

An ice bath would do little to calm the inner wildfire blazing inside of her. Only Setzer could extinguish it.

Ginger feet settled onto the ground as Celes forced herself to leave the room, but she couldn’t leave behind the events which transpired there: a combination of Setzer divulging on his past and daring to indulge Celes with what they both longed for. The recent memory left her body in pleasant shivers.

Celes took all of two steps when she eyed Edgar standing in the hallway, back to the wall with a smile pulling at his blushing face.

“I’m a soldier, not some love-starved twit.” Edgar chuckled and turned his head to Celes. “May I remind you that’s what you said to me back then. Your own words.”

Arms folded against her chest and legs squeezed together, Celes huffed. “Are you done?”

Edgar let out a nervous laugh. “When am I ever? I didn’t even think you’d ever give Setzer the time of—” Just as Celes rolled her eyes and tried to march past him, Edgar grasped for her attention. “Wait, Celes! I’m sorry. I didn’t... look, you had run off after asking about him and then you didn’t turn back up and it got us worried and—”

She turned on her heels to march back to Edgar. “You saw nothing.”
He blinked. “Well, I saw something, but—”

“Nothing, Edgar. Not a damn word.”

“Okay! Okay!” He threw his hands up in defeat. “It’s just between you and me.” A beat passed. “I suppose the three of us, for what it counts. Was he… really drinking again? I swore I—”

“This conversation is over, Edgar.”

“Yes, but of course! Don’t mind me, just...” Edgar cleared his throat while averting his eyes. Few, if any, made the claim of making the flirtatious king himself blush. Maybe at a later time, Celes would cherish the accomplishment. “I get it, okay? We’ve all been through a lot of shit since the world went belly up. Sometimes having something take your mind off of it all isn’t a bad thing. Or... someone, for that matter. Whatever it is between the two of you is none of my business, but...” Edgar offered a soft smile before making his way past Celes. “I hope he makes you happy, if this is what you want.”

While Edgar made quick ground down the hall to presumably return with the others, Celes braced herself against the wall. An exhale trembled past her lips, yearning more for warm lips crushing into her than air. She stood tall as best she could and eventually made her way back to her usual seat in the main foyer with the group.

Setzer was nowhere to be found, but the idle hum of the engine shifted and left Celes with the image of their intoxicated pilot racing through the skies. At least nothing stood as an obstacle at the altitude they soared at. Perhaps the cold air would sober him up, if not calm him down from the sexual tension knotting up inside. She could have slipped out onto the upper deck under the pretense of needing fresh, cool air, but she would have served as a bigger distraction to Setzer than the wine he chugged down.

Celes ignored what the others spoke of and lied back on the couch. She thought of Setzer, each recollection creating another chill in her body. It all rekindled the raw yearning for something more. One side of Celes scolded herself, for she was to be disgusted with the notion of Setzer taking advantage of her with mentions of bondage and domination. A deeply loathed memory of hers involved being bound against her own will with degrading comments spat at her. It couldn’t be possible for such an act to turn into a pleasant fantasy.

But she never jerked away from Setzer during his explanation of the darker thoughts sifting through his mind. The hint of the forbidden starved Celes to the point of insatiable hunger and only one, particular taste would satisfy her. Such an appeal brought an allure to the likes of Darill and Maria.

The exact appeal resided in Setzer now.

But he had been drinking and reminiscing about old affairs. So many excuses popped into Celes’ mind; what had happened between the two of them was a fluke. Though in the days and nights to come, Celes still crossed her legs in an attempt to ignore her own arousal pulsing between. She rolled her head over, bit her lip, and mentally begged for mercy.

She imagined Setzer would have commanded her to scream for it.

Chapter End Notes

The piece of music Setzer refers to is, in fact, *Piano Concerto no. 24 in C minor, K. 491*
by Mozart. And back when I wrote this scene, the Gone Girl soundtrack first came out and I remember having *Technically, Missing* on repeat the entirety of writing this. That song continues to be my favorite in regards to capturing the mood of not just this scene, but the story as a whole.
Chapter 13

She was alone.

Upon reaching the Veldt, Cyan insisted it was in their best interest for only three of them to search for Gau. Celes offered to stay behind and Setzer, as always, preferred sticking to the airship than straying away. However long it would take the men to seek out the wild child was unknown, but the time meant solitude for Celes. She craved for the quiet serenity several days ago, if only to relieve herself of the overwhelming lust still present.

Or, if she was inclined to do so, she knew exactly where Setzer was. He had offered help before; he’d be stupid now to refuse her.

Instead, Celes lounged on one of the couches in the foyer, eyes locked on the ceiling. The motors of the Falcon hadn’t vibrated through the structure in some time and only her booming thoughts interrupted the silence.

She hadn’t spoken to Setzer since their conversation in the far side room. Not because she wished to avoid him, but because time had yet to allow anything else. He piloted the airship and when it stalled for the evening, Celes was already asleep. Multiple times she entertained the notion of sneaking up to confront him, though thought better of the idea. A distraction was doing neither of them favors.

Yet Edgar’s comment after witnessing the two enveloping each other echoed within Celes.

*Sometimes having something take your mind off of it all isn’t a bad thing. Or... someone, for that matter.*

A stiff sigh slipped past Celes’ lips. Her eyes fell shut and she hoped a bit of rest would put her troubled mind at ease. The distant racket of a door opening and slamming, followed by heavy footsteps prevented a nap. The steps drew closer and she cracked her eyes opened.

Setzer descended into the foyer, smiling to himself upon approaching Celes. “Ah, so you are awake.”

“That’s a matter of opinion,” Celes muttered while sitting up.

“Not sleeping well?”

“I’ve slept better.”

He nodded. “Sadly, the Falcon wasn’t built with company in mind, so you’ll have to forgive me. It’s on my to-do list once everything blows over.” When Celes didn’t say as much of a word in reply, Setzer changed the topic. “Do you mind if I join you?”

It was only a matter of time before he asked. Their fleeting moment of intimacy flashed before her and left Celes questioning what he’d do with everyone else gone. Not a drop of alcohol stained his tongue; perhaps it was all lost on him due to intoxication. The thought twisted her stomach. She had no intentions of forgetting what happened. How could they?

After a deep breath, Celes responded. “No, not at all.” She curled up into one end of the couch, offering him room on the opposite side.

Setzer smiled while taking a seat, legs crossed as he leaned back and relaxed. One elbow propped up on the back of the couch, jewel-adorned fingers resting along his temple. “I must say, I’m not one for
idle conversation, so you’ll have to excuse me for being blunt.”

She tried her best not to laugh. Setzer was a master at extending any given moment, enough to drive anyone crazy. Or perhaps he saved that especially for her. “You forget I was a military officer,” Celes pointed out. “Never did well with small talk.”

Though he did chuckle. “No, of course not.” Hesitation came before Setzer’s words did again. “You’ll have to excuse me a second time then.”

Celes held her breath. “What for?”

“Please, there’s no need to be oblivious about it.” Setzer shifted his eyes onto her. “About the other day. I... didn’t mean to sweep you up into that mess. I wasn’t expecting you at all. Was simply looking for a moment to be alone and after finding the bottle and the live recording...” His words trailed off and his eyes lowered. How she longed to have them back on her. “I was a disaster. You didn’t need to see any of that.” After a pause, he scoffed. “Or hear any of that.”

“You were in worse conditions when we stumbled upon you in Kohlingen,” Celes commented. “And while I didn’t mean to intrude, I... well, it was far from a mess in my eyes.”

He didn’t look back to her, though intrigue lingered in his voice. “Really? Then what was it exactly?”

That was it—an opening. Her one chance to dump the thoughts piling up in her mind. Perhaps there would never be another opportunity, for at the rate they were acquiring more people, privacy would be at a premium.

But for now, it was just her and Setzer.

The greedier side of her—the one still overcome with lust—wished to answer Setzer without words. She could crawl over to him, slip into his lap, and straddle him. Celes wanted his hands back on her, his mouth against her flesh. If it meant reciprocating the same treatment he gave her not long ago, she was beyond willing.

But it was the more logical part of her brain which reacted, unsure of the sudden arrival of lust in her life.

“I hated you before I even knew who you were,” Celes confessed, eyes on her lap. “Everything that happened at the opera house? None of it was my idea. I wanted your assistance. Nothing more. But then I met you and you were everything I couldn’t stand. Part of me wished that you would leave when we arrived in Vector and we’d never have to be bothered by your existence again. And I hated the way you looked at me, the way you had my blood boiling, the way you spoke, the way you acted as if the thrill of the chase was more exhilarating than ever properly winning my attention.”

Celes sunk her teeth hard into her lower lip before bringing her eyes up to meet his intense gaze. “But the funny thing is I don’t hate you,” she continued. “I don’t think I could. Not fully. Not when you keep coming up in my thoughts. I think about when we first met, when we were in Vector, when I found you in Kohlingen...” Her breath hitched. “And the other day. All of it.” She laughed, more at herself than for any sense of amusement. “I’m horrible at this, Setzer. I’ve grown up keeping everyone at an arm’s distance, if not further. The Empire sculpted me to ensure I didn’t carry any tender emotions. And with everything you told me the other day... with your… specific relations with your past affairs. I should be scared of the idea of someone wanting to tie me up or hurt me or humiliate me or strip me of whatever power I have. That... it shouldn’t...” Celes quivered. Setzer’s eyes never twitched away from her. “But it doesn’t scare me. I don’t know why. And there you are,
spinning personal tales with little effort. It takes a kind of strength and courage that even I don’t think I possess half the time. I wish I could be more open with you. I wish—” A sad smile bubbled up as she blinked back the prickle behind her eyes. “I wish I could be more like Darill. Or Maria. Sometimes I wished I knew what you saw in me. I can see now what the others saw in you.

“And after the other day, I don’t think I can forget what happened. I don’t want to. I... meant what I said, if you ever remember that.” Unable to lock onto his profound stare, Celes looked away and ignored the heat returning to her face. “Fuck,” she murmured at first. “I’ve never wanted to be close to someone like this so badly. It scares me to an extent. I don’t know what to do with myself, but I can’t lie to myself. I can’t....” Her eyes fell shut. “Please, don’t let me keep rambling. I’m not making sense any more. Just... damnit, Setzer, say something. Do something. Anything. Grab me. Kiss me. I don’t know how else to get my mind off of this.”

She waited for a reply, maybe in the form of words. If Setzer responded physically, Celes feared her semi-composed integrity would collapse. Though she would simultaneously surrender herself to him. The wait coupled with the thought of the latter brought an oh-so-familiar tingle along the inside of her thighs—the sensation which continued to tease her into insomnia countless nights.

There was a shift in weight along the couch. With a quick glance, Celes eyed Setzer sliding down to her. Closer. He cupped her chin and adjusted her face parallel to his. Celes held her breath as Setzer’s eyes flicked over her. One finger grazed along her jawline, enough to coax a mew out of Celes. Yet he stayed motionless, staring into her blue eyes. It was enough to make Celes scream if she so desired.

What she desired more was to ease into him and latch onto his lips, but she recalled her failed attempt the last time she yearned for his mouth on hers. He had loomed over her with a smug look adorning his features after denying her a simple pleasure.

Instead of bestowing her with a kiss, Setzer caressed her face and smirked slightly. “You mustn’t think of me as someone who wants a brief moment to share with you,” he whispered; the seductive, cocky air vanished, yet apathy didn’t linger behind. “Maybe at one point I did, but now is different. I wasted over a year in regret, thinking of what I could’ve possibly done to make every scenario leading up to now different—better. And you,” He nearly moaned out the word. “You don’t make this easy, Celes. I don’t wish to cheapen this. I’d rather be sober and in better spirits when I attempt to woo you. You deserve a soft bed, candle lights, and tokens of admiration. Even if this—whatever this is between us—were to crash and burn, I’d want my time with you to be memorable.”

In the silence, Celes absorbed the intensity coiling in his quiet words. Setzer didn’t protest against her speechlessness, though his hand dropped from her face and he backed away.

“I don’t mean to overwhelm you,” Setzer explained. “Or rush you, as hard as that may be.” He released a sigh. “I like to think you’ll be worth the wait, if you’ll still have me. Think about it for me, will you, Celes?”

But I don’t want to think it over.

Before he could stand, Celes latched onto his shoulder. It was enough to regain his stare. “You say it like I’ll forget about you after this.”

Setzer chuckled. He scooped her hand into his, running a thumb over the back before kissing it. “You’re too kind, ma cherie.”

That kiss wasn’t going to appease Celes, not when she craved more. With the new tone he set between them, she respected his wish to not rush into a potential fiasco. Before she could disagree,
Setzer headed back for the upper deck. She contemplated following and in the end settled into the couch with a sigh fluttering past her feeble lips. The rush of it all brought forth a waver in her chest. The fresh knots forming, though, left Celes smiling instead of shaking.

When her eyes closed, it wasn’t to invite sleep to whisk her away. Cyan, Edgar, and Sabin would soon return with a bouncing, green-haired ball of energy. From there, who knew where they would fly off to, but until then, Celes retreated to her thoughts. Fingertips danced along the back of her hand and recounted the way Setzer’s lips pressed into the patch of skin. His words echoed in the room while she aimed to recapture the moment from his posture to his voice to the intense gaze within his eyes.

Not once did Celes pluck out the bandana tied at her hip to fiddle with.

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Terra came shortly after Gau. Not without a little effort on their behalf, but her desire to reclaim the world was rekindled. Celes never thought she’d be so overjoyed to be reunited with Terra. Fate had a strange hold on life; one moment they fought for the Empire, the next against it, and now together again they would set it right.

The group coalesced, even with half of the party found. Terra was the one who suggested heading up to Narshe, back to where it all began, in hopes to find something. Or better yet, someone. Though Setzer loved to claim the Falcon was the fastest ship in existence, the trip up north was still lengthy.

Which meant time spent with Terra. The presence of another woman on board brought a constant smile to Celes’ face. Terra had much to discuss: all the time spent in Celes’ absence before the events at the Floating Continent and the days leading up to Mobliz. While she spoke well of the children of Mobliz, she turned to Celes and smiled.

“All this time I had forgotten that people like you and the others were there for me, too.” Her pale eyes glistened in the lights within the airship. “I shouldn’t have been so stubborn; I should’ve gone with you without hesitation. All of you cared. Always did, right? And I love you all. I won’t allow myself to ever forget that.”

The focus of conversation shifted from Terra to Celes, but the blonde froze up with what little she had to offer. She recounted the time spent on the Solitary Island and Terra’s face dropped.

“And you were asleep the entire time?” Terra blinked, unable to grasp the concept. “I would’ve woken up thinking it was all a dream if that happened to me.”

Celes flashed a brief smile. “I did for some time. Almost wish I had, but there’s no turning back to change it now.”

“I suppose not,” Terra quietly agreed. “We still need to find the others, if they’re even still out there.”

“They have to be. We’ve come this far successful. We can’t give up hope now.”

Chatter from above caught their attention. Celes peered up from the main foyer and spotted Edgar
leaning over, being his talkative self, though Setzer standing beside him came as a surprise.

Edgar grinned down below. “And what are you two doing down there all alone?”

While Celes suspected ulterior motives beneath Edgar’s question, Terra was quick to respond. “Oh! Just catching up. It has been a while, after all. Have we... reached Narshe yet?” She eyed Setzer. “Aren’t you supposed to be flying?”

“Not yet,” Setzer replied smiling, “and I’m taking a brief break. She can hover fine in the skies. The birds are smart enough to go around, anyways.”

“Mind if we join you?” Edgar asked.

Celes raised an eyebrow, though of course, Terra agreed to the added company. Her approval delighted Edgar, overwhelmingly so, and soon he and Setzer were bounding down to the lower level to join them.

While Celes and Terra curled up on the same couch, Edgar plopped down on the nearest seat, favoring Terra’s side. Setzer found a seat further away to lean back in. Edgar dove in with a talkative bombardment, his charisma glowing all the while. Terra opted to answer at every opportunity, a blessing in disguise from Celes’ mind. She smiled and nodded occasionally, sometimes chuckling when Terra giggled, but she allowed the other woman to fend for herself.

The conversation dissolved into a one-sided narrative on Edgar’s behalf. In that moment, Celes’ eyes sought out for Setzer. He still reclined in his seat, coat resting over the chair’s arm with his feet kicked up on a nearby table. Like Celes, he paid little attention to the actual conversation, eyes settled on a distant focal point. Celes took him in while recalling the last time they spent alone with one another.

She hadn’t forgotten Setzer’s words. Thinking of them now rewarded her with goosebumps. He longed for her, though didn’t settle for a one night stand. Such honesty deemed respect. However, the proper timing didn’t play in either’s favor. Celes didn’t need time to think over his proposition; she needed him, alone, and preferably a million miles away from the group.

Right then, Setzer caught Celes’ eyes on him. Unlike before, she didn’t submit to her embarrassment; she matched his gaze. And he smiled. Setzer shifted and rose, swiping his coat in the process to drape over one shoulder. Celes half expected him to excuse himself, though his destination ended up several feet before her.

“Pardon me,” Setzer cut into Edgar’s discussion with Terra, “I don’t wish to be rude, but may I borrow Celes for a moment?”

Her heart skipped a beat. You can do more than borrow me, she kept to herself. “Of course.”

If Edgar and Terra had something else to say on the matter, it fell upon deaf ears. Her absence would do little in changing the course of their conversation, anyways. Thus Celes joined Setzer and followed his lead to the upper level as Edgar rattled off in the distance.

He brought her to a quieter corner within the upper level, leaning into one of the walls while confronting Celes. “Figured you weren’t going to be heartbroken if I stole you temporarily.”

A fleeting laugh sputtered from her. “Temporarily?”

And he joined in with her amusement. “Something like that.”
“You know,” Celes lowered her voice, “if you wanted to talk with me, you didn’t need to bring Edgar along for a distraction.”

Setzer blinked and failed to restrain the wide grin adorning his lips. “That’s what you think this is?”

Her eyes fluttered. “But... it is? Right?” Eyes flicked back, as if to check to see if Terra and Edgar were there. “Why else would—”

“Edgar asked *me* to come with him and help him get Terra alone.”

“Oh....” Celes tilted her head to the side. A beat later, her eyes widened. “*Oh.* I didn’t realize—”

“Neither did I. Wasn’t going to argue with him. Couldn’t turn down an opportunity to whisk you away.”

“So are we to just stand here until Edgar is done speaking with her?”

“No, I’ve been meaning to speak with you.”

Celes almost forgot to breathe. “You have?”

Pushing himself off of the wall, Setzer drew near. “Have you thought over at all about our last conversation?”

The blush ran deep across her pale skin. *How could I not?* “Yes.”

Setzer tilted his head and leaned in. “And?”

Her answer was ready the moment he finished his speech in regards to the state they were both in, if not back when he cornered her on the poker table. Nothing but selfish sentiments rose from Celes; they were to be reclaiming the world from Kefka and yet there she was, unable to control the various fantasies dancing within her over Setzer. But he *excited* her. The memory of his soft, yet ardent voice vibrated through her.

“I don’t know what this is between us,” Celes whispered, “but... it feels ridiculous that I can’t stop thinking about it when we have bigger matters to attend to.”

“You wouldn’t be alone in that train of thought.”

*You’re not helping.* “Is it wrong to be selfish? I wonder too often of the possibility of these days being our last. What little time we’d have to bask in whatever brings us happiness. But it feels wrong to an extent. I shouldn’t… we shouldn’t....”

He raised an eyebrow. Of course the former owner of the flying casino had a different opinion. “I believe it’s not a sin to indulge now and then. Sometimes when you spend all your effort in every waking hour giving to others, you forget to give back to yourself.” His lips curled upward. “Why do I have the feeling that you were like that as an Imperial officer?”

Celes didn’t answer and Setzer held back the need to roar out in laughter.

“Why are you always so keen on torturing me?” she asked.

“Oh please,” Setzer purred, “I’m not even *trying* now.” His smirk twisted into a devilish grin. “But I can if that’s what you want me to.” He paused. “…Is *that* what you want, *ma cherie*?”

She never paid attention to his hand extending out to brush fingertips over her own. In her frozen
silence, Celes brought to mind a tight hand clutching her wrists, a warm body crushed into hers, a heavy breath beating along her skin, and a thick, smooth voice undoing the essence of her being. She hadn’t forgotten; she had memorized it all.

Questions rolled into her mind like a violent storm. Would it hurt? Would he provide her with pointers? How were they to know where to start and where to end? Would he be disappointed if she ended up not liking a bit of it? She shuddered at the last thought, for the sole truth of the matter was that Celes feared relishing the newfound sensations than dreading them.

“Celes?”

His hand had pulled away and his body stood upright. She berated herself for succumbing to her thoughts and thus silence. Biting her lower lip, she plucked together whatever she could to salvage her time with Setzer.

“I’m sorry, I…. It’s a lot to take in.”

“Does it scare you?”

“The unknown scares me,” Celes blurted out. After a second of recomposing herself, she added on. “Though I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued.”

Setzer smiled softly again. “Do you trust me?”

He uttered his allegiance to her first, then offered trust, all done in rapid succession. There was a time when Celes doubted the weight of sincerity lying behind all of it, but now she didn’t. The question served as proof for every moment he never faltered from her side, forever a beacon of support. Her one regret lied in not expressing the mutuality of the sentiment.

“Yes,” she murmured. *I suppose I always did.*

He didn’t need to reassure her with words. In his eyes, she found tender care. She yearned for that warmth while stranded on the Solitary Island. Whatever happened between them now, Celes had no reason to be fearful.

“Then all will be well,” he said. “Don’t you ever worry.” Shifting his weight, Setzer slipped his black coat back on. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have an airship to pilot.” His eyes stuck onto Celes as he gradually walked past her. “Thank you for your time, *ma cherie.*”

No matter how many times he called her that, it sent chills through Celes like she was hearing it for the first time. She said nothing in response, though the fidgeting and blushing she reverted to brought a brief grin to Setzer’s lips. Then he was gone and returned piloting the Falcon to Narshe. Standing alone, she wondered when the next time would come when they’d be together. Or if such a next time would result in the feather bed and candle lit room Setzer spoke of.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Narshe, much like the rest of the world, had changed since their last visit. It still nestled deep into the icy mountain, but it was nothing more than a barren, deserted place with locked doors. Past the town and into the mines was a familiar moogle willing to rejoin them along with the fresh face of a yeti.

“Good, someone to entertain Gau,” Setzer had muttered, followed by a sigh.

Umaro proved himself useful, though, and handled several locked doors holding the party back. There were indeed several survivors hiding within the town, some willing to provide items in exchange for gil. As for the resident innkeeper, he was less than pleased when the massive heap of fur trampled down the front door. Even though space was available, the man outright refused to bargain with the group and denied them the luxury of a semi-stiff bed.

As annoyed as she was over the commotion, Celes was more grateful for the new party members. Another night spent deprived of a proper bed wasn’t going to kill any of them. Spaces within the foyer filled up and Celes’ usual spot on the couch passed over to Terra, who slept soundly with Mog situated on top of her. Curled up on the floor within a partial blanket, Celes ignored the various snores and heavy breaths. In time, she too drifted off.

And she would have plummeted into a deep slumber if it wasn’t for the faint rumble of the engine vibrating through the floorboards.

Celes dismissed it as a figment welcoming her while stuck between reality and a dream. Though as it persisted, she rolled over and glanced about. No one else stirred. Nor was Setzer in sight.

Is he moving the airship?

She hitched her breath, knowing too well that the pilot in question was all alone on the upper deck with nothing but the bitter cold keeping him company. Many times before Celes contemplated sneaking up with him, but the rest of the group was present and awake. Sitting up, Celes stretched and once more examined the foyer. The entire group was out cold; if they didn’t flinch over the Falcon taking flight, then they weren’t going to stir over a nearby body moving past them.

Lying back down to sleep was an option. A smart one, at that. Though her heart picked up in speed, thrumming harder than the airship’s engine. Biting her lip, Celes maneuvered to stand. She retrieved her jacket and boots to outfit herself with while tip-toeing about the foyer. During her ascension, Celes pulled her hair back into a low, loose ponytail. She paused before the door leading to the upper deck. Doubt riddled her mind and persuaded her to walk away, for what if now wasn’t the right time?

But she didn’t know if there ever would be a time again, right or not.

The cold air enveloped her when she stepped outside. A generous sprinkle of stars scattered across the dark, moonless sky. With the limited light provided, the outline of Setzer was easily missed. He donned his usual attire with his back facing her. Daft hands moved over the controls of the airship and the Falcon glided through the night without a clear destination.

It was the click of her boots against the floor which turned Setzer’s head away from the dark horizon. Celes imagined he was smiling.
“Celes,” he called out past the wind. “What are you doing up at such an hour?”

“I should be asking you the same thing, no?”

His lips quirked up. “Fair enough. Not sleeping well, I take it?”

She nodded. “Something like that. Same for you?”

Setzer returned his sights back to center. “You could say that. This area… it holds several memories for me. Good ones. Suppose those have been keeping me up. I’ve been curious.”

“Curious?”

While he didn’t respond, Celes approached Setzer. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness and drank in the muted lighting along his face. He stared out into the distance, searching for whatever now captivated him. Celes longed for his violet eyes on her, yet the intrigue swelling up in them prickled forth her own interest.

“Would you be opposed to keeping me company?” Setzer asked. “Or were you stepping out for some fresh air?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Did you have something in mind?”

No amount of darkness could hide the grin he bore. “I might. If you’re willing to stick around, I’d be more than willing to show you.”

“Show me what?”

“You’ll see,” he purred. “For now, why don’t you enjoy the ride, hmm?”

Before she could further inquire, the engines revved up within the Falcon. The compass inlaid within the control console pointed north, away from Narshe and to nowhere Celes knew of. Setzer focused on piloting and she heeded his suggestion, drifting towards the railing. With her arms folded on top of the metal surface, Celes searched the skies and land for the unknown oddity Setzer kept secret. Icy mountains and snow-covered fields rolled by, embodying everything in sight.

Periodically, she glanced over towards Setzer. He maintained his piloting stance, never once wavering from the northern horizon. The silence between them teased Celes as much as it pleased her; to occupy the same space as him without the expectation of idle chatter calmed her nerves more than the crisp air ever could.

Celes leaned into the railing and the wintry wind tousled strands of loose, blonde hair about. The first memory aboard the Blackjack filtered through her thoughts—her first time ever aboard any airship. She anticipated departing the vessel far more than reaching Vector. Now, her feet planted firm on the deck and she closed her eyes; Celes understood the appeal of flight along with the thrill Setzer had to experience.

The Falcon soared through the skies and time was as elusive as the glittering heavens. Patience thinned out within Celes, a foreign sensation she opted to blame Setzer for. Wherever his intended destination was, it lay far outside of civilization and well into unmarked territory. She doubted he surfaced for a simple joy ride, not when his adamant eyes searching the skies matched Celes’. Sighing heavily, Celes kept to herself and ignored the itch to know what it was he wished to show her.

Her eyes drifted along the land below her, chin perched on top of her arms. Celes swore the wind
picked up, though the sharp sound had instead been a gasp from Setzer.

“Celes. Look.”

Straightening up, Celes pushed wisps of hair out of her face as she pivoted to face him. Her eyes widened and shot past Setzer to settle upon the skies on the opposite side of the airship.

Brilliant green and purple ribbons of light meandered within the heavens, performing a gradual dance while a few clouds floated by. Bright enough to illuminate the vicinity, all of the continent below lit up before the phenomena hovering in the skies. Celes gasped and darted to the other side, bracing herself along the edge. The spectacle was magnificent, unlike anything she had ever witnessed before.

A childlike smile swept over her lips. “What is it?!”

“You’ve never heard of the Northern Lights before?”

It rang a faint bell in her memory. “I don’t know. I rarely ever traveled up this far north.”

Setzer chuckled. “Darill was more of an explorer than I was. She’d drag me out for a flight just to show me some new marvel she recently discovered. And when you have all of the skies to roam as you please, you tend to fly into occurrences that most people would never dream of. This is perhaps one of my favorites.”

And Celes understood why; she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the dazzling sight. “Is it always like this?”

“Oh, hell if I know. I’ve noticed patterns in it happening in certain months than others. More of a crapshoot than anything else. Just my luck that the lights are out tonight.”

Celes peeled her eyes away to find Setzer. “You took off into the night on the pretense of luck?”

The soft glow of purple and green washed over Setzer, who continued to man the airship. “Was I not supposed to?!” He smirked. “Seems like Lady Luck is favoring me once more. Can’t complain.” After a pause, he asked, “Do you like it?”

Liking it did the scene no justice; Celes recalled not a single moment where she had been in a comparable state of awe. “I don’t think words exist to explain how I feel right now.”

“Then hang on.”

The motors within the Falcon churned and twisted to elevate the airship. Clouds sifted by like a heavy fog until the vessel hovered above. The Falcon maneuvered close to circulate around the beauty occupying the sky and Celes thought nothing of the new altitude, for her eyes fixated on the lights and nothing else. The dancing ribbons of light were now their horizon.

Such a sight was foreign to the likes of Vector. To see stars and not the city’s harsh street lights was a stroke of luck in of itself, but this? This was different. This was all because Setzer banked on a memory—a mere guess—and tested his luck once more. He was right; luck did favor him that evening. Not just with the spectacle floating before them, but also with Celes. She glowed with a smile, delighted in the notion he wished to share this occurrence, delighted she opted to sacrifice sleep to confront him.

Though for having rolled his lucky dice well, Setzer stayed awfully quiet. Celes tossed a concerned look his way.
“Well? Won’t you say something then?”

Setzer faced her, leaving one hand along the wheel’s spoke. “What would you like me to say?”

Her feet carried her towards him. Celes rather loved the way the lights colored his face. “Anything. You always have something to say about everything, but now? I’ve never seen you so quiet.”

“Perhaps I’m enjoying the view?”

But his eyes followed Celes and not the colored lights, the same ones she prayed hid the blush surfacing on her face.

“Are you?”

He didn’t blink, didn’t nod, didn’t do anything but stare at Celes. “Yes.”

She scoffed first, then rolled her eyes, albeit while smiling. “Do you say that to every girl you try to pull this on?”

“Oh only the ones who claim to be former Imperial Generals and emergency opera singers.”

In turn, she giggled and cast her eyes back to the lights momentarily. “Is that so?” A coy hint colored her question.

Setzer hummed. “Have I ever lied to you?”

“I’d like to think not.”

“Then there’s your answer.”

His hand fell from the spoke. The distance between the two of them grew sparse and Setzer treasured his time with each step. The wind whipped his hair, yet never held him back. When he was close enough, he smiled and reached out to brush fingertips along her cheek.

“You’re shivering, ma cherie. I thought you loved the cold.”

“I do,” she answered too fast. And he was right; a continuous chill lived in her, but it wasn’t from the wind. She knew that. The look on Setzer’s face revealed he was aware, as well.

Setzer chuckled. “That’s a shame. I was hoping to warm you up if needed.”

The possibility of the idea brought a tremble to her lips. “On the contrary....” Celes hesitated, unable to hold his stare. “I... feel as if I’ve been on fire for some time.”

Not a damn word was uttered. Only an entranced expression greeted her while his fingers traced mindless shapes into her skin. In the interim, her patience snapped and Celes stepped forward. A gap of mere inches remained between them. Both of her hands rose to settle upon his chest. This time, she locked her eyes with Setzer’s.

“Please,” Celes murmured, resisting the need to grip at his coat, “say something.” Do something, you idiot.

Through the layers of his clothing, the pronounced thumps of his heart pounded into Celes’ palm. His eyes softened, though the fire within them matched the strength of the one consuming Celes. Fingers brushed blonde hair out of her eyes before cupping her face.
“I don’t think words exist to explain how I feel right now,” Setzer whispered.

She would have smacked him, claimed he was mocking her. Or perhaps she would have a couple years ago. But they weren’t arguing or wishing the other would simply leave. Time passed and Celes forgot of the group sleeping below and the countless villages struggling to survive and Kefka’s Tower waiting for them. Her only concern was how to unravel herself from the man before her.

Their noses bumped first and Celes refused to close her eyes until Setzer’s breath hitched. Soft lips found hers, comforted her, teased her. Celes no longer had to wait. Neither of them did.

She relished the pleasant warmth created with each kiss, like a fire building up. Every time his lips met hers, he never pressed for more, always asking for permission without a word spoken. Her only response lied in her hands sliding ups his chest and snaking around his neck. Fingers tangled up in his silvery hair, ensuring he didn’t pull away for even a second.

And Setzer had his own response for Celes. A hand positioned onto the small of her back and guided her closer until their bodies fully pressed into each other. Celes cooed at the tongue teasing her lower lip while the soft nibbles developed into more pronounced movements. She parted her lips for Setzer, welcoming the desperation that riled him up. A hand settled onto the back of her head to hug her in close and a muffled purr vibrated into her mouth.

For once, she didn’t care if someone ventured onto the upper deck for whatever idiotic reason. She didn’t care what happened in the past or what the future would hold. All that mattered was the warm tongue dipping into her open mouth, the insatiable whirs exchanged, the searing heat emitting from both bodies, and the rattle of her heart beating out of time with Setzer’s. She was alive, all thanks to the one she wished to gut for laying a hand on her back at the opera house.

Catching her lower lip in his mouth, Setzer tugged back, sucking all the while. Celes couldn’t resist the soft moan. He gasped for air and when he didn’t dive back in for more, Celes opened her eyes to find Setzer gazing at her. Both continued to cling onto the other and neither dared to loosen the embrace.

“You,” Setzer breathed out, the wind almost washing out his voice, “are the most profound, most delightful, most exhilarating woman I’ve ever met. I thought my luck would have run out by now.”

Celes licked her lips, desperate to taste him again. “It hasn’t.”

He smirked. “I’m starting to think you are Lady Luck herself. Don’t know what I’ve done to earn this. Was almost certain I’d have to spend the rest of my life admiring you from afar.”

“You still pluck my nerves,” Celes reminded him.

“Good,” Setzer chuckled into her.

Then his mouth was back on hers, needier than before. The pure, raw energy shared between them brought forth the slightest squirm on Celes’ behalf into Setzer. She didn’t doubt he could please her with those talented lips alone, but more than her lips ached for him. The subtle rock of her hips into his, however, slowed Setzer’s actions to a halt. His low groan resonated into Celes. Resting his forehead against hers, Setzer caught his breath and Celes trailed a hand up to trace the scars sunk deep in his face. He nipped at her thumb as it skimmed over to tease the corner of his mouth.

“If I were...” Setzer hesitated and licked his lips. “If we were to stop now—”

“Setzer—”
“I don’t think I could guarantee to forget this night ever happened.”

“Then don’t.”

Violet eyes opened to meet hers. “Are you certain?”

Celes nodded, albeit timid. Setzer withdrew to kiss her forehead before squeezing her tight. Celes returned the action and rested a cheek on his shoulder.

“It’s been... so long since I’ve felt this way,” he purred, nuzzling into the top of her head. Thin fingers trembled down Celes’ back. “Since I’ve desired another with such intensity. I don’t wish to....”

The sentence never completed, but the unspoken words lingered in his embrace. Darill had died and Maria abandoned him, thus Setzer possessed every reason to never open up to just anyone, despite his flirtatious ways, but Celes didn’t plan on dying or running away from him.

Thus she peppered tiny kisses along his jaw, the scars on his face, and settled on his mouth for a deep, slow kiss.

“I’m yours,” Celes whispered into him. “Please, have me. You won’t scare me away. You’d have to try far harder now for me to do that.”

She felt him smile into her. “Then I suppose you wouldn’t object to continuing this elsewhere?”

He could have braced her against the control console for all she cared. The proposition had Celes blushing down to her toes. She tugged on her lower lip, coy as ever—the only answer Setzer needed. But Setzer had voiced his concern over properly seducing her weeks before. No place was suitable on board the Falcon and Celes feared their craving for each other would come to an abrupt end over the lack of the ideal.

“But where would we go?” Celes asked.

The grin he flashed took Celes by surprise. “I might have an idea.”

Darill once claimed the Falcon was the fastest vessel in existence and Setzer tested the bold statement. He grinned over the sheer speed and adrenaline of the airship throttling through the skies. Celes clung onto his arm the length of the flight, only to loosen her hold once Narshe came back into view.

The engines wound down to a silent halt and the violent winds once whipping past them calmed to a breeze. Setzer offered his hand to Celes; the quiet invitation jump-started her heart. She didn’t hesitate to give him her hand. Setzer led her down the decks, ignoring the rest of the sleeping bodies, and helped her climb down until she touched down to crunchy snow.

“Are we leaving them behind?” Celes asked, gazing upon the Falcon. “Won’t they—”

“No need to worry,” Setzer reassured while guiding her towards Narshe. “We’ll return come morning. It’s not as if someone’s going to sneak in and hijack the damn thing.”

Perhaps Edgar would attempt such a feat, but he was deep in slumber during their departure. What
brought more blush onto Celes’ features was the idea of the two of them sneaking out in the middle of the night in search of privacy, like two junior soldiers after hours avoiding the patrols. Celes never dared to sneak out while residing in Vector. Adhering to the rules brought long lasting results instead of a quick, late night romp. The Empire, however, no longer reigned over her life and Celes was free to do as she pleased, even if it meant being swayed by Setzer’s bad influence.

Nearing Narshe, Celes perked up her eyebrows. “We weren’t exactly welcomed here,” she pointed out.

“We also don’t have a walking carpet looming around with us,” Setzer retorted. “Don’t you worry. Let me settle this.”

They returned to the inn, stepping over the broken door and into the disheveled building. It stood in better condition than most buildings struggling to stand around the world, but the emaciated interior lacked the warm welcome a proper inn provided. Setzer walked to the front counter the moment the innkeeper rushed up to meet him with an onslaught of words. His cool voice tugged at the man’s strings and Celes leaned against a wall, fidgeting her hands along her jacket.

She thought of how Setzer whisked her away from the opera house and brought her to his room with the deafening intent of having his way with her. Had he laid another finger on her, Celes was sure to break each tiny bone in his body. Now she followed, trusting his instinct and hoped it led to him pinning her to a hard surface, just to pick up where they left off nearly two years ago.

Her thighs squirmed while painting the mental image Setzer once indulged her in—the one of Maria backstage, bound against her will and for his own desires. Celes’ fingers brushed along her wrists, picturing herself in a similar fashion, donning the dress and ribbon, too. The blood rushing through her veins should have triggered another memory—a less favorable one. It never surfaced. Is it wrong for me to want that?

A clunk from the front counter snapped Celes back to reality. The innkeeper wore a kinder face while swiping away the small pouch of gil. Setzer thanked him profusely while spinning around to eye Celes. He too showed off a smile, though his teetered along the line of temptation. With a hand raised, he crooked a finger at Celes. She pushed herself off the wall and followed.

Down the hall and along uneven floors were a series of rooms, none of which were occupied as each door remained open or missing. On the far end to the right, Setzer gestured for Celes to enter before him. The least pathetic of the furnishings present was a broken dresser with a cracked mirror by one wall. The window on the opposite side propped open and pooled in the night air. Celes had resided in far more luxurious suites, but it wasn’t a couch in a communal space.

And there was a bed. With pillows and blankets and space.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Setzer spoke into her ear from behind. “I only need a moment.”

Setzer busied himself with searching through one of the nearby drawers. Celes then wandered to the window in hopes to close it; she worried more of Setzer freezing to death than herself. Amidst her struggle with what was indeed a broken window, Celes paused and gasped at the immediate sight outside. Poking her head out, she eyed the thick row of tall flowers shooting out of the snow and blooming in the night.

“You okay?” Setzer called out.

After a deep inhale to fill her lungs with the exquisite scent, Celes smiled. “Snow lilies. Cid used to have him in his greenhouse, but they always died in a matter of weeks. He always spoke of how
their nectar could be used to create alchemical cardice. I only remember them when I was a child.”
She reached out to a frozen petal. “I didn’t know they grew here naturally. I thought everything had
died off.”

“Perhaps it’s the snow and frost nurturing them,” Setzer suggested. “Besides, you’ve already proved
to me there can be beauty from ice.”

Biting her lip, Celes retracted from the window and stood to her feet. Setzer discovered half a dozen
 candles, lined them all up on the dresser, and lit each one with a struck match. With a hand tangled in
her hair, Celes undid the ties to her ponytail while approaching Setzer. He blew out the match and
dispersed of it once the final candle blazed to life.

“So what deal did you strike up with the innkeeper for this?” she asked.

“No deals,” Setzer replied while inspecting the door. It closed without crumbling, though lacked the
proper lock both she and Setzer desired. “Simply a matter of upping the ante until he folded.” He
released the handle and returned to Celes. “More my style when my tongue is failing me.”

“Never a dull moment with a gambler.”

Setzer hummed out of amusement while circling her, his arms embracing her from behind. She eyed
their reflections in the distorted mirror. His chin perched upon her shoulder while nuzzling in close.
In time, he pushed her blonde hair away to reveal the sensitive flesh of her neck to kiss. Each
glimpse into the mirror brought the reflection of Setzer lavishing her with attention. She blushed at
the sight of his tongue flicking out, not aware of the placement of his hands now on her hips.

“Celes,” he whispered, pausing against her neck, “I need you. More than anything at this moment.
The whole world could be gone tomorrow and I wouldn’t care.” He squeezed her. “So as long as I
could hold you while it all ended.”

She wished to melt in his arms, but Celes turned in place to face Setzer. Ginger hands laid upon his
chest. “You can keep holding onto me even if the sun rises tomorrow.” She sucked in an uneasy
breath. “I already told you I’m yours, so please, Setzer….”

Celes cooed at him cupping her cheek, nuzzling into the warmth of his palm. His lips pressed into
hers, soft once more, but only temporarily. Both stepped into each other, bodies crushing together
while hands clawed at clothing. Celes gasped into Setzer’s mouth when a mischievous hand groped
her rear and hauled her deeper into his hips. The gradual grind between bodies served as one of the
many reminders of the effect she had on him.

When she clutched fistfuls of black fabric, Setzer stepped back to shrug off his prized coat. It pooled
onto the floor and lied forgotten while he rid Celes of her jacket, discarding it with a mindless toss.
Through the dull candlelight, Celes fingered the buttons holding his dress shirt together, but Setzer
distracted her with more sweet kisses on her neck. His hand traced the curves of her body and
groped a breast through her top, enough to coax Celes into squirming, but it was the constant flick of
his thumb teasing her nipple which brought out a moan.

Not once did he slow down his actions. Her nipples perked up through the material while Celes
focused on breathing. Setzer hummed, rocked his hips, and sought out the ties to her top. Celes
braced herself against him, waiting as his daft hands worked over the laces. No different from the
times he fiddled with his cards and dice. The purple garment fell from her torso and sat at her feet.

Setzer stepped away to drink her in. Celes resisted the urge to wrap her arms around her form. Armor
always hid her feminine curves and she made no attempt to embellish her assets. Candlelight
illuminated both her body and his eyes. Those eyes. The way his violet irises meandered over her convinced Celes to stand tall with her arms to her side.

“No need to be nervous,” Setzer murmured, drawing close to steal a kiss. “You’re stunning.”

Each kiss reassured her along with the hands smoothed over her arms. Whatever attention he desired to shower her with was acceptable by Celes’ standards, so long as he didn’t intend to stop. Grasping at her waist, Setzer gently nudged her elsewhere until the back of her thighs bumped into the bed. Without hesitation, Celes sat down and tugged at Setzer’s shirt.

He loomed over her as she reclined back. The bed was neither stiff nor plush, but none of it mattered to Celes. Not when Setzer trailed his lips down her neck, her sternum, and paused at her breasts. The rise and fall of her chest deepened with each gulp of air. The beat of his breath on her bare skin intensified her own fervor. Celes wanted nothing more than for him to make haste and settle between her legs, yet she cherished the way Setzer savored her.

Once more he pulled away, hands shooting down her sides to toy with the hem of her pants. Celes trembled over feather light touches and she caught a sly smirk on Setzer’s behalf. First, he disposed of her boots, their pronounced thuds landing somewhere in the room. Next, he loosened the ties to her pants enough to allow him to peel them away with utmost care. The wait of it all nearly strangled Celes.

For a moment, Setzer stood there. In turn, Celes propped herself onto her forearms, prepared to ask if he was alright. But nothing was amiss; Setzer silently treasured every inch of her toned form, the result of years of military training. He had looked at her in a similar fashion countless times, undressing her mentally from afar. The fine difference between now and then was the other flame burning in his eyes—the one accompanying the lust, as if she were a prized possession he wished to never gamble away.

Though the silence resulted in Celes squirming. “What?”

“Is it... tactless of me to say you are a creature of absolute beauty, like the gods crafted you themselves?”

“Tactless? With a line like that, I’d say you’ve ventured to one too many operas.”

His eyes flicked up to hers. “How the hell did you swat away all those desperate soldiers from keeping their hands off of you?”

“With a quick blade and a bit of magic.”

Setzer chuckled. “Wouldn’t expect any less from you.”

He bent at the hip to press a few earnest kisses into Celes. The brief heat within the action had her whimpering the moment he pulled back. Standing before her, Setzer worked on removing his own top.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable?” he purred for her.

Heeding to his suggestion, Celes pushed herself onto the bed and lied back lengthwise. She never tore her eyes away from him. Quick fingers undid every button on his shirt, revealing pale flesh underneath. With the garment torn away, Celes couldn’t help but stare. Setzer’s physique was lither than the rest of the men in the group, favoring agility over brute strength. Scars scattered over lean muscles, each one far more vicious than upon his arms and face. Stories begging to be told lied beneath the scars.
Setzer crawled into bed immediately upon kicking his boots off, silver hair spilling over his face. Lips met along her stomach, kissing back to her breasts. Celes bit hard into her lower lip while he licked over her firm nipples, though she couldn’t hold back the moan when he indulged in sucking at the perky flesh. She squirmed beneath him, one hand coming up to stroke the back of his head, the other caressing whatever skin she could find: the side of his ribcage, his upper back, the nape of his neck, his forearm.

And when he surfaced to accost her with a kiss, Celes moaned forcibly and clung onto him. Her entire body ached for more than foreplay, regardless of how divine it was. Each raw kiss shared demonstrated her level of desire along with impatience. Before long, one hand of hers ran down to his hips, displeased when she brushed over the fabric of his pants.

“Impatient, are we?” Setzer teased her, his breath on her lips. Celes whimpered, enough to make him smirk. “Then I suppose I should take care of you then?”

Though it meant he broke their kiss. With his mouth elsewhere, nothing muffled her moans. Moving down her body, Setzer worshiped her with his mouth while familiarizing himself with the soft curves of her figure and how she responded to specific touches. Another layer added to Celes’ arousal, enough that when he reached her hips, she imagined he could inhale her distinct scent.

He never needed to part her legs; by then, Celes had done so. Tossing her head into the pillow, Celes anticipated his reaction. Fingertips danced over her inner thighs, lips trailing behind. More teasing, more tension. The titillation surged from the depths of her body, raced up into her chest and secured a tight knot. Celes desired to scream.

At one point she breathed out his name, begged him to no longer torture her. Perhaps it had been his intention. She was certain her pleas fell on deaf ears, though as she drew in a breath, one of his hands caressed back up her leg and close to the center. She noted the pause in Setzer’s actions. She almost prompted him with a question. Almost. The slight pressure of a finger circling her clit dissolved Celes into a series of gasps and moans. Her body soaked up the attention and twitched for more. Lips curled up into a closed smile, only to moan through them when added pressure stroked along the sensitive bit of flesh.

A hot tongue replaced his fingers before Celes could fathom a better sensation. Each stroke brought her to squirm, then arch her back, more so once Setzer arranged the precise rhythm to stir her crazy. To be silent now meant he had stopped, but her moans filled the room and overflowed through the open window. One hand of hers stroked along the front of her body, where she contemplated tweaking her own nipple amidst the pleasure Setzer provided.

He distracted her from the idea by slipping a finger inside of her effortlessly. Celes caught her breath and rocked her hips into him, loving the slow curls of his finger. A second digit entered and coaxed a string of lustful mewls from Celes. All the while, he licked over her with the same consistency, leaving Celes with no choice but to lie back and quiver.

Setzer’s efforts were a slow burn requiring patience on Celes’ behalf. Not even her brief affairs proved to last this long. Pins and needles prickled over Celes’ body. She awaited release, though couldn’t grasp anything more than the man lapping over her. The hand tangling into Setzer’s hair and stroking the back of his head reassured him of his delightful performance.

Her body teetered on the fine line between frustration and release. Each stroke of his eager tongue and fingers reminded Celes of his selfless devotion, though it came down to one particular caress dragging over her just right. The one which sent a sharp jolt throughout her entire body and forced Celes to suck in a breath before releasing it with an overwhelmed cry.
She clung to his head, arched her back, and surrendered over to the absolute pleasure awaiting her in her peak. Setzer never slowed down. After moans spilled out of her feeble lips and after the intense waves dissolved into lingering vibrations, Celes gulped down air and sunk into the bed.

“Fuck,” she breathed into the pillow.

Fingers slid out, though his tongue lapped several more times along the entirety of her slit. The added sensation against her now sensitive skin produced twitches in Celes, but she refused to stop him from indulging himself. When he did cease his actions, Celes peered up to eye him suckling his fingers.

“And here I thought,” he moaned out to her, “I would never hear a sound as lovely as that.”

Embarrassment made her squirm, regardless of her body protesting. “Don’t say that.”

“Hmm?” He drew a finger out from his mouth. “And why’s that?” When she couldn’t procure an answer, Setzer chuckled and crawled over her. “Has no one ever informed you of that? Because you do—” He dipped in to nip at her neck, teasing a coo out of her. “—make the loveliest sounds. Just listen to you. Can’t help it, can you?”

The streaks of crimson coloring her face were a result from many effects, but his compliments weren’t helping.

“I suppose I should tell you...” The words trailed off as he claimed her lips as his. Celes moaned for the tongue forced against hers, the obvious taste still lingering there. Abruptly ending the kiss, Setzer smirked down at her. “You also taste better than I imagined.”

Celes melted into the palm caressing her face. Eyes fell shut as her heart sped wildly. She purred the moment affectionate kisses planted into her forehead.

“You’re beautiful, Celes,” her spoke in between kisses. “Every aspect of you.”

Her eyes opened. “Likewise can be said for you.”

Despite her limbs straining, Celes reached to Setzer and pressed her palm into him. The lines of his scars met with her fingers. A shallower individual would have been disgusted, but Celes witnessed her fair share of battle wounds.

“I never thought I could simultaneously be so content and intemperate.” She offered him a soft smile. “You truly chase after whatever will give you a rush, don’t you?”

Setzer breathed out a partial laugh. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“It’s not. I might have thought differently back then, but now?” Celes dragged her hand up his chest, happy to soak up the heat within his body, identical to the heat still resonating in hers. “I’m having trouble picturing a scenario without you in it.”

“You flatter me, ma cherie.”

“I wouldn’t be wasting my breath, otherwise.” She chuckled. “You did well to take it away from me, after all.”

His grinned into her lips before initiating a slow kiss. Celes hung an arm around his neck and savored the new pace, one she didn’t doubt was capable of reigniting her penchant for sex. Her knees bent, one leg wrapping around his hips. Their mouths showed no signs of exhaustion. Tugging him into her body, the connection of their hips reassured her Setzer was indeed unsatisfied. The
moan into her lips sealed the notion.

“You can’t let me have all the fun,” Celes breathed out.

He paused. “Well,” he whispered back, “I could, though I’ve never been a good liar.”

Though she treasured the sentiment of his selfishness, what Celes wished to witness was the raw energy hiding within him, the one which stirred him to slam her into a wall, to tease her on a spiral staircase, to pin her into a poker table. Even if it was a brief taste, Celes hungered for it. If it wasn’t to her liking, she trusted Setzer to respect her decision. And if it was to her liking? Celes couldn’t predict what she would do.

She nuzzled into his face, recalling how he had done so back on the Falcon while denying her the simple pleasure of a kiss. The fantasy of a continuation—an uninterrupted one, at that—kept her distracted countless days. She envisioned a seasoned hand propping her into position before tearing enough clothes off to provide access. Something carnal, something only achieved after endless moments of sexual tension.

“You don’t need to be gentle with me.” Her voice strove for seductive confidence, yet her feeble lips hindered the attempt. “I meant what I said last time.”

Setzer’s face twitched as he thought over her words. “Said what last time?”

Oh, you fucking tease.

Either the alcohol wiped his memory of her simple request or he donned a perfect poker face. She resisted the need to squirm beneath him. “Back when... we were on the Falcon and....”

Her eyes fell from his. Vocalizing the memory led to hesitation, but she moaned over the mental imprint. The commanding stare paired with a solid, fierce voice. For all her time spent in the military, Celes recalled no commanding officer embodying the same level of fortitude and vigor Setzer possessed. Then again, she always made certain she was the one with such power. But the idea of relinquishing it all—her title, her pride, her power—to allow someone else to capture the essence of authority?

This shouldn’t turn me on.

“And?” Setzer raised an eyebrow. “And what, Celes?”

The tone returned to Setzer’s tongue. Perhaps he did it on purpose to tease her, but with his eyes piercing through her, prodding for an answer, Celes found no reason to disobey him.

“You had me against the poker table,” Celes recounted, “and I had told you... that I wanted you to treat me as if I were still Maria. You asked me if that was what I wanted and... it still is.” The silence was killing her. She brushed a hand over his face, smoothing over his scars. “You don’t scare me, Setzer. I want to experience how you truly want me, nothing held back.” A coy smile quirked up on her lips while she chewed at the bottom lip. “What was it that you said? Yellow means keep going, but not any harder and red means stop? Something like that?”

His eyes widened, the movement subtle. From what the candlelight illuminated around his face, she swore blush colored his pale skin. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” she purred back.

Setzer sucked in a breath. “Yes, what?”
“Yes,” Celes responded loud and clear, “I want you to treat me as if you thought I was still Maria back on the Blackjack after you kidnapped me.”

He didn’t tell her to repeat herself, nor did he prompt her with any further commands. Setzer continued to gaze at Celes, as if discerning the truth. She was no different from him; she too had always been a horrible liar. The heat returning to her body pleaded for his attention. Celes impatiently waited for him to react, to do something.

In time, he ran fingers along her neck, across her shoulders, and back down to circle her breast before gently cupping it. Celes whimpered and wiggled, expecting more than soft gestures meant for a ceramic doll.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you,” Setzer murmured, eyes cast away from her. “I’m not going to treat you as if you were Maria.”

A punch to the stomach would have been kinder than the weight plummeting to the pit of her body. Celes glared at him, ignoring the sweet circles around the peak of her breast and mentally prepared a stern lecture for Setzer. She intended to dive into great detail of how she wasn’t a toothpick of a woman. Others might have feared the notion of cracking, but Celes desired to be smashed into the cold floor to prove she wouldn’t shatter on impact. Just once, even if for a night, she wanted to be at the disposal of a merciless man.

But his eyes flicked back up and her anger evaporated.

“I’m going to treat you like Celes Chère, the eager little slut who asked for this.”

Setzer caught her nipple between forefinger and thumb. The tight pinch forced her to whimper, but the sharp, upward tug that followed morphed the sound into a soft cry. Eyes fluttered wide open as she tossed her head back. Pain prickled from his fingers and through her chest. He released her nipple and the pain subsided gradually, but it was the residual warmth, a pleasant fuzz soothing the area once assaulted that elicited the best reaction.

Celes never experienced a sensation like it before; he had hurt her, let her taste pain, and she couldn’t help but moan over it.

Before she caught her breath, Setzer’s mouth fell upon the sensitive side of her neck. He didn’t shower her with kisses and playful licks, instead sinking teeth deep into her. Celes yelped, yet never agonized over the potential of him breaking through skin.

“Until I’m finished with you,” Setzer growled in between bites, “you are to be an obedient slut. If I deem you to be stepping out of line, I won’t hold back with disciplining you.”

The combination of bites and suction inflicted overwhelming pain to Celes. She writhed beneath him. Anything to prevent herself from screaming. Yet she couldn’t help but wonder how loud she’d scream for Setzer if she did disobey him.

“Do you understand, slut?”

Celes fluttered her eyes and nodded. Another abrupt pinch of her nipple flooded agony through her body. She twisted and cried out.

“Don’t be fucking fresh with me,” he hissed. “I want you to say it. Or have you lost your tongue somewhere along the way?”

Gulping down cold air, Celes parted her lips. “I understand.”
Setzer cocked his head. “Did you honestly become Imperial fucking General with that pathetic attitude?” She blushed and whimpered, more so when his mouth relocated to bite and suck her earlobe. “Once more, slut, but with feeling. The whole town should know by morning that for one night, you belonged to me.” The smooth chuckle filtering into her ear sent a lasting chill through Celes. “A former military officer such as yourself should know how to yell loud enough to wake up everyone back on the Falcon. Or do you not have it in you anymore?”

Had anyone possessed the nerve to humiliate in her such a fashion back when she donned Imperial armor and marched down the halls of the Empire, Celes would have smacked them. But Setzer reigned supreme, clutching onto the mental leash he had attached to her. Celes contemplated of disobeying, but the sole thought of submitting in exchange for a reward heightened her flourishing libido.

When she responded, she did so as if addressing a high-ranked superior: clear, concise, and loud enough to be heard from the back ranks. “I understand!”

Not a second later, Setzer crushed his mouth over hers. A different kiss, raw power laced within it, similar to the tone he presented. He backed off only when Celes dangled over suffocating from the aggression.

“Good girl,” he whispered. “Much better.”

He positioned himself to the opposite side of her neck, his hand on her other nipple, prepared to torture her. The doubling sensation left Celes shuddering and tossing her head while he bombarded her. She thought to bite down on something to prevent herself from screaming. Oddly enough, she never wished for Setzer to stop. It hurt, though the eventual release soothed her from the agony. It all riled Celes up, enough for her to rush a hand up to sink her teeth into and muffle her cries.

At one point, Setzer pulled away. Instead of being grateful for the break, Celes whimpered. She eyed him tearing bedsheets off the mattress and working his hands over them as if creating makeshift rope. Though when he sought for her knee to hook the cloth under the joint, Celes hitched her breath.

Setzer brought his eyes to hers, along with a slight hesitation in his movements.

*I trust you, Setzer,* she thought while licking her lips. *You won’t do me harm. It’s okay.*

Celes demonstrated no protest. It incited Setzer.

With both her knees hooked with the sheets, he tied the ends around the metal bars of the headboard. Celes hissed at the tight, buzzing sensation left Celes shuddering and tossing her head while he bombarded her. The thought of Maria bubbled to mind, how she desired to be taken advantage of. A folded pile of blue silks had sat on a nightstand; Celes understood their purpose now. *This* was what was to take place on the Blackjack.

Setzer tore her hand away from her mouth upon finishing. She gasped as he pinned her wrist above her head. The force behind it, the particular squeeze to prevent her from moving, all resonated with the distant memory. Celes’ heart fluttered and she moaned deeply, more so when he force a hard kiss onto her. The change in position along with his added weight almost wobbled on the edge of Celes’ tolerance, but not enough. The rougher he was, the more euphoric the sweet release became.

And there she was, borderline addicted to the high achieved from foreplay alone.

Though with no hand to bite at, Celes opted to sink her teeth onto Setzer’s lip while he suckled one of her own. She could almost feel him shudder. Setzer jerked back and gasped. For a split second, Celes prepared to apologize. Perhaps it was all a mistake and she wasn’t cut out for his ideal, sexual
scenario. However, the smirk he wore upon licking his lips said otherwise.

“You fucking minx,” Setzer groaned before sinking down for more.

He returned with a forceful, passionate kiss while his body crushed her. Instead of pinning her to a wall, he pinned her to a mattress croaking beneath their movements. Celes longed for the weight of his body to return to her, passing by with a memory and nothing else. Together they could create something new. It was in the gape of her thigh, the pinch of his nails in the thick flesh, and the roll of his hips. Celes never found the strength to dampen her enjoyment, not when he provided more reasons for her to yelp.

“Listen to you,” Setzer spoke after biting her lip back, his heavy breath beating on her. “You’re enjoying yourself. Truly, genuinely enjoying this.”

The hand clawing into her thigh scaled up her body. In the middle of catching her breath, Celes inhaled abruptly over his fingers tracing her lips. After circling the edges, Setzer thrust an entire finger into her mouth. Celes accepted the digit, earned a chuckle from Setzer, and received another finger sliding in.

“Can’t help yourself, can you?” Fingers pumped leisurely into her mouth, her tongue stroking over them with each pass. “So willing, so eager. And such a sight to behold.” His tongue dragged over his lips. “Gods, did the boys you allowed to share a bed with you even know how to handle you?”

Unable to speak, Celes shook her head. She didn’t hold onto the past experiences with her brief lovers. She had good reason to never think of them again now.

Setzer scoffed. “Those fucking idiots. Can smack them in the face with the broad side of a sword and they still wouldn’t know how to properly fuck a woman. I bet none of them would believe you submitted yourself to this. Tied up, presenting yourself to me…. You truly are a slut. And all mine. And to think, for all the times I’ve thought of doing this to you just to put my mind at ease all those lonely nights, none of them will ever compare to this. To right now.”

He had thought of her. Her. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, yet Celes blushed more over the lewd confession than over the current position of her body. It turned her on even more.

With his fingers sliding in and out of her mouth, Celes sucked lightly, her tongue flicking over the tips the next time they pulled out. The lusty moan Setzer exhaled out shook the foundation he built for himself as the dominant individual. Despite her current state, Celes wasn’t as helpless as she appeared; she too possessed power. She allowed him to take advantage of her, to push her boundaries and limits, yet it was Celes who held onto the ability to tell him to stop or push further.

It was almost as exhilarating as the sharp bouts of pain inflicted upon her.

She whimpered when his fingers retreated, though she didn’t complain for long. Setzer stood beside the bed, revealing the black pants he still somehow wore the entirety of their night. Even from what little light glowed in the room, Celes couldn’t mistake the obvious bulge formed at the front. That had been her doing, after all.

He tore away the assortment of waist sashes first, followed by his belt. The same hands that worked her body up moved over his attire with matching speed and diligence. Watching him kick off his pants and stand nude had her heart skip a beat and deepen the red hue lining her skin.

Returning to the bed without hesitation, Setzer drifted back over Celes. He pinned her wrist once more with his weight settled into her body. A soft coo spilled past her lips at his hips crushing into
hers, but it didn’t help when Setzer insisted on rubbing his hard on against her and coating himself in her juices.

“Still enjoying yourself?” he moaned to her.

A pleasant chill dancing up her spine. Before she could answer, his mouth engulfed one of her breasts. Teeth closed around a hardened nipple before sucking, all of it leaving Celes to cry out. He squeezed her wrist—a reminder to Celes that she asked for this, she wished to experience it. She couldn’t complain. Every moan and pant accentuated her delight.

Celes did possess a single, free hand to do her bidding. His tongue pleasing her deserved praise outside of words. She tangled her fingers through his hair, just in time as he bit at her again. Unable to contain herself, Celes cried out and yanked at the silvery locks. In an instant, Setzer jerked back and moaned for her, on par with how she had been moaning for him the entire evening. When she did ease her grip, locks of hair spilling through her fingers, Setzer nuzzled into her chest and purred like a kitten basking in the sun.

“I can’t remember the last time someone did that,” Setzer said. “Almost forgot what it felt like.” His tongue dragged up to her neck. “Celes Chère... always keeping me on my toes, always finding new ways to surprise me. Just as I feared.”

Celes looked him over. “Feared what?” Such weak words bubbling out and popping.

A hand grasped at her neck, fingers teasing her jawline. Beneath the hair covering his face peeked out an aroused smile. “I believe I may be addicted to you now. Would you hold it against me if I said I might not want to restrain myself?”

She blinked, but didn’t hesitate. “I’d be more upset if you did hold back.”

A shaky laugh sputtered out of him. “Then I hope I never disappoint.”

Setzer’s weight shifted and the anticipation boiled through Celes. Hugging her legs into him as best as she could, Celes waited for him to finally align himself and thrust into her. She was ready—had been for some time—and beyond eager. Though his lack of action seared her bones black, prickled goosebumps over her skin, and constricted her lungs.

It was a miracle she could utter a damn thing. “Setzer,” she whined, “please....”

“Hmm? What was that now?”

Another chill danced up her body while the subtlety behind Setzer’s movements grew deliberate and pronounced. You tease.

“Please,” she whispered, failing to focus. Her free hand clawed at his chest. “Please, I need....”

A wildfire raged out of control in her body, the flames daring to consume everything it touched. Ice she could deal with, wearing it as armor daily, but fire? Celes didn’t know what to do with fire. To melt meant to drop her guard, to surrender, to be terrified. But with it came the experience of sheer, blistering heat. The problem with fire, though, was simple; people either wished to extinguish it and risked burning with it or opted to view the beautiful disaster from a safe distance.

If anyone was bold enough to enter a firestorm and tame it down to a mere spark, it was Setzer.

For now, he reveled in watching the fire burn through her. “Please, what?” When she didn’t respond to his liking, his hand cupped her chin and clung tightly to the side of her face, forcing her to eye him
as he leaned in. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I need you.” The words gushed out of her quivering body.

“You need me to what?”

You fucking bastard. Celes squirmed the second his hips slowed down a complete halt. Almost. “Stop teasing me,” she pleaded gently.

“You do need to speak up, ma cherie. You have quite the lovely voice and from what I’ve heard thus far? Well... you do know how to project.”

Unable to bear anymore, Celes swallowed her pride and spat out at Setzer. “Stop teasing me already! Weren’t you the one who said it was a shame I was never fucked properly?! Well, what the hell are you wait—”

In her brief time lecturing him, Celes never noticed the realignment of his hips. Setzer thrust into her and squeezed out an abrupt gasp from Celes. He released the grip on her face, allowing her to loll her head and exhale a moan to fill the room. All the while, Setzer braced himself against the bed and regained composure in the stillness. When he resumed movement, he did so gradually, deliberately. Bound legs clung onto his form and Celes remained anything but quiet. He filled her, stretched tight muscles, and presented little reason to stop.

A string of curses fluttered out of his mouth in between breaths before lowering himself onto Celes. Lips found the nape of her neck and upon instinct, Celes hugged an arm around his scarred body and kissed the top of his head. His gentle attempts proved to be far more intense than Celes anticipated. It tickled her curiosity over what he was capable of uninhibited.

Again she pleaded in between gasps of air and lustful coos. The evening was to be shared and thus every sensation and emotion they stirred in one another was to be remembered. Their mutual intimacy drowned out the world. Celes forgot the time when he insisted she needed a moment to relax and indulge. He offered to assist her, if need be, and Celes wanted him to have her. Gods knew Setzer waited long enough.

I’m yours now. So, please....

Setzer surfaced to kiss her, just once. A deep kiss, enough to curb the edge. Their eyes locked with one another. He rested his forehead against hers. The moment of stillness mirrored with eternity. Every second of waiting was worth the moment he slammed his hips into her.

Never was he gentle; ruthless was kinder. Setzer ravaged her—a steady, yet vigorous rhythm. Each thrust shot through Celes and created a unique cry from her gaping mouth. She clung onto him, dug nails deep into his skin. Not once did he flinch over the pain, even when she dragged down and tore flesh. Nothing numbed the absolutely pure rush firing through her like violent tremors pulsing over the earth.

Her muscles stretched and screamed in protest when Setzer pinned one leg further into the bedding. Celes ignored it so long as it meant a delightful experience once she was released. And like hell she was uttering either of those safe words now. Each bout of painful discomfort came the fuzzy warmth double-fold. Once her body grew accustomed to him—and his to hers—undeniable bliss lied in the wake of it. The shared heat had both panting, hearts racing together, and bodies thirsting more.

Their lips locked in a desperate attempt to taste the other and Setzer continued to pump into her. A few more strokes, another kiss, and one last squeeze at her wrist sent her body into spasms. Every
muscle tensed as she broke away to gasp for air, then moan uninhibited. The ecstasy differed this
time, though overwhelmed Celes enough to render her into a vocal, twitchy mess.

Even though Celes sank further into the bed from exhaustion, she still cooed for Setzer working over
her. The tension knotting up on his face conveyed his desire to accompany her in the blissful
aftermath. She didn’t protest against him using her, rather enjoying the built up aggression as he
indulged himself. With a slight smirk, Celes combed her hand through his hair before tugging at him.
It was enough for him to hitch his breath, then moan. Setzer laid eyes upon her, his stare screaming
with delight.

With a sudden increase in both speed and brute force, the two gasped together. Halfway through, he
bit down onto her shoulder, but Celes never flinched. Nor did she over the warmth filling her up.
The grip from her wrist loosened, the release alone an orgasmic experience. Fingers danced along
her open palm before gliding up to test the space between her fingers—a tender invitation. Celes
clung back. Neither let go, even as he finished with a content groan and collapsed into her.

Beads of sweat rolled off of Celes. She gulped down sticky air while licking her lips. From the
corner of her eye, she spied upon Setzer nuzzling into her neck with a purr upon his lips. The sight
had her smiling. Her free arm embraced him and her lips pressed into his forehead.

She swore he murmured into her, albeit incomprehensible. “What was that?”

Groaning, Setzer lifted his face to Celes. Strands of hair fell into his eyes, a few sticking to his
sweaty skin. “You’ll have to forgive me,” he said, exhausted. “I got carried away towards the end.”

Celes blushed, but not for long. “You don’t need to apologize.”

“No?”

Celes eased into his face. “No.” She stole a tender kiss. “Thank you.”

Setzer smiled, stripped of the usual cockiness he bore with it. “Thank you,” he echoed back.

Unraveling himself from Celes, Setzer made quick, yet careful work of the makeshift binds around
her legs. Upon releasing them, he scooped an arm beneath her knees and pulled her into him.

“Are you alright?” Setzer asked.

Celes busied herself with a sigh over the bliss enveloping her like a massive, soft blanket. She
wriggled in his arms as he gradually helped her stretch. Purrs spilled past her smiling lips. She was
nothing but a pile of goo in his hands.

“I’m more than alright,” Celes responded, the crack in her voice remedied with a hard swallow.

“You certain?” She hummed while curling up into Setzer. He stroked over her head and kissed her
temple. “You were such a good girl. I’m proud of you.”

The sudden praise had her heart fluttering. “Why?”

“Why not?” Setzer snickered. “For your first time, you thoroughly impressed me. I was fully
prepared to stop, you know.”

“You’d be sleeping back on the Falcon if you stopped.”

Setzer couldn’t contain the rolling laughter. “Don’t spoil me, ma chérie,” he teased. “I may grow
used to it.” He paused. “Do you need anything?”

“I need you to shut up and not leave this damn bed.”

He tilted her chin up and pressed a kiss into her. “As the lady wishes. Just a moment.”

Celes snuggled underneath the covers while Setzer ventured off to fetch a cigarette from a coat pocket. With the end lit by candlelight, he returned to lounge back in bed with her. Celes nuzzled in to rest her head upon his chest and Setzer draped his arm over her. It was enough to satisfy Celes, the cool air pooling into the stale room and his fingers ghosting over her bare skin. She didn’t ask for more, yet the night was young.

They shared more than warm bodies; they shared kisses and gentle caresses. They shared stories to entertain each other with smiles upon their lips. Setzer spoke of the various tales attached to a few, select scars of his, recalled the past, outlandish dramas turned racy gossip at the opera house, and grinned over the recollection of the prized moments which earned him his infamous status as a gambler. And Celes spoke of the few voice lessons she received growing up, recounted her days training as a child and outperforming most adults, and chuckled over the few antics within the military worthy enough to be suited for a drinking story.

Celes lost track of time amidst their sleepy conversation. Setzer’s cigarette was long gone, but the skies remained black. In the moments of cherished silence, they inched closer before entangling themselves with each other. Celes smiled over the hands stroking her back and cradling her head. She couldn’t remember the last time—if there ever was one—she smiled the way she did now, let alone laugh or gasp or purr or yelp.

And when sleep did welcome them, it never lasted long. Celes woke multiple times in the night, unsure of her surroundings. The candles had long flickered out and the occasional breeze stroked her nude form. Though she was always greeted with the same arms holding her, the same legs tied up in hers, and the same sleeping face inches away from her.

He asked if she was alright. Alright paled in comparison to what thrummed down to her toes. The fate of the world, for once, never pulsed on her radar and the blissful ignorance was all thanks to the man who brought her genuine happiness that evening.

Chapter End Notes

Roads by Poppy Ackroyd was a huge inspiration for this chapter, particularly the first scene.
Chapter 15

The sunlight splashing over her face stirred Celes awake. The open window welcomed the cold air, which played with the tattered curtains. She shifted and the bedsheets clung at her waist. The morning air—or perhaps it was the afternoon air—washed over Celes and left her cooing. With a small yawn, she nestled back into the pillow.

Though she was interrupted by an embrace from behind and warm lips on her sore neck.

“Morning,” a low groan entered her ear. “Sleep well?”

Peering to her side, Celes smiled at the sight of Setzer nuzzling into her. It hadn’t been a dream, their night shared together. And he was still there. She brushed fingertips along his face and responded with a delighted hum.

And he smiled while kissing at her fingers. “Good.”

Those lips of his found hers in due time. She smiled at the faint taste of his last cigarette lingering on his tongue. Between the kisses and gropes, Celes eased out a gentle, yet sleepy moan. Her breaths trembled against his mouth when Setzer’s hips ground into her rear, far more deliberate than his other actions.

“Should we be thinking about returning to the Falcon?” Celes asked, unable to part more than an inch away from him.

Of course, he chuckled. “What, you’re not enjoying this?”

Celes’ timid eyes fell. “I didn’t say that—”

“Then the Falcon and the others and the whole damn world can wait for all I care.”

Before Celes could protest, Setzer guided her onto her stomach. The change of position was worthy of a gasp, more so when Setzer followed to lay on top and pin her in place with weight alone. Never did he cease the relentless attention he lavished upon her neck, shoulders, and jawline. Celes squirmed and moaned, biting her lip when his hips moved into her again.

“You’re rather forward this morning,” she whispered.

“Waking up to the likes of you?” Teeth tugged at the cartilage of her ear. “Hard not to be. I like to think I was on my best behavior and allowed you to sleep in.”

The image of Setzer lying beside her and watching her plummeted Celes into a flustered state. “Did you now?”

A low groan served as his answer. Despite his resolute approach, a hint of affection glowed in each action in comparison to his persona the previous night. To pick which aspect she enjoyed more was an impossible task; so long as Setzer had no intentions of stopping, she cared little for how gentle or rough he was.

But Setzer was right; what was the rush with returning to the Falcon?

Moans flowed out of Celes and her hips wriggled from side to side in hopes for extra attention elsewhere. In the back of her mind, she damned him before the gods for knowing how to rile her up
in so little time. In return, Setzer pawed for several pillows and propped them beneath her hips. She blinked and thought to ask of his intentions, all of which was scattered when he slid inside of her and pinned her to the bed.

The different angle pierced Celes with more ferocity than before. Her eyes widened as the sheets muffled her cries. The set pace rived with the pain inflicted on her during the night. It was decadent. In short time, Celes parted her lips and begged for more, for him to not stop. From his desperate movements to his jagged breaths pounding into her ear, there wasn’t a hint of Setzer planning otherwise.

Both of their moans mixed with one another’s. Celes clung at the sheets while Setzer sucked at her growingly sore neck. Each precise thrust hit her enough to jolt through her stomach, flutter up into her chest, and burst out of her gaping mouth in the form of a pleased cry. All of it overwhelmed her, blurring out reality as Setzer gained speed.

Celes focused on the inevitable high awaiting her while Setzer had his way with her. So close. She could almost taste it. Amidst their lust for one another, the sound rapping at the door was but a distant echo.

The door cracked open. Celes caught it from the corner of her eyes. Setzer did, as well—a second too late. The worried voice pouring in choked on shock as Setzer growled and swore out loud. In an instant, the door slammed shut. To Celes’ dismay, Setzer ceased all movement into her. A whine vibrated on her pursed lips. With her eyes upon Setzer, she hoped he would ignore the interruption. Instead, he hung his head and braced himself above her.

“Shit,” he muttered while pulling out. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

He left Celes lying on the bed in search for his pants. She didn’t dare move, intent on him returning to finish the deed after settling with whatever the hell lied outside. For now, she enjoyed the view of him dressing in those black pants, never noticing how well they clung to his form. The added sexual frustration produced a tighter fit and Celes couldn’t help but smirk. Setzer paid no attention, combing a hand through his messy hair before exiting with the door slammed behind him.

Muffled voices sounded down the hallway, one of which was female. Minutes passed by before Setzer returned, his back pressed into the closed door with exhaustion tugging down his face.

“So, that was Terra,” he breathed out, a nervous hand clawing his hair.

Celes didn’t know whether to be upset or amused. “And?”

“Several of them were panicking when they discovered neither you nor I were to be found.”

No one was privy to their spontaneous plan when they were all asleep. Celes preferred that—there was no point in arguing it. Regardless, she whimpered. “This won’t complicate anything, will it?”

“Unless you’d like it to.”

Had the pillows not been propping her hips up, Celes would have contemplated chucking one at Setzer. “I’m not exactly keen on letting the entire group know what we were up to while they were dozing off.”

After a pause, Setzer cautiously added, “To be fair, I did off-hand tell someone that if I played with the right hand at my disposal, then it shouldn’t come as a surprise if we were to suddenly… vanish, as it were.” Setzer sighed and shook his head. “But it looks like Edgar is a late riser and thus the early birds worried.”
“You… told Edgar?”

“Hmm? Oh, please, don’t think of it like that. It’s not like I indulged him on details; merely informed him of our potential absence.” Setzer folded his arms. “And do you have any clue as to how difficult he’s been with me after he walked in on us that one, particular time? He’s like a Jidorian socialite getting worked up over potential what ifs. Besides, watching him chase his own damn tail over me being vague as hell is nothing short of amusing.”

“He’d connect the dots,” Celes pointed out.

Setzer began his walk back to the bed. “He would even if all we were doing was racing chocobos for fun.”

Celes raised an eyebrow. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Sure,” he agreed while sitting at the end of the mattress. “If that’s what makes you happy.”

“And what about Terra? Is she okay?”

The laughter dissolved into something more nervous. “I’m not sure what qualifies for okay for her. The girl is a touch naive, but far from stupid. She was flustered, though, which I’d imagine would work in our favor.” He kissed along Celes’ spine. “She’ll be fine. It’s not like she’ll run off and announce to the group in detail of what she saw.”

“You make it sound as if you wish for this to be a secret,” Celes cooed out.

“Private, yes. I’m not the type to speak of affairs during idle conversations. I don’t find it acceptable. But secret?” Setzer purred into her skin. “I’ve done secret before and that didn’t fair well for me.”

“Then what do you propose we do?”

For they were no longer comrades fighting for the greater good of the world. What they were now exactly, however, was beyond Celes’ grasp. Two individuals with an obvious, mutual attraction, but was it as simple as a casual affair? Or a budding relationship? The latter sent blood pumping through her body double-fold. The thrill of tangling up with Setzer was exhilarating, but she would have lied outright if she denied curiosity in regards to exploring further. For all the soldiers she fooled around with, Celes sent them on their merry way once finished; never did she spend hours talking in the aftermath of physical exhaustion and nothing else.

And Celes was rather fond of bonding with Setzer.

“I propose we don’t worry about it until we get back to the airship,” Setzer said. “I’m sad to say that I must take my leave and tend to the Falcon. We’ll set off in a few hours, so you take your time here, ma cherie.”

Celes whimpered as she rolled onto her side and rubbed her legs together. “Wouldn’t you rather be tending to me?”

He froze, only his lips pulling upward. In the midst of her protest, Setzer leaned in to kiss her pout. “Well, you have two options, then: either you can take care of yourself and tell me all about it later or we can finish this at our earliest convenience.”

Both options had their appeal, though Celes blushed more over the prior. After being at his mercy, she doubted her fingers would do her justice anymore.
She spoke after biting her lip. “Another time, then?” Whenever the hell that was.

His sweet smile glowed upon his face. “If that’s what you wish.” Again he stole a tender kiss before reluctantly retracting. “Stay as long as you like. I’ll be sure to inform the innkeeper of your occupancy.” Setzer picked his garments from the floor and dressed in haste. He saved his signature coat for last. “I’ll see you soon, ma cherie.”

And then she was alone. Nothing but the wind, the faint ambiance of the village waking up, and the beat of her heart. Celes rolled onto her back, basking in the afterglow of every incident that led to her current state. She smiled, beyond content. Her and Setzer, intertwined with one another, mixing pain and pleasure, and unable to stop, like two addicts getting their fix from each other. Setzer Gabbiani, a welcomed surprise to her once regimented life. If what he provided was a taste, Celes was dying for another helping, another bite.

A soft knock fell onto the door at one point. Celes mused over Setzer’s return, yet she possessed the decency to cover her nude form with the sheets. Hugging a pillow into her chest, Celes prompted whoever was there to enter. The door cracked open and a recognizable shade of greenish-blonde hair poked in.

“Um... Celes?” Terra caught her eye. “Oh! You’re awake! I, um... is it okay for me to come in?”

She couldn’t help but give the other woman a smile. “Of course. Is everything alright?”

“Yes, yes! I wanted to stop by and... well, actually, Setzer asked if I could check up on you.”

Celes raised her eyebrows. “Did he?”

After fiddling with something outside, Terra entered with a tray in hand. “Gave me a coin purse to request a breakfast from the tavern nearby. Said if you were okay with it, that I could join you.” She paused before Celes, her face overcome with blush. “That’s... if you want me here. I-I’m truly sorry about intruding earlier. I thought perhaps—”

“Terra,” Celes interjected, her voice softer than the wind blowing in, “it’s alright.”

Aside from the frustration over her precious time severed from Setzer, she could never fault Terra for it. Had Edgar barged in again, however, Celes would have exhausted herself from the onslaught of Blizzagas cast in his direction.

Terra fluttered her eyes. “Y-you sure? I really didn’t mean—”

“Come.” Celes patted a spare spot on the bed. “You can join me. No harm done.”

A sigh of relief released from Terra, followed by a smile. The tray settled onto the mattress and she joined Celes. Before she examined their meal, a familiar scent prickled through Celes’ nose. She caught her breath—a dozen snow lilies tied together nestled in the side of the tray.

“What are these doing here?” Celes asked while scooping them into her hands.

The question perked Terra up. “Setzer asked me to pick some outside. Said it was….” She breathed out a giggle. “It’s for you.”

“For me?”

“Aren’t they pretty? And they smell like fresh snowfall mixed with regular lilies. Makes you wish they could bloom anywhere.”
Flowers, Celes thought with a radiant, yet small smile. For me. She held the makeshift bouquet to her chest and inhaled the aroma. “He didn’t have to do this.”

Terra tilted her head and caught Celes’ eye. “But he did.”

Unable to argue with that line of logic, Celes sighed, one reserved for the lovesick damsel who received the banal dozen roses from a secret admirer. With the snow lilies tucked away, the center of attention became the tray of food Terra brought with her: an assortment of cheeses and fruits along with a small loaf of warm bread and cooked meat. The ruined world lacked quality food; everyone knew that. A feast such as the one before Celes was nothing short of a small fortune. As was whatever deal Setzer struck up with the innkeeper for a single room for one night.

“Oh.” Terra paused in between bites of food to gesture to one of the pots of steeping tea. “And this is yours.”

Celes lifted the top, immediately choking on the strong whiff of mint laced with something else she couldn’t pinpoint. Something foul, that much was certain. “You sure you don’t want to share?”

For whatever reason, Terra’s face turned crimson. “Um... Setzer insisted it was yours. And that you should drink all of it.”

Plucking out the damp tea bag, Celes eyed the peculiarly shaped leaves. She recalled similar loose tea used by the handmaidens within Vector, drinking cups of the concoction when they opted to pursue an affair with a soldier. The blush burning through Celes rivaled Terra’s.

“Oh,” Celes uttered. At least Setzer was efficient. “Right, of course.” Where did he even find this? Perhaps another surviving remnant aboard the Falcon? Celes glared while pouring herself a cup. What if Edgar gave it to him as a joke? There were plenty of items lying about in Figaro Castle. Wouldn’t be a surprise if Edgar, of all people, had a stash in the back. She clutched the cup while staring down the contents. Shit, what if Edgar really did give it to him?

“Oh, Celes? Are you okay?”

Snapping out of her thoughts, she nodded. “Yes, I am.”

The tea itself wasn’t soothing or decadent, but with enough sugar—or what posed as sugar—Celes forced the warm liquid down her throat. The food, on the other hand, was a pure delight, borderline spoiling her. She wondered if most taverns held a stash of higher quality wares the second someone threw an extra thousand gil down on the counter.

As always, Terra’s presence was beyond welcomed, as was the notion of their time deemed uninterrupted. The last time they shared conversation freely, let alone food and cups of tea together, dated back to their time served under the Empire, far before Terra fell subject to the puppet crown. A fond set of memories, one Celes hoped Terra pieced back together in due time.

“Celes?” Terra piped up once half of the food was consumed. “Do you... do you love Setzer?”

The question blindsided Celes and she was thankful she hadn’t been consuming anything, unless she wished to choke on it. “Excuse me?”

“It’s just that—” Terra fixated her bright eyes elsewhere. “I know I haven’t been aboard the Falcon for some time, but I’ve... noticed the way he looks at you when you’re not watching. Every time you enter the room, he focuses on you and nothing else. I always was of the opinion that you didn’t care for romance, not after our last conversation in Narshe. Or didn’t want to, anyways. But if you and him were....”
The words trailed off and Terra busied herself with a piece of cheese to munch on. Celes’ mind raced through the silence, unsure of which of the million thoughts to pluck out to vocalize. When she thought of Setzer, she didn’t pair it with love, yet she didn’t neglect the notion of growing more emotionally intimate with him.

*Does that even qualify as love?* Celes wondered. *One can be close without such a silly emotion coming into play.* Their talk after sex, though, had been as invigorating as the sex itself. And with both, she was at peace; she didn’t require thick armor of ice around him.

Not anymore.

But *love*? Love was scribed in books, depicting grandiose tales of helpless women saving themselves for a dashing, handsome knight to sweep them away from the disaster which was their life. Tales meant to rot the minds of little girls who knew no better. Celes never believed in the idealized notion of love. Not when she desired to forge her own path. She didn’t need a man to do so for her. The path she walked was a lonely one, but Celes preferred to keep a distance between herself and others. The further away they were from her, the less likely she would hurt them.

Or hurt herself. It was better that way.

“I’m sorry,” Terra offered when Celes never answered. “I shouldn’t have asked. It’s none of my business, anyways. I... was simply curious.”

“I don’t know,” Celes said. “What I do know is that he makes me happy. I feel... like I can be myself, that I don’t need to worry about putting on a performance to appease someone.” The irony in her words shook a chuckle free from her gut. “Yes. He makes me happy. That I can say for sure.”

“Does he?” Terra smiled. “Happy is good! I’m happy you’re happy. We all should have someone who does that for us.”

Fond, recent memories fogged up Celes’ mind. “Yes, we should.”

Eventually, the tray laid empty, teacups drained, and the sun sat high in the sky outside. Terra offered to clean up and left Celes to tend to herself. After a long stretch upon standing up from the bed, Celes gathered her articles of clothing splayed out across the floor, a sight unworthy of her military days. She laughed to herself over the mess and the thought of poor Terra witnessing the state of the room.

Just as she thought she had gathered everything and proceeded to head out, her foot caught on something. Celes peered down to spy upon the colorful bandana. She smoothed her fingers over the item. Each stroke of her thumb flickered another image of her time back on the Solitary Island. It fueled her to keep rowing through the rough seas until she reached land. It rallied her to seek out life in the ruined world. It led her to Sabin, then Edgar, and finally Setzer. While it continued to dangle from her hip beside her rune blade, its subtle weight diminished.

As had the vague reminder of who it possibly belonged to.

Not long ago, she clutched it to her chest while deep in thought. Now, her heart never picked up in speed upon looking it over. Locke had once captured her attention; in his absence, someone else captivated her interest.

Edgar proved an excellent point; having someone to distract her from the despair sifting through the world was more beneficial than she gave it credit for. Yet Celes continued to tie the bandana up by her side. The only difference proved to be a token of where she had been at that point in her life, how utterly low she descended, and how far she had come now.
“Oh, so you decided to come back!” Edgar greeted Celes with a grin as she ascended into the Falcon. “And look! You brought flowers! You shouldn’t have, Celes, really now.”

She clung onto the bouquet of snow lilies and stared. “Keep telling yourself that.”

The king followed her up the steps leading to the upper level. “You know, if anyone should be handing out flowers, it should be me to you.” Celes threw a glare in his direction before proceeding down one of the halls. “N-not like that! Don’t give me that look! Had I realized I was going to sleep through half of the morning, I would have passed the word along to Sabin.” Edgar laughed. “His routine always has him up at—”

“The only apology I see you needing to give me,” Celes interrupted and turned on her heels, “is for if or when you decide to tell entire airship why we were missing.”

“Yes? Dear Celes, what do you take me for?! If you think for even a moment that I’d be inclined to make myself privy in regards to—”

She snorted, the kindest act she could offer amidst Edgar’s bullshit.

Defeated, Edgar scanned the area before replying with a soft voice. “Please, I may have a reputation to uphold, but I’m not cruel. All Setzer told me was that he wished to spend time with you.” He swallowed. “Alone. And if all went well...” His head bobbed before he continued. “Then we’d be lucky if we saw either of you come morning. That’s all. I swear. I even tried to have him enlighten me with his plans and he refused. Quite the gentleman, I must say.” An eyebrow quirked up. “Though from Terra’s reaction upon returning to the airship, I can wager a guess or two. Poor thing.”

“Poor thing? Really?” Celes scoffed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were the only one allowed to fluster her.”

It was meant to be half joke and half seriousness, but the blank stare followed by the flourishing blush made Celes wish they had found Relm, simply so she could immortalize the sight with oils on canvas.

“I-I don’t know what you mean by that!” Edgar coughed up laughter. “Fluster Terra? Me? You must have me mistaken for someone else, Celes.”

No amount of biting at her cheeks could dull the smirk she wore. “I didn’t realize you liked her so...”

He attempted to hush her with a series of flailing hands. The dramatics left Celes giggling.

“This isn’t a laughing matter!”

“I see how it is. You just asked Setzer for details so you could figure out something for the two of...”

“Shush, you!”
Edgar fumed and failed to defend himself, yet Celes stifled laughter. Though his bright blue eyes shot past her and Celes followed his gaze. Poking out of the corner of the hallway was the airship’s pilot himself, far more polished since Celes last saw him. Insecurity reminded her the mess her hair was in, currently pulled back into a loose ponytail and needing to be washed. The scent of sex soaked into her skin and the discolored blotches lining her neck—no amount of Cures would vanish the bruises—didn’t aid her in masking the events of the previous night. Thankfully, neither Edgar nor Terra commented on it. Not yet.

“You’re making quite a bit of noise, Edgar,” Setzer called out from his end of the hallway. “More so than usual. Should I be concerned?”

“No! Not at all! Simply catching up with Celes now that she’s returned.”

Setzer sauntered towards them. “If she’s back, then we should be on our way out, no?”

Edgar nodded. “That was the plan last time I heard. There was discussion going around as to whether we headed to that cultist tower everyone’s speaking of or further explore the eastern side. Don’t believe we’ve run into Thamasa yet, have we?”

“Or what’s left of it,” Celes added.

Her abrupt realism had Edgar sigh. “It’s worth a try. Can’t hurt. Don’t know where else Strago or Relm would be.”

Setzer shrugged. “I’ll fly wherever, so it makes no difference to me.”

As Edgar and Setzer discussed the finer details of their next route, Celes peered over her shoulder to the silver-haired man. The room left between them balanced the line of respecting boundaries and sharing personal space. An embrace would have been welcomed. So would a kiss on her bruised neck.

She held the snow lilies to her chest, the scent of both the flowers and Setzer mixing before her. Ignoring the two men, she thought of Setzer’s promise of picking up where they left off. At their next convenience, as he put it. The luxury of a private bedroom wasn’t going to grace itself to them any time soon. The thought of waiting had Celes squirm in place, the pulsing warmth returning between her legs.

A flight path was agreed upon and Edgar backed away grinning. “I’ll let the others know of our direction and that we’ll be on our way.”

With Edgar out of sight, Celes exhaled audibly. “I swear, that man is more—”

Rough hands latched onto her arms and forced her backwards down the corridor. She almost tripped, sputtering out half-formed words. Setzer hauled her around the corner, whipped her about to face him, settled his hands upon her face, and dove in for a hard kiss.

Celes whimpered and released the snow lilies from her clutches to paw at his chest. Her mouth opened for him, the invitation allowing Setzer to step into her and pin her firmly against the wall. His name left her lips, though he silenced her before she could utter more. The hand traveling down her side and settling upon her hip earned him a moan, as did the not-so-subtle grind of his hips.

“Setzer,” Celes gasped out after pulling her head to the side. Keeping quiet and soft was to be a chore if he continued prodding her slight arousal into a friskier territory. “What are you doing?”

He nuzzled into the side of her face. “Can’t you tell?” All of his weight crushed Celes. She bit her
tongue to prevent whatever sounds wished to escape her. “Said I would take care of you at our earliest convenience, no? Do you not take me for a man who keeps his word?” His tongue darted out to lap from her neck up to her ear. “May I remind you we didn’t need a coin toss to settle that agreement.”

“No, I know.” Celes focused on breathing. Those playful licks weren’t helping. “But... now? Don’t you have to be heading up to pilot the Falcon?”

He shook his face into her. “No one appeared to be in a rush. Are you?”

“What? N-no, I—”

Celes whimpered into Setzer’s mouth the second it overcame her. Mere kisses alone did the trick to deliver a set of chills through her stomach before settling deep into the folds between her legs. Celes writhed into him. The delightful groan from Setzer signaled his awareness of the hold he had on her; it provoked him to push Celes further.

She managed to wiggle her face away, much against her own wishes than anything else, and caught her breath. “Someone could walk in on us,” she stammered. “Or... hear us. I wasn’t exactly... quiet last night.”

“Or this morning,” Setzer added.

*You're not helping.* “I don’t wish to be rude.”

Setzer blinked, then poked his head around the corner. “No one’s coming or even further down the hallway.”

“But... what if something did happen?”

Bringing his attention back to her, Setzer chuckled at her frazzled state. “Don’t you have a sense of adventure?” He purred and nestled his face into Celes’. “I almost wanted to pounce at you even with Edgar there. Maybe even let him watch.” The fresh streak of crimson on her cheeks had Setzer grinning. “Would it be bold to wager you were turned on and lost in thought while him and I were talking just now?”

After swallowing hard, Celes parted her lips to try and defend herself, but nothing surfaced. However, a soft squeal flickered forth as Setzer skimmed his hand along the top of her pants before sneaking in and between her closed legs. Celes tilted her head back and clenched her jaw while he stroked.

“And I’d *love* to get you off,” he moaned gently into the side of her face.

His hand alone was fit for the job, but Celes craved more. While Setzer teased her, she dropped a hand to press into the front of his pants with the intention of returning the favor. Setzer’s reaction was to close his mouth over hers, both of them moaning into one another.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, lips brushing over hers. “I thought you were nervous about being out in the open?”

She was, but her own desires trampled what fears she reserved; her trust in Setzer outweighed potential embarrassment. And maybe he had a point; a hint of risk hanging over them was an adrenaline rush. Celes said nothing, striving to undo his pants to properly squeeze her hand around him and in turn cajole a delighted sound out of Setzer.
One second her back was against the wall, the next he spun her around and slammed her chest into the structure. Celes braced herself, licking the corners of her mouth as Setzer yanked at the ties of her pants.

“As much as I appreciate the fine craftsmanship of these,” Setzer whispered, “they’re not exactly conducive for this scenario. A dress would’ve been ideal, not to mention impeccable on you, though I understand you’re not fond of them for the sake of battle.”

She blushed at his words, though not as much as when he left the bunched-up material mid-thigh. Just enough exposure for Setzer to have his way with her. And almost matching the position he had her that morning, the faint memory riling her up further. Celes rolled her thighs back, eagerly waiting.

“I’d much rather have your legs wrapped around me, but I must say....” Setzer groaned into her neck. “You are quite a sight right now.”

“Am I?” The coy question was the last thing Celes was able to say as a hand clamped tight over her mouth. She widened her eyes and peered back to Setzer.

He grinned. “Yes, you are, ma cherie.”

One other hand looped around her body, dipping back down to stroke her clit. Celes gasped into his hand, quivering over the intensity scaling up her body. Pushing her further into the wall, Setzer pinned her into the position and didn’t keep her waiting before he thrust into her.

Celes closed her eyes and cried out into his palm, thankful for him dampening the plentiful sounds gushing out. Stripping Celes of her voice might have brought on a sense of helplessness—and it had briefly—but his dominance over her remained more alluring than intimidating. Despite the lack of privacy, she had gone from mildly turned on to a damn animal in heat. All thanks to the bastard behind her.

The combination of strokes both inside and against her overwhelmed Celes. Her legs shook and begged for the comfort of a bed. But Setzer was determined in his actions. He muffled each sound she produced, each one vibrating onto his palm. Before long, Setzer lowered his head to nip at her neck as a means of silencing himself.

He wasn’t gentle with her—again—opting for a rough, hard ride. Celes relished that side of Setzer with each passing second. They grasped for the other and whimpered out pleas for more. The subtle twitches from his body and heavy pants against her skin told Celes how much Setzer enjoyed himself, enjoyed her. She was certain she returned the favor in kind.

The hint of her muscles tightening had Setzer groan into her. “Are you going to be a good girl and come for me?”

She would have entertained an answer. A verbal one. Instead, Celes clawed at the wall and his arm. Her back arched while the tiniest of muscles twitched out of control. Unable to contain herself and the overload of delightful sensations, she screamed into the clamped hand. Muscles strained and relaxed on a cycle. A single string of moans oozed out of her mouth until it calmed into soft pants. In response, Setzer moaned into her ear, his tongue against her neck briefly.

With her body utterly satisfied, his hand latched onto her hip while the other continued to muffle her. The moment he locked her hips into a sharper angle, his thrusts gained momentum and fervor, enough to elicit the occasional moan from an already worn out Celes. Setzer had been harsh before, but now he was relentless. And somehow, Celes was content with him using her body for selfish
needs. It even aroused her all over again.

Had her pants been stripped and discarded, she would have insisted on wrapping her legs around his body for him to properly brace her against the wall and pump into her. The thought resulted in Celes licking at his hand in between gulps of air. Setzer took note, pulling his hand back enough to entertain her with his fingers. Celes was eager to take them into her mouth and suck hard while Setzer ravaged her.

But the fingers fell from her mouth to her chin and Celes didn’t struggle when Setzer whipped her face to his for a kiss. Their closed mouths over each other silenced them and allowed both his hands to cling to her hips. The extra stability coaxed cries between the two of them. All Celes longed for now was to feel him come undone against her, inside of her. Had Setzer not occupied her lips, Celes would have toyed with encouraging him verbally.

Neither had to wait long, though. Celes smiled when he broke their kiss to hitch his breath. Such an alluring sound. And she was the reason behind it, along with his own peak. Both of their bodies melted into the wall. Setzer embraced Celes, face buried into her neck.

“Better?” he asked her.

She let out a quiet laugh. “I feel like I should be asking you the same thing.” Her hand cradled the back of Setzer’s head. “Much better, though. And you?”

Setzer hummed. “Of course. With you, how could I not be?”

“Now you’re just teasing me.”

He showered kisses along one side of her face. “Only speaking the truth, ma cherie. Though I’m sad to say this is the part where I need to actually go do my earnest job of piloting the damn airship, because the gods know I’m not letting Edgar touch it.”

A pout formed on her lips when Setzer pulled away. Recomposing herself was easier said than done when her legs were no better than gelatin. Celes leaned into the wall to catch a second wind. Eyes scanned over Setzer taking his time with readjusting, a slight smirk coming onto her face.

“Do you even know where we’re going next?”

Setzer snorted and rolled his eyes. “I already forgot.” Before Celes could laugh, he eased back into her body, lips inches away from her. “I have you to blame for that, ma cherie.”

They shared a long, tender kiss, waiting to see who would end it first. Celes restrained herself from wrapping her arms around him; the willpower required to release him was nonexistent. The look glittering in his violet eyes mirrored the sentiment.

“Thank you,” she breathed out to Setzer.

“Thank you.”

Just like the other night. Save for the notion where he parted ways with her to pilot the Falcon. No cuddling in bed, no talking for hours on end. But even in his absence, Celes smiled. She was content. A foreign concept for her, of all people.

For who was ever to believe that a wandering gambler dared to melt an ice queen’s armor?
In between searching for their dear friends—that little, rare time valued above all else—the two of them exchanged glances. Discussion of their end goal filtered through idle conversations, but in those moments, Setzer only had eyes for Celes. The attention was never unwanted. While she did her earnest to maintain composure in the heat of battle, her mind drifted elsewhere once her rune blade laid to rest.

To waste nights away in a private room was a luxury no one could afford, but it never stopped either of them from making advances. She longed for the next time spent with Setzer, regardless of the brevity. The next time could mean stealing a quick kiss or nuzzling into each other for a tight embrace when no one else watched. Always enough to keep a hint of longing and never enough to satisfy.

In the past, affection was a path to weakness in Celes’ eyes. With the connection with Setzer at her disposal, the nourishment it provided only empowered her. He accepted her as she was. Not as the former General of the Empire, not as the Imperial traitor, not as the cold-hearted bitch from Vector, but as Celes. Always Celes.

Her one regret was being blind to him for so long, writing him off as lewd with ill intentions. Yet Setzer desired nothing but the best for Celes. With Setzer, she was safe. She could lean on him for support and he never hesitated to catch her. Every glance, every touch, every kiss, every word dripped with affection.

Though Celes hesitated to confront him on the matter of whether or not to be more publicly open with their recent affairs. They stuck to private alcoves and the few rooms with lockable doors, albeit with only a table and chair inside. When they believed to be alone, they embraced and spoke tender words for no one else to hear. Setzer couldn’t care less what everyone else thought of them, for Celes’ opinion on the well-being of their budding moments together was held higher than the voices of those not involved.

But criticism once bombarded her within the Empire. She marched down cold, metal hallways, resilient of every word spat in her direction. Vulnerability wasn’t an option. What would the others think if they knew the Magitek knight delighted herself in the company of a companion? What disapproving commentary would take place to spite Celes?

She was distracted with lips closing over hers and daft hands rolling across her back. Setzer lied beneath her on the cramped couch the one time the main foyer sat empty. Everything in her body begged to rub herself against him and tug at the multiple layers of clothing he insisted on wearing. Lewd and suggestive, not a hint of subtlety. But Celes broke the kiss and held her breath as voices boomed from the upper level.

Relm was playing with Interceptor again, amused by how the recent addition to the group—a cloaked mime of mysterious origins—was discerning whether to follow her lead or the dog’s.

As rushed feet hurried back and forth above with no intentions of heading below—and were oblivious to anyone being present in the main foyer—Celes heaved out a sigh.

“Does this truly worry you so much?” Setzer murmured into her.

She laid her head on his chest. “It’s not that I worry, it’s...”
A hand smoothed over her head, tucking locks of blonde hair behind her ear. “It’s something new and different. I understand.” He paused. “If it puts you more at ease, we don’t have to be open about it.”

“That’s not what I meant—”

With a tight embrace, Setzer calmed her down. “I can respect your need for privacy. I wouldn’t disrespect you like that, ma cherie. As much as I want to scream about it from the upper decks of the Falcon, I don’t want to risk insulting you. That’s a gamble I won’t take.” His lips pressed into the top of her head. “Whenever you’re ready, may it be after we settle this score with Kefka or before. Know I’m here for you. That much won’t ever change.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “I’m sorry, but did I hear you admit you wouldn’t be willing to gamble something?”

“Someone,” Setzer corrected her quietly. “And that someone is worth keeping my mouth shut for. I’d rather it be that way than to not have you at all.” He took in a deep breath. “I’m not inclined to cling to tangible objects; it’s not good for business, but it’s hard to say you don’t make quite the impression on me, Celes.”

And she smiled. “You’re too kind.”

He blinked, then contorted his face. “Though I suppose Edgar and Terra are more aware than anyone else, Edgar more so.”

“I do believe Terra walked in on a lot more than Edgar did.”

Setzer snickered into her neck. “True. That much doesn’t bother me. And I don’t doubt their silence, especially Terra’s, but Edgar will be more of a tease about it than necessary.”

Celes tried not to laugh. “If anyone’s to know, better it be them.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

She shook her head. “It should, but... it doesn’t.” Baby steps, she told herself.

“Good.” A moment later, Setzer grinned. “And here Edgar wanted me to be his wingman. Oh, how the tables have turned.”

“What, are you just now feeling bad about this?”

“Are you kidding me? Not even in the slightest. Poor bastard shoots himself in the foot every time.” He tucked a hand beneath her chin, lifted her face up, and kissed the corner of her mouth. “Never worry, ma cherie. I’d hate to give you reason to do so.”

The corners of her lips remained upright as she turned in to properly kiss him. “Then don’t.”

Setzer never pressured her, never expected more. While he did test her limits and pushed her far enough to teeter, Setzer was never more than a foot away to offer a hand in support.

And every night the group prepared for sleep, Celes lay on her usual couch and listened to the boys chat away until their yawns grew more prevalent than the matters at hand. Celes snuggled into one of the spare blankets, eyeing Setzer plop onto the floor and lean into her couch. He and Edgar were always the last two up. The topics of conversation ranged from the finer details of machinery to the difference in South Figaroan and Jidoorian fabrics and threads. In the end, Edgar fell victim to sleep
It was then, when everyone else drifted off, that Celes inched her hand out from under the blanket and draped her arm around Setzer. Every time, he hummed before lacing his fingers into hers. Tender kisses planted into her palm and flooded Celes with decadent chills. Both held on with an adamant resolve. Setzer tilted his head back to eye her, offering a small smile. They never spoke, words unable to communicate what their touches and glances held. Had Celes not been so self-conscious over the lack of privacy, she would have either slipped down to curl up in his lap or offered Setzer to join her with what little space the couch provided.

Instead, Setzer closed his eyes and laid his head against the couch. She stroked a thumb across his palm through her conscious state, savoring the warmth beating through his skin. Come morning, when Setzer slumped over on the floor and Celes tangled up in the blanket, her arm still dangled down to him and his fingers maintained the absent curve of her hand.

With their numbers growing, it was only a matter of time before the group brought up the question of Kefka. At the center of the world, his tower stood prominent, unmoving. If anyone was to knock Kefka down a peg, it was everyone residing on board the Falcon. Every last one of them was ready. The only question to be answered was when they would strike.

Edgar had insisted on returning to Figaro Castle for last minute preparations. Though his return was brief as he mentioned a wonky incident within the engine room. Of course the king wished to inspect further, bringing his brother, Terra, and Cyan with him. The plan was for the Falcon to meet up with them on the other side of the castle’s moving act. And Setzer was in no rush.

No one dared to stand above while the airship was in flight except for Celes. A moment alone—the two of them. She couldn’t deny herself the prospect of Setzer’s company. The wind rushed past Celes as she snuck up from behind and wrapped her arms around him. The subtle jolt in his body had her smiling.

“Well then.” Setzer peered over to eye Celes, who perched her cheek upon his shoulder. “What did I do to earn this pleasure?”

“Nothing,” Celes replied. “Is it a sin for me to want fresh air and a lovely view?”

Setzer chuckled while bringing his sights back to the horizon. “It can be if you want.” He released a hand from the wheel to rest over Celes’. “We should be there in due time. And from there, well… I suppose we’ll figure out a course of action once the Figaros return. Until then, I’ll fly circles above the desert to keep us entertained.”

After a brief squeeze, Celes released Setzer to circle around and face him. “Is that all you had in mind?”

The wind played with her long hair, obstructing her view of Setzer, though not enough to hide his sly grin. “The airship doesn’t fly herself, or else I’d take temporary leave for whatever suggestions you have. And stalling now might have some of our stowaways running up to ask what the matter is.”

Celes nodded, pouting ever so slightly. She knew better than to expect more than mental stimulation. Standing by to watch him navigate the vessel, however, did Celes no favors. The skill required to
pilot the Falcon deserved nothing short of admiration, but the longer she stared at his hands, the more 
she thought of what else said hands could be working on.

“Do you care to try?”

Blinking out of her reverie, Celes tilted her head. “What’s that?”

With one hand at the wheel, he stepped back and motioned to the empty space between him and the 
console. “You keep eyeing it and I don’t wish to bore you, so...” A nervous laugh came forth. 
“Don’t worry, I’m not going to let you crash. Nor will I tell Edgar that I let you lay hands on the 
wheel before him.” Setzer threw in a wink for good measure.

While Celes had no interest in becoming a pilot, refusing any opportunity Setzer offered was silly. 
Celes flashed a soft smile and stepped before him. In front of her were the spokes of the wheel along 
with the multiple levers, switches, and buttons upon the console. She vaguely recalled the Blackjack 
having a polished wood finish for the wheel, whereas metals mimicked marble on board the Falcon.

Setzer pressed his lips to her ear, instructing her to place a hand upon one of the spokes. As he 
rambled off on the mechanics behind the stability granted in the airship, Celes brushed fingertips up 
and down the length of one spoke. Gradually, her hand closed around it. It dawned on her that Setzer 
paused mid-sentence to observe her antics. The realization didn’t lessen the flush surfacing on her 
cheeks.

“I see you have that part down,” Setzer purred. “Wonder where you picked up that—”

“Oh, shut up,” she tried to snap at him, yet a giggle laced within the words.

“If that’s what the lady wishes, I can comply, but—” His free hand settled onto her hip, pulling Celes 
close into him. “—something tells me you have other thoughts in mind.”

Celes cooed as Setzer nestled himself into her, face resting in her neck. His hand slipped away from 
the wheel and toyed with a couple levers, leaving Celes in charge with maintaining balance.

“You know what I want,” Celes breathed out. “You always do. Even when I think there’s no way 
you can further probe my mind, you surprise me. But you....” She gazed at him from the corner of 
hers eye. “I have more trouble pinpointing what’s on your mind.”

Setzer raised an eyebrow. “Wishing I was that spoke?”

And she nudged him with an elbow. “You know what I mean.”

“Well,” he said once his laughter faded, “if it’s details you want, I can——” His breath hitched, 
followed by his hand snapping towards the wheel. “Easy there. A little too much to the left.” The 
grip on the wheel loosened once the airship returned to his liking. “As I was saying, I can enlighten 
you, if you’d like.”

“And what have you had in mind?”

Setzer repositioned himself further into Celes while brushing his lips over her earlobe. His voice 
dropped to a whisper. “It’s hard not to fantasize about all the things I wish to experience with you. 
And it doesn’t help that you’ve been quite... open and eager.”

For Setzer possessed a particular taste when sexual endeavors were at hand and Celes only 
experienced the smallest of doses. His drunken confession came to mind, where he expressed his 
time spent with Darill and Maria——two opposite ends of the spectrum.
What was it that you called yourself? Celes struggled to recall the proper title. A switch?

“Though I don’t wish to push you too far, too fast,” Setzer said with a sigh.

She shook her head. “But you aren’t.”

Another shaky chuckle fluttered out. “Oh, Celes... if only you knew what you did to me, what power you have over me.” The hand upon her hip snaked up to slide over her stomach and hug her close. “One moment I think about you on your knees, hands and arms restrained, body completely on display. And I’d want nothing more than to have you like that beside me. No need to speak or act; just stay by me in silence. Now and then I’d be able to pet you, caress you, fondle you. Enough to remind you that I cherish your obedience and company.

“Then the next moment, my mind goes elsewhere. I think about that particular outfit you had of yours, the one you wore in Vector as a General.” He moaned. “The things I’d let you do to me while you were wearing that. You could’ve dragged me back to your room, tied me up to a chair, blindfolded me, and unleashed whatever hell you desired. I don’t break easily... and I’ve been fortunate enough to experience your fury. I know how decadent you are as a good obedient, little girl, but does kitty still have her claws?”

This wasn’t normal. Or at least the logical half of her brain would have informed Celes promptly of such if it hadn’t been abandoned. The scenarios depicted by Setzer brought a twitch between her thighs. Any sane person would object from outright fear over the idea of relinquishing all freedom and receiving pain in conjunction with pleasure. Yet the one who promised her such a nightmare made her feel equally safe and adored. Wasn’t thinking like that wrong?

You wouldn’t hurt me, though, and I wouldn’t hurt you... despite what could happen. Or will happen.

The submissive side had its appeal. All the times Celes wished to hang up her General guise and be something else, even if for a night, were mere daydreams. To be plain and simple Celes, stripped of titles and expectations, wasn’t a possibility. On the flip side, the constant demand for composure and dignity in a position where all she wished was to lash out and attack wore down her shoulders like tremendous weights. If she was to channel the energy in a productive manner, perhaps the act of tormenting an unfortunate soul would benefit her as much as it would for a masochist.

She planned to rip Setzer’s throat out one night, instead striking him across the face. The sheer exhilaration shooting through him wasn’t forgotten. Nor was the hard wall against her chest when they deemed to pick up where they had left off. Two wildly varying responses, yet from the same man.

Thus was it wrong to desire both experiences?

Celes licked the corner of her mouth. “Maybe.”

The groan vibrating along Celes’ body was discontent, to say the least. “Maybe? Oh, don’t tease me now. I still have an airship to pilot.”

The scenarios played over in Celes’ head. Her lips curled into a coy smirk. “Do you... have other ideas?”

“Hmm?”

Her breath caught in her throat. Another pulse through her groin left her knees trembling. “Unless those are the only fantasies you have involving me.” Celes tossed her head back to eye him.
“Honestly, Setzer. I thought you would be imaginative.”

The stare frozen in his eyes was one Celes wished to burn forever into her memory. Something ignited in them and she swore she could hear the gears churning in his head louder than those belonging to the airship.

Setzer hissed into her ear as Celes returned her head to center. “Do you know what I did after you gave me the tiniest taste of what prowess you had that night on the Blackjack?” Even if she entertained a guess, Setzer offered her no time to respond. “You were all I could think about when I retired to my room and gods, how such a simple act did enough to render me incapable of sleeping until I fucking did something about it.” The last string of words he growled out. Celes closed her eyes and basked in the heat of his voice. “You could have done more than slap me across the face. You could beat fists on me, strike me down with whatever blunt implement you found handy.” His breath hitched before he continued. “I thought of you pinning me to the ground, not caring how uncomfortable I was, and squeezing your lovely, pale hands around my throat. So angry, so alive.”

Sharp bites and prickles with a lingering pain from their first night together were nothing in light of a forceful backhand across the face. And strangling him? Celes thought of Setzer reclined in bed, utterly aroused from their brief meeting, and tending to his needs all with the thought of her tormenting him. She struck down soldiers before, verbally berated them for their idiocy, but nothing to the likes of what Setzer thought of.

“You’d want me to physically attack you?”

“It’s strangulation, ma cherie. A form of an attack, I suppose, but there are nuances.” He squeezed her and his voice softened. “But only if you were comfortable. A daydream is one instance, but I could never force you into a position that made you hesitate.”

“Doesn’t it hurt? You can’t breathe, for gods’ sake.”

How quick he was to respond, however, sent a flutter into her chest. “If you put all of your weight into my windpipe and outright cut off airflow, then yes. I wouldn’t breathe and pass out in due time. But that’s not the point. You’re not aiming to choke; you’re aiming to make breathing a laborious chore. The trick is all in the hand.” For a moment, his palm rested along her throat, lighter than his hair tickling her neck. “You push up and into the chin, rather than down into the neck.” With a ghost of a touch, he demonstrated. “Extends the sensation and further prevents passing out within a minute.” As his hand fell back to her torso, Setzer nuzzled into her. “And whether or not it hurts is a matter of opinion. I happen to be quite fond of it.”

“I noticed,” Celes breathed out.

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Mistress. A title once fitting to the likes of Darill and now Setzer whispered it before her. Celes doubted if she could live up to the vast role. Yet Setzer nuzzled and purred, drunk off of the thoughts alone. He was no amateur, either; he spoke with a wisdom only experience could weather.
“I think,” Celes murmured after some time, “I’d like to try. I wouldn’t be opposed.”

“Only if you wish.”

“As long as you know I don’t wish to actually harm you.”

“Ah, but there is a difference, of course. I’m glad to see you’ve found the line separating the two.”

Or at least Celes believed she had. Bare minimum, peeking into the confines of Setzer’s mind allowed her to digest the possibilities. The scenarios were endless, both of them testing the other to find what made them tick in hopes for both their heartbeats to thrum in sync.

Though the images folded into themselves and intensified. Celes bit her lip and clenched at the wheel. “And what about me? Do you… wish to punish and command me?”

The silence persisted while the howl of the wind whipped by her ears. She almost dared to toss Setzer a glance, but she focused on the horizon line acting as her focal point for navigating the airship. The weight of his hand shifted to her hip and his deep inhale echoed in her hollow body.

“I want your arms tied up,” he began with a deep, rich ring on his tongue, “firm and behind your back. I want you bent over something. Anything. I want your clothes torn from your fair body. I want you screaming and crying each time I spanked your ass. I want you to be a means of my own enjoyment and nothing else.”

Simple and blunt. This time, Celes didn’t need to ask for the finer details. The image rang true in her mind until it flashed before her eyes. The pain hadn’t worried her. A worn soldier such as herself was no stranger to pain; a traitor, however, was also no stranger to binding.

The grip from the wheel loosened, her hands touching opposite wrists subconsciously. She ignored Setzer’s dive for the wheel to maintain altitude, instead rubbing over the fragile skin. Red and purple rings once bruised her wrists, the grooves of the chains lasting for days since she was released from them. Weeks after her freedom, she still clutched her wrists, waiting for the metal to pinch and claim her against the wall. Celes refused to be a victim again—to anyone. No chains would ever hold her back.

“Celes?”

She lost track of how many times he uttered her name, a hint of panic more obvious in his voice than in his hands when they latched onto the spokes. Hitching her breath, Celes craned her head back to acknowledge Setzer.

A sense of worry weighed down his face. “We don’t need to do this.”

Catching herself, she snapped her fidgeting hands away from each other. She had waited for the memories to seep back into existence, to steal her from reality and plummet her into a trauma-induced hysteria. Only her heart raced and nothing more. Boxed in by Setzer’s arms, she absorbed the concern residing in his eyes.

Maybe, just maybe, if he was the one temporarily striping her of freedom, she wouldn’t be terrified. It was quite possible he could instill new memories into her fibers.

“Is that what you want?” Celes asked.

His eyebrows pinched together. “What I want is for you to be safe and happy.”
“And you’d keep me safe and happy?”

“Celes,” Setzer sighed out gently and tilted his head, “I would pamper you like the goddess you are the moment either the scene was finished or you said otherwise. You said yourself that you didn’t wish to harm me and I trust you in that. I know you’d take care of me after. I’d show you no less in reverse circumstances.”

She stared at her wrists far too long. “It’s... I—”

“Please, don’t feel the need to explain yourself. Never. Say one word and I’ll obey. I promise.” When she struggled to grasp the proper response, another heavy sigh fell from Setzer. “I apologize. I shouldn’t have brought this up.”

While the words eluded Celes, nothing restrained her body from pivoting to face Setzer straight on. “No, please,” she said, “don’t say that. It’s not that. It’s—” Her hands rose to cup his face. “You wouldn’t... hurt me, right? It’s not about malicious intents. There’s more to it than that.” Stepping into his body, Celes embraced him, burying her face into his neck. “I trust you, Setzer. I feel safe with you. I can’t say that with much of anyone. I’d be willing to try and not simply to appease your desires. I...”

_I want to make new memories with you, share new experiences. I want to only think of you and the absolute pleasure you flood me with any time I think of my wrists bound against my will._

“As long as you remember,” Setzer spoke and sobered Celes from her thoughts, “to let me know the moment it’s too much. Do you understand?” And she nodded. _Ma cherie..._

He kissed her temple, or tried to with the angle she was at. The soft gesture didn’t go unnoticed; she smiled and returned the sentiment with a kiss upon his neck. The scent of incense, cinnamon, and cloves tickled her nose and nudged her to continue peppering the area with slow, steady kisses. Trailing further up, Setzer purred through closed lips while exposing more of his neck.

“And what are you up to?” Setzer moaned out when she accepted his quiet invitation to lavish the particular sensitive section on his neck, right by the back of his jaw.

Celes teased him with a flick of her tongue. “What do _you_ think?”

He barely laughed. “Proving to be a distraction?”

“Trying to assure you there’s no need to worry.”

“You don’t need to—” The slightest suckle brought a stutter to his voice. “—do anything to get that point across.”

“Then maybe,” Celes said, her voice daring to match the same smooth, intoxicating quality his always possessed, “I’m eager to return the favor to you.”

He straightened up against her. “What favor?”

“Always so attentive to me and my needs. Is it so wrong for me to give you a taste of what you do for me?”

“Celes—”

Jerking her head back, she shot Setzer a nasty glare. “Look,” she snapped, “can’t I just have my fun with you? I’ve been itching for this for _gods_ know how damn long. So unless you’re going to use
one of those safe words you keep insisting on, I’m going to abuse whatever time I can spend with you, okay?” She huffed audibly. “Gods, you can pilot this thing in your sleep. It’s not like you’re going to crash into anything.”

The sheer shock painted on his features made Celes second guess her outburst. Though the shock mixed with intrigue. A twitch resided in his lips.

“I’m usually not at the mercy of such a confident woman when I’m sleeping,” he whispered. “Tends to be a sure way to stir me out of a slumber.”

She blinked and chuckled. “Are you trying to tell me that you’ve never had a woman tease you while manning the Blackjack?” His throat twitched while swallowing. Celes bit at her cheeks to prevent a wide grin. “Is the gambler not up for a game then?”

“Careful,” Setzer teased, “those words are grounds for fighting if you don’t tread lightly.”

“How about I test you to see how well your concentration skills are?”

Unraveling her arms from his form, Celes slid her hands down his torso, taking her time before they settled at the top of his pants. A thumb stroked along the leather belt fastened tight there. Setzer’s eyes flicked away from hers to double check the skies, but always returned with an earnest hunger.

“And if I win?” he asked.

“Then you can brag about it to whoever you damn well wish.”

He tilted his head with a devilish grin. “I get to claim you couldn’t make me flinch with that mouth of yours?”

“Your words, not mine.”

“And if you win?”

“Then I get to brag that a certain pilot isn’t all he’s cracked up to be, because he’s rendered useless when—”

“Alright! You’ve made your point!” Resting his forehead against hers, Setzer hitched his breath upon Celes taking her precious time with undoing his belt. A curse slipped past his dry lips. “You are surely going to be the death of me,” he whispered before taking her mouth into his.

As short lived as the kiss was, it made up for it in fervor. They moaned together, reluctantly pulling back. Setzer locked his sights past Celes, hands white-knuckled at the spokes of the wheel. She turned her cheek to rest upon his shoulder, shifting her focus from his belt to the ties of his pants. A few times her fingers fumbled, but it made no difference; Setzer inhaled and exhaled deeply, the rise and fall of his chest urging Celes to go further and interrupt the steady flow of air.

All the discussion of fantasies did well to harden him. Celes took him into her hand, smirking at the faint sound he made in approval of her strokes along his length. Cold air kissed her face, yet he burned in her palm. She tightened her grip, satisfied with the shudder jolting through his body, one the wind couldn’t reproduce even if it tried. If she so desired, the consistent jerks from her hand would eventually satisfy him, but Celes, much like Setzer, had also been scheming.

Descending to her knees, Celes brushed her lips over him. The quiet promise of her tongue darting out any second turned Setzer’s breaths shallow. The airship had yet to buckle beneath her, but Celes was far from finished. When the broadside of her tongue ran up his length, she delighted in the
drawn-out, yet muffled moan from above. Her tongue explored every inch, circling around the tip before her lips hinted at the potential of parting wide for him.

Setzer exhaled a groan the instant she took him in, her lips pursed tight to demonstrate what she had once done to his fingers. The lust scorching through them intensified, both determined to outdo the other. Celes sucked hard with each motion of her head drawing back, stroking what she couldn’t take into her mouth. Whenever her tongue teased along the sensitive, pulsing flesh, another shudder and gasp cracked Setzer. He muttered a string of sharp words in a foreign tongue and Celes chuckled.

But what drove the point further was the hand resting on the back of her head. The slight, sporadic thrusts were one matter, but his grip intertwined within blonde hair brought a whimper to Celes’ lips. He never forced her, only ensured she didn’t ultimately stop. The rock of his persistent hips left Celes to accelerate both her pace and firmness. He clutched at her hair, forcing a moan out of her.

In an instant, Celes flicked her eyes up to judge how close he was, if the throbbing against her lips and tongue matched whatever face he wore now. She didn’t expect to meet his eyes, whimpering again at the thought of him watching her for gods knew how long. Enough to not be worried about the direction of the Falcon. A minor victory, but a victory nonetheless.

Setzer clutched her head in place. His hips rivaled the work Celes strove to maintain. He filled her mouth before he filled the open space around them with a delightful cry. Thankful for not gagging at the warm liquid pumping into her, Celes swallowed what she could. Once he released his death grip, she eased back and licked her lips, patting the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand. For good measure, she licked over him several times, just to further soak the distinct taste into her tongue.

“And where,” Setzer spoke, breathless as ever while Celes returned to standing, “did you ever acquire such skill for that?”

Her hands fell to his hips to help recompose him while he worked on flying the airship, or more likely prevented it from crashing into a mountain. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“You tease,” he hissed.

“I had my fun back in my days before becoming an officer. I told you that.”

“True, but… not that.”

Celes giggled. “So….“ She finished fastening his belt, allowing her arms to dangle loose from his neck. “Did I win?”

Setzer scoffed, yet smiled. “I say the jury is still out on that, ma cherie.”

“I think you’re in denial.”

“I think we should call it a draw and spare me whatever dignity I can salvage.”

To that, Celes burst out into laughter, squeezing him all the while. She cooed when an arm looped around her form and returned the gesture.

“Would you think ill of me if I said I’ve been wanting to do that for some time?” Celes asked.

“Really?”

“To distract you while flying,” she elaborated.
“Well then,” Setzer dragged out, “I am not ever going to oppose you from entertaining such an idea, so by all means.” After chuckling, he drew in a breath and spoke without an air of humor. “Though if we’re keen to play games such as this, then shall I suggest something? I think you and I should have a little a game. A wager, if you will.”

She paused, blinked, and turned her head to Setzer. “Why do I have a feeling this will not end well?”

“Have a sense of excitement, ma cherie! I haven’t even laid out the potential spoils yet.”

The idea of it sent a loud thrum in her head. Leaning into him, Celes basked in the warmth of his body.

“Go on,” she said.

She swore she could feel him grinning into her. “A game to decide which scene we play out first and who will be the dominant and who will be the submissive.”

Now it was Setzer distracting her and she wasn’t even manning the Falcon. The delicious scenarios he spoke of earlier trickled back into her thoughts, ones which did little to numb her libido.

“I don’t have my General’s attire anymore,” Celes pointed out.

She could almost hear Setzer’s eyes roll. “Oh, please. Detail details. We’ll improvise. I’ll buy you something.”

“You’ll...?” She fidgeted in place; no one had ever bought her anything.

“Now, as I was saying, you and I should have a wager. Play a game of our liking and whoever wins gets to play with the upper hand, so to speak. What do you say, ma cherie?”

Tripping over her thoughts, her feeble lips parted. “And what would this game be exactly?”

He snorted. “Not a coin toss.”

Celes giggled, welcoming the break of humor more than she wished to admit. “Then what do you suggest? I’m not as acquainted with these sort of games as you are.”

“What about a game of throwing knives?”

“That’s a game?”

“Yes. Think darts, but with knives. And far more interesting.” He paused. “And I may or may not be eager to break out the set of unused knives I’ve had laying around for some time.”

“I didn’t know you were skilled with them.”

“Well then, always learning something new, no?”

Celes sought out his eyes with her own. The sheer delight illuminating his features made it evident he spent plenty of time concocting this game he suggested.

“So if you win,” Celes stated, hoping she understood the rules, “I’ll be your pet?” She waited until he sucked in a breath and nodded. “And if I win, then I’ll be your mistress?” And another nod, accompanied by a smirk. “All over a game of knives?”

“But of course. I’ll even be a gentleman and give you a couple practice rounds. Can’t imagine you
were allowed to do such a thing back in Vector.”

Celes raised an eyebrow. “No, you merely swept all those gambling soldiers away on your airship.”

“Sounds like something I would do. Is it a bet, then?”

Eyes flicked between Setzer’s and his lips, all too aware of how much closer he was. “I believe it is.”

“Seal it with a kiss?”

“As opposed to what? Shaking—”

Setzer didn’t allow Celes to finish, already stealing her lips. The sweet kiss convinced her to not fret and melted tension she was clueless to having. All they needed now was enough alone time to implement said plan. But when he broke away, eyes on hers, a serious expression washed over Setzer, almost warranting concern.

“Would it be selfish of me to ask of something else from you, Celes?”

A smile spread across her face. “Another wager of yours?”

To her surprise, he shook his head. “No, nothing of the sort. Just a meager request.”

Celes’ smile faltered as his eyes floated elsewhere. Perhaps she offended him, though she abandoned the idea when a hint of pink colored his pale cheeks.

“I’ve been thinking for some time now,” Setzer said, “that I never appreciated the moment I first met you. Not when you were aboard the Blackjack, but when you were on the stage. I might have thought you were someone else at first, but the more I dwell on it, I realize I want to reverse time to properly appreciate your performance.” Setzer closed his eyes and inhaled. “Your performance. Not Maria’s.”

The plan involving the opera house was a thing of the past for Celes. Every detail, every second of the ill-thought out scheme sent her into a state of loathing, from the gown she wore to the purple octopus descending from the rafters—especially the latter. Yet if it hadn’t been for the hell she dragged herself through and the insanity that persisted, she never would have crossed paths with Setzer.

With one hand on the wheel, Setzer clutched Celes’ hand to his chest. “Promise me one thing, Celes: when this is all said and done, would you... put on a performance for me? Would you sing for me again? Just once. That’s all I ask of you.”

It had been an act, a single moment in the spotlight with a silly song attached to it and a full house watching. But the only audience this time would be Setzer. And somehow the request throttled her nerves more so than before she took to the stage back at the opera house. In comparison to the old plan concocted, Setzer’s wish favored a tender sentiment and Celes’ chest filled with a delightful warmth.

“For you?” Celes rested her forehead upon his. “I think I can manage that.”

Setzer lit up. “You mean that?” He squeezed her hand. “So you’ll promise?”

Celes brought his hand to her lips to place a deep and dear kiss on the scarred skin. “I promise.”

That hand brushed over her features, cupped her cheek, and lingered long enough to extend the smile
on her face. Setzer embraced her, forsaking his post at the wheel momentarily. Celes prayed he never let go.

“Thank you,” he said below a whisper. When he did let go, Celes continued to cling onto him, though allowed Setzer to focus on flying. “And what timing. Should almost be there.”

In the distance, Figaro Castle sat in the middle of a vast desert. The Falcon landed by the nearest patch of green grass and the group waited for the rendezvous with Edgar’s group. With Setzer’s lollygagging—and Celes took full credit for that—it served as a surprise when Edgar and the others weren’t waiting impatiently outside the desert. With none of them in sight, Celes’ forehead tensed and lips frowned.

Before she could suggest investigating Figaro Castle, Gau jumped up and down while pointing in the distance. “Chocobos! Chocobos!”

Four of the feathery creatures headed to the Falcon, carrying riders with them. Familiar riders, at that. Nor were they returning from the desert. The bright blue of Edgar’s armor glistened in the sun when he dismounted and marched towards Setzer.

“We need to leave,” he demanded more than stated, “preferably sooner than later.”

Setzer’s mouth hung open. “That was the plan, last time I checked, minus the sense of urgency.”

Celes eyed the others; even they held concerned expressions. “Edgar, what’s going on? Is everything alright?”

Later on, Edgar would have gone into detail about the ancient castle they discovered mid-transportation while within his own castle, along with presenting Celes several upgrades in armor. For now, a more pressing matter took precedence. “We stopped by Kohlingen to stock up on supplies. Sabin was the one who found out—” Edgar caught his breath. “We have a lead on Locke.”

A simple name did wonders to render Celes motionless and speechless. She swore she misheard Edgar, who explained their visit with the elder looking over Rachel and the mentions of Locke searching for the Phoenix Cave months ago. All for the delusional hope of reviving his loved one, an idea as deranged as the lie Celes convinced herself of some time ago—that he was alive somehow.

*But we’ve been to Kohlingen before, Celes thought. Why are we finding this out now?*

She knew better. They had stumbled into a bar and found another lost soul. Since then, Locke faded away and Celes toyed with the bandana less and less. The new distraction brought a glimmer of genuine delight amidst the chaos within their reality. Setzer did more than fuel her motivation to keep fighting; he tended to her when her hand grew weary of holding a blade and sparked another yearning.

Yet Locke’s actions could not be forgotten so frivolously. He freed her from her shackles, announced his immediate loyalty, and swore she was protected under his watch. Back then, Celes struggled not to fall for the cheeky rogue. His presence tested her, for she was above love and its stupid antics. Always torn over what she truly felt for him, always wondering what he ever thought of her, if anything. He earned her admiration, rightfully so, but the entirety of her heart?

It stopped beating for him some time ago, yet the murmur of his name stirred old emotions long forgotten by Celes, like blowing out dust and cobwebs in an abandoned attic.

Cyan had purchased roughs maps from Kohlingen, which detailed the potential path to the Phoenix Cave. Back on the Falcon, the group discussed with restored enthusiasm of their next course of
action to recover their last team member. With Locke found, the Returners would be whole again and prepared to face Kefka.

Everyone leaned over the maps in the main foyer, though Celes sat by herself to the side. There, she held the bandana. While no proof was available of it belonging to Locke himself, the fabric and pattern were uncanny to what he wore. It had to be his.

She didn’t notice Setzer favoring her over the old maps, nor did she pay attention to him making his way to her. It was the hand on her shoulder that informed her of Setzer’s presence. Celes whipped her head up to meet his gaze, unable to read his face.

“We’re about to head out soon,” Setzer said. “Hit up the few locations that could be this cave. Cyan was suggesting splitting up into two groups. Easier to navigate, if the maps are true. I don’t know, I wasn’t exactly following. I... figured you’d want to go with them.”

Celes nodded, perhaps too eagerly. “But of course. I’d want to help.”

“Right,” Setzer breathed out. “Of course you do.” His eyes flicked away for a second. “We’ll find him, Celes.” He squeezed her shoulder to reinforce his statement.

Her hand laid on top of his. “I hope so.”

Setzer flashed a brief, small smile to her while his grip fell from her shoulder. As he ascended to man the airship, others filtered to Celes to express reassurance of tracking down Locke. The bandana never left her hands.
They found the Phoenix Cave. Just as Cyan had predicted, splitting up proved to be optimal for navigating the ancient grounds. Heat seared through the walls and monsters threatened to kill them, but it didn’t hamper the group from pressing forward.

And they found Locke.

When he turned to find recognizable faces behind him, his brown eyes widened. Each person he looked over with care, but he lingered on Celes. She held her breath, waited for him to speak. The last time she laid eyes upon him, panic consumed the essence of their souls as the Blackjack crumbled midair.

*You tried to reach for me. You tried to save me again.*

Locke hadn’t changed much over the course of time, save for his clothing; he had swapped out most of his black attire for deep blue fabric and only wore one layer of his old bandana set as a headband. But it was still Locke. Without the Returners garnering his attention, he abandoned his revolutionary ideas and poured his efforts into finding a cure for Rachel.

And he did. Despite the deep cracks riddling the magicite he clutched to his heart, it was the answer he had been yearning for.

Taking the world back from Kefka would have to wait, for all he wished was to return to Kohlingen and see if it worked. What he would do afterwards? No one was certain.

He never spoke to Celes or much of anyone when they boarded the Falcon, thus silence filled the hull. Locke hunched over on a couch, clinging to the magicite. Each time Celes contemplated approaching him, she talked herself out of it. Yet she still longed to reconnect with Locke, for the realization of his presence somewhere out there in the world jostled her train of thought. But to have him back and far removed from reality? Celes couldn’t bear it.

*Rachel was first*, she reminded herself. *She was always first.*

Even if Rachel was revived and Locke chose to give up everything to be with her, Celes needed to witness it firsthand; she needed proof of his true intentions, that he never had eyes set on Celes.

Thus when Locke left for Kohlingen alone, Celes waited ten minutes, then followed.

Her walk to the rotting village was brief and free of monsters. Even through the catastrophe, the dilapidated home containing Rachel stood in the back of Kohlingen. Celes entered like an unwanted visitor; she feared the thunderous beats of her heart were heard all the way back to the airship. Shuffling to a halt, her eyes fell on the basement stairs.

Though she couldn’t bring herself to head down. Instead, Celes leaned into the wall and grasped opposite elbows. She cursed herself for fretting over old emotions.

*I don’t want to feel this way. I don’t want to be attached to him anymore.*

Nostalgia had a sick sense of humor, rehashing the sensations to the point of suffocation. It had been
a silly crush, after all—a bout of puppy love. It blinded her, allowed him to tug and yank on the taut strings tied to her heart.

In a few days time, the wistfulness would die out, if not sooner; someone else had already captured her attention.

The constant affection showered upon her when no one was looking left Celes blushing, giggling, and smiling. Setzer weathered the storm and met her in the calm. Such patience was commendable, if not worthy of an epic. They could have been two ships passing in the night through that storm, regarding one another from afar. Equal amounts of men fawned and scorned her in the distance, but none braved the cold, bitter ice encasing Celes. And then there was Setzer, forever persistent as an unrequited admirer. The thrill of their subconscious chase ended once they entwined with each other; perhaps it was possible Setzer loved more than the chase itself.

*But this isn’t love,* she caught herself thinking. *It can’t be. It’s not. It’s…. But she didn’t know.*

Time stretched and trudged on. Impatient fingers drummed along her arm. Celes stared out a window and sighed. Her eyes never glanced to the stairs she refused to venture down.

She nearly mistook the lethargic beats to be her heart pounding into her head and not as footsteps. When a jaded adventurer emerged from the depths of the basement, Celes caught her breath. Locke kept his gaze to the floor until halfway across the room. He paused, as did Celes.

“Locke?”

When was the last time she uttered his name? The foreign word numbed her tongue. He perked up, gradually eyeing her. As always, he smiled despite his lowered guard. Her presence hadn’t upset him, though the smile was a horrible mask; a redness swelled his eyes and there was no hiding the occasional sniffle.

*Did she not make it? After all this time, was it all for nothing?*

“Have you... been waiting for me?” Locke blinked while he questioned her.

A twinge of guilt bolted through her. “I didn’t mean to be, I only—” She sighed. “I needed to know if... if she’d come back. If it worked.”

His smile cracked. “I wouldn’t want you or any of the others to be here when it happened. It’s not your matter to be concerned with.”

*But it is,* was what Celes wanted to blurt out. She bit her tongue instead. “And what about now?”

“Now?” Locke breathed out a half-hearted chuckle. “Now I can admit I was a fool for thinking any of this could work. But I’m alright now. Rachel... she put my heart at ease. I feel as if I can see straight for the first time in years. So from here on out, everything will be okay.”

“Are you certain? Locke, if you need—”

“What I need now is to move on.” He nodded while staring out a window. “I need to pave a new path for myself and not let the past define me. I’m more than that; it simply took too damn long for it to all sink in. I may not be able to change the past, but I can change the future, yeah?”

In all the time she had known him, Celes caught a glimpse of the man who stood for a revolution to sweep across the world and better the lives of everyone.
“Come on, Celes.” Locke beckoned to her. “Let’s head out. Can’t keep the others waiting for much longer, right?”

He escorted her out, stuck by her side the entirety of their short trek. Their hands almost brushed when they boarded the airship and Celes dismissed it as a gentle breeze fooling her. Only twice did she glance over to eye Locke, to make sure he was still fairing well. Both times she caught him returning the gesture. Not a word was exchanged.

There in the main foyer were the usual suspects lounging around: Sabin and Cyan off to one side with a restless Gau while Edgar rose from his seat next to Terra. Looming above on the upper level was a curious Relm with Strago behind her along with Mog and Umaro further down. Shadow perched from the banister and Gogo mirrored his stance.

Edgar dared to ask the one question sifting through everyone’s mind. “Did it... the Phoenix magicite. Was it a success?”

“Yes and no,” Locke began, rubbing the back of his neck. “The magicite was too damaged to be of any use and shattered instantly. But there was still enough magic to bring her back, even for a moment.” His profile wore a sad smile. “She told me everything that I needed to hear... and that I needed to move on, to let go of the chains that have kept me bound to her. She’s in a better place now and I think I can finally rest at ease knowing I did what I could.”

Edgar flashed a smile. “Good. We all had been worried about you. And my sympathies for—”

“No, please,” Locke threw up his hands and shook his head, “that’s not necessary. All’s well now. I’ve done my grieving.”

Celes raised an eyebrow over his bold declaration, one Locke thankfully never spotted. Her lips pursed as the memory of fallen comrades sent goosebumps over cool skin. A dense weight still hung from her chest in regards to avenging the likes of General Leo, Cid, and the late citizens of Vector. It was one notion for a soldier to persist through the hardships of witnessing deaths—horrendous, merciless deaths—but to release the thought of a lover, one aged well with time, was different.

While the others poked and prodded Locke with various questions, Celes found Setzer leaning over the railing. His eyes scanned the foyer before settling upon Celes. She offered him a small smile and from what she could see, he returned one in kind.

“So does this mean you’ll be joining us?” Terra asked Locke.

A livelier smile encompassed Locke. “But of course! We still have to settle this crap with Kefka, right? I might have lost myself along the way over the past couple of years, but—” His eyes scanned the lower and upper levels, smiling at each face he saw. “—if we’re in this together, then you can count me in!”

A round of cheering boomed from within the Falcon. The Returners were reunited and this time, the likes of Kefka wasn’t enough to knock them down. They’d fly to the tower and strike every obstacle until they tore through the delirious man. More than a sliver of light shimmered in the distance; hope burned bright like a roaring flame.

Edgar shouted to Setzer to prepare for departure. Cyan interjected, again concerned with supplies, which in turn had Sabin snickering about checking the rations while they were at it. As the jovial banter persisted, Locke laughed to himself, his sights shifting to Celes. She almost didn’t notice.

But she did notice him approaching her.
“You know,” Locke murmured, “in the brief moment life was restored to Rachel, she told me how I needed to let go of her, that she didn’t wish to see me tormented for the rest of my life. She told me…” He reached for her hand, gradually testing the spaces between her fingers. Shock numbed Celes frozen. “She told me,” he continued while squeezing, “to love the woman who was now in my heart the same way I loved her.”

His eyes never wavered from hers, an intensity glowing in them which never once existed. A stiff lump lodged into Celes’ throat. “Locke, what are you trying to—”

“I’m sorry I’ve dragged you along for this long, Celes. I hope I can make it up to you now.”

She blinked and then his other hand brushed stray locks of hair out of her face. He stepped towards Celes, hand settling upon her cheek to reposition her, then nestled in close. Eyelids fell shut, lips parted, and the space between them ceased to exist as Locke kissed her.

At one point, she had yearned to share this kiss. The anticipation tortured her, but instead of melting in his arms, ice encased Celes. Her eyes shot wide open. Her muscles hardened like steel. Every ounce of reason screamed to writhe away, yet shock made a statue out of her.

No sense of urgency persuaded his ginger lips. He spoke of love, yet the simple kiss was akin more to a soft whisper than a bellowing expression of passion. But what bothered Celes the most was the taste. A particular sapor left her licking her lips in the afterglow. This? It wasn’t right—it wasn’t there.

In due time, Locke pulled away with that same, upbeat grin he wore for the world. Nothing exclusive to her. And much to her dismay, most of the group had spied upon their public display of affection, yet from the reactions rumbling through the airship, no one questioned the one-sided nature of the act.

Relm cracked up and sang a childish song about young lovers while her grandfather grumbled over her antics. Mog danced in celebration up along the railing. Sabin clapped loudly while adding something along the lines of it being about damn time. All of them cheered over the supposedly blossoming relationship. All of them except a few.

Edgar stood and tried not to stare, his smile faltering. Terra’s eyebrows pinched toward the crown of her head as a hand clamped over her mouth. To anyone else, their expressions were that of embarrassment and alarm, maybe even both.

But then there was Setzer.

Violet eyes fell onto Locke, then briefly onto Celes. She expected a grimace, she expected tension lining his features in the attempt to prevent rage-induced cries splitting through the interior. But not a hint of any emotion humored Setzer. All that was missing was a set of cards and a pile of chips to complete the veil. Amongst the ceremonious commotion, Setzer tore himself away from the railing and retreated to the helm.

She wanted to squirm away from Locke and dart up to cling onto Setzer, to paw for his attention, to beg for his arms to catch her before she crumbled to the floor. She wanted to hear his rich voice vibrating in her ear, complete with the sweet, beloved pet name he insisted on calling her in his native tongue. She wanted to yank him into a hard kiss, to beg for him to rid her of the unpleasant taste invading her mouth, to finally—finally—let everyone in the damn airship know that she belonged to Setzer Gabbiani and not Locke Cole.

If he even thought of her in such a light. If that was even what they shared.
“Shit, I’m messing this up already, aren’t I?” Locke’s nervous laughter reeled in Celes’ attention. A hand brushed over her face, yet it never registered to Celes. “I should’ve done this while we were alone. I didn’t mean to put you center stage.”

The irony bubbled forth no humor within Celes. His hand fell and she stepped back. Locke didn’t stop her, though he continued to smile fondly.

“I still meant what I said, though,” he continued, “and I’m not going to make the same mistake I made with Rachel. I’m here for you, Celes.” The low, rolling laughter persisted. “Gods, I’m a rambling mess. We should probably focus on Kefka, right? Settle that before we... well, settle this.”

Yet the question of Celes’ sentiments on the matter never surfaced. Perhaps for his sake and the sanity of the others, it was better left for later; Celes doubted she could converse in a civilized fashion after what happened.

The engines within the Falcon revved. Celes caught sight of Edgar darting upward. She knew why. She would have done the same if it hadn’t been for the fact she was well aware of how Setzer reacted with his defenses down.

Locke had other plans, though. “Hey, let’s head on up top! Check out the view while we’re flying.”

Before she could protest, Locke clasped her hand and moved forward. They passed Terra, who followed Celes’ panicked eyes and quickly offered to tag along. Celes sighed with relief over the extra companion in tow. Together they emerged onto the upper deck, catching Edgar mid-sentence as he stood by Setzer at the helm. Edgar was quick to change the topic to a discussion of their flight path. Setzer replied via nods. Neither brought their attention to Celes.

Locke whistled sharply as his eyes sized up the Falcon. “Geez,” he dragged out, “look at this thing.” He wandered away from Celes to scan the perimeter. “Wow, it looks worse than the Blackjack,” he blurted out. “Sure hope this rickety thing will stay together.”

The commentary was more fatal than a dull blade turning within bloodied flesh. It was simply a question of who would react first: Celes or Setzer. But Locke wasn’t aware of Darill or what she and her airship had undergone. Celes doubted Setzer would ever consume enough alcohol to entertain Locke, of all people, with such a tale. The brief flash of his outrage surfacing across his face didn’t help.

In seconds, Setzer replaced it with a wry smile. “It will. Trust me.” His eyes fell back onto the path ahead of him.

Locke beckoned the two ladies over to the railing. Terra flanked Locke, already diving into conversation to captivate him. With little to say, Celes allowed Terra to assume control while she favored silence. Celes peered back when Locke wasn’t paying attention; Edgar continued to speak with the silent pilot refusing to acknowledge her gaze.

The rolling sea replaced the stretches of grassland. By then, Celes silently excused herself from the deck. No one protested. Perhaps some didn’t care. Instead of submerging into the airship, Celes yearned for a private room, complete with an ice bath and enough time to scream until her throat rubbed dry and raw. She had no privilege to do so and her heart raced out of time. Celes found solace on one of the couches, curling up into herself while conversations continued around her.

Intuitively, she unraveled the bandana from her side. Smoothing her fingers over the fabric, she closed her eyes and brought it to her chest. Did Locke even want it back? Or would he think her crazy for claiming it to be his, let alone keeping it for some time? Perhaps it was only a coincidence
and it’s not Locke’s. Celes squeezed the bandana before tying it back to her side. Maybe there would never be a right time to approach Locke about it; maybe the time for any of that was long past gone.

But she still had time to approach Setzer. He deserved to hear the thoughts whipping through her mind and Celes cared little if she dissolved into mad rambling—he needed to know. Whatever feelings she once had for Locke, that tender crush of hers, were gone. It all simmered down to admiration and appreciation. To bring herself beyond those sentiments was impossible. Not after what they had been through.

Not after what she and Setzer had been through.

She closed her eyes, then opened them. In the small time frame, the position of those in the foyer deviated and their conversations changed outright. When Celes shifted on the couch, her muscles stiffened. Terra loomed over her with a gentle smile, locks of wavy hair framing her face.

“Looked like you needed the rest,” Terra said. “Doing alright?”

Celes groaned. “I’ve been better.” *Didn’t even know I fell asleep.*

Forcing herself upright, Celes scanned the room. No sight of Locke. Nor were the engines roaring as loud as they were when she had been awake.

“Are we stalled?” Celes asked.

“I think so. Either that or Setzer decided to let Edgar fly and we all know how he feels about that.”

Celes didn’t know which was worse: Setzer flying while upset or stopping because he was upset. Or at least she imagined he was. She didn’t blame him either way.

“Have you… seen him?” Celes raised an eyebrow. “Setzer, that is.”

Terra’s face lit up. “I think I did. Went down that one narrow corridor a while ago.” She threw a finger in the general direction, which led to the small room with the gramophone and poker table. “Not sure if he’s still there, though. Um, Celes?”

“Hmm?”

“Is… everything alright?”

*I honestly don’t know.* “It will be soon enough. No need to worry.”

Terra put on a frail smile. “Oh, okay.”

With that said, Celes rose and headed down the hallway Terra spoke of. Her stride was long, yet sluggish. As she rehearsed a dialogue with Setzer, Celes mind toyed with her. She second guessed every thought. Her twitching fingers curled into fists. She focused on breathing in hopes to find a second of peace. Upon turning the corner, Celes almost crashed into someone. She fluttered her eyes
and craned her head up.

To be fair, Edgar was just as stunned by her sudden appearance. “Ah! Celes!” He spoke above a whisper. “What a pleasant surprise seeing you here.”

One hand perched against her hip. “What are you doing back here, Edgar?”

“W-what am I doing?” He blinked rapidly. “Wouldn’t you like to know!”

“Whatever,” she sighed out. “Excuse me, I’m—” About to circle around him, Celes skidded to a halt when Edgar jumped in her way; right in front of the door she wished to go through.

“I... wouldn’t go in there right now if I were you,” Edgar warned her. “You’re better off staying out here with me.”

“Edgar, what the hell is going on?”

“What’s going...? Nothing! It’s simply—”

“And you are?!“ The muffled bellow pierced through the walls. Celes stared past Edgar to the closed door holding back the voice. A moment later, the screaming persisted. “You are so full of shit! I can’t believe any of this! Why the hell is it that someone like you had to still be alive after the world was ripped apart!?”

The realization widened Celes’ eyes. “Locke?”

“So,” Edgar dragged out. “This is the part where I suggest that perhaps you and I should take a stroll around the Falcon. You know, take our time, enjoy the—”

Celes shoved Edgar aside and marched for the door. Without hesitation, she sent the structure flying open on weak hinges and paused mid-walk. Locke was there, as was the man she initially sought out, who was backed into a wall by the fuming rogue. Setzer caught sight of Celes during her abrupt entrance, but it wasn’t enough to deter Locke from his verbal attack.

“You can keep living in whatever delusional world you’ve made up for yourself,” Locke spat out, “but just know that—”

It was then Locke noticed Setzer’s eyes elsewhere, thus spun around to investigate. Seething rage contorted his face, a look Celes had yet to witness with him and one she was terrifyingly close to donning herself. Thankfully, it melted away.

“Celes...?” Locke said, rather bewildered. “What are—”

“What the hell is going on?!“ Celes demanded. Edgar’s hand fell onto her shoulder, but she smacked it away. He didn’t touch her again.

Locke jumped forward. “This idiot,” he spoke while gesturing to Setzer, “has been trying to fill my head with lies—”

“And you’ve been eloquently trying to convince yourself of that,” Setzer said, dry as ever, with a roll of his eyes.

Locke snapped his attention back to Setzer. “Will you shut up?! What reason should I have to trust you? Why should any of us trust you?! All of us have a purpose to be here, but you just tagged along for the fun of it! Tch, the only greater good you ever cared about is whether or not you get a fat lump
of gil at the end of this shit.”

Setzer’s eyes flared up as he tilted his head. “A far more honest profession than whatever trade you keep trying to convince us all you have.”

“Oh, don’t even get me started with that, prick.”

With her patience broken like a frail twig in a storm, Celes boomed loud enough for everyone to remember which one in the room was the former General. “Quiet! Both of you!” She circled around with the hopes to wedge herself between the two. “I don’t know what the hell is going on, but I didn’t come all the way down here to find you two having a drama party. We have bigger stakes to worry about! Now’s not the time to be fussing over our companions.”

Setzer snorted while Locke went slack jaw. “Companions?” Locke asked. “Is that… what?! You’re calling this disgusting scoundrel a companion?! I thought we were all in agreement that he was nothing more than—”

“Locke,” Celes seethed through a clenched jaw, “now is not the time to be picky over our allies. Have you seen what our group is comprised of? We need whatever numbers we can get to take on Kefka and furthermore, Setzer has been more than useful in our efforts. I do recall the lot of you being able to escape Vector because of him. Shall I recite all of the other instances to jog your completely shot memory?”

“I’d be quicker to trust a card shark,” Setzer piped up. “Trust me, the feeling is mutual, Locke.”

“Oh, thank the gods,” Locke rolled out, drenching his words with sarcasm, “I was starting to worry you had a change of heart.”

This wasn’t how Celes envisioned this unfolding. It wasn’t what she desired and from the obvious look of it, neither of the men were keen on the turn of events. They bickered back and forth, slinging mud in hopes to make the other buckle and fall to the floor. But Celes wasn’t interested in the finer details of their shared annoyance with each other. The moment their voices escalated in volume, Celes slipped fingers into her mouth and blew an ear-piercing whistle to quiet both. She crossed her arms and flicked her eyes back and forth between Locke and Setzer.

“So I’m going to ask one more time,” Celes said. “What the hell is going on?” The silence persisted far too long for Celes’ liking. “Really? Are you serious? Is this how we’re going to act now?!”

“He dragged me here,” Locke explained, glaring at Setzer the whole time. “He instigated all of this crap. You are seriously more fucked up than I—”

“Locke.” The curt tone erupted from Edgar, but it never dented Locke.

“And what for?” Locke scoffed. “Just to intimidate me? And you call yourself a gambler. Can’t even take kindly to losing. So just quit it with this whole charade and get over yourself!”

Confusion plucked at her already tight nerves. Her eyes settled onto Setzer, who busied himself with glaring a hole into a wall. She thought of reaching to him, offer a sense of comfort in the chaos brewing about them, but thought better of it.

But when he craned his head back, Setzer eyed each one of them, finding Celes last. “You haven’t told him yet?”

She blinked. “What?”
Locke snorted. “See? She doesn’t—”

“You know,” Setzer said, eyes piercing Celes, “what I’m talking about.”

And she did. It was the reason why she wished to speak with him, preferably alone; it was the reason why she wanted nothing more than to wrap herself up in him and express the extent of how badly she wanted him. Not Locke, but Setzer. A kiss on its own could speak the lengths her mouth was unable to form via words, but with the tension residing within Setzer, the chances of it happening that evening were slim.

Or ever again, at the rate they were declining.

Lost in her thoughts, Locke struck again. “He’s been going on and on about how you’ve bothered to give him the time of day. That he’s been looking out for you this whole time. That he’s—” He broke out in sarcastic laughter. “What a joke. How can you tolerate someone who says crap like that?”

She couldn’t cough up half a reply, but her face softened, her eyebrows tented upward, and her lips curled to the floor. Locke’s smug smile faltered. He snapped his head back to Setzer, who simply rubbed at his temples. Spinning on his heels, he eyed Edgar, who met him with a glare reserved for a beloved pet misbehaving.

“You’re kidding me,” he mumbled. “You’re.... The two of you....” His head whipped between Celes and Setzer. “How could you—”

“What does it matter, Locke?” Celes’ voice rang with defeat. “What difference does it even make? Is this truly what you want to focus on instead of the task at hand?”

“Focus on the task at hand? Did you tell yourself that when he—” He directed a finger at Setzer. “—came around to seduce you?” Locke fashioned his words as he would wield his daggers. Even his knees bent halfway to the fighting stance he always assumed. “I had always been there for you. Always did my best to stay by your side, even when the times got rough. I didn’t try to throw myself at you, unlike some people in this room, and I like to think that counts for more than whatever sick intentions he has for you.”

A lie. An absolute, outright lie smacking her across the face. Nails threatened to cut her palms as she met Locke’s raging stare, desperate to maintain a firm hold on reality. Images threatened to derail her mental stability, the ones depicting the Magitek Research Facility—the moment which contradicted every damn thing he uttered now. Celes’ trust didn’t lie within Locke anymore. Not in that regard. Not when the man beside him offered an open hand and a nonjudgmental gaze whenever they crossed paths.

Don’t do this to me again, Locke.

A curse fell out of Locke’s mouth while he exhaled. “Can’t you just give me a straight answer? How the hell can you submit yourself to this? Don’t you remember what happened back at the opera house? You... you couldn’t have possibly enjoyed any of that, Celes. Right? Just how—”

“Will you shut up.” Setzer’s staccato words cut through Locke while he pushed off of the wall to stand tall. “You’re clearly upsetting her, idiot, so stop.”

Setzer approached Celes, one hand sinking into her shoulder. She was numb to the initial touch, but his warmth gradually washed over her, calmed her senses, and loosened the fists she unknowingly made. Once her hands settled to her sides, his other hand cupped her face.

“Forgive me, ma cherie,” he murmured to Celes, both his voice and eyes pleading for her to accept
his apology. “I didn’t mean for this to get out of hand.”

The hissing voices and flashing memories vanished, nothing but mere ghosts retreating from holy magic. The only reason she shook now was over the tender touch radiating through her form. With his eyes refusing to look elsewhere, Celes inhaled and released her breath and worries. She felt safe. She never thought she would experience it with another human being.

Celes licked her lips, parting them to give a response. She was silenced the moment the growl rumbling through the room morphed into a livid cry.

“You son of a bitch!”

From the corner of her eye, Celes caught all of it in the frame of a second. Edgar bolted over to latch onto Locke, grasping nothing but empty space. Locke brandished a prized dagger in a tight, gloved hand, barring his teeth while a wildfire ignited every inch of muscle. He snapped forward, pure adrenaline fueling his swift movements. Setzer investigated the commotion a second after Celes—a second too late.

The swipe of the blade was a clean strike, worthy of praise and a dead target. The steel nipped at the left side of Setzer’s face, sinking into his jawline before dragging upwards at an angle and skidding over his nose to lift away to nick an eyebrow. Blood splattered out and followed the arc of the dagger. Bright crimson painted the wooden panels. Droplets absorbed into Celes’ garment, the absolute last of her worries.

Setzer flinched and hissed before yelping in the stunning agony. His feet stumbled backwards as he clutched his face. Blood streamed through the cracks of his fingers and soaked his sleeves. Setzer braced himself against a corner while Edgar finally grappled Locke to restrain him from launching a second attack.

All the while, Celes darted for Setzer. His name squeaked out of her feeble lips. She clung to his side and inspected the damage. Blood dripped from his jaw, freely and swiftly, as he muttered in his native tongue, presumably curses. While she lacked the abilities of a medic, she possessed a simple Cure, a laughable spell when the wound sunk deep into his face. Regardless, she brought her hands up and began the incantation.

“Don’t,” Setzer rasped. “Leave it be.”

Her trembling hands dropped. Words caught in her throat like a thick bout of sickness. She sat by passively as Setzer struggled to stand and made his way to the door. The prospect of him leaving throttled panic into Celes, jolting her to her feet. She intended to follow, intended to set right to the pathetic mess they all collapsed into.

“That’s it,” Locke growled, almost pleased with himself. “This isn’t your game to win.”

Ignoring him, Celes reached for the bleeding man. “Setzer....”

He glimpsed over his shoulder, hurt eyes falling onto Celes, then proceeded through the exit. She took one step, prepared to pursue, but Locke had to have the last word.

“Pathetic.” He scoffed. “Like he could ever comprehend what romance is. Maybe now he’ll know better before meddling with what isn’t his.”

A change of mind spun Celes on her heels to advance towards Locke. Edgar acknowledged the storm barreling towards them and immediately released Locke to step aside. Before Locke registered his freedom, Celes slammed a tight fist into his cheek. The force swept Locke off his feet and to the
floor. A sharp cry filled the room and he clutched the fresh wound, spitting up more blood to line the floor.

When he dared to haul his head back, a hint of fear highlighted his eyes, as if he never dreamed of Celes’ capability of striking anyone down.

Maybe now he would listen.

At first, his lips moved, the meager attempt nothing but futile. “Celes—”

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Celes roared, not caring who heard. “Are you so oblivious to everything that’s not circulating around your life to the point that you’re willing to strike at innocent people?! Is that what you do when you feel threatened? Was that supposed to come off as heroic and romantic, because you thought you were protecting me?! You might have saved me once, Locke, but you are by no means a saint.

“You tried to pass it off as nothing in Albrook? Or how you said you wished to help me just because I reminded you of someone? I am not someone in need of saving. I needed you for every reason but that. I needed someone to support me, not to whittle me into helplessness. But I wanted you to love me. I wanted you to have eyes for me and no one else, but you are just as fickle as the infantry soldiers who couldn’t keep it in their pants half of the time. And don’t give me that look! One second you’re promising me how you’ll always be by my side and the next I see you speaking similar words to Terra. Gods forbid if Relm was old enough to be worthy of such attention.

Because all this time, it wasn’t me you wanted. It wasn’t any of us. It was Rachel. That poor woman…. You deprived her of the ability to pass on and preserved her for what? For your own sake?! And what if the Phoenix magicite had worked?” A barrage of attacks from her rune blade and magic would have been kinder than the stare she skewered Locke with. “Then what? Then would you have written off everything we’ve fought for, everything you fought for, just to be by her side again? Not even a damn hour has passed and you honestly can tell me that you’ve moved on? I don’t care what she told you in her borrowed time; you would have dropped everything for her and not think twice of those you toyed with before. I don’t even know her and yet I know she deserved better!

“So can you truly look me in the eye and tell me that you’ve loved me all this time? Can you?” She scoffed when he continued to cower. “Look at you. Do I intimidate you that much? Did you forget you saved an Imperial General? I am not like your beloved Rachel; I will not lie quietly for all eternity for you to fawn over. And even if you could say that to me now, I don’t think I could ever believe you, not after the emotional wreck you dragged me through. You had your chance, Locke. I would have willingly handed myself over to you if you had asked, but that time has come and gone.”

And he was stupid enough to challenge her authority. “And what about... did you....”

“And what about what? Did I what?!”

Locke wiped back the blood dribbling down his lips and chin. “Tell me Setzer was lying... about... the two of—”

“Is this honestly what all of this is about?!” Celes huffed up and clenched her jaw. “Is it because you’re jealous of the fact someone confronted me before you ever could? Why should it matter?! If you claim to care half as much as you say you do, then wouldn’t you be content knowing that someone was taking care of me and making me happy? Or are you actually that selfish?” Celes scoffed. “What am I saying? Of course you don’t care. You had to make a disgusting show out of
kissing me in front of—"

“Celes—"

“—everyone! I didn’t want you to touch me, let alone kiss me. I’m not some damsel to win over and be yours, as you put it. And you call Setzer disgusting?! Did the Phoenix magicite drop on your head before we—”

“That wasn’t my intention—”

“Then what the hell was?!"

“I love you, okay?! I truly do! I don’t know what the hell else to do to prove that to you. It felt right to do and I know I haven’t been perfect and I’ve wanted to make it up to you. But knowing that... that Setzer.... How could you?"

“How... could I?” Celes fluttered her eyes and recoiled. “Are you serious? How could I?! Not once in all of this time has he judged me! Not once did he second guess my motives! Not once did he force me into something I didn’t wish to do. He had my best interests in mind and I’m almost certain he would have spent the rest of his days watching me afar and never having me, just as long as I was happy. Setzer was there for me in the beginning of this world of ruin. He comforted me, reminded me this world wasn’t completely riddled with pain and misery.

“And you know what, Locke?” Three steps and Celes was inches from him, dropping her voice to a growl. “He f*cked me. I asked for it and loved it. And not once did I think about you. I was completely his and happy. And when I heard you were still alive, I wanted to find you, but I didn’t ask for this.” She shook her head. “I never did. If you were the bigger person in the scenario, you’d move on and be happy that I was happy.”

With the damage done, Celes retreated. She glanced to Edgar—a blushing Edgar, nonetheless—and hoped her softer gaze was enough of an apology. Before exiting the room, she eyed Locke.

“And you know what?” Celes’ tone stayed even, yet unyielding. “You’re wrong. Setzer does know what romance is. This airship? It belonged to his lover before she died in its crash. And he rebuilt it and kept it hidden within a memorial to her until recently to help us in our efforts. He didn’t dwell on the past or spent his time attempting to relive those memories; he moved on. You could learn a thing or two from him.”

Locke might have had more to say, but it was all for nothing. Celes fled the room and slammed the door. Her back braced against the structure as she glared at the opposite wall. Rage muddled her mind in place of the thoughts that had been long bottled up. And when the rage simmered down, all that remained was an emptiness Celes wasn’t familiar to.

Her breaths rattled in her throat. Her lips trembled. An unwelcome chill haunted her bones and a sharp pain stung her palms. Fluttering her eyes, she noted her fists had never relaxed since striking Locke. Celes sucked down shallow breathes. She coaxed her hands to open, yet they shook and froze.

Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back. What have I done?

By the time her breaths lengthened and smoothed out, her fingers reached downward and skimmed her thighs. Her heart still thumped in her ears, but she preferred it over the fury.

Celes wiped away the tears swelling in her eyes and marched off, fueled only by adrenaline, in hopes to salvage whatever remained of the ruins.
I listened to a lot of Glass Sea when editing this section. It has a haunting sense of beauty and anxiety that mirrors the chapter.

I'd also like to apologize for the unspoken hiatus of sorts I took. Holiday season being busy aside, I've been putting my health as top priority in my life. Some days are better than others, though it has interrupted many facets of my life, writing included. I'm still editing future chapters and plan to keep posting, health pending. Thanks for all of your support ♥♥♥
Fresh blood trailed along the floor and Celes followed. As she returned to the platform overlooking the main foyer, others gathered above and exchanged worried whispers. She didn’t have to wonder why, either. Their eyes fell onto Celes in search for answers, but their guess was as good as hers.

Terra stepped in her path. “Celes, it’s Setzer. He’s… not doing well. I offered to help, but—”

“I know,” Celes breathed out. “Give me a minute. Keep everyone calm out here, alright?”

Terra nodded, though pouted, then backed away.

The crimson mess darted under the cracks of a door right before the ladder leading to the upper deck. Setzer ducked into it several times when the group discussed their next movement. No one disturbed him then. Celes recalled the mention of it once belonging to Darill—a personal room. Trespassing crossed the line over into disrespect, but Celes couldn’t delay speaking with him any further.

She knocked first. Nothing. Once more, she rapped her loose fist along the door, then sighed and tested the door handle. To her surprise, it was unlocked. Celes slipped in and closed it behind her.

Compared to the rest of the airship, the space was lush, complete with an exquisite rug covering a majority of the floor and a mirrored oak desk pressed into one wall. Old maps plastered the adjacent wall and the few candles lit unveiled trinkets and relics from various, dead cultures. Locke would have swiped everything from the room. Celes scrunched her face over the thought and set her sights on the man slouched over the desk.

A black coat draped over the chair while several washcloths splayed out on the floor. Blood saturated both the washcloths and sleeves of the coat. A water basin sat on the desk, though the creature hopping about the surface garnered Celes’ attention. The outfitted bunny danced before releasing curative magic into the air.

Then the creature spotted her and perked up. It wiggled its hips, then bounced in place. “Mugu mugu?”

Setzer straightened up and peered past fallen hair. A washcloth covered half of his face, slowly soaking in blood, but his eyes were free to lock onto Celes. The quiet air left her nails clawing into her palms. The mysterious bunny bounced to Setzer and prepared another healing spell, only to be waved off with a dismissive hand. Its ears flopped over as it shuffled to the end of the desk to jump off, disappearing in a puff of magical smoke.

The washcloth fell to the floor with the others and Setzer combed his hair out of his face to reveal the damage. Blood no longer gushed out of the wound at an alarming rate, but instead oozed. First aid precautions were taken, though the wound still called for stitches and ice, at the bare minimum. Maybe liquor. Celes could help with the ice and someone had to be handy with a thread and needle.

The silence tortured her more so than the sight of the open gash. “I’m sorry,” she croaked out.

Setzer scoffed. “For what? Do you not understand the definition of let it be? I wish to be alone right now, Celes. The least you can do is respect that.”
While Setzer drew cool water into a cloth, Celes approached from behind and stared at the mirror hanging above the desk. Their eyes met within the reflection. Setzer lowered the cloth and sighed.

Before he could object to her stubbornness, Celes spoke. “I had been looking for you. I hope you know that. I wanted to find you alone and not in the middle of an argument.”

“Impeccable timing,” he offered back, then cast his gaze downward to tend to his face.

Celes’ hands fidgeted over one another. “Terra could help you with that. If it’s not tended to right away, it will—”

“I’m not stupid,” Setzer replied dryly. “Not the first time I’ve received a scar. Was only a matter of time before it happened again.”

Another scar to add to the collection wasn’t worth flinching at, but the others were well-faded, leaving the new wound as a stark contrast against pale skin. And the intent behind it pained Celes as much as it pained him.

“Still, I didn’t wish for it to come to this.” No response. Teeth sunk into her lower lip. “What were you even trying to discuss with Locke?”

Setzer whipped around in his seat. That glare of his shot straight through her like her rune blade did with monsters. She never witnessed this particular fury in his eyes before; it rivaled, however, with the intoxication he submitted himself to back in Kohlingen.

“Are you mocking me?” Setzer spat out.

“I only wanted to—”

“If you expected me to ignore what I and everyone else had witnessed earlier today,” Setzer ranted on as he rose from his seat, “you are terribly wrong. I have mild tolerance for the man at best. I’d rather persist through whatever civility we can muster than threaten the idea of brawling every time we cross paths. We don’t get along. Fine. Wouldn’t be the first time I had to deal with someone trying to compensate, but if it weren’t for the fact that we’re all in this together to take back the world, then I would have thrown the damned thief off the airship that very moment.”

“Setzer—”

“In the short time we spent together before the world was torn apart, I had to watch him lead you on like it was his job. Perhaps the others overlooked it, but run a gambling operation long enough and you notice the smallest of subtleties. I couldn’t do anything then to comfort you; you wouldn’t have let me if I tried. I always told myself that there was the possibility you’d run back to him the moment he—”

“Stop it!” Celes shrieked. “It’s not like that anymore!”

Cocking his head, Setzer didn’t flinch as Celes drew closer. “Anymore? Is that supposed to be comforting?”

“It’s the truth! So take it as you will. Setzer, you weren’t ever meant to be a replacement or a temporary distraction.”

He scoffed. “No? Then what am I to you, Celes? Am I anything?” A slight hesitation in his words occurred before he poured out, “Was I ever anything?”
Violet eyes demanded an answer and Celes feared uttering the wrong thing. “I don’t know,” she enunciated each, trembling word. “I was trying not to focus on the technicalities of it and instead focus on what felt right.”

“Did it feel right when Locke kissed you?”

She fluttered her eyes. “What??”

“Answer the question.” Leaning in closer, Setzer repeated himself with a gradual, booming force. “Did it feel right when he kissed you?”

“Two years ago it might have! But not now! Never now. I wanted to tell you that, but you ran off and I wasn’t sure how to tell you.” Arms wrapped around her body to stabilize herself physically and mentally. “So I’m telling you now.”

A light chuckle fell out alongside an exhale from Setzer. “Two years ago. It’s honestly been that long? And are you so sure? Because after we discovered a hint of his whereabouts, the same look came back to your face. The one where you couldn’t stop thinking about him.”

“That’s not true.”

“Please, don’t lie to me. You might not have told me about that bandana by your side, but I’m not stupid.”

“I wanted to make sure he was still alive,” Celes explained. “It wasn’t anything more than that. I wanted to return a favor to the one who instilled hope into me not once, but multiple times. He had been there for me. When I was supposed to be executed, he was the one who saved me. I’m not exactly keen on forgetting that particular detail. If you want me to outright abandon Locke and any memories I’ve shared with him, know that I can’t. I won’t. Not for you, not for anyone. Shouldn’t you understand that? You and Darill—”

Anger flickered across his body. “That’s different.”

“She made an impact on you! She offered her heart to you and vice versa. If I were to tell you to forsake anything and everything she had ever touched in your life, you would laugh at me. And I’d never ask for you to do such a—”

“Let me set one thing straight with you and I will not repeat myself.” The growl snapped Celes to attention and with swift feet, he backed her into a wall with each step. “Darill was the only person who ever understood me. She never had to question me; she just knew. She offered me a way of life where I could be myself, where I could call the skies my home, because it certainly wasn’t home back on the ground. I had known her for years. She was my best friend, my partner-in-crime, my soulmate. When I found the Falcon crashed in that valley, I prayed luck was on her side and she escaped somehow. But when I found her tattered corpse impaled by debris, a part of me died with her that day.

“And here you are, claiming that some random thief who stumbled upon you and saved you from execution, only to turn around and discard you upon given the implication that maybe, just maybe, you had turned on him, is on par with what I once had with Darill. Are you trying to insult me?! Don’t even try to defend whatever pathetic case you have to compare the two. I don’t want to hear it. And the whole time you were so lovesick with him, like something from a badly written opera.

“And you know something, Celes? When the four of you didn’t return from Vector? All I could think about was you. I wanted to make sure you were safe. I knew it was far more dangerous for you
to be setting foot back onto Imperial grounds than the others. So when I arrived and you were missing, I immediately asked for you. I was ready to run into the barricaded walls and find you. I didn’t want to leave without you.” He breathed out a sarcastic laugh. “And that fucking idiot.... He couldn’t bear to tell me what happened. He never mentioned you when we ventured to Zozo. Edgar had to be the one to tell me. And Locke claims to love you, after all of that. And you’re trying to tell me it’s okay, because it’s somehow similar to what I once had?”

“I don’t know what else to tell you,” Celes whispered. “What I do know is that I don’t wish to have Locke in my life as I once desired. He’s more of a brother figure than anything else now.”

“Would you kiss your brother?”

“That’s not the point!”

“Then what is it that you want?”

Sucking in a sharp breath, Celes screamed without a care. “I want this not to be complicated! This was never my intention! There are days where I wish Locke hadn’t found me back then and others where I wish we skipped over the idea of acquiring an airship and risked commandeering a galleon to head to Vector. I never know if one day I’m going to hate you or if I’m not going to stop thinking about you!” Light fists thumped at his chest. “I hate the way you look at me. I hate the stupid nickname you give me. I hate how you’re making me worry sick about you right now. I hate the cigarettes, the drinking, the gambling, the carefree attitude, the absolute nerve you have. And I hate how you’ve done more for me than Locke ever has and you still don’t believe me when I tell you that! You’re a beloved mistake and an unbearable wonder. Some days I wish I never gave in to you.”

Her outburst sent Setzer back several steps, taking an air of caution as they stared each other down like wild animals. The anger residing in him morphed into disbelief and disgust, all evident on his face.

His tongue wove words through a soft, contained rage. “I swear, if Darill was still alive, she’d be laughing at me. She’d ask me what the hell I was doing chasing after someone like you. She’d try to convince me that women like you were meant to be watched from afar, for sailors don’t brave a hurricane unless they have a death wish. Some days I was willing to weather that storm in search of the calm and hoped you’d let me in.” His jaw clenched while he shook his head. “If there was one thing Darill loathed, it was the life nobles led. Nothing but uptight, spoiled brats. Pretentious bitches are what she called people like you. I tried to look past it, but I see it now. I’m sure Gestahl loved you. I honestly don’t understand how the fuck you were able to get through life.”

Others had spat dislike in her direction, from her peers during her training days to her men during her time as a ranked officer. People lined the streets to ring their voices loud—the cold-hearted General of Vector was nothing more than the Emperor’s personal bitch. Such a privileged, little girl, who sat upon a plush pillow and sucked on a golden spoon. They never stopped to ponder over who she was before donning the General’s guise. Past the praise, only the negativity reverberated through her consciousness. It was the reason why she found difficulty rising from bed, the reason why she forced herself to exceed expectations, and the reason why no matter what the hell she did, doubt swallowed her whole and vomited her back out for the sake of sick humor.

The voices whispered in her ear; they told her to give up. The visions of every struggle blazed through her mind, reminders that a single slip-up could result in her permanent disposal for the likes a replacement—a better model. The sensations flooding and drowning her had once been bottled until the glass split into crackling spiderwebs.
Lunging towards Setzer, flat palms rammed into his chest. “Don’t say that!” She assaulted him with a series of shrills. “Don’t you ever say that to me! You think you have me figured out?!” Another blow connected with his torso and Setzer stumbled backwards. “You think you know everything there is to me, don’t you?! Well, grab yourself a fucking ticket, because there’s a line! I am not any of that! I’m not the privileged wench you’re painting me out to be. You said you would never judge me! And yet here you are doing just that!”

With another blow, Setzer tripped on the rug. He gasped and struggled to regain composure. Finding Celes’ wrist, he held on tight, but fell backwards and brought her with him. A tremendous crash shook the entire room before Celes collapsed on top. Setzer groaned and shifted his weight, though Celes sat upright to loom above; she was far from done with him.

“You want to know the truth?!” Celes yelled in his face. “I was as much a tortured soul as anyone who was laid to waste by the Empire! I had no choice in the fucking matter! My options were either follow orders or be killed! I was a pet project—the perfect knight! You think I ever asked for any of this?! Did you?!”

Celes slapped him, striking across the fresh wound. Setzer hissed as his head snapped to the side. Gripping at his shirt, Celes yanked the material and Setzer upwards, then slammed him repeatedly into the floor. The rug provided minimal cushioning.

“And here you are telling me not to compare anything I’ve ever experienced to your pitiful life! Let me remind you to not compare anything of yours to mine! You don’t know the hell I’ve been through! You don’t know where I came from! I was already welcoming death to take me away from this forsaken world when others my age weren’t aware death existed. While others played on the streets and went home to loving families, I had needles and tubes attached to me before returning to an empty, lifeless room. The only love I ever knew was the praise of my superiors for not being another failed experiment!

“I had to watch everything fall apart! The Empire was all I ever knew! I tried to help, to make things right, and it was all for nothing! I had to wake up after a year spent in a coma to no signs of life. I resigned myself to death, because all this time, I’ve been nothing but useless. I couldn’t even fucking kill myself! I tried! I wanted to die so I could finally be at peace and not be plagued by this fucking dread that consumes me every day! I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to help. Don’t call me a spoiled bitch just because I was scared shitless of being replaced by those who forged and tempered me!

“You think I don’t know what it’s like to not belong somewhere or to long for freedom and a different life? I grew up knowing I was out of place! But I didn’t have an airship or someone to whisk me away from my problems! I had to work twice as hard to be better than everyone or else they’d rip me apart! You think I enjoyed that?! You think I came from some luxurious family with wealth and power?! Is that what you fucking assume?! You think I never wished to be like you, to turn into a bird and fly away from all of it?!”

Again she struck him. “I trusted you! I opened up to you! I took down my defenses and let you in, because I thought you understood! I thought I’d come running to you and tell you I didn’t want Locke and all I wanted was you and you’d brush it off with a kiss and we’d just move on. But you just wanted to throw this crap at me and why?! Is this how you truly feel?!”

Preparing for another blow, Celes paused as her weight shifted. Her hips sunk into his, legs straddling his body. It was enough to burn her face.
They had discussed this before; she had witnessed it before. The time she smacked him and how he moaned instead of cowering. The time he explained how Darill had done worse. The time he detailed to her of what he yearned for her to unleash onto him.

Ice froze over in her eyes. “You sick fuck. You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“This wasn’t my intention, Celes. I couldn’t help myself. I—”

She didn’t strike again; her hand rushed down to clutch his throat. The sudden pressure hitched Setzer’s breath. Celes hung from above and pressed hard, gliding the force up into his chin. Every strained breath confirmed the notion—it was enough to torment him.

“Don’t say a word to me,” Celes growled. “Don’t even think about it.”

Beneath her, Setzer wiggled. The subtle rock of his hips into her—an accident or an intention, she didn’t know—sent a jagged chill up her spine. Only several layers of fabric separated them. Tingles teased her body over the slightest bit of friction. Her initial bout of anger blended with something darker.

Something she never thought she’d be capable of.

“Is this what you want?” Celes raised an eyebrow. “It was one of your twisted fantasies of me, was it not? You said you wanted me to treat you as if you were one of my prisoners of war, right? So, Setzer, is it everything you wanted?” She glared at him before snarling out, “Is this still turning you on?”

He heeded her threat and said nothing. With enough room to tilt his head, he nodded, tongue barely poking out to lick his lips.

Yet Celes didn’t need an answer; she was aware of the effect she had on him. What she underestimated was how utterly aroused he became in such short time. No foreplay needed, unless the brief spurts of violence counted. She rolled her hips into him, sliding up along the stiff bulge confined in his pants. While not as intense as his tongue or fingers, there was something to be said of their clothing numbing the sensation. Celes repeated the movement, harder the second time around. On the third pass, she failed to hold back the quiet moan tickling the back of her throat.

Setzer’s hand twitched closer to her body. Before it could rest on her thigh, Celes barked out a demand. “Don’t fucking touch me.” He listened and retracted, once more a motionless, mute body for her to control.

Not once did Celes imagine her authority would provide an invigorating rush. Setzer was obedient and didn’t dare to snap back like an undisciplined soldier once under her command. Oh, how Celes wished to hit the pathetic excuses of men back then. Now, she made her presence known; only she reigned supreme in the struggle for power.

“A mistress and her pet. That’s how you put it, didn’t you? Would Darill still be laughing?”

No response. Celes cooed as her hips moved on their own with a wanton greed.

Each action held a force behind it, lacking patience and compassion. To be aroused over her newly discovered dominance hadn’t been Celes’ plan; a flurry of emotions caught her in the chain of events and now burned through her core like a forgotten fire consuming everything in its path. Such a yearning needed to be quenched before it raged further out of control. It wasn’t about pawing his pants off to feel him inside of her; it was about her using him for her selfish desires.
“This so-called spoiled, noble bitch you speak of,” Celes spoke in between soft moans, “thinks you should have thought twice before spewing out such nonsense. I hope you’ve learned something from this.”

With every movement, every attempt to go deeper than before, Celes trembled above Setzer. Her hand cemented into his neck while she rubbed against him. Through the constant rhythm, Celes braced her free hand on his chest. Wild beats from his heart thumped into her palm. As moans burst through her once tightened lips, Setzer never made so much as a whimper.

Hair spilled over her shoulder as she lost herself in the lust and gasped. The friction sparked off a much-needed release. Head tossed back, she squeezed at his neck while riding out the sensation pulsating through her body. Celes smiled while she quieted from the high, cooing in between gasps for air.

In the afterglow, she peered down to Setzer, realizing her ecstasy also deprived him of air. A sobering realization, one which derailed her enjoyment temporarily.

*What have I done? I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t have enjoyed that. Shit.*

Dread battled with sheer content consuming her. Celes snapped her hand away and Setzer gasped severely for sweet air to fill his lungs. His eyes rolled back before he exhaled. She swore he moaned while licking his lips, the sound like thunder rolling in the vast distance.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Celes murmured. “I’m sorry.”

Right when she repositioned herself in an attempt to roll off him, a hand snatched her wrist with the same force she applied to Setzer’s neck. He hooked his leg over hers and their bodies spun over together. Celes crashed onto her back. Setzer pinned her wrist to the rug as silver hair framed his face.

“You’re so beautiful when you’re angry,” he moaned to her. “Do you understand now what you do to me, ma chérie? You’d only hurt me if you denied me of it all.”

Then a light flickered his eyes, one similar to the flash of dark lust Celes just experienced. His other hand grabbed her face in a vice grip to draw her upright. She squealed in protest. Once they locked sights, Setzer’s lips quirked into a smirk.

“My turn.”

While he released her face, Setzer snatched her neck and forced Celes to stand. She clawed his arm, as if to lessen the tension constricting her air passages. Barely able to stand, Celes struggled against Setzer, though he paid no attention while dragging her to the desk. A swift, yet forcible kick sent the chair flying, crashing into a wall and collapsing on its side. He released her wrist to swipe the desk clean, the basin cracking in half with water pooling on the floor. With the moment it was cleared, he slammed Celes down onto the surface.

She shrieked, the pain splintering through her chest and cheek. No longer did he strangle her throat, but he succumbed Celes to a new discomfort. Her hands flattened over the structure with the intent to push herself upright. A hand slammed into her back and pinned her in place. She yelped, though hoped to catch a glimpse of what was going on.

“Don’t move,” Setzer demanded.

The power he exuded now rivaled her own over him, if not surpassed it. Now wasn’t the time to tease with the idea of disobeying. Celes swallowed hard and listened to him.
Setzer’s hand at her hip promptly removed her belt. It never clanked to the floor. Again he snatched her wrists, positioned her arms behind her back, and slipped the leather strap tight around her biceps. A second item—a soft piece of cloth—bound her wrists together. Celes’ heart stopped. No matter what attempts she made to wiggle free, the unknown restraint suppressed her strength and held her in the uncomfortable position.

Shallow breaths jutted in and out of her trembling mouth. As Setzer reclaimed the chair to prop into the door handle, Celes closed her eyes and ignored the panic threatening to encompass her. It wasn’t cold steel rubbing her wrists raw. It wasn’t a damp, shoddy prison cell with the prospect of death looming from every inch. It wasn’t days of torture and abuse, verbal and physical.

And he wasn’t a brazen soldier threatening to make her plead for her execution to put herself out of her misery.

*He won’t hurt me. He won’t hurt me. He won’t hurt me. He won’t hurt me. He won’t—*

Thick, dense footsteps took their time returning to Celes. A sharp tug ripped her pants to her knees. Celes blushed as she passively presented herself to him, bent over the desk. Fresh from her recent orgasm, the scent of sex lingered in the room. His hand sank into her upper back. The anticipation of his next action quickened her breaths and heart.

Setzer’s touch softened along the backside of her exposed legs. He traced over the curve of her rear, groped lightly at the thick flesh. When he pulled back, Celes whimpered, hoping his hand would return to the delicate spot. And it did in the form of a sudden, keen smack.

Nothing but hot, searing pain lived in her. As pins and needles traveled upward, inside and out, all the agony bubbled up in her throat until she released it in a scream. Head tossed back, which was met with his hand slamming her head back down.

“I said,” Setzer hissed, “don’t move.”

The intense restraints forced Celes’ eyes wide open, more so when another strike slapped her. She screamed again, though within those moments of nothing, Celes experienced a warmth she was familiar with. The intensity now didn’t compare to anything from before; she could indulge herself into a drunken stupor over how utterly *blissful* the sensation was.

Again he spanked her with a force daring to break skin—Celes was nearly certain of that. She bit hard on her lip in hopes to muffle her agonizing cries. It *hurt*. It rivaled with every injury she received throughout her military career, yet the pleasure hiding beneath it had no equal. Celes waited for those moments after each strike, where torture promised delirium.

She should have found it wrong. Pain didn’t bring pleasure, yet her body overthrew any logic left in her. Unable to help herself, Celes released the hold on her lip and cried out. The sound produced from the depths of her being transformed into an erotic coo when the bliss.

Hot breath beat upon her ear. “I see you’re enjoying this,” Setzer groaned. “So who exactly is the sick fuck now, hmm?”

She replied with a loud yelp after he smacked her. The pain drove her to tears, first swelling in her eyes and then rolling down her cheeks. Despite crying, despite screaming, despite all of the torment Setzer submitted her to, Celes couldn’t deny the fleeting seconds of bliss she found. Not through soft kisses or tender caresses, but through discipline.

But as much as Celes enjoyed herself, the pain quickly overwhelmed pleasure. As each bout of
warmth fluttered further away, agony seared down to her bones. Yet she didn’t desire to stop, for as embarrassing as it was, Setzer wasn’t wrong; Celes was enjoying it, aroused enough for him to slide inside of her with utmost ease if he wished.

She hitched her breath, suspended in the moment of waiting. This time, his hand wasn’t required to make her scream.

“Yellow!”

And she waited, half expecting him to ignore her warning. Celes sucked in air and blinked away tears, bracing herself for the inevitable, but it never happened. The soft touch along her rear came as a welcomed surprise, enough to bring her down from the anxiety-inducing heights she dangled from.

He listened.

Celes whimpered at the rough squeeze her gave, the soreness of her skin more evident than before. His hand moved away and a coo fluttered out of her when he skimmed down over her slit. Celes hoped his fingers would thrust into her, tilting her hips just enough to further present herself to him. The hand left her. Celes sniffled while listening to the frantic tugging of clothing. Her imagination ran wild over the image of Setzer ripping apart his attire in order to take advantage of her. Blood boiled through her veins, pumping wildly in the interim. Maybe he’d tease her, make her beg to be fucked.

Instead, he forced himself inside with no further warning. A jagged breath raked through her throat. The front of her thighs slammed into the sharp edge of the desk alongside each thrust. A fresh experience—blunt, yet constant—one which dulled in comparison to the spanking she received. The wooden structure crashed into the wall and vibrated through the airship.

He used her body for his own pleasure, relentless as ever and not once pausing to tend to her needs. Wobbling on the line separating torment and thrill, a mixture of moans and cries shot out from her despite her best efforts. Her arms sat stiff in their makeshift restraints, her entire backside burned from the repeated strikes, and her eyes couldn’t stop producing tears regardless of how immensely aroused she was from their play.

She loved it. She wanted him to use her, if only to hear and feel him come undone.

The hand at her head lifted. Her neck screamed over the release, but her leeway was short-lived. Fingers combed through her long hair, gathering most of it with several twirls. Setzer yanked the pale locks backwards akin to the reins of a chocobo. Celes was forced to arch backwards, head tossed upwards, and mouth parted for an agonizing scream.

Through blurry tears, she caught her reflection and blushed. On a good day, she wasn’t eager to stare at herself, for vanity was best saved for those with nothing better to do. Her face was a mess by her standards, but with a timid glance up to Setzer’s reflection, she had never seen him so captivated by anything else, save for perhaps flying.

And Celes was pleased to have a perfect view of Setzer when he finally had his fill. It had been a shame, however, when the sound of the desk slamming into the wall coupled with her own cries drowned Setzer out. She didn’t need to listen, though, when she could feel, drawing out a moan with each twitch and pulse. Much to her dismay—and also to her expectation—Setzer denied her of a second orgasm.

The release of her hair sent Celes collapsing onto the desk, but the warmth she yearned for never reached her. Tension prickled up her back. Her eyes snapped open. My arms. My wrists. I can’t….
She focused on the softness of the cloth, the texture of the leather, but her mind warped the sensation into steel biting through her flesh.

_Get these off me._ More tears overflowed from her eyes as the room warped into a colder setting. She tried to flail about, tried to wriggle away from the scene unfolding in her mind. _Let me go. Let me go!_

She couldn’t comprehend the agile hands working over the restraints. Her left arm fell asleep in the act and flopped over like a dead weight the second she was freed. Both limbs tingled and ached, but it was the flood of pleasure which brought a stutter to her inhale. On an exhale, Celes inadvertently moaned. The leather belt fell to the desk with a thud and a second later, the cloth floated down to join it. She recognized the material through wide eyes—the bandana.

Her mind told her to move and reclaim her freedom. She wobbled, struggling to stand. As she prepared for a second attempt, heavy fabric enveloped her before Setzer swept her off her feet. He pressed a kiss into the corners of her eyes, kissing away the tears.

“Celes,” he spoke to her. “Are you okay? Celes, please, can you speak?”

All Celes could do was cry. She buried her face into his shoulder and surrendered to the tears. His hold on her tightened.

“Nod if you’re okay,” he whispered into her hair. “Please….”

A second later, she found the strength to nod. The tears trickled out, despite squeezing her eyes shut. Her body quivered in his arms.

“I-I can’t… stop crying,” Celes whined. “I don’t know w-why.”

“Did I push too far?”

She immediately shook her head. “No, I-I loved it. I just can’t…”

“What do you need right now?” When Celes didn’t respond, Setzer continued. “Celes, I’m going to place down in a corner for a moment and I’ll be right back. Is that okay?”

She eventually nodded.

Bundling her up in the blanket, Setzer lowered Celes onto the floor with care, propping her against the wall from an angle and not directly on the set of bruises she obtained. She curled up into herself when he parted from her, not realizing how much she required his touch to keep her anchored in reality. But Setzer kept to his word and returned shortly. Celes caught a glimpse of a new water basin with a set of washcloths along with a small jar scented with vanilla.

With the items settled beside her, Setzer brushed a hand over the edge of the blanket. “May I?”

Celes nodded again, allowing him to unravel her briefly from the blanket to strip off her attire. Setzer removed each piece with tender care, stacking them in neat piles to the side. Before removing her top, Celes shuddered at his fingers brushing past her arms. He scooped up her hands and kissed along her wrists. When fresh tears pooled in her eyes, it wasn’t out of fear.

“You were such a good girl,” Setzer whispered in between kisses. “Even remembered our safe words…. I’m so proud of you. It’s perfectly normal to feel this way after an intense session.” His lips pressed between her eyes. “Thank you, Celes. You did well. Now let me take care of you.”

Once nude, Celes melted into Setzer’s arms, content when he laid her down in his lap. The blanket
draped over her form while he untwisted the top to the jar. She quietly sniffled and sobbed, though never made a peep as he scooped out the lotion to massage into her bruised backside. The washcloths came next, dipped into cool water and pressed into her neck, her arms, her wrists, her forehead.

In time, her body calmed down. The threats of a flashback faded into nothing, though her wrists still twitched. The tears still slipped out.

“Are you okay?” Setzer asked while stroking her head like a pampered pet.

She nodded, curling into him and soaking up the attention.

“Do you need anything, Celes?”

On instinct, she clung onto him. “You,” she said above a whisper. “I need you.”

Her neck ached, thus stirring Celes from her slumber. She blinked past swollen eyes to lit candles on the floor, illuminating a tray of food and a teapot filled with a familiar, peppermint scent. Next to her was Setzer, slouched over and entertaining himself with a solo card game and burning cigarette. As Celes shifted, Setzer halted his game and rested his smoke on an ashtray before facing her.

“You’re awake,” he murmured and kissed her forehead. “Did you sleep well?” Celes nodded while wiggling over to inch into his lap. Setzer scooped her up, blankets and all, and settled her into him.

“How are you?”

“Well,” Celes purred, her voice rubbed dry and hoarse. She only winced over the sting of her sore rear. She shifted her weight against him and Setzer never protested.

“You sure?”

Celes hummed while nuzzling into the crook of his neck. Had his grip on her loosened, she would have given another answer. They sat together in silence, the stench of blood and sex wafting through the room. On and off, Celes trembled, but it faded away the second Setzer tightened his embrace and decorated her cheeks with light kisses. He pushed blonde hair out of her face, not once caring if she clung onto his shirt.

“I’m sorry for what I had said,” Setzer said at one point.

“What?”

“I was furious and spoke out of line. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt and allowed you to speak your share. My mind got the best of me, thus I didn’t think or see straight. You... don’t have to forgive me for those wretched words I called you.” He sighed. “I never meant for anything to spiral out of control, but I never bore witness to someone else daring to swipe away the one I cared for the most. I only wished to set matters straight with Locke, not to upset you or anyone else. My anger... it was directed at you. It shouldn’t have been.”
“I was no better.”

Setzer shook his head. “I suppose we were caught up in the moment. Some pairs talk out their problems, some don’t. I guess we just....” He coughed and Celes blushed. “That doesn’t excuse what I did to you.”

“Oh what I did to you.”

“You had every right to be angry.”

“And you didn’t?”

“Not if it hurt you.” A weak chuckle sputtered out of Setzer. “Well, not emotionally. You know what I mean, yes?” She nodded and he sighed. “J’ai aimé jusqu’à atteindre la folie.”

Celes scrunched up her eyebrows over the foreign Jidoorian words. “What was that?”

He kissed away her tears. “Will you forgive my rudeness? I understand if you don’t.”

“It’s not that,” Celes replied. “I’m still overwhelmed by everything: the confrontation with Locke, our argument, the....” She swallowed hard, unsure of how to describe the twisted intimacy they shared. Or how to explain the peculiar timing of memories she wished to rid her soul of.

“What do you need right now?”

Celes looked into Setzer’s eyes. The slash across his face sunk deep into the skin, dried blood clotting the wound. It was only a matter of time before it turned into another scar for his eclectic collection.

“Don’t go,” she begged. “Just... stay here. This right here is perfectly fine.” Setzer stroked her arm while cradling her. Another thought surfaced to mind. “I doubt I can walk come morning, let alone now.”

Setzer smirked into her. “Then I suppose I did something right.”

She pulled off a small, frail smile. “And what of you? I wasn’t exactly... gentle with you either.”

He drew in a deep breath, as if to recall the strangulation. “No, you weren’t, and it was everything I wanted it to be.” He purred. “And I wanted to hold you, just like this. Little effort on your part.”

Yet she rolled over his question again in her mind—what did she truly need?

“When Locke kissed me,” Celes began, “all I could think about was how much I wanted it to be you. But it wasn’t you. It... felt wrong. I wanted to rush to you and have your lips on mine and replace the taste that was still in my mouth. That sensation... it’s still there. I don’t want it—”

Before she could finish, Setzer silenced her with a soft, deep kiss. His mouth closed over hers, never going past slow nibbles. Celes hung her arms loose around his neck while cooing. Neither pulled back, waiting until both their lungs begged for air.

Once more, Celes caught sight of his new scar. She frowned and ghosted a hand over it.

“I’m sorry,” Celes whispered. “You didn’t deserve this.”

But Setzer closed his eyes and nestled into the palm of her hand. “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. It’s no longer the point, though. Instead of dreading it, I’d rather it serve as a reminder.”
“Of what?”

Eyes opened to meet Celes’. “Of when I took a dagger to my face over giving you up.”

Chapter End Notes

If there's something I can't stand, it's people covering up abusive relationships as BDSM. A true BDSM relationship, whether as an occasional thing in the bedroom or a lifestyle, is forever safe, sane, and consensual. But we're human; we make mistakes. And sometimes things get intense or veer off the road. That's normal in any relationship, let alone a BDSM one. I've always seen BDSM stories as either weird kinky slave AU's that don't really come off as BDSM or super strict to the rules and never had a hiccup - there's nothing in the middle, nothing normal. This was an intense scene to write, edit, and read, but I desperately wanted to show something I don't think is typically shown. Sometimes you jump into unknown territory in the heat of the moment. Sometimes you desperately want to try something new, even if it might scare the shit out of you. But at the end of the day, despite the screaming and crying, you just want the other person to know that no matter what, you trust and respect them. That's what BDSM means to me and I hope I've conveyed that thus far.
A single candlelight flickered. The flame provided dingy light for the room, casting deep shadows over Celes’ face. She stared at her reflection for quite some time as countless memories surfaced in her mind. Moments of violence and passion alike washed over her like pinpricks until they blurred into nothing.

But she held onto Setzer’s words before departing. He kissed between her eyes, tucked blonde hair behind her ears, and gazed upon her like nothing else mattered. “Take as much time as you need, ma chérie,” he had whispered. “I must return to my duties, but don’t you rush. Whenever you’re ready.”

She broke away to eye the door drenched in shadows. Behind it lied a dozen faces she hesitated to confront. She and Setzer... weren’t exactly quiet in the earlier hours. Not the best timing, but nothing had been as of late. Her mind raced and plagued her with a million scenarios. All of them resulted in her humility. Even then, she recalled Setzer’s soft eyes and those words of his.

There had been a time when she garnered unwanted attention and the masses stared. Each set of eyes she walked by judged her for innumerable reasons: for excelling when they didn’t, for conducting treason, for coming back as if none of it happened. The things they called her... that lived in her bones. Every tremble reminded her of who to blame for the horrors which persisted in her being.

No one was to blame now, however. Save for herself, perhaps, but carrying that burden for eternity bore no appeal. Rising from the desk, Celes strode towards the door, inhaled upon grasping the handle, and stepped out.

Everyone else had been in the hallway or the foyer, though none of them noticed her until the door shut. As if on cue, each head spun to settle upon her. No one said a damn thing.

Blue eyes flicked about until she exchanged stares with all of them. Setzer was absent, as were Edgar and Locke, but they weren’t the ones she anxiously awaited. Those wrinkling their foreheads in her direction no doubt did so thanks to what had transpired that day.

Celes did exactly what she had done in Vector when others literally and figuratively spat in her direction—she held her head high, drew her shoulders back, and marched onward.

No one spoke to her as she made her way to the couch down in the foyer. Whispers broke out, gradually rising in volume until typical conversations resumed where they had left off. Some acknowledged her with a brief nod or smile in passing, but nothing more. Even when Edgar emerged and exchanged idle chit-chat with Celes, no one spoke of what had happened.

Not of Locke. Not of Setzer. And certainly not of Celes.

For the first time in gods knew how long, she found solace in that solitude.

She tried speaking with both of them. As much as Celes wished to forget the events that had unfolded, ignoring it did no one any favors. A week lied ahead of them to finalize preparations and last minute travels; Celes refused to spend that time afflicted by the words left unsaid. We have greater matters to attend to, was what she would have said, both in the past and present. But a
gaping wound expanded with each passing hour spent not resolving the lingering tension.

From appearances alone, Setzer and Locke acted civil, sharing the same air only when the entire group needed to be present to discuss their agenda. Other than that, Celes caught them glaring at one another from opposite ends of the room or in passing, though only if the other didn’t notice. Celes huffed; she didn’t doubt the two refused to discuss their confrontation like adults. Had they been her troops, she would have lectured them in public to the point of humiliation. Anything to drive her point across.

But this wasn’t the military and she was no longer an officer of any importance. So she took matters into her hands another way.

Celes finally approached Locked upon his return from a supply run. He barely held Celes’ gaze, the purplish-blue welt on his face still prominent.

“Hey,” she spoke gently, hoping it would be enough to bring his face up.

It wasn’t, though. “Hey,” Locke offered in return.

Celes sighed. Had talking with him always been this difficult in the past? “Did you all find what you were looking for?”

“Yeah.” Either a scoff or a sigh left Locke. Celes couldn’t tell. “Bought the town out in potions, that’s for sure.”

They stood in silence. Others strolled past them without acknowledging either. Locke shuffled his feet and Celes refused to avert her stare.

When the room cleared out, she spoke again. This time, she skipped the small talk and dove into the heart of the problem. Locke never lifted his head while Celes quietly explained how she and Setzer had become more than comrades in battle. She spared him particular details, doubting he’d be fond of their explicit hook-up, but it was there—the truth laid out in front of him.

That she was entwined within Setzer with no intentions of letting go.

He said nothing. Not at first. Celes wasn’t sure what she wanted Locke to say, anyways. Perhaps that he was happy for them? Happy for her, at least? Was that too much to ask for? Was his past mistakes and bitterness worth holding onto a useless grudge?

“Yeah,” Locke, eventually said. But the kicked puppy eyes of his slowly shifted into something else as he furrowed his brows and pursed his lips. “Yeah, okay. I get it.”

“Locke—”

“I’ll stay out of both of your hairs and—”

“Locke, that’s not what I meant—”

“Then what did you mean?!”

Finally, his head snapped up and Celes held her breath. There was that anger again, an expression she was too familiar with. Swallowing hard, she stood her ground—stepped closer, even—and struck him down with her icy eyes.

“To grow up,” she wanted to scream, but tempered her voice to a hair above a whisper. “To mourn
the past and move forward. Everyone else has. Perhaps you should take our lead.”

The once tightly knit muscles strung about his face eased away. The corners of his lips turned downwards and his shoulders tensed. Locke nodded, though Celes questioned his sincerity. Before she could ask further, Locke shuffled past her and retreated elsewhere upon the Falcon.

The next time she found him was while everyone shared what barely qualified as a hot meal. He smiled and laughed with the others as they recounted warm-hearted stories to pass the time and erase the dread of knowing their final showdown with Kefka crept closer.

No one ever mentioned Locke’s behavior or the nuances he displayed before Celes, thus she opted to forget and take her own advice—to move on.

Of course, Setzer broke that trend as if his life depended upon it.

“Can’t say I’m happy to have him back on board,” he said while staring down the hallway. At the other end stood Locke with Edgar and Terra, none of them paying a bit of attention as Celes and Setzer leaned against the wall together in one of their few moments alone. Or something resembling it.

Celes peered past Setzer to eye the group in question, then flicked her sights back to him. Apprehension and hostility didn’t tug Setzer’s lips into a frown or wrinkled his forehead; amusement lied there instead.

“But,” Setzer continued, his violet eyes returning to Celes, “I suppose there are worse people to have on board. I’m certain I’d rather die than have Imperial soldiers march onto my airship.”

Celes raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

He chuckled. “You’re the exception to the rule, ma cherie. In my defense, you weren’t wearing your Imperial regalia when we first met and I certainly don’t recall a lady amongst the duties and taxes officers demanding to board my vessel. Might have swayed my mind otherwise.” Setzer shrugged. “But Locke stole a few candlestick holders. Not the worst option when you weigh both in hand, no?”

She resisted the need to heave out a sigh. The subject of Locke had yet to surface between them since their lives exploded. Then again, Celes had yet to spend proper alone time with Setzer since then. With the Falcon crowded, neither were free from attentive ears picking up on their hushed words, either by accident or on purpose.

Instead, they took advantage of their affair turned public knowledge. Setzer always took to Celes’ side when the group gathered. His hand fell onto her shoulder, sometimes her waist. He greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, far too brief for her liking, and he kissed her knuckles upon departing. In front of all eyes to see. Celes didn’t object; it was never her intention to begin with.

So much for a secret, she kept to herself. Or wait until all of this blew over.

Neither heard anyone object to their fleeting displays of affection. At the same time, no one questioned either her or Setzer on what exactly it was between them. Celes thanked the gods for that. Preparations for Kefka’s Tower were taxing enough, let alone needing to explain her personal life to anyone.

And she wanted their moment down the hallway, away from everyone else, to be without any bumps. But when else are we to ever discuss this? Her gaze wavered as she moistened her dry lips.
Setzer dipped his head down until he met her eyes. “Something the matter, Celes? Did I say something wrong?”

“Wrong?” She blinked and pushed her hair out of her face. “Far from it.”

“Then should I let you be? I don’t wish to be annoying you with—”

A soft chuckle fell from her lips while she shook her head. “Forgive me, I simply find it odd that you have no trouble poking fun at Locke when only a couple days ago....”

The words were lost to her. Mouth ajar, she stared upon Setzer’s features and relived the horrid moment when Locke drew his dagger against what should have been an ally. Celes lifted a ginger hand to trace the fresh scar living in his skin. She didn’t ask for this. Neither did he, but now he had to live with it forever. Just as she had to witness it every time she gazed upon him, forced to relive the memory she wished to erase from all their lives.

His hand closed over hers, bringing her palm to stillness against his cheek. “We all have our ways of coping, Celes,” he said, a sad note hidden within his smooth voice. “If I dwelled on every tragedy of mine, I wouldn’t be standing here.”

“I’m not asking you to dwell on anything.”

“Then what?”

Her fingers curled into him as Celes stepped closer. “Will you not speak with him?”

The slight wince was enough of a response. “About what?”

“I don’t know.... About what happened?”

“I tried speaking with him already and that didn’t exactly get me very far.”

“So then you’re fine with ignoring the fact he attacked you?”

Setzer released a heavy sigh, his eyes set elsewhere. After a pause, he faced her. “Locke and I have been at odds since the four of you stepped foot upon the Blackjack. Even if you slapped me in the face and kindly told me to fuck off, it wouldn’t change how he and I interact with each other. He won’t see anything from my perspective and try as I might, I’m not too keen on stooping to his level. However—” Setzer’s face hardened. “—I’m not particularly fond of how he treated you in general, though I doubt I have any control over that.”

Celes’ hand slipped away from his face. “Are you suggesting I’m not to speak with him again?”

The laugh rolling out of him was at least a genuine one. “Please, Celes, I only get my kicks off when you’re also enjoying being told what to do.” He cocked his head and smirked. “Outside of that, I can’t and won’t control you.”

“But it irritates you.”

“Having to listen to Edgar snore at night irritates me, not the fact you converse with someone not to my liking.”

“Wait... Edgar’s the one snoring?”

“Did I say that out loud?”
“I was almost certain it was Sabin.”

Setzer grinned. “Then let’s stick with your version and pretend I said nothing.”

While he chuckled, Celes rolled her eyes with a small smile and whacked his arm. “But you’re fine with everything, then? Everything that happened... you’ll just move on?”

“Might as well. Not like I’m presented many other options.”

“I wish Locke was this easy to deal with.”

To that, Setzer raised his brow once more. “Is that so?”

Celes peeked past Setzer again. The group had vanished and not a soul was in sight. Even then, she whispered of her recent interactions with Locke. Her frustrations boiled to the surface. Celes loathed the quiet, yet deadly glances they exchanged while simultaneously ignoring the other existed. If only the two men could agree to disagree.

She rambled, more than she wanted to. Her shoulders tensed and face wrinkled as a headache threatened to ruin her evening. It wasn’t until Setzer rested his hands on her waist that she realized the aches in her body.

His nose poked hers and nudged her to face him. His sweet, warm breath tickled her lips. His fingertips drew random shapes into her sides.

“Do you remember,” he murmured, slowly guiding her to the opposite wall, “there was once a time when you were beyond lost in your little world and I had suggested that you relax?”

A shaky exhale shook through Celes. How could she ever forget the promises he teased her with upon that staircase and how close he had been? Years later, she quietly admitted how she longed to kiss him then. If they hadn’t been interrupted, maybe Setzer would have.

“I also remember,” Celes whispered, gasping softly when her back met with the solid surface of the wall, “telling you multiple times that we had bigger matters to deal with.”

“Yes,” he agreed. Those violet eyes of his never twitched. “I agree with you now, which is why I am not fretting over someone else disliking me and wishing I was dead. Because that doesn’t matter. He doesn’t matter. Did he actively harm you in any way when you last spoke with him?”

Recalling the exact details became more of a chore when Celes’ focus resided on Setzer’s lips. “He... no, he didn’t—”

“Then it’s done. Why spend your time and energy on something you can’t change?”

With a deep breath, she said, “Because I want to put my mind at ease.”

The crack in Setzer’s lips brought a chill up her spine. “Ma cherie.... If only there was a way for me to remove every last one of your worries. I fear that even if I did nothing but focus on you until the end of time, it wouldn’t be enough to unwind you completely.”

“And what, dare I ask, is stopping you from trying?”

He paused and Celes held her breath. It wasn’t the first time he laid eyes upon her, but every time he did, she recalled the first night they spoke alone upon the Blackjack. How he looked at her then, stepping into the moonlight, illuminated only by his cigarette. And after she struck him.... That same
expression washed over his features and the intensity, the hunger, the absolute admiration he held for
her never waned.

Celes parted her mouth for him before he closed his over hers. Both clung to one another as they
nipped with lips and teeth. Her nose bumped into the crevasse that was his scar, though Celes was
beyond occupied to think of the horror anymore.

Instinct alone brought her to rock her body into his. She felt Setzer’s breath hitch within that kiss,
only to drive her further into the wall. Celes burned from within, more than she wished to let on.
With her lips busy, her hands wandered, tugging beneath his coat in hopes to brush over a patch of
skin. Again she brought her hips to his, again she tugged at his lip with her teeth. Blood boiled
within her and refused to simmer until she tasted something other than simple gestures of affection.

The third time she bit at Setzer’s lip and her nails raked through his shirt, Setzer hissed and reeled
back. Celes froze. Had she harmed him? No blood trickled from his lips, but it was the pained
expression he wore that troubled her more.

He didn’t dive back in for another kiss. Both hands cupped her blushing cheeks and smoothed over
her. “Oh, Celes,” he whispered, “how I wish we had more time together.”

She tilted her contorted face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I wish we met under better circumstances and didn’t have to squeeze in time to see one
another, let alone steal a proper kiss from you.” He shook his head, a quiet laugh seeping out of him.
“We’ve been through quite a lot in these past months, haven’t we?” When Celes continued to stare in
silence, Setzer continued. “I don’t wish to push you any further than I already have. At least not for
now.”

A dagger must have carved through her chest. “What?”

“I’m impressed with how well you’ve persevered, Celes. Truly, I am. At the same time, I don’t wish
to push any further. Not when it comes to play.”

Her throat ached and cracked dry. “But it’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? Then why can’t we
enjoy it?”

“Not now, Celes.” He kissed between her eyes, then her nose, and finally her lips, so softly she
swore it could have been but a gentle breeze. “I don’t wish to be a distraction.”

Celes scoffed. “Tell me you must be joking.”

“And I wish I was, but the fact of the matter is that your well-being trumps over even my desires, so
forgive me if I wish to slow down.”

His hands still held her and caressed her skin, forehead resting upon hers, but the curttness in his face
forced her to disengage. Celes closed her eyes and longed for a time when the world wasn’t being
threatened with destruction and her mind wasn’t stretched to the ends of the world and back.

“You’re still being a good girl and taking care of yourself, yes?”

Setzer had left the small container of vanilla-scented lotion in her possession, instructing her to tend
to her bruises daily. And she did, for it smelled divine and provided a slice of luxury and relief in her
hellish life, but also it made him smile every time they crossed paths and he asked if she was well.
Every smile was a reminder of how much Setzer valued the aftermath, perhaps more so than their
detectable act not long ago.
“Of course,” Celes murmured.

“And you’re well?”

She hummed and nodded, then cooed when he kissed her temple. His scent filtered through her nose and smoothed over her taut muscles.

“That’s all I care for now. Everything else can crumble.”

As they held onto one another, content in the calm and each other’s heart beats, Celes quietly wished he would never let go. Even when they parted ways for him to pilot the airship and for her to ration out their new intake of supplies, his touch lingered on her waist, her cheeks, her lips. Celes licked her lips and paused intermittently to mentally return to where Setzer’s silence spoke more than Locke’s. Only then was she finally content with the unspoken, yet shaky truce amongst the three of them.
Days remained before their planned strike against Kefka’s Tower. The group cleaned every merchant they could find of their wares, promising it would all go to good use. Each vendor scoffed; assurance of saving the world paled before good coin that ensured they lived a little longer. With combat necessities acquired, they stopped where they could to meet up with others. Some old friends, some former supporters of the Returners, and some mere acquaintances found in passing once upon a time. Anything to grip onto and cherish, for while no one spoke of it, the sentiment quietly hung over them—maybe this time they wouldn’t come out alive.

As everyone else departed the Falcon, Celes stayed aboard. Those she would have wanted to see or speak with again no longer walked nor breathed. What more was there to do? Celes lowered her head and kept to herself. The days to come meant finding a means to distract herself until they faced Kefka.

She wished she had a better distraction than wandering the Falcon.

The boarding ramp slammed shut and captured Celes’ attention. From the hallway she loitered in, she focused on the echoes residing in the foyer. Edgar’s voice filtered through first.

“But isn’t it a touch too late to be bringing this up? We don’t have time for speculation.”

“You’re not wrong for that matter.” The time-worn, yet wise tone belonged to Strago, no doubt. “Still, I can’t help but wonder what would happen.”

Edgar sounded not even the slightest bit amused. “We still need to take care of Kefka. Everything else can come after that.”

“All this time, we’ve been focusing on ridding ourselves of Kefka. A noble cause, of course, but we’re forgetting a truth in this predicament; Kefka has bent the Warring Triad to his liking. One cannot exist without the other. To destroy Kefka means to destroy the Warring Triad.”

“Yes, you’ve been rambling on about that for a while now.”

“And if you’d let me finish, you wouldn’t be dismissing it as you are.”

Silence drifted through the Falcon, enough to squeeze Celes’ heart until it skipped a beat.

“Gadgets and tech might be the norm where you’re from,” Strago continued, this time with a hint of sadness, “though in Thamasa, we are aware of the origins of our magics, even if our blood is diluted over the centuries. The gods, the Warring Triad... whatever you wish to acknowledge them as, they brought magic to this world. Removing them would mean removing magic.”

“Figaro has fared well without magic. Surely Thamasa can do the same.”

Celes swore Strago chuckled. She resisted the urge to peek out to spy upon Edgar’s face. “Thamasa,” Strago said, “is the least of my concerns. You forget that there are those who live and breathe magic, for it is what keeps them alive. The very magicite we carry.... What Espers remain will cease to exist alongside Kefka.”
The silence came again, yet Celes didn’t notice as her eyes went wide and her throat dried out.

“That,” Edgar said, slowly, carefully, “in theory, that would mean...” A sudden, quiet panic gripped his tongue, but Celes couldn’t ignore the words if she tried. “What would become of Terra?”

“I can’t say. She carries more magical blood than all of us combined. Hopefully, her human half can find a reason to stay within this world.”

Their conversation persisted with Strago convincing Edgar that it was, in fact, a mere theory. For all they knew, nothing would happen. Or magic would be ripped from Terra’s body before it disappeared—before Terra disappeared.

Celes gazed upon her trembling palms. What if... I was to disappear?

She squeezed her eyes shut. The ghosts of needles stung all over her body and reminded her of the chill within in her veins and where it came from.

Perhaps she wasn’t an Esper offspring, but true Esper blood lived in her. It always had. Existing without it never crossed Celes’ mind. And there were her allies, casually discussing possibilities without a fraction of the panic Celes now harbored.

Spinning on her heels, Celes rushed away from their voices, yet the reminder of Strago’s warning rang loud and clear. She paused halfway and leaned into the wall. Her forehead burned against the cool, metal surface as she clung onto herself.

Why hadn’t anyone raised this earlier? Why did it only surface now in whispers? They could have figured out another way, something that wouldn’t result in stripping the world void of magic and all the life it had touched.

Images of Terra bombarded Celes. After all she had been through—what they had been through—Terra didn’t deserve death. She had a whole world to explore and live within, after spending the entirety of her life locked up within a fortress. There had been better days under Imperial rule, but the last of them, the ones which robbed her of her identity, were not kind.

Sometimes Celes wished she could have forgotten as much as Terra did. She had been forced to remember everything from her successes to her mistakes. Especially the mistakes. Celes winced and damned the biting metal nipping at her wrists—the only chill she loathed. It was but an illusion now. Several breaths reminded her of such.

But she couldn’t find anything to calm herself from the terror that was her own imminent death sneaking up behind her.

“Hey, you doing alright?”

The voice jolted her upright, though she tensed more upon realization of who inquired about her well-being. Celes rubbed her arms and dropped eye contact.

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

“You sure?” Footsteps dared to inch closer. “I don’t know if I like you being this quiet.”

Despite looking elsewhere, Celes gasped gently when Locke leaned in to catch her gaze. He blinked and contorted his face out of worry.

“What’s up?” he asked.
With a deep inhale, Celes straightened her posture and forced her hands to her sides, albeit balled into fists. “Shouldn’t you be off somewhere? Everyone else is essentially saying their goodbyes to whoever they can.”

Locke shrugged. “Not a lot of people to see. Besides, everyone I care most about is already on the airship.” He flashed a smile. “Guess I lucked out!”

Again her eyes faltered and again Locke refused to walk away.

“What about you, Celes? I don’t think I’ve seen you leave the airship since we’ve been doing the last rounds.”

She stared at him, part incredulous and part in shock. At least she tried to blame the latter on him. “Like yourself, I suppose everyone I care most about is already here.”

Though when Locke said it, his voice bounced with optimism and Celes’ trailed off while her shoulders crawled up her neck. He didn’t pick up on it. She didn’t expect him to.

“Ah, well, guess that means nothing to do but wait.”

Celes nodded, looking past Locke. “Yeah,” she breathed out.

A sigh fell from Locke’s lips. “Okay, but really now—what’s going on?” She parted her lips to dismiss him, but Locke cut her off. “I know you’re not one for small talk, but this... isn’t like you. Celes, you look like you just saw a ghost.”

She shut her eyes momentarily. I wish I had.

“Did something happen? Are you worried about something?” Locke rattled off more questions with the intent to open Celes up. Instead, she folded her arms tight across her body. “Or I can just fuck off and leave you alone, I guess.”

The remorse behind those words snapped Celes’ eyes open. Locke shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor while shuffling by her. As much as she longed to be alone, further damaging whatever friendship they had left to salvage wasn’t doing either of them any favors.

So Celes swallowed down her pride and looked to him. “Are you afraid at all?”

It was enough to bring Locke to a halt. His head followed her voice and their eyes met. “Of what?”

“Of facing Kefka?”

“Kefka?” Locke scoffed. “I’m more eager than anything else. About time we had a chance to smack that guy in the face for everything he’s done. And to do it without anyone holding us back. We’ll be on equal footing this time around. I just wish we could hurry up and get to it already.”

Of course, you are. “And what about after?”

“There’s what?”

“After he’s destroyed.”

Locke simultaneously cocked his head, raised an eyebrow, and looked upon Celes like a Marlboro. “I uh... hadn’t thought that far ahead? Celebrate? Be happy we’re not dead? I don’t know. Kind of not on my radar. Guess I’ll figure it out once we get there. Still need to kill the guy, yeah?”
The breath in her throat staggered. “Yeah.”

“Why? Were you thinking beyond that?”

A million thoughts screamed in her head. “I suppose I’m more worried about the idea if we don’t defeat Kefka.”

Locke paused. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not—”

“Seriously, Celes? You of all people shouldn’t be so pessimistic. Look at everything you’ve done. You’re the one who brought us all together again. You’re the one who reminded everyone that it was worth getting out of whatever rut we’re in and move forward.” He rubbed his neck and dropped his gaze. “Shit, even though you verbally handed my ass to me, it was enough to motivate me and move on. More than once, too, might I add. I can only credit you for that. Couldn’t be bothered otherwise before you showed back up.”

Celes held her tongue, conflicted by both gratitude and rage.

“But what else was I to expect, right?” Locke met her with a crooked smile. “You’re General Chère. Wouldn’t have gotten that title for nothing.”

“I’m not a General anymore,” Celes quietly reminded him.

“Pfff, yeah, okay. You still were one at one point. More than anything I’ve ever accomplished. Just makes you that much more qualified to rally and inspire us all. So yeah, I don’t really buy it if all you’re thinking about is what will happen if we don’t win.” He took one step forward, teetering on the fine line of being too close. “You got this far. Why bother worrying about the what ifs? Just keep doing what you’ve been doing this whole time. Everyone else will follow suit.”

Every fiber prickled like electricity. She wanted to throw up. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream how she felt inside.

She wanted to not die while the others stood victorious.

“Be strong, Celes.” Locke was surprisingly gentle, his words marked with that smile she had once been fond of.

Instead of lecturing him, she humored Locke by dropping her arms once more and holding her head high. A grin consumed him along with a firm nod.

“Yeah! Like that! Everything is going to be fine. Besides, the world’s already ended once and we all managed to survive, right? Doubt there’s anything worse Kefka can sling at us. It’ll be over before you know it. Don’t worry—I’ve got your back.”

Celes expected him to leave after that pep talk, yet he lingered. They exchanged gazes and Celes held her breath. The memories of their detrimental moments together washed over her. Always brief, never ideal. For every moment, she had a question for him, all of which she would never speak, for she never believed him to fully answer her.

Did you truly believe I was a spy back then? Has your heart healed now? Would you have continued to wander the shattered lands after the failed attempt with the Phoenix magicite? Would you keep fighting without me here to encourage you? Was it truly your bandana I discovered? Did any of it matter to you? Did it ever?
A single thought echoed in her head until the rest faded to nothing. Her face softened and her nails ceased to dig holes into her palms. Locke blinked as she inched close enough to whisper.

"Knowing everything you know now," Celes said, "with all the regrets and broken promises." She swallowed and licked her lips. "Would you have still saved me from that jail cell?"

It had been far too long since she witnessed such a solemn expression upon Locke’s face.

More voices bounced off the walls from another room. Laughter spun about there as Celes held Locke’s gaze and awaited whatever he had to offer.

"Would you have still followed me?" Locke asked. "Knowing everything you know now?"

She longed to scold him for throwing a question back at her without answering hers, but she thought against it upon discovering the truth in his words. Every taut muscle of hers relaxed.

"Yes," Celes confessed quietly with a slight nod.

And he returned the gesture. “Yeah.”

She never noticed him leaving her side. Then again, no one seemed to notice Celes when she slipped out of the Falcon.

The wind never ceased to slow down. Thus was the way when sitting by the ocean. It carried the scent of salt and another quality Celes couldn’t place. Maybe it resided only along shorelines or maybe it solely relied on something more mystical with Thamasa in the area.

She curled up into herself, never flinching while strands of blonde hair whipped about her face. The sun gradually sank into the ocean and set the world aflame with its many colors. Somewhere behind her, the sky cooled off into blues and violets with the promise of stars hidden within. The Falcon docked along the plains beneath the cooler skies.

After seeing the sun fall and rise countless times on the Solitary Island, Celes ceased to care for such a phenomenal view. Now she desired otherwise. The beach was different here. If only she had all of eternity to spend on that shore, drinking in every last, minuscule detail.

But somewhere beyond the horizon was a madman she had to confront. Backing away wasn’t an option. Even if it was, Celes doubted she could live with herself. None of it changed the possibility of her death alongside Kefka. Or perhaps her life would be taken before they reached him. Or Kefka would claim all of their lives.

Cringing at the thought, Celes buried her face between her knees and squeezed her legs. After all they had been through, they had to live. They had to be successful. The rest of the world had given up, but they hadn’t. Locke was right; she was the General of the group, always reminding others time and time again to cease their childish antics. Because of her, they were thirteen strong with a mission to bring an end to Kefka.

*Magic runs through me,* she mused. *I wasn’t born into it, but I was raised with it. To destroy Kefka, we must destroy magic. All of it. Not some of it, but....*
“Oh, there you are!”

Celes didn’t bother to see who stumbled upon her, the voice mixed with the wind and rolling waves.

“Everyone’s been worried about you back on the airship. No one really knew where you went, but I had a guess.” There was a giggle. “Glad I guessed right!” The wind danced between them. “Is it okay if I join you?”

Craning her head back, Celes caught sight of Terra, holding her loose bangs out of her face to keep the breeze from claiming them. That compassionate smile warmed Celes down to her toes.

*How can you be smiling now when you could potentially die?*

Celes blamed her shudder on the wind and gestured to the open patch next to her. Terra shuffled over and curled up next to Celes.

“It’s really pretty, isn’t it?” Terra squinted and raised an arm up to block the sun’s rays. “We didn’t get nearly as nice of sunsets back in Vector. I wonder if they all look the same or if every place is different. It’s soothing, either way.” Terra hummed and wrapped her cloak around her body. “I like it here.”

“How... did you know I’d be here?” Celes questioned, ignoring every dreadful, negative speculation bursting to life.

Terra shrugged. “Like I said—a guess.” She met Celes’ gaze. “It’s where I would have gone. You and I aren’t that different, so I thought to look here first.”

Different and yet the same. It was their differences that earned Terra her coveted spot within the Empire and that damn crown upon her head. What didn’t separate them, however, left them intertwining in solidarity. Celes longed for Terra to remember those times.

“Everyone’s worried,” Terra explained, “but I really wasn’t. Maybe they got used to you never leaving the ship. Guess they never noticed how you really feel.”

Celes raised a brow. “And how do I really feel?”

“You’re worried, aren’t you?”

Her chest constricted as everything else hollowed out.

A soft, light hand fell upon her own. “You’ve always been worried,” Terra continued, her voice almost lost upon the wind. “I wish I could take some of that away from you so it could be easier. You deserve that much.”

*I’m not worried,* was what Celes wished to say. The words balled up in her throat. How could she lie to Terra?

“You think so?” Celes ended up saying.

Terra nodded. “Of course! You’ve put so much effort into helping everyone else that you’ve never really stopped to help yourself. Well... I mean, unless you have. It’s only from what I’ve seen.” Terra scooted closer and draped an arm around Celes. “I just want you to know you’re not alone.”

The warmth flowed through Terra and over Celes—a familiar sensation she hoped Terra recognized, even if she didn’t fully understand. Celes eased into her friend, their heads resting along each other as
their sights set off to the burning horizon.

Alike, yet different. Enough to bond together when the rest of the world was against them.

“You’re not, either,” Celes murmured, wrapping an arm around Terra to hug her close. “We’re in this together.”

Terra’s giggles fluttered through Celes until even she cracked a small smile. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Not another word passed over them as the sun set. The fiery hues mixed in the water cooled until pinks faded to indigo. Stars sparkled to life in the sky. Not enough to illuminate the world, for the residual slivers of sunlight glowed across the land, albeit dying.

Only then did the two of them agree to return to the Falcon, helping each other up to standing and brushing off sand and grass. Terra fussed with her unruly bangs while Celes didn’t bother to tame her windswept locks. They ambled towards the grim, dark silhouette of the Falcon.

Celes’ steps trailed behind and Terra paused with her. The words came so easily, almost flawlessly. “Does it pain you to face Kefka again?”

“In a way, maybe,” Terra said. “It’s hard to explain... like I’m not sure how to feel.”

“Because of the amnesia?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Would it give you peace to end the one who did this to you, though? Even if it meant giving up your own life?”

Terra hesitated, though Celes hoped it was for searching for the right words and not out of discomfort. “After everything all of us have been through, I’d like to think that whatever it takes to bring an end to this and restore balance is worth the effort. Maybe I’ll feel differently when I face him, but for now? The only thing that feels right is standing with my friends and bringing an end to the madness.”

Celes didn’t expect Terra to approach her with a warm hand upon her shoulder. For an instant, it smoothed away whatever worries haunted Celes.

“I’ve got friends,” Terra mused, kindness sparkling in her eyes, “and so do you. We’re all here for each other and we can’t do this alone. Even if I do worry and nightmares visit me more often than dreams, I know in my heart that I... we must push onward. I believe in you, Celes. I always have. Even if we die trying, I know we can do this.”

The squeeze of Terra’s hand confirmed that notion. Celes stood in awe for but a second as Terra pivoted towards the Falcon; she envied the fearlessness residing in Terra.

It wasn’t enough to quiet Celes’ thoughts at night or calm the dread chewing her from the inside out, but if Terra was going to meet death with her chin up and a smile upon her lips, then Celes was sure to follow.
I like to image *this song* playing during the second half of this chapter - really sets the mood.
Poison tainted the ground. Not a soul was found left in Doma. Surely those who managed to survive—if there were survivors—fled elsewhere. Cyan would have known, but Celes opted to hold her tongue.

The group spread out across Doma, their final destination before setting sights onto Kefka’s Tower. Cyan had been patient, never chiming in when the question of where to go next came up. It wasn’t until everyone’s options were exhausted—neither Celes nor Terra requested returning to Vector—that all eyes settled upon the older warrior.

He only wished to see his home, or what was left of it.

None of them spoke. They stood in awe of the destruction that crippled Doma before the world fell into ruin. Sometimes they shuffled to take in the emptiness from another vantage point, though the silence persisted. Celes stayed back, refusing to venture into the barren city.

Much to her surprise, Celes caught Cyan from the corner of her eye. Instead of diving into the ruins of his homeland, Cyan approached Celes. Decades of experience tempered his posture, but his eyes held the recent tragedies which robbed him of any happiness.

“Tell me,” Cyan murmured, almost quiet enough for the wind to steal his voice and carry it away, “did thou know of the vile plans intended for Doma?”

Her breath skittered in her throat. “I wish I hadn’t,” Celes answered after a pause, “but I did. It... wasn’t anything formally agreed upon. It was—”

But Cyan briefly held up a hand and nodded. Beneath his bushy mustache, he frowned. “I have heard rumors since we were all separated... that thou spoke out against such plans, for it wasn’t just.”

“They were more than rumors; they were the truth.”

His lips cracked into a smile, or was it a smirk? “I never trusted thee. After what had happened... how could I? I was blinded by misery and vengeance. Thou didn’t deserve such disrespect.”

Celes fluttered her eyes. “Cyan, what are you—”

He bowed gravely before Celes, eyes to the ground. Once he stood upright, Cyan’s gaze softened. “Is it too much to ask for thine forgiveness?”

“You... never did anything wrong, though. You had every right to think ill of me.”

“And no longer do I think so.”

The wind teased wisps of her hair and stung her eyes. With each question she wished to present to Cyan, she found a man at peace with the terrors that once haunted him. Such strength was admirable.

Thus she nodded, a small smile upon her lips. “I forgive you, Cyan.”

He nodded back and drifted towards Doma. Maybe to pay his respects to the deceased or to relive memories of a better time. None of it included Celes or any of them, yet Cyan invited them to accompany him.

Come morning, they would ready their weapons and assault Kefka’s Tower. One last battle,
together. Celes sucked in an uneasy breath and turned away.

*I don’t want this to be the last time.*

While everyone found solitude in Doma, Celes scaled the rickety steps back up the Falcon and emerged into the foyer.

Her eyes flashed wide. Setzer lounged on one of the couches, jacket absent and heels perched upon a table. He lulled his head back and tapped a finger against a glass. A single bottle situated on the table, its contents nearly gone.

“I’m not intruding, am I?” Celes asked, rubbing her hands over one another.

His violet eyes blinked open as he brought his head to center. That scar... it still made her heart skip a beat. “Hardly. I take it everyone’s finished with this evening’s field trip?”

Celes shook her head. “No, they’re still... out there. I...” Setzer raised an eyebrow as she sought for the right words. “I thought you were joining them, as well.”

“Really?” Setzer chuckled, swished his drink about, and took a steady sip. “Not exactly how I intended to spend my last night, if you will. I’ve had my share of ruins and lost dreams. Besides, I’d prefer to spend my final days relishing whatever delights I can have, but....” He shrugged and raised his glass. “This was the last bit of scotch I could salvage on the airship and I doubt anyone else is in the mood for some poker.” Then he smiled, a light flickering in his eyes. “Though I wouldn’t say no to your company.”

As Setzer patted the available space next to him, Celes made her way over to the couch and collapsed. A heavy sigh rushed out of her. She eased into the plush structure while Setzer refilled his scotch.

“Please don’t be hungover for tomorrow,” Celes groaned.

“How do you know I won’t fight better when I’m drunk?” He tossed her a wink and Celes rolled her eyes, albeit with a smile. “This, anyways, is more of a gentleman’s drink, not for a drunkard at a cheap tavern hoping to forget his pitiful life.” Setzer sipped the amber liquid, licked his lips, and offered Celes the glass. “Care to try some?”

She eyed it, perhaps longer than intended. That brief smile of hers vanished and her mind fogged over with the dread she couldn’t rid her being of yet.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Celes,” Setzer said, reaching out to tuck blonde hair behind her ear. “Figured it would calm those tense nerves of yours. Gods know you damn well deserve it by now.”

Celes scoffed. “Everyone’s treating tonight as if tomorrow the world will end. They’re all out there staring at ruins and you’re in here drinking the night away.”

“And?”

“And... I don’t want to think like that—that this is our last night. Every battle I’ve prepared for, I’ve done so with embracing the idea that I had already won. I never wanted to accept defeat as an option. And I refuse to think differently now. We have to win or else this was all for nothing.”

“So then what would you rather be doing this very moment?”
“Running through practice routines? Examining maps and tactics? Surveying our item inventory?”

“Again?”

“It’s better than doing nothing.”

Lowering the glass into his lap, Setzer scooted closer, their shoulders bumping. “I can’t tell the future, but what I do know is that there’s no sense in worrying about things you can’t predict or have any power over.”

“Says the gambler,” Celes grumbled.

“Says the man who has come to accept that the dice don’t always roll in his favor. Winning is ideal, but we as human beings don’t have such a luxury when death is staring us down. We win some, we lose some. Such is life.”

“But we can’t lose now.”

“No, we can’t, but you can’t fault others for taking a moment of reprieve to not think about how fucked up all of it is.”

Celes flicked her eyes to Setzer. Once he finished his share of scotch, she snatched the glass to down a giant gulp. It burned her throat as she shuddered. Upon gasping for air, Celes sunk deeper into the couch and licked her lips.

The laughter filling the airship left her glaring, however.

“Well then!” Setzer grinned, carefully prying the glass out of her clutches. “Remind me to take you out drinking once this is all over. Get us something top shelf and not just a few swigs at the bottom of a bottle.” He raised the glass once more. “It can be on me.”

As Setzer polished off the scotch, Celes folded her arms. “I’m only humoring you now, because you won’t get off my case about needing to relax.”

“Well, it’s the truth. You do. And you don’t want me fighting Kefka hungover as much as I don’t want you heading into combat with an hour’s worth of sleep under your belt, if that.”

“It’s going to take more than alcohol to knock me the hell out,” Celes muttered.

Lips brushed over her neck as Setzer nudged her hair aside. She memorized each kiss that met her skin until his hot breath lingered upon her ear.

“I can always help with tiring you out,” Setzer purred.

The offer was decadent and tempting. They were alone, after all, and considering Cyan, he wouldn’t be rushing back to the Falcon anytime soon. Or the others, either. Just her and Setzer. Nothing picturesque, but it was sufficient. Just a fleeting moment of rapture they could share before their solitude slipped through their fingers.

But Celes laughed and shook her head. Setzer reeled back, lips flat and brows knitted together.

“So this is the part,” Celes spat out, “where we confess all of our feelings and make sweet love, for this could possibly be our last night together?” When Setzer didn’t answer, she averted her gaze and chewed her lip. “I don’t want to think like that.”

“Then what would you prefer to have?” Setzer reached out to smooth her hair out of her face when
Celes opted for silence. "Ma cherie....” Those gentle words caressed her very soul and brought her eyes back to Setzer. “What is the matter?”

The dread clutched her throat tight, but it didn’t stop the thoughts from crowding her mind. A headache loomed over her as tears pierced through her eyes. Celes swallowed hard and blinked it all back.

Setzer discarded his glass and laid both hands over hers. She knew better by now than to lie to him. After all we’ve been through....

Celes remembered what Locke said to her. And Terra. It all blurred and faded.

And Setzer waited, like he always did.

“The Warring Triad,” Celes began, “it holds the source of all magic, does it not? Kefka links himself to it to ascend into godhood. We must destroy him and doing so means destroying the Warring Triad. Which in theory, would mean... all magic....”

She inhaled and focused on the ice which flowed beneath her skin. Always cold to the touch, always ready to burst forward upon her command. The ice kissed and blessed Celes with its endless power. She fashioned it into attacks to overcome her foes and into armor to shield herself from the world and its horrors. Without it, what was she? Without it, would she....

‘We’re no different, you and I! Don’t think otherwise!’

“All magic would... I would....”

She blinked and was back in Maranda. She blinked and was being dragged to her jail cell. She blinked and was blinded by stage lights. She blinked and was clashing swords with Kefka. She blinked and was falling from the Blackjack. She blinked and stood on that cliff again.

One step. That’s all it took to end it. One step and she could forget everything and everyone would forget her. No more worries or burdens. Simply freedom.

A rough hand cupped her cheek and turned her head. Celes fluttered her eyes. Her open hands trembled in Setzer’s. She expected him to lecture her for dwelling far too long on the possibilities. Instead, his eyes exuded the same warmth in his hands.

“Celes.”

Broken from her thoughts, Celes noted the muscles of his face churning. “Yes?”

Setzer drew in a deep breath. “The other night, back when Locke....” He didn’t need to finish that sentence; Celes knew what he referred to. “You had said something—about when you woke up after the catastrophe.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “How you were eager to embrace death.”

That conversation had unveiled all out of anger. Celes had been upset; they both were. Hurting or worrying Setzer was never her intention and yet he sat there as if he discovered life was stripped from her.

“I remember Darill,” Setzer continued softly, “and how she lived without a care in the world. She lived each day expecting to die the next. She was reckless abandon personified and she didn’t care. I used to think she was born ahead of her time. An anachronism, if I’ve ever seen one. Death was a positive outcome, a chance to escape this all. I felt the same way for a long time. Don’t hold onto anything valuable, for it might slip away.” He chuckled, as if discovering irony in his words. “But
there’s a difference between that and believing you’ve lost everything. I....”

He kissed Celes’ fingertips. Rolling a thumb over the back of her hand, Setzer lowered his gaze.

“I can at least say Darill died doing what she loved, that she had no regrets.” His eyes returned to hers. “But the thought of discovering you taking your life in such misery? It eats me alive.”

Arms embraced her slowly, tightly. Celes rested her cheek upon his shoulder while he cradled her head and rubbed her back. No ulterior motives or empty emotions—only pure affection. Celes returned the favor, hooking onto his shoulders. She inhaled his distinct scent, the one she once hated, only to find comfort.

“And whatever happens when the Warring Triad falls,” Setzer whispered into her hair, “we’ll face it together. I wish I could do more to comfort you, tell you it’s your active imagination feeding you lies, but I don’t know. I just... don’t know. And for once, I wish I did. But please, trust me when I say I want you to live, Celes. I’ll do whatever it takes to aid you. I promise.”

For the first time since the Solitary Island, Celes’ heart pounded with determination; she longed to live.

“Am I... something valuable worth holding onto?” she spoke against his shoulder.

Setzer nuzzled into the side of her face. Goosebumps riddled her skin, perhaps the alcohol’s doing or Setzer’s presence. “I’d sooner put my life on the line if it meant never losing you, though I’ve always placed my bets on you.”

Celes brought her head back, brushing noses with Setzer. “But why?”

He cracked a solemn smile. “You’ve always won, ma cherie.”

A pin drop could have echoed from the opposite side of the Falcon. Mere lights flickered from the gas lamps and nothing more. What Celes deemed to be her head throbbing was simply her heart racing wildly through every inch of her body. She couldn’t part from Setzer, not her hands nor her eyes. If she did, she feared everything would vanish and abandon her in absolute darkness.

But he was right there. He always had been.

She released a breath and swore Setzer licked his lips. Another inhale and Celes moved in, just as he was.

Their hands clawed one another, their lips locked, and their lungs begged for air despite their desperate actions. And Celes would have sooner suffocated than part from Setzer. She pawed at his shirt and he clung onto her hair. She gasped and moaned against his lips while he bit and sucked hers. Alcohol and lust alike rolled through her until her blood boiled.

“I thought,” Setzer groaned in between kisses, “you didn’t want some contrived thing to be our last moment together?”

“And I thought,” Celes responded, matching his fervor, “you wanted me to finally fucking relax.”

That conceited grin of his against her brought new chills through Celes. “As the lady wishes.”

Celes smothered him with kisses while forcing him back on the couch. Pinning both his shoulders down, she straddled him without ripping her lips away. Hands fell to her hips as she settled into his lap. A delightful moan erupted from Celes upon confirming how damn riled up Setzer already was.
All her doing. Always. Everything he did now was for her and she for him.

She managed to undo enough buttons to reveal Setzer’s scarred chest. And neither crumbled when they parted for Setzer to peel off her jacket. Their lips reunited with a burning hunger. Silver and pale gold locks intertwined. They rocked into one another as their heartbeats thrummed out of sync.

His fingers toyed with the hem of her pants, then the laces of her top, then the sensitive sections of her neck. She clawed his chest every time he left her quivering to mere touch alone. A smirk adorned his features, always accompanied by a moan. Gasps erupted forth when Celes tugged his hair or bit his lip hard or dared to draw blood along his chest. Such power was more fuel to the already roaring fire.

Forehead resting along his, Celes caught her breath. “I think I could get off just like this.”

Hips rolled into Setzer, rubbing along that prominent bulge which begged to be freed. Neither bothered to do so, not when they were desperately lost in one another. Even through the layers of fabric, Celes swore he twitched and writhed.

“Well,” Setzer drew out, each word like his hot tongue along her clit, “why don’t you?” Both hands stroked over her thighs and rear before gripping her hips. “I certainly won’t stop you.”

Blush seared her cheeks. But Setzer smacked her ass and Celes chuckled lowly into him.

She tangled a hand up in his hair and gripped his pretty neck with the other. Locking eyes with Setzer, Celes focused on rubbing against him. The sensation vibrated through her, though it was Setzer’s intense stare never faltering which left Celes quivering. She thought of all the missed opportunities with him, of the times he implied he was more than open to fooling around. Her tongue poked out to lick her lips at the thought of him thrusting into her in that cramped, spiral staircase, not stopping until she was screaming. His name trembled off her tongue, nothing but hot breath crashing into his lips. And he held her tighter, closer, whispering words in his native language. Maybe to offer sweet nothings, maybe to seduce her further, or maybe to express how he’d rather be fucking her on the table. So long as he didn’t stop, Celes didn’t care.

Everything slipped away: her worries, her fears, her failures, all of it. None of it mattered when the man before her worshiped her like a goddess gracing her presence before a mere mortal. That devotion enveloped her with a warmth she had never known before. It also teased her with the idea of tearing his pants off to get at what she really wanted.

Setzer’s fingers dug into her as she refused to slow down. Just the right rhythm, just the right angle.... Celes closed her eyes to bask in it all. So close. She wanted to taste it. Just one last time. With him. Her hands fell to his shoulders and her head hung forward. Those delectable lips she preferred to get drunk on over any alcohol imaginable brushed along her ear. His tongue poked out to tease her until his rich voice filled her, drenched in a decadent tone that did more than she could do to herself alone. He pleaded for her to come undone and cry out for him.

“Please,” Setzer said, the words squeezed out from a raw throat as he gasped and clung harder onto Celes.

She wanted to say it back, as well, but the words were lost upon her. But she didn’t stop, nor did he. Their gasps and moans blended together, as did their pulses and trembling muscles.

A metal hatch from below cranked open. Celes’ breath hitched first, then Setzer’s, as they froze. Frantic eyes searched through veils of hair as their hearts raced in their ears. But Celes made out familiar voices and eyed Setzer.
They blinked and burst out into laughter.

Celes fell to the side, only to have Setzer catch her. She draped her legs over his lap while he buttoned his shirt up halfway. Still snickering and shaking their heads, they tossed their sights to the entryway to see who would emerge first.

Terra bounced up first and waved to both with a smile. Sabin was close behind, blabbering away to Gau and Cyan. Shadow paid no attention, but that was nothing new. It wasn’t until Edgar—of course—that someone finally said something.

“The hell—” He cocked his head, eyeing the empty bottle and then the couple curled up into each other on the couch. “Did you get her drunk?”

Setzer snorted. “Come now, Edgar, what do you take me for?”

“A man who doesn’t invite his friends along to the festivities, that’s what!” He gestured dramatically to the bottle. “Couldn’t even spare some for the rest?! How am I supposed to spend my evening?!”

“Maybe that’s what you get for polishing off the other bottle I had stashed a couple of weeks ago.”

Edgar scoffed. “The nerve. Some friend you are!” He eyed Celes while shuffling off. “I don’t know how I feel about you giggling like that.”

But Celes waved Edgar off as she covered her mouth in an attempt to hide her endless amusement.

“Well, if she wakes up with a hangover,” Edgar said, glaring at Setzer, “I’m blaming you.”

“Can’t be all that bad,” Setzer offered. “Better to wake up to that than your snoring.”

They continued to bicker until everyone boarded the Falcon. Celes sat up and retrieved her jacket in an attempt to be halfway presentable. Truth be told, the alcohol left its mark on her, but her desire left unattended kept burning through her. From the way Setzer looked at her upon slipping her jacket on, she could wager a guess as to what riddled his thoughts, as well.

He leaned in and whispered to her while the others chatted. “You know, we really need to stop making a habit of that.”

And Celes snickered and smacked his shoulder. To that, Setzer drew her in for a quick, yet deep kiss. “Yes,” Celes said. “Yes, we do.”

“Next time,” Setzer said, “we’ll get a door that locks.”

She nodded out of habit, but it wasn’t until the group fell silent and retired for the evening that she stayed up, staring at the ceiling while lost in thought. Next time. If there even was a next time. By the time a blue hue promised dawn in the distant horizon, Celes had already forgotten the warm memories spent with Setzer. Dread instilled her every waking hour. She abandoned sleep and retreated to the upper deck, where she practiced sword routines until the sun bathed the land. It was the only way Celes could put her mind to ease.

It was the only way she could win.
From afar, the structure was mammoth, but up close, Kefka’s Tower surpassed every man-made creation and stood as a new pinnacle in architecture. Entry required an airship, for scaling the tower was crazier than the man inside claiming to be a god. That very man needed to be destroyed to secure the mutual goal of restoring balance to their world. And with Kefka’s destruction, magic as they knew it would vanish.

The exact essence imbued in Celes’ blood.

Everyone discussed group arrangements along with pinpointing proper drop areas on the upper deck of the Falcon. Celes stood clad in a combination of plate and leather—not exactly to her liking, but it didn’t damper her movement and speed tremendously—and held her helmet at her side. Terra had helped braid her hair into an intricate, tight bun, far from the norm for Celes, but she couldn’t say no to Terra’s aid. Only a few wisps blew into her eyes which fixed upon Kefka’s Tower.

“You know, you can’t exactly fight if you keep leaning into the railing to stare longingly into the distance.”

As Edgar acknowledged Celes, she cast her sights out past the tower. The sun’s glare glistened across the horizon and coated the world in a haze of orange and yellow.

“Would be quite a shame if we left you here while we ventured off to win the battle, so to speak.” Edgar chuckled, albeit uneasy. “We’re almost ready, anyways. You’re paired with Cyan, Sabin, and lover boy over there.”

Celes flicked her gaze past Edgar to spot Setzer piloting the airship. All of his attention channeled into realigning the Falcon to better sneak into the tower. While he wore his usual garb, thick sheets of black leather lined his body beneath his coat along with several metal plates gripping his arms, shoulders, and shins. Celes could count on one hand the number of times he accompanied her into battle; the arrangement of throwing knives and magically-imbued card decks were unconventional, but Setzer’s quick hands made them dance.

“Figured you wouldn’t complain,” Edgar continued.

“Let me guess. You’re with Terra?”

Watching him blush never grew old. “W-why would you ever think that? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She shrugged. “Figured you wouldn’t complain.”

His mouth opened and hung speechless. “Ha. Ha. Very cheeky of you. Did they teach comedy routines to the officers back in Vector?”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Be happy I didn’t pair us together, dear Celes.” Edgar flashed a grin. “Or else I’m rather certain we’d be fighting each other. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

With a pat on her shoulder, Edgar strolled back to his group. Terra was indeed there, donning gear of a battlemage while testing out a contained Fira. Beside her were Locke and Mog. Not a hint of worry in any of them.

Left to her own devices, Celes opted to follow Edgar’s lead in checking on her teammates. Cyan and Sabin practiced bushido and blitz techniques in unison by the bow, but Setzer wasn’t busy in comparison. Oh, how she wished they could be alone, even for five minutes. It was enough time for
the two to envelop each other and forget what lied ahead. Maybe revisit what they couldn’t finish the other night.

Setzer did catch sight of Celes as she approached him. As always, he shot her a smile before returning his focus to piloting. “I should apologize ahead of time.”

“For what?”

“All hands on deck, isn’t that right? I’d stay behind and make sure the airship is fine and well, but that’s the least of my worries. I have no intentions of holding the group back; I’ll do my best to carry my own weight.” Setzer glanced at Celes when she remained quiet, chuckling at her puzzled expression. “Seriously? I’m with you, Cyan, and Sabin. I didn’t have years of training in the art of combat. Not my style.”

“Just enough to get by?”

“Enough to throw cheats and idiots off of the Blackjack.” The corner of his lips quirked up. “I bet on fights, not participate in them. If I was better at a fight, rather certain I wouldn’t have most of these scars.” While the other marks accrued a sense of charm, the fresh scar distorting his face was but a reminder of what had transpired not long ago.

“Leave the front line work to us,” Celes offered, her eyes lingering to the knives dangling from his belt. “You... throw them, correct?”

“Unless circumstances grow dire, yes. You don’t play darts a foot away from the target. No fun in that.”

“Then if you’re good at darts, I imagine you’ll be fine.”

Setzer smiled. “Glad to have your blessing, then.” Setzer brought the airship to a halt, hands releasing the wheel before turning to Celes. “Won’t be long before we dive in.”

She nodded. “No, it won’t.”

And there it was again—that hollow sensation ripping her apart from the inside out. Her eyes lowered as she swallowed hard. No matter how she tried, Celes couldn’t escape the dreadful potential of what would happen in their foreordained battle.

Was life still possible without magic? Would she die from the shock? Would she be too weak to survive?

“Celes.”

She returned her eyes to Setzer. “Yes?”

He broke away from the helm of the Falcon to face her. “Whatever happens,” he murmured. “Whatever it is that lies before us... please know we do so together.” Setzer scooped her hands up into his. “*A vaincre sans péril, on triomphe sans gloire.*”

Those lips of his planted deep into her knuckles. She longed to be rid of her gloves to relish the warmth he bestowed upon her.

Celes breathed out a chuckle. “What did you say?”

“Hmm?”
“Those words... what do they mean?”

A smile came over Setzer’s features, though a hint of sadness marked them. “To win without risk is a triumph without glory.”

“Spoken like a true gambler,” Celes whispered back before easing in to kiss him.

Their lips locked. She nibbled slightly, barely. Celes melted into Setzer, hands perched upon his chest as he embraced her. The kiss faded and they broke away.

“Let me collect Sabin and Cyan,” she said.

“Please do. The sooner we get into the tower, the sooner this will be over.”

She smiled for Setzer as she headed past Edgar’s group to retrieve Cyan and Sabin. All were eager to execute the intricate plan to overthrow Kefka, but apprehension filled every conversation.

_The sooner this is over, the sooner I ‘ll find out what my fate truly is._

A grotesque blend of steel and rock twisted together to line the halls and tunnels of Kefka’s Tower. Navigating the area proved to be tricky. So did the monsters lurking about. Celes gripped her rune blade with one hand and prepared spells at a moment’s notice with the other. Each spell used to support her group was but another reminder of what could happen if they won. The magic flickered to life and blazed brilliantly before vanishing to nothing.

Nothing. Just like her.

Gestahl had offered Celes a final chance to redeem herself back on the Floating Continent. With Kefka’s help, they were to create a new generation of magically-infused humans. She, too, could have elevated to godhood beside Kefka, revered by all. Yet Celes refused. Nothing could have sweetened that deal. Even if it was extended again in an attempt to ease her worries and ensure her life, Celes convinced herself nothing was worth such selfishness.

Flashes of cards accompanied her spells. Each handful whizzed by to pierce through enemies. Setzer was by no means a soldier, but he never missed his target. Bare minimum, it distracted the creatures enough to wonder who the hell had the audacity to poke them with magical cards or a small knife while a samurai and monk dished out more fatal attacks. Setzer glanced to Celes on and off, smirking as he playfully twirled a knife between his fingers. They exchanged few words outside of the usual checkups after each fight, though his eyes spoke leaps and bounds.

Vanquishing every monster encounter and traversing the puzzling interior eventually led them to the other two groups. With everyone accounted for, all that remained was Kefka himself.

Celes couldn’t believe her eyes as they approached the tower’s peak. When she was younger, she recalled a prestigious man known for his caliber as a Magitek knight, one she at first viewed as a role model. One day, she would achieve similar greatness. He was the only one like her and thus understood what they were; everyone else was a mundane human, but they were infused with the ancient magic crafted by the gods. He skimmed over her with mild interest, albeit with an eccentric quirk. Celes didn’t mind. Not then.
Rumors spoke of the countless experiments which drove him, the man she respected, into madness. Time worked against him, each passing day spent falling in a downward spiral. Humanity slipped through his fingers and forever disappeared into an abyss. Celes wanted to help. In a sense, it also meant helping herself; with each twisted plan he concocted, Celes feared she too would one day awake to insanity.

Though when Kefka turned, greeting them all with wide eyes and a grin spanning from ear to ear, Celes saw nothing worth saving. The man she once knew as a child was long gone. Or perhaps it had always been a charade and this was his true self. Asking for the truth was useless; Kefka himself didn’t comprehend the notion anymore.

Kefka sputtered on about destruction, how all life came to an end eventually, that there served no purpose in clinging onto precious things that would only slip away. He called them pathetic for thinking there was anything worth holding onto. They were better off accepting their destruction, for it was the ultimate fate of everything in the world. Some tried to argue and reason with Kefka, Terra being the first to step forward, but Celes bit her tongue.

Not even an amused chuckle shot out of him. Kefka contorted his face in disgust. “And did you all find your somethings in this broken world that just won’t die?”

Terra again didn’t hesitate to answer. Love fueled her to push forward and keep her head held high. She drew strength from those who touched her life: the children in Mobliz, the strangers who offered aid along the way, and most of all, every individual standing behind her. It channeled the fires which licked her sword as she took an offensive stance before Kefka.

Others called out with their own reasons for fighting and Celes mulled over the question. The darker times continued to surface, the moments when she was alone and terrified. She recalled being bound by shackles, sentenced to her death. She recalled witnessing the slaughter of her comrade and peer while she laid powerless. She recalled waking up to a torn, decaying world with no hope in sight.

But Celes wasn’t alone. Despite the hardships, people were there for her. Those who didn’t judge her for her past or what she was based on title alone. Those who allowed Celes to be herself. She eyed everyone standing around her, each individual armed and ready for the worst. If they survived this battle and walked away victorious and on their separate ways, she hoped she could regard them as friends and vice versa.

Sucking in a hard breath, Celes refused to restrain herself when she yelled back to Kefka with a strength suited for a military officer. “Someone willing to accept me for who I am!”

Kefka flicked his tongue out as if a sour taste lingered there upon hearing everyone’s answers. “Bleh! You people make me sick! Well, if that’s how it’s going to be... then I’ll make sure to snuff out all your precious somethings. Every last one of your sickening, happy little reasons to go on with life!”

The grip on the hilt of her weapon only tightened. “I’d like to see you try,” Celes snarled.

She couldn’t tell who charged in first. Spells flared and metal struck metal. Cries of agony and hope filled the blood-red skies. Celes spun amidst the battle, the sound of her thrumming heart overwhelming all else. She caught her breath and steadied her rune blade for a precise strike fueled with magic. Again and again she flung herself at Kefka to chip away at his foundation and put an end to the destruction and chaos.

And when all that remained was the pinnacle of his throne, Celes sprinted forward, teeth bared and eyes skewering her former peer.
Her rune blade crashed into his hardened arm, both striving for dominance. And when their eyes locked, Celes’ heart skipped a beat. Only once.

“I,” she bellowed out, driving her blade through his arm, “am not you!” Freeing her weapon from the toughened muscles, Celes spun in place to attack again. “We are not alike!” A flurry of slashes bombarded Kefka. “You can say we mirror each other—” Celes skidded to a stop and held her hand out. “—but you’re wrong.”

Ice coated not only her fingertips, but the air they breathed. Snow danced around Kefka and the unique flakes and Kefka alike froze. Celes’ hand glowed a brilliant, pale blue as she lifted it high above. A cold torrent whipped past them and spiraled around her target until the winds stilled and exploded into splinters of ice.

“I’ll prove it to you!” Celes screamed, thrusting her hand downward.

Ice shattered, Kefka cried out, and Celes never flinched.

It didn’t matter who delivered the final blow; what mattered was the self-proclaimed deity was screaming. The agony doubled onto itself multiple times, each cry more excruciating than the last. The pure entity of magic ripped apart from him, no different from how he dismantled the world over two years ago. Every inch of Kefka broke into fragmented shreds and disappeared like sparkling embers from a dying flame.

Thus Kefka died slowly, painfully. So did all magic. None of them, however, predicted the tower collapsing upon Kefka’s defeat. As Kefka vanished from existence, his screams still echoing on the winds, everyone sprinted away in hopes to escape.

The monsters also disappeared, leaving a clear, yet winding path back to the Falcon. One foot after the other and gasp after gasp, Celes ignored the dull ache rippling through her body. They needed to reach the Falcon. Setzer would fly them out of the mess they were in.

Only once did her eyes stray. A slight weight lifted from her hip. Celes feared it to be either her belt or rune blade, though both were intact. A colorful-patterned piece of fabric, however, was not. She whipped her head around, discovering the bandana lying on the floor further back.

She reasoned with herself that it was meaningless. All of them needed to keep running. But memories soaked into the bandana from after her suicide attempt. Who it belonged to didn’t matter anymore; it instilled hope within Celes when all other lights snuffed out.

A sharp gasp left her as she skidded on her feet, the turnabout far from graceful. She darted by everyone and ignored their confused and angered calls. The floors groaned under her weight, the panels collapsing in the distance. Her body twitched in protest, but not enough to admit defeat. Not until they reached the airship.

Celes scooped up the cloth and held it to her chest. Finally, she could breathe again. But a hitch in her throat brought her attention to the floor beneath her. The panel buckled and disintegrated. Celes lunged out to grasp onto something—anything. Everything within arm’s reach had vanished into the dark pit below.

“Celes!”
Covering more ground than she had in such time, Locke slid on his knees and extended a desperate hand. Fingers danced over his arms before grasping onto his hand. With a connection established, Locke slammed his other hand over hers.

“I won’t let go!” Locke called out through the rumbling room. “I promise!”

Adrenaline fueled Locke as he hoisted Celes up and back onto her feet. She still clutched onto the bandana, eyeing it once more to ensure it hadn’t fallen again.

Locke scoffed. “Are you crazy?! You almost got yourself killed... for that?!”

Had it been another time, Celes would have rolled her eyes. Typical Locke, one moment running in to save the day and the next opening his loud mouth with no filter present. But she recalled the emotions swelling up in his face upon grasping her and Celes held her tongue—he had experienced this before and knew it all too well.

Celes opened her mouth, though the floors dared to give out. The rest of the group advanced on and Locke intertwined his hand with hers.

“Geez,” Locke said, “if I’m going to die for something, it’s not going to be in this heap of a mess!”

Celes didn’t protest when he yanked her along, forcing her to match his speed to dart down the hallway. Her heart pumped out of control as she pushed her body further through the agony. Soon they caught up with the main group and before long, returned to the Falcon itself.

By then, Setzer worked his brisk hands over the controls to start up the airship. Celes whipped her head around to count the bodies present. When she swore she miscounted, Terra discarded her human form for a bright, feral body, thanks to her Esper blood. Even as their supply of magicite floated above and shattered, Terra dared to take to the skies to guide them out of the falling structure.

“Terra!” Celes cried out as the other woman shot forward like a streak of lightning

Celes tore away from Locke and ran for the bow of the airship. Her head pounded louder than the gears grinding and the engine roaring. Debris fell from above and yet Terra zipped past it unscathed.

“Hold onto something and hold it tight!” Setzer yelled as the Falcon propelled forward.

The abrupt shift from stationary to flight startled everyone, yet they complied. Celes didn’t doubt Setzer’s capabilities to maneuver through the death trap—he had every right to brag about being the finest pilot—but she did doubt Terra’s mortality while the rest of her kin ceased to exist.

One of the Espers—her father, if Celes recalled correctly—had mentioned how Terra possessed a fighting chance, so long as she found something worth holding onto in her human life. Then only her Esper half would vanish. A ray of hope, a sliver of possibility.

But Terra wavered in the skies as the tower shrunk behind them. Celes shrieked out her name. Panic set in, plunging down to her stomach, enough to numb the pulsing pain her body experienced despite no longer running. And Terra, too, plummeted from the sky, nothing but a lifeless body no longer glowing.

The Falcon dove through clouds and ignored all else except Terra. The unanticipated action threw off even the most resilient guards, each one collapsing with resounding thuds across the deck. A pronounced series of crashes echoed in Celes’ head.

As the Falcon decelerated and leveled off, Celes lifted her head to inspect the damage. Most of the
group groaned while coming to their senses. Celes swore she caught glimpse of ashen hair with a hue of mint green.

None of the pain was enough to stop Celes from rising to her feet. She darted for Terra, who slumped over on her side, no longer an Esper, but human. Dropping to her knees, Celes shook the limp body. Tears pooled in her eyes. Over and over Celes repeated her name. Others crowded around her; Setzer knelt down to inspect the situation.

A long groan startled all of them. Terra rustled and fluttered her eyes open.

“Celes?”

And she smiled. “Terra, you’re alive!”

“But....” Slowly, she sat up and Celes aided her. “Then that means... my Esper half. It’s gone.” The realization brought a gradual smile to Terra’s exhausted face. “My humanity is intact. I’m alive.”

Celes nodded and squeezed her hand. “We’re all alive,” she thought while swallowing hard. “Though you should be thanking him for catching you.” She motioned her chin over to Setzer.

“Thank you, Setzer,” Terra said while facing him.

Even when playing against death, Setzer took his chances to laugh at fate’s design. “Didn’t I tell you? The Falcon is the fastest airship out there! No better time to show off, if you ask me.”

Terra rose to her feet, exhausted, yet strong. She smiled as everyone rejoiced in not only her safety, but in the victory they all achieved together. Kefka’s Tower deteriorated from afar into the rubble and ruins of a time best forgotten. The remains of the foundation diminished as the Falcon tore through the skies. Celes leaned into the railing as one question echoed on everyone’s lips: where to next?

The group shared ideas while Celes eyed the landscape whizzing by below. A few thoughts of her own simmered in her head, all of which she was keen to voice, but their voices grew distant and fuzzy. The pounding of her heart persisted up into her head, bringing forth a pain worse than a headache. Celes sucked in a breath and winced. The same agony rippled through her entire body. But she was safe. She no longer ran in terror, thus there was no reason to fall victim to a searing, hot pain.

Somewhere within the obscured voices was one calling out her name. Celes coughed brusquely into her palm. Blood splattered her gloved hand and dripped down her lips. She screamed, or thought she had. All sound ceased to exist, save for the piercing crackle and high-pitched ring popping into her ears. She blinked, unable to focus as her vision of her hands multiplied and splintered like a broken mirror.

Just like Kefka. Just like the magicite. Just like all magic in existence.

The world spun out of control as her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Darkness flooded her. Celes expected the hard floor to do little to comfort her before she succumbed to death, but instead the infinite sensation of falling haunted her. Reality blurred. Was she falling from the Falcon?

But Setzer will catch me.

I’ll die, but....

He will.
Please, don’t let me go.

Setzer.

Please.

I—
Chapter 22

Darkness consumed every imaginable corner and left behind a dreadful pain. Perhaps death cloaked the surroundings and played a cruel game with Celes—drawing out the inevitable until she submitted to insanity.

The whispers of her thoughts echoed around her, though one voice stood out amongst many. It called out to her—nothing but a flicker of life. She recognized the tone, for despite the biting cold held in each word, warmth dwelled there and thus comfort. Years passed since that voice first spoke to her. A memory better left forgotten, but the past had a way of crawling forward to disrupt the present.

Pain churned within her core. Celes opened her mouth to scream, yet no voice of hers erupted. Silence emanated as she doubled over. Not even tears fell. The darkness shifted, somehow, like a living entity. Colors blurred around Celes as familiar images flashed before her eyes. The visions bombarding her made the shadows a welcoming notion.

She discerned images of a little girl hiding under a collapsed porch in a back alley of Vector. Imperial soldiers spoke with sugar coating their tongues, dragging out the child clad in rags and dried mud. In an instant, the scenery changed. The little girl, barely old enough to walk, tucked into a room overcrowded with other children. The frightened screams and tears vibrated through the walls. Every last one of them went unanswered.

Again the images changed, presenting another room, vast and empty. A flash of blue whizzed across the training arena while similar screams shook the observation windows. Sheets of ice lined one wall. Shattered ice shards covered the floors. Claws and teeth scraped and carved into the resilient metal. The creature crashed to the floor and accepted defeat. It cried like a wounded animal left to bleed out, yet no one put it out of its misery. But the little girl with the dirty clothes wobbled to the icy Esper and recognized the tears pouring down the frozen face. Their eyes met. Neither flinched. A second later, they embraced.

Colors morphed and bled together to paint the little girl elsewhere. Attendants washed her up, revealing pale blonde hair and fair skin underneath layers of dirt. And as the child looked into the mirror, warped voices of her superiors echoed off of the walls. Celes couldn’t decipher the cacophony now, but she knew what was said then. They said the compatibility test was a success. They said they found the perfect test subject. They gave her a name suitable for an angel, yet they raised her to be a merciless demon. Celes hadn’t forgotten what the Empire did to her.

Glancing at her hands, Celes didn’t wince as bright scarlet blood dripped from her palms. At a young age, those very hands killed plenty, either in training or on the battlefield. It was what earned her the honor of becoming a General. Never before had the Empire seen such a successful Magitek knight. She was to be proud of her accomplishments, for she was special and unique. Without it, she was nothing.

Nothing. Celes focused on the word. The pain swimming inside her chest jerked forward, as if an unknown presence attempted to yank it out of her. Coughing violently, Celes clutched her chest and resisted. Even the ice couldn’t dull the torture. The whispers escalated into rage-filled screams and somewhere in there, she swore Kefka’s undeniable laughter rang. The imagery surrounding her rapidly flipped from one scene to the next—a horrific slide show of her pitiful life.

Arms wrapped around her from behind—gentle, light, and loving. It swelled her up with warmth, followed by a distinct chill. Celes held her breath. Icy hands stroked her body as a face nestled into
her neck. She swore she felt frozen teardrops fall onto her skin.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Celes whispered, almost afraid to say it out loud.

The embrace tightened. “I always was here.”

In a blink, the images shifted. Celes recounted moments: the Magitek Research Facility, the Esper attack on Vector, the star-crossed night in Albrook, and the moment the world plummeted into ruin. All from a different perspective—her perspective. On another plane of existence, she stayed beside Celes, encouraging her, embracing her, protecting her, and supporting her.

And before Celes crashed into the ocean, the magicite from her pouch glowed and summoned forth the one who caught her and broke her fall, the one who used the last of her powers to send her to shore while the magicite sunk to the unknown depths.

Glancing over her shoulder, Celes spotted Shiva clinging to her and crying. Just like when they first met. While the other kids—or test subjects, as the Empire once referred to them—had ran away from the monstrous sight floating before them, Celes approached the Esper. As a child, she understood the distress which brought Shiva to tears far better than any adult could comprehend; she understood the yearning for freedom, even through death. They understood that.

Shiva stirred, gradually spinning Celes around to face her. “But I won’t be for much longer,” Shiva spoke, her voice an ethereal chime woven through distant, icy winds. “You already knew that, though, didn’t you?” Celes refused to nod. “Do you remember what I told you then?”

Years fragmented the memory, but shards of the Esper’s wisdom whispered into her mind. She had called the little girl courageous, said she had a heart as pure as snow. She was to hold onto that part of her soul if she was to survive the hells of the Empire.

The recollection changed the scenery again, hazy blurs warping into split-second glimpses of her past. Celes tried to block out the atrocities unfolding. She had been young then—too young. How was she to know better? The deaths of innocents piled up, her peers fearing a mere child as she gripped a blade in one hand and commanded ice in the other. She experienced the slaughter that was Maranda once more, along with the cold, iron shackles confining her before her execution. Every moment where the rest of the world pointed the blame at her resurfaced and dared to rend Celes.

“You need to continue being strong,” Shiva whispered. “Especially now, for I must leave soon. Be strong and remember the pleasant moments. Remember there are those who care about you.”

With several deep breaths, the violent images vanished. Far less traumatizing scenery washed over her like pages of a book turned at a leisurely pace. A little girl hummed to herself while tending a garden in Vector. The same girl stood alone in a courtyard, fine-tuning a routine with her rune blade. Other faces accompanied the visions, ones which left an impression on her. There was her military equal, who always held her with the utmost respect. There was the older scientist, who offered a slice of normalcy in her rigid, military routine. There was the magical girl, who now acted more like a little sister eyeing her in constant awe. There was the king, who despite his antics, always had her back. There was the older warrior, who once regarded her as a spy and now respected her. There was the treasure hunter, who saved her life multiple times and still chose to stay beside her despite their past.

And then there was the gambling man, who she had every reason to hate and yet allowed him to steal more than just her heart.

A clawed hand skimmed over her face as they returned to darkness. Shiva smiled sadly to her.
Esper’s blue skin sparkled as glittering specks of ice broke off and floated away. The same happened to Kefka when his magic ripped out from his soul, but Shiva never screamed or flailed; she silently accepted her fate.

Arms looped around Celes’ neck as the Esper eased into her face for a long, soft kiss. The cold would have squeezed out a gasp from anyone else, but not Celes. And when Shiva reluctantly pulled back, half of her face was missing, her entire body dissolving into diamond dust.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t have done more,” Shiva said, her heartache present in those words.

As Shiva slid away from Celes, she latched onto the Esper’s hands one last time. “You did more than anyone else would have done.”

She closed her eyes and remembered the chair she had been bound to and the various needles and tubes surrounding her. Barely a child then, starved of a proper life. But the sight of the Esper floating in the massive test tube close by, the one they specially picked to infuse her with, was comforting. It never stopped comforting her.

When Celes opened her eyes, Shiva had nearly disappeared. She smiled back, mirroring Shiva’s melancholy. “Thank you.”

Her hand faded from Celes’. Swirls of sparkling ice danced before her. The beautiful display vanished, flashes of blue twinkling like stars in the sky until all that was left was darkness.

Light poured in through an ajar window and coaxed Celes to open her eyes. A pillow supported her head and thick blankets weighed down upon her. She let out a soft groan while examining stone walls decorated with colorful tapestries. The draft brought in dry air. Celes stirred under the blankets when the door opened and a woman dressed in plain robes entered.

The tray in her arms clattered to the floor as she gasped. “You’re awake! Oh, thank the gods!”

Before Celes could ask anything, the woman bolted out. Echoes of the woman faded down the hall; something about fetching the king. In her time alone, Celes pushed herself up to seated with utter exhaustion. As the blankets slid away, a ghastly sensation crept over her. Celes shuddered and scrambled for the blankets to nestle back into. Neither pain nor pleasure brushed over her; she had yet to experience this in her life.

When the door crept open again, Celes was relieved to see someone she knew. Edgar rushed in, no longer donning his armor and opting for royal garb: an attire composed of a mintan, a belted kaftan, and boots of bright blue, gold, and white cottons and silks. Behind him was his brother—who hadn’t changed out of his usual attire—and Strago. Kneeling to her side, Edgar laid a hand upon Celes’ arm and scanned her over.

“Celes,” he said with a hint of worry on his tongue, “are you alright?”

Her eyebrow perked up. “Please tell me it hasn’t been a year since I’ve been out. I’d rather not make that a habit.”

All seriousness broke from Edgar’s face as he chuckled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”
He squeezed her and Celes cupped her hand over his. Somewhere in her mind, she recalled Shiva’s words and the overwhelming imagery, Edgar’s presence intertwined within it. *What was that, then? A dream? A nightmare? But it felt so real.*

“What happened?” Celes asked, her eyes meeting each of their stares. Someone had to know, unless they all blacked out.

“You passed out on the Falcon,” Edgar explained. “It’s been three weeks and we’ve been worried you wouldn’t wake up since you were….” Edgar struggled to find the right words, instead offering a smile. “I’ll spare you the details.”

There had been blood. She knew that much. The world spun around and vanished. After that, there was only the darkness and images and Shiva. Maybe it was a figment of her imagination.

Instead of answering, Edgar looked to Strago. So did Sabin. Hunched over, Strago crept over to Celes.

“We had known the possible outcome for Terra’s fate before entering Kefka’s Tower,” Strago began, his voice far more energetic than his appearances let on. “But yours? I wouldn’t have guessed that infused magic through technology would react in a similar fashion. Ha! I was wrong! And to think that you and Kefka had matching treatments. One would imagine you’d both have the same fate.” Strago grinned beneath his thick mustache. “But like Terra, you had something to hold onto, didn’t you? Something that’s kept you alive.”

There was no point in rehashing the visions of her unconscious mind, but with her wits returning, Celes favored the whimsical dream more as a reality than before. So she nodded to Strago; if he was as wise as he made himself out to be, he’d understand.

“Magic was taken from you,” Strago explained, “just as it had with Terra and Kefka. You are no longer infused with whatever the Empire had injected into you. Nothing but good old human.”

Celes closed her eyes and recalled the sight of Shiva vanishing. *Her* magic empowered Celes for a lifetime; now she was defrosted from the magic lining her blood.

“Do you hurt at all still?” Strago asked.

Upon opening her eyes, she found all of their eager gazes falling onto her. “I feel….” She shifted beneath the blankets, trying to burrow deeper. “I don’t know what this is. It’s like pins and needles everywhere, but dull. It’s… new to me.”

Strago hummed and nodded. “If I spent most of my life blessed by the likes of Shiva, I wouldn’t know what that was either.” He patted her arm. “You’re cold. Nothing life-threatening. Simply a new thing to grow accustomed to.”

“Is there anything I can do about it?”

“Do about it?” Strago blinked, then laughed. “Wear warmer clothes? Bundle up? Move to warmer climate? Whatever you like, Celes! Though I suppose you have the warmer climate part for the time being. Edgar’s been so kind enough to offer his abode to all of us while we’ve been planning for celebrations.”

Edgar was already rolling his eyes halfway through Strago’s sentence. “You make it sound as if I wasn’t worried about a lovely lady’s well-being! I’ll have you know that Sabin’s more to blame than I am!”
Sabin’s grin bore no shame. “Hey, I can’t say no to a reason to line the dining tables with enough feasts to feed the entire world.”

“We did not invite the entire world!” Edgar shot back with a glare.

“Close enough!”

Strago cleared his throat and straightened his posture. “Why don’t you two boys take your argument elsewhere, hmm? I’m sure Celes wishes to rest some more and the likes of you don’t exactly make it easy to sleep.”

While she wasn’t tired anymore, Celes wasn’t opposed to being lazy in bed and staring out the window, for once in her life. The news of both the current state of the world and herself was plenty to absorb.

“What about you?” Celes called out to Strago, who peered back with a perplexed look. “Both you and Relm are descendants of the Magi, are you not?”

A warmer smile crept onto Strago’s face. “Descendants, yes, but our blood wasn’t as thickly coated with magic as yours. A touch uncomfortable, but we will manage. We were not created artificially to replicate the abilities of Espers, thankfully. No need to worry about us, Celes; we were all worried about you.”

She blinked, wanting to ask Strago more, but he bowed out. Shaking his fist in the air, he croaked at the Figaro twins about scooting out and giving the lady some privacy. Sabin quickly followed, though when Edgar reached the door, he lingered. With a quick look out the room, he closed the door and returned to Celes’ side.

“Strago was right,” Edgar uttered. “No one knew what to make of the situation when you passed out. I was worried about Terra and I never thought—” Edgar shook his head and sputtered out a nervous laugh. “I’m glad both of you are well and alive.” His eyes flicked up to meet Celes’. “And I know I don’t have to tell you who was the most concerned about your well-being.

She tilted her head. “Was it Gau?”

A much-needed laugh erupted out of Edgar. “He was worried that the tall lady with the scary sword was sleeping for too long and that maybe she needed to eat more.” Edgar snickered and his smile softened. “Locke might have been the one who caught you and carried you up to this room, but he never visited you alone. I think after everything that happened with Rachel….” He shook his head. “Well, you know how he is. But Setzer?”

As Edgar trailed off, Celes waited with bated breath.

“I’d be off to bed,” Edgar continued, “and notice a light from inside here. I’d peek in and find him sitting along the bedside, doubled over next to you and passed out. I always told him that there were plenty of guest bedrooms and you wouldn’t have wanted him to do that to himself, but he just smiled and told me he was perfectly content right where he was. Everyone else has been spending the time either reaching out to old connections before Kefka tore the world apart or simply relaxing, but Setzer? Any chance he got, he was here, holding your hand or stroking your head, just quietly waiting for you to wake up. I finally convinced him to leave last night and eat in the dining room instead of having a servant bring up food. Even then, he preferred to skip meals, the stubborn bastard.”

She hadn’t meant to worry any of them, especially not Setzer. With their threat disposed of, nothing
stood between them. Or was the illusion of whatever pleasantries they shared shattered along with the magic imbued in the world? Had it all been a fleeting affair to tide them over in the gloomiest of times?

All those worries vanished while Edgar recounted Setzer’s recent evenings.

“Where is he now?” She had to ask and Edgar had to know.

“Now? Hell if I know. Downstairs somewhere, maybe getting food. He needs it, anyways.” Edgar threw a mocking glare at her. “Ah, to starve a fool! All for the one he admires. I see you haven’t lost your touch.”

“Didn’t realize I had one to begin with.”

Celes slid out of bed, testing her feet along the marble floors when Edgar flushed furiously. All she wore was a silk nightgown with loose ribbons, the thin material more suited to the desert climate. Not enough, however, to explore outside the room, at least to Edgar’s liking, for his mad rush to the dresser produced a thick robe for her to don.

“Here.” Edgar launched it at her more so than passed it over, then immediately averted his gaze. “You should wear this.”

She couldn’t help but smirk. “What is this now? Is the king shy? Are you losing your touch?”

“Oh please, don’t humor yourself!” After a pause, Edgar sighed. “I couldn’t look at you like that if I tried. You’re more like a sister at this point than anything else.”

She fluttered her eyes while slipping the robe on. “Really? You mean that?”

“Well, the hair’s not exactly right, nor are the eyes. More like something you’d find in Narshe than in Figaro, so we can just say you’re adopted.”

Celes snorted lightly, to which Edgar responded to with a deadpan stare. “I’m sorry, I… thank you, Edgar.”

Rising to her feet, she eased into him with a hug. He returned the sentiment and kissed the top of her forehead.

“And I’m glad you’re well and alive,” Edgar murmured. With a loose arm draped over her shoulders, Edgar guided her to the door. “Now then, let’s go find this gambler that’s running amok in my castle. I swear, if he finds the old game room out in the back, I might have an illegal operation running out of it in ten minutes.”

While Celes had visited Figaro Castle before, she had yet to do so at her own leisure. As she walked down the wide corridors with Edgar, she passed by the rest of the group scattered about. Their faces lit up, proof they were indeed worried. She ensured every one of them that she fared well, despite the biting chill in her bones. A cold breeze, however, was the least of her worries after the trials she faced.

In the middle of the castle was a grand staircase, one she recalled walking down before. This time, though, as she stood at the top, she peered down to eye someone conversing with a few servants. The details of the discussion didn’t matter, for all Celes focused on was the particular shade of silvery hair. And when some servants turned to greet Edgar, Setzer also turned. Yet his eyes fell upon Celes, just as hers did with him.
Setzer scaled up the stairs in haste and Celes met him halfway. Her strength wavered, but she kept her head high until he drew her into him. Celes welcomed those arms holding onto her for dear life. Nestling her face into his neck, she smiled as his usual scent tickled her nose. Not a word was said, initially, and Celes savored the silence.

When he did speak, he breathed out the words while burying his face into her hair. “You’re alive.”

She nodded, cooing gently at how his hand stroked her back. “We both are. Can’t win without a little risk, right?”

Celes never thought she’d be so happy to hear Setzer chuckle the way he did.

“I must be on my way to Jidoor,” he told Celes only several hours after their reunion.

“So soon?” She tried not to gawk. “But why?”

His smirk screamed he was up to no good. “Would you believe me if I said it was a surprise?”

While she silently protested, Setzer promised to return in time for the celebration held at Figaro Castle. Celes offered to walk him out to the Falcon, but he insisted on her staying inside to recover. To erase the frown plucking at her lips, Setzer scooped her hand into his and kissed into the palm.

“I’ll return,” he purred as her hand brushed over his face.

From one of the balconies, Celes observed the Falcon floating towards southern skies. Not even Edgar was privy to Setzer’s plots, though he insisted Setzer had to return for the festivities.

She expected no less from Figaro’s king to plan a spontaneous gathering with the doors open to anyone able to attend. No other expectations or ulterior motives; simply a night spent exchanging pleasant tales and creating new memories. And there was plenty of reason to rejoice now in the reclaimed world and order. More so than Celes imagined.

It hadn’t occurred to her until Relm brought it up that they were all heroes. The little girl puffed her chest out and proclaimed how they would forever go down in history for their success. While Strago was busy trying to remove his granddaughter from her imaginary pedestal, Celes rolled the idea over mentally. Heroes. She never pictured herself as one. The thought was unnerving at best.

How could anyone forget the Empire and its treachery? Had it not been for the Empire, perhaps the disaster wouldn’t have ever taken place. The Empire was gone, though, yet the impressions it left behind burned into everything it touched, Celes included.

Instead of fretting over the details, she distracted herself by spending time with whoever was willing. Cyan had been kind enough to spar with her to test her skills sans magic. Their practices were refreshing, as were his stories of Doma’s golden age and his late wife and child. Strago was more than willing to sit down and further speak of the Magi and Thamasa, so long as Celes didn’t mind Relm painting her portrait all the while. Relm possessed impressive talent, even if she claimed Celes fidgeted more than a tree in the wind, but the watercolors of gold, peach, and blue were beyond words. Even Locke kept her company at one point, though neither spoke of their past spent together. He discussed, instead, of his time before the Returners and the crazy adventures that landed him into heaps of trouble.
But of all of them, Celes spent the most time with Terra. Multiple times per day, the two met up, whether it was to explore the many hallways of the castle or to curl up in the same blanket by the fireplace at night. A crown no longer controlled Terra’s thoughts, magic didn’t threaten to burn a fleet of men alive, and the military regulations didn’t chain them up. Now was a time for laughter, to be alive and at peace.

Shiva was right; there were plenty of people who cared about her, whether she realized it or not. Celes’ only regret was how long it took to accept and appreciate the warm kindness.

Terra spoke plenty of her dreams and hopes come after the celebration. She mentioned returning to Mobliz to check on the children, but she also expressed another desire. With her freedom, she wished to be just that—free. To travel the world and experience a life she only thought was possible in a bard’s song. Why stay isolated in one spot to help others when she could wander and help many? Dozens of ideas poured out of Terra’s mind and yet she never mentioned a sliver of apprehension over her lost magic. Terra only smiled for the unknown future.

“I can’t decide,” Terra hummed out while the two of them relaxed in her room the night before the celebration.

She stood before her bed with a worrisome look. Laid out on the mattress were a series of dresses, ranging from blues to reds. The designs originated from a handful of locations: a Kohlingenian round gown; a South Figaroan kaftan; a Jidoorian sack-back gown; a Vectorian empire dress. All of them were tremendously feminine for Celes’ tastes, but Terra adored the silks and lace and ribbons.

“I love how this one poofs out at the bottom.” Terra picked up the pale blue sack-back gown to hold against herself. Celes already pictured her twirling around the entire night to show off the petticoat.

“But look at this one!” Placing the blue one down with care, Terra held up the crimson kaftan. Unlike the previous garment, it was best reserved for a sultry temptress than a giggling ball of energy.

Celes couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow. “Where did you find the dresses again?”

“I was telling Edgar the other day how I wouldn’t have anything for the celebration and he told me not to worry.” She plucked out another dress and examined it in the mirror. “And all of these showed up in the afternoon without any indication as to who sent them, so… maybe Edgar?”

It took every bit of strength not to smirk. “Maybe.”

“But what about you, Celes? What are you wearing?”

Whatever I have lying around? “I don’t know.” Celes shrugged. “I haven’t put much thought into it. Um… perhaps if I… styled my hair differently?” Terra pouted. “And wore some jewelry?”

“Oh! You can borrow one of mine!”

Celes eyed Terra’s physique and then her own. A soft chuckle left her. “I’m rather certain none of those will fit me. Besides, I’m not well suited for dresses.”

“No? But what would you wear to all the fancy functions back in Vector?”

“What... fancy functions?” Celes sighed when Terra cocked her head. Did the crown rob you of all your memories? “I was a military officer, not a pretentious noble. I had ceremonial garb for more important occasions, but nothing that ever called for a dress.”

“I suppose.” Terra returned to fussing over the dresses, still fawning over the blue. “I think you
should wear a dress."

“Oh?”

Terra nodded. “You should wear something nice for Setzer, don’t you think?”

Her face shifted to the deep red of the kaftan. She had done so before, back when they first met. Even when the circumstances weren’t ideal, Setzer still loved it. She could repeat the performance, so to speak, albeit with altered intentions. No stage, no audience—only Setzer. And he had asked for an encore, after all.

Oh, what are you? Twelve? Don’t be ridiculous. “You really think I should?”

Terra hummed a delightful note, ignoring Celes’ apparent hesitation; either she was oblivious or didn’t care.

Yet when Celes retreated to her room for the evening, the suggestion never left her thoughts. To dwell on the details of a single night was a silly concept. What came afterwards? Everyone buzzed over the celebration. No one thought past it—refreshing, yet odd.

Her bedside window framed the night sky, empty of everything but the moon and stars. Celes perched her chin upon folded arms and sighed with distant eyes; whatever matters Setzer had to tend to in Jidooor had to resolve quickly in order for him to return in time for the celebrations.
“Miss Chère?”

Celes hadn’t been expecting company. She had retreated to her room under an hour ago, spending her day aiding in last minute preparations until Edgar shooed her away. Once alone, she gazed over her meager selection of attire for the evening. Nothing noteworthy for a fancy function, as Terra had put it, and she didn’t dare ask Edgar for assistance when he was busy enough.

Though the timid servant girl inched in, clutching a large gift box adorned with a lush, green ribbon.

“I-I was told to give this to you,” the servant explained as her eyes failed to meet Celes’.

Taking the box into her lap, Celes paused before undoing the ribbon. “And what is this exactly? Who sent you?”

The girl straightened up, arms held behind her back. “I… wasn’t to say, except I was told that you’d understand.”

Fingertips caressed the silky ribbon; the color reminded her of Terra. Perhaps she had pulled a few strings to arrange something for Celes, after all.

With the ribbon discarded and the top removed, Celes peered inside and gasped. A golden, shimmering fabric inlaid with crystal details sat inside. Celes stared briefly before scooping up the contents. Just as she suspected, it was a sleeveless dress, though nothing typical of modern fashion trends in either Figaro or Vector, at least to Celes’ knowledge. While the front covered up the entire body up to the jaw, nothing concealed the back, leaving the fabric to plunge and sit at the sacrum. The item sparkled in her hands, akin to liquid gold than any fabric she knew of. When the light struck it precisely, the dress revealed to be more translucent than it let on. A modest woman would have fainted at the sight.

She noticed more within the box. Carefully placing the dress to the side, Celes plucked out matching earrings, a bangle, shoes, floral-scented perfume of snow lilies, and... something else. Her face scrunched together upon pulling out what appeared to be a set of delicate, miniature, golden chains. Impeccable craftsmanship, but it remained an oddity.

“Oh.” The servant girl produced an envelope from one of her pockets, blushing deeply. “I was also to give this to you.”

The scent stained on the stationary hit Celes first, though when she cracked it open and read the note, her mind was set at ease.

_Ma cherie,

It would bring me utmost pleasure to see you wearing this tonight. If everyone’s to be in the presence of a goddess such as yourself, it’s only right that you dress accordingly. Should you require assistance, you can ask the kind woman who delivered them._
No signature, but Celes recognized the penmanship. A thumb smoothed over the paper as she reread the contents. A deep inhale brought the faded scent of incense, cinnamon, and cloves. Now she could understand how Maria might have longed to receive letters in her dressing room.

Peering out her window, the edges of the Falcon hovered in the distance. *But why didn’t you come in person to deliver this to me?* Her cheeks flushed lightly. *Or maybe this is as much of a surprise for him as it is for me.*

“Thank you,” she said to the servant while tucking the note away. “I suppose you were told to help me if I needed it?” The girl nodded. “Then you wouldn’t happen to know what exactly *this* is, do you?”

Celes lifted up the dangling chains. While she was no fashion expert, the dress possessed plentiful crystals and other draped fabrics; adding the item in her hand was redundant, if not tacky. Still, Celes wished to honor Setzer’s arrangement.

But the servant’s face reddened before responding. Even then, she silently retrieved the item to hold up against her own body. Celes identified the top portion as a collar, where the rest of the chains dangled from. One jutted down the sternum and ended at hip level, where another chain would have wrapped around the lower back. Various other chains draped across what had to be the chest, though Celes couldn’t reason how they stayed put.

Then the servant pinched at the two separate clamps to open them.

“These… these go….” The girl looked away while directing to her breasts.

Celes stared and blushed harder than the servant. “Is that….” Celes pointed to the chain work. “Is that to go… underneath?”

The servant nodded. *Oh, thank the gods.*

But it added a curious element to the mixture. The entire night, Celes would don a dress she never would conceive of wearing in a million lifetimes, all while donning bondage jewelry beneath. And no one would know, except for *him*.

“Does anyone else know of this?” Celes asked, pleased to see the servant quickly shaking her head. “Would you… be so kind and help me? I wouldn’t want to ruin a lovely garment over my lack of coordination when it comes to these… things.”

The reflection in the mirror was a stranger. Almost. The servant had done well to not only fit Celes into the dress, but also style her hair and make-up. All of her blonde hair twisted and pinned back and up in what had to be something stylish. As for her make-up, it stayed true to her natural complexion, her lips and cheeks stained a nude hue. Though it was her eyes—smokey shadows highlighting her blue irises; a genuine Figaroan aesthetic—which perfected the look.

This wasn’t a look fit for a General; it was fit for a being far more divine.
As she stood, the dress clung to her body—more than she expected it to—while the fabric swirled and brushed along the floor. One wrong move would rip the material apart and Celes noted to take caution walking, though witnessing it flow with her was surreal. Twirling around to marvel at the dress, she eyed her reflection again and focused on her exposed back. Little was left to the imagination, the dress covering enough of her rear to stay tasteful, but she did notice a delicate golden chain poking out from beneath to run along her lower back before darting back under.

Beneath the thin layers of gold and crystal, she wore an item not appropriate for the night’s function. The dress covered the collar, though the fabric barely concealed her perky nipples. The clamps were to blame. Any sudden movements daring to tug at her breasts would result in a reaction worthy of raised eyebrows and concerned gazes. It was intense enough stomaching the constant sensation tweaking at her nipples, even after adjusting to the initial, sharp twinge of the clamps set into position. A dull ache thrummed in her chest now—a constant reminder of what she truly wore.

She glared at her reflection one last time. Her posture fell back into an old military stance. “You were once a General,” she said as if addressing a soldier. “You’ve taken hundreds of blows and given them all back ten times over. You’ve persevered through agony that would make grown men cry. You’ve experienced sensations worse than death and lived to tell the tale. You are Celes Chère and, gods be damned, you—” She spun on her heels, hitching her breath at the sensation in her chest, and marched for the door. “—will not be bested by a pair of nipple clamps for a few hours.”

All of Figaro Castle was empty, though the distant laughter and lights led Celes in the right direction. Others also followed her lead, faces she didn’t recognize. Edgar half-jokingly mentioned sending courier pigeons to every corner of the world, for the celebration was open to all. She didn’t doubt him.

Still, when Celes entered the ballroom, she was dazzled by the lengths taken to achieve the spectacle. It was decorated to meld in with any high-end gala, yet all walks of life graced the floor. The havoc stormed down upon the world hadn’t discriminated and now everyone could rejoice with those who they would never associate with otherwise.

Live music played, rotating a variety from Figaroan Chaabi to Jidoorian waltz tunes to Kohlenginish jigs. Food lined an entire wall with servants on constant vigilance to refill the empty plates and glasses. Those keen to dance gathered at the center, some treating the opportunity like a regal ball while others danced like drunkards in a local tavern. A first for Figaro Castle on many levels. Edgar and Sabin had to be somewhere grinning over their success.

Some dressed up for the occasion, some weren’t, thus leaving Celes uncertain where she fell on the spectrum. Maybe Setzer desired for her to stand out. She scanned the sea of people and sighed; none of her peers stood out against the masses, not even that particular shade of silver.

Celes descended the small set of stairs, musing over her next move. As her heels clicked along the bottom step, she swore she heard her name within the surrounding idle conversations.

“It is you!”

Her eyes widened as Locke rushed over. Tonight he shed his rugged, worn attire for a more sophisticated look. The leather pants and boots favored a social setting over adventuring. The white shirt peeking out beneath the crisp jacket was no doubt Edgar’s doing rather than Locke’s decision.
No bandanas, either, leaving him with his hair slicked back.

“Locke,” she called back with a soft smile. “Good to see you. You look—” How was she to describe him without insinuating more than a genuine compliment? “Nice,” was what she settled with, already mentally smacking herself.

To that, he laughed. “Think so? Not really used to it, but Edgar insisted I clean up for appearance’s sake and all that.” He rolled his eyes while flailing his hands. “Something about how we kind of saved the world and people will want to see us in good light.” As his arms dropped, he looked her over more deliberately than she had with him. “And you… you…” Their eyes met and Locke presented her with a grin. “You look absolutely stunning.”

Celes would have folded her arms against herself if it didn’t jostle the chains and clamps beneath; muffling a moan before Locke wasn’t high on her priorities. Her fingers fidgeted over one another while she held his stare.

“Thank you,” she replied plainly.

“And here I thought you weren’t a fan of dressing up like this.”

“Could say the same about you.”

A nervous chuckle trickled out of Locke. “Oh please, I feel ridiculous in this. The sooner I can get out, the better, but I can stick it out for one night.” He stepped closer while taking in their surroundings. “It really is something. Amazing how the twins were able to figure out a way to bring everyone together.”

“They all deserve it,” Celes noted.

“That they do,” Locke agreed before returning his eyes to her. “I’m just glad we all got out in one piece and that it’s over now. No more Empire to fight, no more innocent lives lost over nothing.”

She lifted a finger. “No more Returners. Looks like you’ll be out of a job.”

His grin said otherwise. “Oh, Edgar will think of something for me to do. He’ll keep me busy, though with my line of work, I’m never out of a job.”

“Your treasure hunting escapades?”

“Hey now! Don’t say it like that! You make it sound like a joke!” After a deep exhale, Locke continued, his voice softening. “But yeah, something along those lines. The structure of the world has changed and who knows what unearthed rarities are out there to be explored and claimed. I only got a taste of it in the past two years. Are you kidding me? I’m dying to head back out and keep exploring.”

“So that’s your plan? Going out and living for yourself?”

Locke nodded. “Wouldn’t have it any other way. Not a dull moment, that’s for sure. And if things get tough? Well, I’ll just crawl back here and take up some less lucrative jobs. It’ll all work out one way or another. I’m not worried about it.” His eyes strayed from hers briefly, presumably to examine Celes and her exquisite outfit again. “And what about you, Celes? Finally put any more thought into it?”

At first, he blinked. “Not at all?” His face hardened when she shook her head. “I always thought out of the group, you’d be the first to know what to do. You’ve always been a lady with a plan.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything.”

Locke bent at the hip to lean in closer. “But seriously? Not even the slightest idea?”

Her gut reaction brought her a step backwards. “Locke, I don’t know, alright? It’s simple as that.”

“I guess so,” he mumbled while straightening out. “Sorry, I… was curious, that’s all.” A smile returned to his face. “But you’ll think of something. I know you will. And who knows, maybe we’ll cross paths again.”

“Maybe.”

“I know I would like that.”

Of course you would. Celes hummed gently while averting her stare. She searched for another familiar figure in the crowd in hopes to divert her attention from Locke. No one caught her eye and she returned to center in time to witness Locke gawking again. Lips pursed and eyebrows knitted together; she cleared her throat. Upon being snuffed out, Locke stumbled over an explanation.

“I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, blush spraying across his cheeks. “Shit, I’m not better than Edgar, am I? It’s just… you look amazing tonight. And I know this isn’t exactly your… thing. A dress like that is guaranteed to turn heads.” Locke did his best to hold her stare, though he struggled. “Where did you even find something like that? Here I thought you’d show up in your usual attire.”

Celes held her breath and prayed her hesitation wasn’t noticeable. “It was something Edgar picked out.”

Locke blinked. “Seriously?”

“Locke, does it really matter where I found it?”

“No! I just… wow. Okay. Guy’s got taste. I’ll have to let him know next time I—”

“I’ll let him know,” Celes assured him in a hurry.

About to reply, Locke silenced himself as he looked past Celes. He beckoned someone to them and Terra bounced over in her pale blue dress. She waved back to Locke, though when she drew near enough to recognize Celes, she gasped and absorbed the golden dress.

“Celes! You look beautiful! But I thought you said you didn’t have any dresses?”

Locke, don’t you even—

“Edgar found one for her,” Locke jumped in.

Celes closed her eyes to roll them.

“I knew it!” Terra clapped her hands together. “I told you he’d find something! I’m so glad you were able to show up in something different. It suits you.”

Celes examined her dress. The fabric clung to her body, yet she felt bare and exposed. If anyone bothered to stare long enough, a faint silhouette of legs teased the eyes underneath with the right
lighting. A balance of embarrassment and exhilaration. But she didn’t want the eyes of strangers on her; she wanted Setzer’s gaze.

Flashing a smile in thanks, Celes drifted to silence as Terra dove into conversation. Locke and Terra laughed over a story when Celes excused herself to search for a drink. Terra didn’t second guess her, though Locke hesitated. He waited long enough for Celes to walk away, disappearing into the crowds and out of sight.

Her primary goal was to escape, though Celes did acquire a drink along the way. The sweet contents twisted her face while she meandered about the ballroom. On and off, strangers approached her to either ask if she was a part of the group ending Kefka’s reign or where she obtained such a remarkable dress. The latter proved to be the more popular question. She offered forced smiles and mind-numbing chit-chat to appease them. As a soldier and officer, discussions were to be brief and exact. The grandiose conversations some folk wished to engage in with her were more nauseating than her drink.

Mid-conversation with a group of ladies, she found him.

From afar, Setzer spoke with another individual. Or perhaps he, too, experienced the same dilemma Celes faced and drowned himself in alcohol to stomach the rambling. His back faced her, though when he pivoted to hand off an empty glass on a passing tray, he froze and locked eyes with her. The voice speaking with her faded as she chewed her lip.

He turned back to whoever he was conversing with, lips moving before he marched straight through everyone else and directly for Celes. She absorbed every inch of him during that time. His choice in attire for the night was no different from his usual clothing, consisting of a justacorps, waistcoat, and breeches in black brocades with gold embroidery. Though once closer, Setzer was remarkably polished in comparison to the previous times Celes laid eyes on him. The jacket was new, as were the earrings and other embellishments adorning his outfit. He made the effort to tame his hair back into a slick, low ponytail. Before her was the sight of nobility, not a gambling pilot with a kink list longer than the guest list.

No more out of place than she was.

His steps slowed to a halt. By then, those chatting Celes’ ear off acknowledged the presence of another joining them. Setzer paid no attention. Celes didn’t blink when his eyes drank her in.

“Please forgive my rudeness,” Setzer said, his words for those flanking Celes, but his eyes on her alone, “but I must be stealing this lovely lady for the time being.”

Celes swallowed. Took you long enough.

Before anyone protested, Setzer laced his fingers around Celes’ glass and extracted it from her grasp. He passed it off to the lady on her right, then took Celes’ hand to lead her away.

Barely five steps out, he planted a long kiss into her palm. His eyes narrowed onto her while groaning lightly. A second later, Setzer tugged Celes into him and dipped in to brush his lips over her ear. She couldn’t tell if her whimper was from the clamps or his decadent actions.

“Dance with me,” he whispered.

It wasn’t a suggestion; it was a command, both alluring and dangerous. She sucked in steady breaths while her blood pulsed. That look of his wasn’t doing her any favors. While Celes never answered, she also never tore her eyes away or jerked her hand back.
Setzer led her to the dance floor. A song ended and the participants clapped in gratitude while awaiting the next melody.

A flash of anxiety sputtered within Celes as her feet locked up. “I’m… not exactly the best at this.” Learning a choreographed segment during the opera was similar to her combat routines. This? This was different.

Her comment did little to deter Setzer. “Yes, I do recall you saying that once.” Content with a particular clearing in the middle, he spun on his heels to face her. “Still don’t believe you. Follow my lead. I’ll do the rest.”

Celes allowed him to reposition her hands, settling one on his shoulder while he held the other. As for Setzer’s remaining hand, it looped behind her. Fingertips grazed her lower back, brushing the exposed chain. Celes gently hissed in air, the reminder sending a sharp chill throughout her body.

And the slight, short-lived quirk of his lips? He knew. Only he knew of the constant, dull ache pulsing in her chest—the one Celes ignored and tolerated—and how everyone who gazed at her was oblivious to what she truly wore. It drove Celes insane.

His hand settled further up her back before drawing her in close. New music played and participants began to sway. She followed him, doing well not to stumble amidst their waltz. The dance itself prickled her skin and hitched her breath, but it was Setzer’s presence which elicited more disturbances in her body. And that hypnotic stare… it did more to her than the nipple clamps. Those hungry eyes undressing her burned through Celes until her thighs twitched.

“I don’t believe,” Setzer said in time, his voice for her ears only, “there are proper words to describe how unbelievable you are tonight.”

“I have you to thank for that,” Celes said.

Setzer’s lips twitched. “Is that so?”

“Would it explain the trip to Jidoor?”

“Maybe.”

You damned tease.

He spun Celes around before elaborating. “I have connections in Jidoor that have always catered to my tastes. They were so kind to help me at a moment’s notice when I told them I had to dress someone as divine as you.”

Such deeds were unnecessary in Celes’ mind, but she refused to argue. Better to allow the man with a flair for the dramatics to have his way, especially if it meant surprise gifts.

Though she had to know one extra detail. “Did they make just the dress?”

“And what do you mean?”

Her heart skipped a beat. No amount of make-up hid her flushed face. “You… there was more than a dress in the box.”

“I told you,” he said with a grin, “I have connections that cater to my tastes. What do you think?”

I think that you’re enjoying the sight of me wanting to wiggle out of my skin. Though her silence was
enough of a response for Setzer as he chuckled.

“The dress is based on designs from several centuries ago,” he continued. “Figured that was a wiser plan than looking like everyone else.” He tilted his head, the intensity growing in his eyes. “Now everyone seems to be looking at you.”

Celes hadn’t kept a record of how many heads exactly turned to her that evening. As she cast her gaze elsewhere, she spied upon a handful of people directing their attention to her. Without her rune blade or additional clothes, she was naked. Maybe Setzer wanted it that way.

“I’m sure I’m not the only one who’s been garnering attention.” Celes flicked her eyes over Setzer. She longed to run her hands over his chest to inspect how many layers he wore. “You clean up ridiculously well.”

Though he laughed softly. “I can’t say no to a gathering like this. Had to dress the part and all. I could, however, do without people rushing my way as if I’m a hero.”

“You were by my side when we fought against Kefka,” Celes reminded him. “Do you not think your efforts should be praised?”

He gave her a wry smile. “All of you had valiant intentions. I happened to be outdone by a lovely temptress in a coin toss, where I agreed to help if I lost.”

“At any point, you could have left.”

“Perhaps.” His fingers drew random patterns along her hand. “I’m glad I stayed.”

Her smile left her face glowing. I am, too.

“And,” Setzer continued, “I see you’ve had your share of people coming over to pester you with mindless chatter, as well.” With a deep inhale, he failed to hide the roll of his eyes. “The thief included.”

“We simply talked,” Celes said. “Nothing more.”

“Oh, I figured such was the case. I wasn’t worried that he’d lead you off somewhere.” Setzer shook his head before muttering. “Idiot looked like he had never seen a woman in his life.”

Celes released her breath. “He spoke about his plans now this is all over. We don’t have any reason to band together. Kefka’s gone and all is well.” Locke’s words rolled about in her head. “He asked me what I was going to do.”

Setzer perked up a brow. “Did he? And what did you say?”

“I… I don’t know. I told him I hadn’t thought about it, because I haven’t.” Her gaze upon Setzer melted into a coy expression. “I was hoping to ask you the same thing.”

“What I plan to do?” Celes nodded. Setzer looked away briefly, yet never stuttered in their dance. “Honestly, I’ve had enough excitement to last me for a while. I could be content with flying around the world for some time. No obligations, nothing to hold me back.” He hummed while closing his eyes, matching the melody. “Why do you ask?”

“You had… we had spoken of how….” Celes steadied her breaths and held a firm stare. “When this is all over, then maybe….” The words slipped through her fingers as her heart pumped wildly. The dull ache teasing her nipples didn’t help, either.
On board the Falcon, they were private for the sake of not interrupting the joined efforts of the group. Yet it never stopped them from sneaking off to steal a hard kiss or crush their bodies into one other. Now everyone knew. Their secret was diffused. Setzer could lock lips with her in the middle of the ballroom for all eyes to see and she wouldn’t have stopped him.

*We’ve been through so much,* Celes thought. *I don’t want to let go of that. I can’t now.*

As they danced, Setzer demonstrated utmost grace, on par with a formally trained dancer. Celes barely kept up. His face easing into hers caused a hiccup in her breath. Their noses touched and his eyes hooked onto her with no intentions of releasing.

“What is it that you wish to do?” he murmured. “Everyone will be parting ways soon. Surely you must have an inkling of an idea in that lovely head of yours.”

Tugging at her lower lip, Celes managed not to choke on her response. “I have no place to go back to, Setzer. The Empire is gone, my military career is obsolete, and whatever future I once had vanished. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself now if I tried.”

“Then humor me and try.”

For a brief moment, she closed her eyes, trusting Setzer to guide her. His voice simultaneously calmed her and jolted pleasant chills across her body. She longed for more than a dance with Setzer.

“I don’t want to lose this,” Celes breathed out. Her eyes opened, begging for more. More of his touch, his words, his scent, his attention, any of it. “I don’t want what happened on the Falcon, after all that time, to be forgotten. At first, I convinced myself I needed a distraction from all the terrible things going on in the world, but now?” She barely managed to laugh at herself. “Now I feel like I need to convince you it wasn’t just a stupid, childish dalliance.”

Setzer’s movements slowed and Celes followed suit. At one point, she ignored the music, not caring for its crescendo or eventual diminuendo. The dance floor came to a standstill as the music tapered off into nothing. Applause overwhelmed the senses. Setzer had yet to release Celes, instead stepping into her for their bodies to meet. The subtle contact snagged Celes’ breath, teeth sinking into her lip to muffle the moan dying to gush out. The brief, invigorating pleasure faded and the tedious pain resurfaced.

None of it registered to Setzer as his mouth hovered over her ear. She trembled beneath his warm breath, though it paled in comparison to the shaking his whisper brought out of her.

“You don’t need to convince me.”

Catching her breath, Celes nestled the side of her head into his. The entire ballroom could stare; it made no difference. She wanted him—the man cradling her like she was glass and ceramic—to never let go, to never leave her side. Just as he promised.

The musicians prepared another song and new dancers joined the floor. The constant, yet somehow distant chatter washed over their silence and time managed to stop.

But through the thick ambiance pierced an abrupt yell. Celes fluttered her eyes, swearing Edgar’s name wove through the angered words. If a woman was scolding the king, it was one matter—another scornful lover publicly humiliating Edgar—but it belonged to a man. Setzer, too, expressed concern while peering behind him to find the commotion.

They exchanged glances instead of words, apprehensive of the state their friend landed himself in. Celes nodded to Setzer before heading for the origin of the ruckus. Most ignored the outburst, too
lost in their own bubbles to worry. Pushing through the thick crowd, Celes pinpointed Edgar, who
donned his finest, deep blue kaftan with scarves draped about his form and ribbons in his hair to
match.

The man opposite of Edgar was a stark contrast; he dressed well for a lowly merchant, clad in a
simple tunic, pants, and boots. The idea to allow everyone entrance, regardless of status, had been
Edgar’s. However, those not accustomed to noble etiquettes, such as the one confronting Edgar,
didn’t think twice to shout before royalty. Thankfully, Edgar braced himself for the entirety of the
verbal assault.

“You must know of the losses we’ve had!” the man continued to yell.

“Everyone has lost something,” Edgar replied, voice soft, yet dominant. “That is why everyone is
here—"

“They all lost something when that crazy from the Empire decided to be hellbent on magic! But
before all of that? None of you have a reason to complain.”

Setzer’s hand fell upon her shoulder to squeeze lightly. When he released Celes, he didn’t hesitate to
intervene. “And what exactly is going on?”

Edgar whipped around, eyes widening at both Setzer and Celes, though more so for her. Had
circumstances differed, Celes would have whacked him for being worse than Locke, though instead
she met Edgar with concern.

“Nothing that you need to concern yourself with,” Edgar tried to assure Setzer, who in turn narrowed
his eyes. When Setzer refused to back off, Edgar sighed. “This man here is seeking aid for the towns
that were affected before Kefka did further damage.”

“Kefka might be gone,” the man butted in, “but the damage isn’t. Vector was destroyed and no one
cared to help those who lost families and friends. No, the upper crust hid in their homes and
pretended it never happened! Everyone had no choice but to flee to Albrook and now that town is a
filthy mess. The streets are overrun with poverty and beggars. Families are torn apart, children are
starving.... Surely you must know this!”

Edgar returned his attention to the distressed man. “I do. I was there myself.”

“Then you must do something!”

“I am but the king of Figaro. My powers do not reach out to the towns that were once under Imperial
rule.”

The man scoffed. “Were you not an ally of the Empire?”

“Oh, they still say that?” Edgar rubbed his temple. “Lovely. It was a complicated mess of an affair,
but it doesn’t matter anymore. My allegiance was always with the Returners—"

“Fuck the Returners! And you call yourself a king! You can’t do a damn thing to help those truly in
need, yet you have no issues with throwing this event for anyone able to attend? What a joke. I came
here on behalf of everyone in hopes to receive even a drop of aid. I see that I was wrong to assume
so. And with the Empire completely wiped out, no one’s willing to stand up and help. No one has
taken responsibility or action. What the hell are we supposed to do?!”

Celes had tucked herself behind Setzer while the conversation unfolded, though she stepped forward
at the mention of the Empire. Everyone was gone. Anyone of importance or power died before
Celes’ eyes. Except for her. While she lent her hand to the Returners in the end, her roots still clung to the same soil.

“Not everyone was wiped out,” Celes said.

All eyes fell on her, but she focused on the poor man seeking aid. His face scrunched up while trying to place her. Then again, her current outfit wasn’t the standard issued uniform.

“And who are you exactly?” he asked.

“Celes Chère,” she said, standing tall, “former Imperial General to Emperor Gestahl.”

It clicked. His eyes were swallowed by an unfathomable rage as his eyebrow knitted together.

“You,” he hissed out with clenched fists. “It had to be you that survived the mess.” He marched towards her, but Edgar blocked him from doing so. “The cold-hearted bitch of Vector, the Emperor’s own fucking masterpiece. I heard they made you in one of Cid’s messed up labs to be the perfect soldier. I bet they were so proud to send of a pretty little thing off to slaughter the masses. You fucking cunt—”

The anger radiating off of Setzer rivaled with the cursing man. “Don’t you dare—”

Celes snapped a hand up at Setzer. Their eyes met, hers far softer than his. After he filtered a breath through his lungs, he backed off and crossed his arm.

“I know what I’ve done,” Celes replied to the man, “and I’m by no means proud of my actions.”

He laughed, then spat at her feet. “And yet you had no issues with marching into Maranda and leveling the town.”

“We came under the pretense to draft recruits—”

“By fucking force!” he hollered. “Drafting recruits, my ass. Tell me… did it feel good to strike down upon innocents? Upon the women and children sobbing for mercy? Did you feel a sense of accomplishment watching the place go up in flames? I was there, you bitch. I saw what you did to the kind folk there. You didn’t have a shred of sympathy. You were a monster. Maranda hasn’t been the same since that day, all thanks to you.”

Her memories were but a blur, but the desperate cries struggling to grasp onto life shot through crystal clear. It wasn’t until she returned to Vector when she holed up in her room, emptied out her stomach, and screamed into her pillow. Praise showered upon her from peers and superiors alike. Emperor Gestahl himself had never been prouder. He had bestowed the instructions to her, but she was never prepared for the catastrophic carnage raining down upon the town. Celes could never forget.

“I can’t change what I did in the past,” she said without a catch in her throat, “but I can do something now.”

“Really? What the hell can you possibly do?”

She took one, wide step towards him. Edgar loosened his hold as the two upheld partial civility. “I know better than anyone else of the brimstone and hellfire the Empire rained upon those who didn’t deserve it. Trust me when I say that I would do anything to help now. I want to see Vector rebuilt and all the surrounding towns to be brought to their former glory. I want to make sure we don’t repeat the mistakes of the Empire. I want the people to not think of the horrors that occurred
whenever they look upon their homes. All those who polluted the lands with vile deeds are gone now. We can start anew.”

“We? Don’t make me laugh.”

“Laugh all you want. I still stand by my word.”

“Do you?” He cocked his head. “Well, don’t tell me that.” After a pause, he smiled slightly. “Why don’t you tell it to the good folk of Maranda?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “What are you suggesting?”

“You heard me. The people have been craving justice. They’ve been outraged over no one speaking for the crimes of the Empire. No one has been taking the blame. Though if you show up and are willing to accept culpability, I can’t promise everyone will forgive you of your crimes, but you might have far fewer people wishing you died in that mess when the Espers came around.”

Since she walked through the ruins of Vector, Celes longed to rebuild it all. To return meant it was a possibility, but stepping foot into the likes of Maranda again twisted her stomach. The people deserved justice, but what this man spoke of resembled a trial.

“If you want me to come to Maranda and offer my aid—”

“The people want someone to take the blame,” he corrected her. “The people want someone to suffer for all the atrocities the Empire threw at them.”

“Now wait a damn minute,” Edgar spoke up and maneuvered to Celes’ side. “First, you wanted help and now you make it sound as if there’s an execution set in order.”

“I can’t speak for everyone, but I know some wouldn’t hesitate to—”

“She fought against Kefka!” Edgar retorted. “She helped reunite us! If it wasn’t for Celes, all of us would still be under Kefka’s thumb. You can’t just—”

“Forgive my rudeness, your majesty, but I don’t care if she beat Kefka to a pulp with her bare hands. What I care about is justice for those affected by the Empire. We need someone to speak for the crimes committed. It cannot be ignored and swept under the rug. None of us will allow for it!”

Edgar continued arguing with the man and heads began to turn as the heated conversation soured. Celes paid no attention. She recalled the faint image of Maranda that fateful day. Her rune blade was an extension of her arm. Her voice cracked raw from bellowing orders. Her blonde hair clung to her sweaty, bloodied face. An angel of death was a rightful descriptor of her back then; it was exactly what the Empire wanted.

And there she was, dolled up to perfection in the middle of a joyous celebration with the knowledge of vindictive folk—and rightfully so—desiring her death to atone for the sins committed by the Empire. Words couldn’t always sway minds, but actions could. If her blood was spilled on the ruined roads of Maranda and she was sent off to join the other damned souls of the Empire, perhaps the people would rest easier.

But only if. Redemption wasn’t completely out of the question.

Her tongue ran over her dry lips as she inhaled. “I’ll go.”

Edgar stopped mid-sentence and stared. The man, however, was noticeably taken aback by Celes’
willingness. She met his gaze, steadfast and solemn—a true General’s stance.

“You will come to Maranda on behalf of the Empire?” the man asked. “Will you truly do that?”

“I don’t give my word to just anyone,” Celes responded. “I want to help. If it means taking the blame and letting the people decide what to do from there, then so be it.”

Shock washed over him before he uttered another word. “By the gods, you mean it.” He released a breath. “Good. Maybe now everyone can get what they deserve. I hope you’ll make good on your word, General.”

It had been far too long since anyone addressed her as such. It almost disturbed her now. “Please, it’s Celes.”

A dry, callous chuckle rumbled through him. “I’ll see you in Maranda, then.” He looked to Edgar. “Your majesty, thank you again for your time.” He disappeared into the crowd before any of them squeezed in a last word.

“Did that... just happen?” Edgar blinked. “Did you just agree to what I thought you—”

He never finished his train of thought. Celes instead followed his stare. Behind her, she found violet eyes torn between anger and incredulity. A new, unwanted tightness swelled in her chest.

“Setzer....” Her voice sent him backwards with a huff of soft laughter.

“Well,” he said, each word sodden in sarcasm, “I suppose that solves the mystery as to what you will be doing with your time when this is all over.”

“No, that’s not what I meant, Setzer. Please—”

“Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He didn’t blink an eye as he ignored Celes, walking away to lose himself to the horde of people. Her feet urged her to pursue him, though the tight hand on her shoulder prevented her. Celes whipped around and gasped at both the hand and the merciless rigidity caused by the clamps.

“Let him go, Celes,” Edgar told her, mirroring her sentiments. “You know as well as I do that he needs some space.”

“But I didn’t mean—”

“I know you didn’t, but he also had to listen to a stranger not only degrade you, but set up a potential death sentence for you.” Edgar sighed and lowered his voice further. “I don’t think he wants the death count to go up to two in regards to his lovers. I certainly wouldn’t.”

She enveloped her arms around herself. It proved to be less comforting than she anticipated; now was not the time to be aroused. Ignoring the prickles along her body, she searched for Edgar’s eyes for assistance.

“Is this what you want?” he eventually asked her.

“I know what the Empire did,” Celes explained, her voice losing the strength once present a moment ago. “I know of the horrors that lied beneath the beautiful facade they cracked up. I helped them achieve those twisted goals. I had no other choice, Edgar, and when I tried to stand up against them, they threw shackles on me and prepared my execution. All I ever wanted was to help, now more so
than ever. They deserved that. If me showing up puts their minds at ease, then so be it. Bare minimum, I provide an explanation... though that man wasn’t wrong; they do deserve justice. I don’t fault them in that.”

A thousand words appeared to compete for Edgar’s attention, but whatever bubbled up from the depths of his mind never flowed to life. Edgar only nodded with a frown. Guilt passed over Celes.

“I can’t stop you if that’s what you wish to do.” He paused. “It’s rather brave of you. I hope they admire you for it.”

“It’s not brave,” Celes corrected him. “It’s what must be done. There’s a difference.”

He cracked a brief smile. “Yes, of course.” With a deep breath and awkward cough, Edgar released a majority of the tension gripping at his muscles. “So, before all of that happened, have you been enjoying yourself?”

Typical Edgar, always trying to lighten the mood. Celes appreciated that aspect of him for once. “As much as I can, yes. And yourself?”

“Are you kidding? I live for this sort of thing! It’s been far too long since we’ve hosted such an event here. It’s a wondrous time. All the music and the dancing and the food and the gossip.” The way he raised his eyebrows should have concerned Celes. “Word has it, apparently, that I’m the fashion mastermind of the evening. Dressed both Terra and you. Must have been some concoction I drank the other night, because I do not recall finding that—” And now he was goggling at her dress. It was only a matter of time. “—in the spare closets lurking around here. Usually when I get that drunk, I’m lucky if I wake up with three women in bed with—”

“Edgar!”

He threw his hands up in defeat. “I’m only saying that if no one else is going to take credit for dressing you, I’m not going to tell people no.” His arms dropped and after a pause, he added on, “Aren’t you cold in that?”

The heat of blush flashed over her face, though not as quick as her hand whacking Edgar’s arm. Celes had to resist the temptation to slip her arms up higher to cover her perky nipples; it would only provoke more questions from Edgar, much to her dismay.

“Ow!” Edgar didn’t need to feign pain, rubbing where she struck him. “Why are you hitting me now?! It was an honest question!” Her death glare calmed Edgar down. “I figured after what had happened, you’d be strolling down with five blankets bundled around you. That’s all.”

“I’m fine, actually,” she replied with honesty, though her own comfort while wearing the dress had never occurred to her. “So long as I’m not wandering out in the desert, I won’t have much to worry about in terms of the cold. Plenty of warm bodies inside, anyways.”

Edgar smiled, albeit brief. “Good. And you do look lovely. I’m surprised you didn’t bring your rune blade with you to thwart anyone making advances on you.” The silence following Edgar suited neither of them. Then again, neither was the forced, light-hearted conversation. Even then, Edgar was reluctant to say it. “You should... look for him.”

He patted her shoulder before moving away, perhaps in pursuit of Terra with the way he was combing through the people. Celes did the same in hopes to spot Setzer, though she knew better. During downtime on board the Falcon, he either tracked her down or holed up in a room; even Setzer needed to recharge from the dramatics consuming his life. Now was no different.
Celes scouted the ballroom for an alcove or private room. Several people stopped her, wishing to speak with the woman who had helped bring an end to Kefka. For every person who showered praise onto her, she now found someone glaring at her from a sweep distance behind a glass of champagne.

At the far end of the ballroom, a balcony sat untouched with double doors standing ajar. Past the glass panes stood Setzer, leaning into the balcony. Celes squeezed past the doors and paused. Every fiber of her soul wished to run over and cling to him. She resisted, swallowing hard. The party turned into a distant murmur as the silent night greeted her. Only the light of the stars and full moon were alive in the desert. With what composure and poise remained in her, Celes ignored the chill of the night and drifted towards Setzer.

“Mind if I join you?” she asked halfway.

Setzer cast his eyes to the distance, a glass of scotch in one hand with the other gripping the banister. No response, though it didn’t deter Celes from approaching.

“I’m not here to quarrel with you,” Celes mentioned while coming up to his side.

She couldn’t tell if he was chuckling or not. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Celes sighed. Her pale hands laid upon the stonework. “I also can’t say I’m sorry for what happened.”

“Of course you can’t.”

Focusing on him, Celes noted his closed eyes and hand rubbing his forehead. “Setzer, I meant that —”

“You don’t need to explain yourself,” he politely cut her off, only to manage a weak laugh.

“Perhaps not.” Especially not with the tone he presented her with. “But it’s not as if I was sentenced to my death on the spot. I’ve had that happen before; this is different.”

“Different?”

“I’ve agreed to talk with them, Setzer. I can’t say what will happen and I certainly won’t act like that, either. All I can hope is for the best outcome. Surely that’s something you’re familiar with. You know better than anyone the outcomes of a risky gambling. I didn’t wish for this to come between us. I still… want to figure something out. For the two of us. I couldn’t imagine walking away from you now. I mean that.” Another pause and still no answer. “Setzer, please.”

He gulped down scotch before settling the glass along the banister. His eyes sought her out, the sentiments tangled in his stare leading Celes to hold her breath.

“There might not be something to figure out if you head off,” Setzer murmured. “You could be walking to your own funeral for all we know.”

“And if I wasn’t?”

He sighed. “Do you know how much I’ve thought about us after we did our hero charade and saved the world? I’ve thought of dozens of scenarios, each one of them a delightful fantasy. We wouldn’t have to worry about the world coming to an end. We’d be… happy.”

To say she never thought of similar fantasies would have been an outright lie. “And what are these
scenarios? Tell me. Maybe we could—”

“It’s not that simple. You’ve already resigned your fate to the hands of common folk who are keen on vengeance. What will be the outcome is unknown, yes, but I don’t gamble blindly. If there’s one thing I know from all my time gambling, it’s that if the odds are against you, even by a single percent, that one percent is enough to make the probable outcome not entirely to your liking. I’m well aware of the possibilities and one of them could mean your death.”

She shook her head. “I can’t just say no because I’d rather be alive. I’ve… they’ve been victims to such atrocities. I’ve been the one to deliver it, in some cases. I spent sleepless nights regretting those moments. This is my only chance to make it up to them. If I can help them, then I will try. If they’d rather wish I’m dead?” Celes’ eyes fell from his. “Then I guess I don’t blame them.”

“Are you serious? Are you listening to yourself?”

“I am serious. Just as I’m serious when I say I wish you’d come with me.”

He jerked back. His eyes widened and mouth dropped. “No.” Setzer shook his head. “Celes, don’t do this to me.”

“All I am asking is—”

“What if I were to go with you to Maranda and they wish for your execution? Am I supposed to stand there and watch you die? Am I supposed to walk away, forever having that memory burned into me? The one where I escorted a lovely lady to her death and stood by and did fucking nothing about it? I’ve had my share of women leaving me behind, but I’d like to not add being an eyewitness to one’s death to my list of achievements.”

“And yet there’s still a chance,” Celes pointed out, her shoulders and face equally tense, “that I could show up and not a sword will be drawn against me. So what would you rather do, then? Would you—” The thought flashing across her mind drew her lips downward. “Would you rather not keep me company and put my mind at ease? You… you promised me before facing Kefka that you’d be by my side.”

“That was different.”

“Then what the hell is this?! You stood by me once before. Why not now? Would you… not even say goodbye to—”

In two steps, Setzer closed the distance between them. Warm hands clutched onto Celes’ face and melted into her skin. Setzer never tore his eyes from hers, the intensity building up within them as he drew a long breath.

“What would I do? Is that what you wish to know?” When Celes gave the slightest hint of a nod, he exhaled. “I would try to convince you to not go, to run away from it all. That your duties in Vector are long gone and you can start anew. And I’d take you with me, fly away and never be heard of again. I’ve already kidnapped you once, may I remind you; I wouldn’t hesitate to do it again if it meant you’d live.”

Behind her eyes, tears threatened to trickle out, but she blinked back every dreadful drop. “Then what’s stopping you?”

Another weak, forced laugh fell from his lips and crashed straight to the ground. “Fantasies are but that for a reason, sometimes, and I know better than to clip a beautiful bird’s wings to keep her caged in hopes for an occasional song. You need a sense of purpose. Wandering the world on the airship
isn’t that. Just as I couldn’t tie myself to one location for an extended period. I’d feel as if the walls were collapsing onto me before I suffocated to death.”

“We could work something out,” Celes whispered.

Setzer gazed upon her for what felt like an eternity. Their foreheads touched and his eyes fell shut. “You sure don’t make this easy, you know that? You never did. I’ve always loved that about you. But in some respect, it’s my fault. I wanted to taste you before I even knew who you truly were and now that I have, I…” Whatever Setzer had to say died in his throat. “I should have seen this coming.” His eyes opened, the violet hue radiating in the darkness. “I shouldn’t have been so blind or stupid to it and yet here I am, barely able to accept the truth. You’re the General from Vector, who is more used to commanding armies and cutting down her foes than living an ordinary life in a boring, country town. And I’m the wandering gambler, who is more apt to fly off than ever face reality head-on. I’d rather take a chance and say I did it than regret never having seized the moment. I’ve gained enough riches to make the Empire appear like beggars on the street, yet I’ve lost all of that and more in a fortnight. It never mattered to me.

“But you? No, I could never gamble you. I was always of the opinion to never grow attached to things. Separation is key when gambling. Won’t miss anything you lose that way. And yet you won over more than my allegiance the day you won our wager. You’ve done more in your short life than I ever will do with the entirety of mine. You’re willing to sacrifice your life just so the regret doesn’t rot you from the inside. I admire that strength. Envy it, even. Truly, I—”

“Setzer, please.” His name trembled out of her feeble lips. “Don’t speak like that.”

“Then you’ll have to forgive me, ma cherie.” His thumb stroked her cheek while her hands clung to his shirt. “You’re shaking.”

“No, I’m not.” Lies and she knew it, but Celes refused to admit weakness. Either the cold, desert night or her emotions were to blame.

It never stopped him from stripping away his jacket to drape around Celes’ shoulders. The thick, extra warmth soothed away the goosebumps, yet it did little to ease her mind.

“I should have been more mindful,” Setzer said, the apology evident in his tone. “I keep forgetting you’re no longer made of ice.”

“It’s not your fault.” Oh, how she loathed how pathetic she sounded.

“Still, such an intention shouldn’t be solely selfish.” One hand rested on the curve of her waist, the other upon her shoulder. “But you’ve been such a good girl this evening.”

He didn’t need to elaborate. As for Celes, she wished for nothing more than to be by his side, obeying his every word while he stroked her hair as a token of appreciation. Or maybe he would reward her in a way which rendered her to squirming and screaming his name. And whenever he was ready, she could return the sentiment in kind. Be one another’s pet, as Darill had once called him. The oddest of circumstances brought them where they stood now. Celes didn’t wish for it to happen any other way.

And she certainly didn’t wish for one other notion. “I meant what I said earlier. I don’t want this—us, whatever this is—to be a brief affair. I don’t want to remember you that way. It might have been an uneven road for us, but I don’t wish to part ways and only think of this as—”

Lips pressed in between her eyes and silenced Celes. Once more, Setzer rested his forehead on hers
and searched through her eyes. “I never viewed this as a brief affair, ma cherie.”

Vivid colors exploded in the sky. Both looked away to see a few more bursts fill the evening with a kaleidoscope of color and crackles. Neither of them noticed the doors opening to the balcony, but the abrupt, drunken laughter reined Setzer back. A small group stumbled out in search of fresh air and a better view of the fireworks. Celes couldn’t fault them for their enjoyment, even if it robbed her and Setzer of privacy.

By then, Setzer stepped back completely. She nearly suggested they go elsewhere to continue their discussion. Gods knew she wanted his hands back on her, whether blocked by fabric or nothing at all. Without the anchor of his touch, Celes lost herself in a dizzying mental mess. Don’t go was what she wanted to say, but Setzer positioned himself closer to the door.

“If you need anything,” Setzer said before departing, “my door is open this evening.”

Those soft words, now nothing but an echo replaying in her mind. It sent Celes’ heart fluttering; it almost coaxed her to run after him.

What have I done to myself? I’m no better than some lovesick floozy throwing away everything for a fleeting moment. I should have known better.

But she hadn’t. It was all supposed to be a simple plan of sneaking into Vector. Celes couldn’t have foretold what would come from brushing paths with the likes of Setzer.

So instead, she watched him re-enter the ballroom and disappear into the endless crowd. Celes waited—maybe he would return. She scoffed at herself for even thinking of such foolishness. Bracing against the banister, she attempted to focus on anything that wasn’t him. But his coat warmed her and his unfinished scotch sat nearby and the fireworks illuminated the entire desert.

But it was his scent seated deep in the fabric which enraptured Celes.

She inhaled deeply and flicked her eyes to the moon and stars hidden behind the array of chromatic bursts. The Falcon had spoiled her; the sight was not nearly as gorgeous from the ground as it was suspended in the heavens. She remembered drifting through fluffy clouds, remembered ribbons floating in the northern skies. Celes smiled back then, entranced by the emerald and amethyst glow washing over everything. What captivated her attention more was Setzer absorbing her radiance, as if she was brighter than the stars, moon, and aurora combined.

He had kissed her then, shared a bed with her, and refused to leave her side. A much-needed escape from the grim reality spiraling around them.

But she wanted more than an escape.

Celes closed her eyes and embraced the recognizable sliver in her mind. She had stood along a balcony before, though instead of the moon, a spotlight blinded her. Instead of stars, faceless patrons watched and awaited for the prized soprano vocals. Instead of fireworks, the live orchestra boomed and guided each lyric. Singing was never the issue. And Celes had been too busy, disgusted with the costume and general principle of the idiotic plan to think of how to make the song tear up the audience. For what was this genuine sound which dwelled within a melancholy soul, hollowed by the absence of her beloved?

When she walked away from the balcony, ignoring the small crowd pushing out to witness the spectacles adorning the skies, Celes finally felt confident to emerge out on stage and sing Maria’s aria.
I imagine the orchestral version of Ronfaure is what Celes and Setzer dance to.
“Fireworks! Can you believe it?” Relm’s laughter rang through the thick crowd. “The last time I saw the skies light up was in Thamasa, but we had magic to do that, didn’t we—”

Celes was already at a standstill when Relm collided into her. So much for leaving unnoticed, Celes mused, her eyes trailing past the young girl to find Strago beside Relm. Cyan and Gau lagged from behind. Someone had been tasked with forcing mildly appropriate clothing onto Gau—whoever that was deserved a reward.

“Celes!” Relm exclaimed after smoothing out her pants and fixing her hair. “What are you doing coming back inside? Aren’t you going to see the fireworks? Oh, you should! It’s going to be so pretty and the skies will light up with all sorts of colors and Edgar was telling me how much of the stuff they have and—”

“It’s chilly out there for her, Relm,” Strago reminded her. “She can see them plenty fine from inside.”

“Pffff!” Relm made a face. “She’s got a jacket with her!” Relm gestured to it for emphasis. “She’ll be fine! Besides, Gau’s not wearing any shoes and he’s okay.”

Strago examined the other child, then eyed Cyan, who simply shook his head as if to say, please don’t ask. “I’m sure he’s an exception to the rules.”

“Well, isn’t that dandy,” Relm threw her hands up and marched off. “I’m going off to see fireworks and you old grumps can do whatever.”

Gau followed her lead, shouting something about sparkly lights. With a sigh, Strago made his way after them and flashed an apologetic smile. Cyan, however, remained. He wore a sapphire and white akome from his homeland. Even as they celebrated, his katana peeked out from the layers of patterned silk.

Cyan approached her not with hostility, but with parental concern. “Dost thou fair well?”

“As fair as I’ll be,” Celes said a second later.

His dark eyes glared at the folded coat in her arms. A noncommittal hum sounded from Cyan before his eyes returned to hers. “It is not my place to be intruding on thy business, but do know that if thou need anything—”

“I appreciate the kindness.”

Cyan bowed his head. “Understood. I imagine thou will be departing for the evening?”

“For now, yes. Am I keeping you from watching Gau?”

He heaved out a sigh. “As much as Sir Gau and I get along well, I welcome a break. It would be a lie if I expressed a lack of interest in the evening’s fireworks. In Doma, we had to find a reason not to use them in celebration.” Cyan smiled briefly. “Might have to inform the Figaros how it is truly done.” With that said, Cyan bowed gravely, head kept down. “Lady Celes.”
Doman customs were not fresh in her memory, though she recalled a time when he refused to even blink in her presence. Celes reciprocated the gesture and the two exchanged smiles before parting ways.

The voices faded to gentle murmurs as she navigated the hallways. Guards made their rounds while lost, yet drunk guests stumbled by Celes, never once stopping to ask where she was going. Up the stairs and towards the back of the castle resided the guest quarters. She and the others took residence there until departure. And one of them belonged to Setzer.

The windows lining the wall overlooked the desert. Splashes of color illuminated the hall in bursts, followed by snaps and fizzes. Her eyes followed the doors until she found light peeking out from the bottom crack of a single room.

She paused before it. He said his door would be open, Celes thought. It was an invitation, right? I wouldn’t be intruding. Instead of knocking, she tested the doorknob, which turned easily in her hand and welcomed her to the room.

A lively fire crackled in the hearth. Perhaps a bed and a dresser were present, but they were lost to the darkness as the fire revealed only an end table and fur rug.

“Close the door.”

Celes held her breath. She scouted the premise for Setzer. Outside of the fire’s glow, the dimmest of illumination flickered over his body and face. He had shed the superfluous layers of his attire and freed his hair from its ties. In one hand, he cradled a wine glass while the other propped up his face, elbow firm in the arm of the chair.

As instructed, she closed the door, snickering when it locked. “Finally found us a door that locks,” she teased, then smoothed out his jacket. “Thank you for letting me borrow—”

“Until further instructions are given, you are to be quiet.” Setzer sipped his drink. “Do you understand?”

Her brow furrowed, followed by the abrupt leap of her heart into her throat, daring to choke her. The entire night, she obeyed his command, from the pretty dress to the chains and clamps still torturing her underneath. No one knew of the delicious pain she was in. No one but Setzer. As much as Celes desired to free herself from her confines, she wished to do so under his watch and by his word, for whatever Setzer had in mind, it was filthy.

Thus she nodded.

Setzer hummed, the sound a hint above the crackling fire. “Good.” The motion of his hand was lost to the darkness. “You can place the coat on the table. You’ll also find something else there.”

The only table in view was by the fireplace and Setzer didn’t reprimand her approaching it. Something indeed splayed across the surface: a strip of black fabric, more apt for a waist sash. She swapped items and stroked a thumb over the silk.

“Return to where you were before.”

Celes searched the room and recalled her exact placement.

“Stop.”

She ceased movement.
“Face me.”

And she did.

“The item in your hand? You’re to blindfold yourself. Do you understand?”

This wasn’t him yanking on her hair, nor was it the flat of his hand spanking her rear. Nothing screamed of pain in her palms. It would, however, rob Celes of using her eyes. Nothing more. She wished to see Setzer and drink in his expression when she finally disrobed. Rendered blind, she was no better than a helpless soul searching for guidance. His guidance.

A new prickle danced between her legs as blood thrummed in her veins.

“How do you understand?” he repeated, more assertive the second time.

Celes swallowed before nodding.

“Then be a good girl and put it on.”

It wasn’t leather or cold steel; it was soft and delicate. Celes fumbled with implementing the blindfold, her hairstyle working against her efforts. When it fastened tight around her head, she opened her eyes to a black world. Neither light nor movement pierced the opaque cloth.

Deprived of her sight, the remaining senses heightened out of plunging into the unknown. A creak riddled the floor and a chill teased her body. Perhaps it was the rock of Setzer’s chair. A pause followed, nothing but the fire filling her ears, and then the creak returned.

Celes waited. Her breaths hitched. Surely the silence would kill her first.

“Come forward,” Setzer said, yet Celes hesitated. “Follow the sound of my voice.”

The tone basking on his tongue warmed her, holding the unspoken: it’s alright, you’re safe. Now, Celes tucked their safe words away; she was not to be bested by a mere blindfold.

Her stride shortened from her usual walk, heels clicking into the wood until she stepped onto the rug. The warmth of the fire flooded her left side—she wondered if he started it for her—as shallow breaths flowed through her.

“Stop.”

Silence followed after Celes came to a standstill. Her hands fidgeted along her dress. She swore she heard him exhale. Was he close enough to reach out and touch her? She licked her lips at the thought. It never happened.

When Setzer spoke again, his voice softened. “Take off the dress.”

A simple request, yet Celes still blushed. The last time she reprieved herself from a dress, the blasted thing hadn’t survived, but Celes donned a custom garment, a gift from the man opposite her. She treated the clasps at the back of her neck like glass. Everything held together thanks to those metal loops; surely the dress would cascade down her form to pool to her feet in an instant.

With one clasp left, his voice froze her. “Slowly.”

She couldn’t deny him. Even if Celes preferred to let the damn thing drop, she couldn’t disobey him. The silent promise of a reward for being his good girl urged Celes to comply.
Poking her tongue out to wet her lips, Celes pressed an arm into her torso while her free hand clutched onto the neck piece. The material unraveled to reveal the collar clutching her throat and the chains spilling down her chest. Her breath snagged as she further exposed herself. She swore she could feel his stare like a heavy weight against her body. The image of Setzer smirking warmed Celes’ face more so than the fire.

“Stop.”

With the bunched up material above her hips, Celes obeyed. The stillness did little to ease her fluttering heart.

“Turn around,” Setzer added a second later, “away from me.”

Swallowing hard, she listened and pivoted on shaky heels.

“Cross your right foot in front of your left.”

She pursed her lips. Right foot crossed over the left as she tested her balance. Celes exhaled upon steadying herself, content with not tripping over her own damn feet.

“Now when you continue, bend over.” A pause, then, “slowly.”

If I fall over, this is your fault, she wanted to growl out. But she could speak; she had not been maimed in battled or made mute by a Silence spell. She alone opted to hold her tongue and not shatter the illusion for the thought alone of knowing how much Setzer’s arousal grew with each passing second from her obedience. In the back of her mind, a small voice hissed with poison. She was selfish for allowing a man to possess such control over her. Celes squashed that voice; Setzer’s voice was the only sound she desired to hear.

Her hands clenched the dress as she bent over. She was no graceful courtesan, but her eagerness for perfection overwhelmed any sense of humiliation. The material slipped from her waist as she guided it down her legs. When her fingers brushed with the wooden panels, she released the dress and braced along the floor for extra support. With Setzer’s silence came Celes’ stillness.

But the toned muscles of her legs excelled in carrying her into battle swiftly and lacked the flexibility of a dancer. The stretch tugging her hamstrings burned, rivaling the tension tweaking her nipples. Each breath deepened and provided little comfort when her body caved into slight, constant quakes. Celes bit her lip to hold back her screams.

The darkness within the blindfold offered no mercy. The lively fire continued to warm her. The muffled fireworks vibrated through the floor. Her heart thumped in her ears, louder than her breaths.

She craved for anything to indulge her. She fantasized of a hand trailing her back and teasing between her legs. Setzer never reacted, despite Celes being on display for him. His scent alone aroused her, but to hear his voice again would have been akin to physical contact.

In due time, new creaks and clatters emerged in the room. Celes wagered the source came from a body shifting and heavy boots trekking about. The sounds crawled to her side and stopped. Celes tilted her head. Not even a sliver of light peeked through the blindfold.

A soft hand eased into her exposed slit. Celes sucked in sputtering air and withheld the moan desperately trying to escape. His slick fingers rubbed along the warm flesh. She sunk teeth into her lip.

“This is turning you on, isn’t it?” One finger dipped down to circle her clit. “You truly do have a
dirty mind, don’t you?”

Even if she possessed the ability to speak, Celes was distracted by the illusion of him finally sliding his fingers inside, working into her until she couldn’t hold back any longer. But he didn’t. His touch ignited her body, but never tended to the flame produced. She was nearly ready to grovel.

Then his fingers left her. No amount of restraint stopped her from whimpering.

“Stand up.”

While he never instructed her to do so slowly, Celes acted as if it was her only option. Any faster and her head would spin in a dizzy mess. Once upright, his scent overwhelmed her.

Celes desired his hands on her again. Anywhere. Along with his hot breath teasing her skin and his quiet voice echoing in her ear.

“Turn around.”

Right as she did so, the heavy clunk of assumed boots moved away. Wherever he went, she was eager to follow.

“Come closer.”

He barely finished his sentence as her feet shuffled toward him. Celes clutched her jaw and resisted the violent urge to tear away the blindfold.

“Stop.”

Celes’ faltered to a halt. The heat of the fire persisted, but Setzer’s voice was nearby. Something ran along the chains connected to the clamps. The subtle movement and shift in the body jewelry teased her. Jolts of lust overpowered the pain and bundled up deep in her core.

“I don’t know how to say no to you anymore,” Setzer sighed out, the hint of dominance faltering all but briefly. “One taste and everything else pales in comparison.” She listened to his long inhale as he stopped toying with the chain. “I never want anyone else.”

Setzer yanked the chain towards him. Celes gasped, eyes shot open. Searing agony buzzed through her. She stumbled forward, her weary legs threatening to crumble, but she crashed into something and braced herself for impact. The collision damaged only her pride as she clutched onto both the chair and Setzer.


Several tears slipped past her eyes. As the pain pierced her, she caught her breath in time for the warmth to flood over the agony. She reveled in it, as fleeting as it was.

An arm wrapped around her waist and pinned her against him. She shifted to straddle his lap, though all she longed to do was reach out, rip away the remainder of his clothing, and crush her body into his.

He teased the chain looping across her lower back, the hum of his voice inches away. “You’ve been so good this evening. Perhaps I should reward you?”

Celes nodded, maybe too quickly. He chuckled. The clamps loosened from her nipples and Celes
tilted her head back, drew in as much air as possible, and much to her surprise, exhaled out a
delightful moan from the rush of release.

One by one, the chains were undone and metal clanked onto the floor. Celes sat in his lap, clad in
heels and a blindfold. Setzer didn’t entertain removing either. Instead, his hand glided across the
small of her back as his mouth enveloped her nipple. Unlike the torture stalking her throughout the
night, his lips demonstrated mercy and his tongue lapped over the hardened flesh as if tending to a
wound.

She clung to Setzer and the chair as he eased into her other breast. Celes withheld any indication of
pleasure, whether it was the desire to moan or rock her hips into him. Easier said than done with a
particular mouth pleasing her.

“You’ve been holding back, haven’t you?” Warm lips trailed up her neck, planting sweet, soft kisses
along the way. “Keep quiet,” he whispered, “unless you’re begging or reacting to me.”

To test her, he sucked at the crook of her neck. Celes no longer stilled her tongue. She indulged him
in helplessly content cries. Her nails gripped into his shoulder and her body quivered.

“Please,” she tried to murmur, the cracked word more of a desperate moan.

He stopped. His breath was on her neck before his words were in her ear. “Please what?”

“I need you,” she whimpered.

“And what do you wish for me to do about it?”

 Plenty of thoughts surfaced. She licked her lips while mustering the courage to reply.

“Use me.” The words trembled out, her voice coy as ever. “Please, I….”

When her voice faltered further, Setzer pressed a kiss into her jawline. “Why don’t you show me?”

A troublesome request when she couldn’t see a damn thing, but her wits remained at her disposal.
Pale hands pawed at his shoulders, his collarbone, his neck, and his face. She traced his features,
discerning the newer scar there, not yet faded properly. Fingertips brushed over his lips, then his
chest, where his heart raced as wild as hers. Celes clawed the shirt, wanting it gone, but impatience
bested her.

Further down she traced the hem of his pants, a belt obstructing her path. With time and effort, the
leather piece loosened and the rest unraveled. Her hand shifted inside and Celes delighted in the soft
breath Setzer inhaled, followed by those lustful sounds. Against her hand, he was as eager as she
was. She displayed avidity with each stroke, but his hand resting over hers slowed the pace.

Something nuzzled into her—his nose, perhaps. Celes didn’t flinch, especially not when his lips
sought out hers. She expected a kiss mirroring the pain she experienced that evening, but Setzer was
mindful of each nibble and lick.

He still throbbed when he pulled Celes’ hand away. A firm grip on her waist realigned her and not a
moment later, Celes moaned as her desire was fulfilled. Their lips never strayed or stayed silent.
They embraced, bodies crushed and moving in a gradual, steady pace. Whenever she attempted to
speed up, he clung to her and forced her back into the slow rhythm—a devilish scheme as
excruciating as their past affairs. Even though he never pinned her to the nearby table to take
advantage of her, Setzer’s dominance rang clear, even as he sat beneath Celes. And the mental
submission proved to be as intense and rewarding as the physical.
The fire was sure to burn out by the time they finished. Celes focused on the nuances and subtleties forcing her to quake: his fingers stroking her waist, his tongue flicking over her lip before consuming her, his sharp inhales as she readjusted her hips, and his movements into her before filling her up completely.

But she didn’t expect the wandering hand sliding down her belly and between them. As fingers curled into her, Celes broke their kiss to cry out. Overwhelmed by the sudden delight, Celes clung to him and desperately gasped as he refused to stop. His name broke out upon her lips amidst her desperate pleas. And when she ceased to beg, it was replaced by blissful cries.

Celes still latched onto Setzer despite losing her breath and twitching wildly. She never noticed the hand slipping away from her, too focused on the fervid afterglow. The hairpins holding her blonde tresses together were plucked out, followed by the blindfold. When her eyes dared to open, the fire blazed bright as she adjusted to the light.

Then she turned to Setzer, who nuzzled her cheek. “And you may have your voice back, as well,” he whispered before stealing a soft kiss. “You are too good to me.”

She cracked a small smile. “And you are too good to me.” Celes shifted her weight and whimpered; he had yet to experience what he bestowed upon her. Though exhausted, Celes rolled her hips into Setzer and smirked when he gasped.

“And what do you think you’re doing?”

“You couldn’t have possibly done all that simply for me,” Celes purred. “I’m surprised you’re not taking advantage of the situation.”

His eyes faltered from hers, albeit briefly. “I only wanted to make you happy.”

“It would make me happy if you pinned me somewhere and fucked me until I couldn’t walk come morning.”

A simple, blunt request, yet Setzer stared at her. As he hesitated, she wiggled her hips.

When he did move, he was swift and precise. Celes held on tight as he scooped her up and settled her onto the fur rug. Blonde hair splayed about while Setzer loomed above. It wasn’t long until his hips moved into her again. Celes tightened her legs around him and Setzer pumped into her, giving Celes a new reason to moan.

Though his soft kisses contrasted against the rest of his actions. Something wild and something tame. Always full of surprises, always keeping her on her toes. Celes coaxed him further with her lips upon his and hands lost in silvery hair.

In the back of her mind, a thread of logic told her to stop. Blatant lust didn’t solve the problems which fumed up earlier in the evening. She desired to talk to him, reason with him, and devise a solution. But she had confronted him before with similar intentions, only to be bound up and bent over a desk. It worked out. They worked out, surviving worse conditions. Hope wasn’t lost and Celes intended on addressing the matter soon enough; she simply couldn’t think straight or comprehend anything past the decadence shared with Setzer.

“Don’t stop,” she thought she uttered at one point.

Or perhaps she imagined it. And if she had, she prayed to never snap back to reality and forever stay in the blurry haze where Setzer was.
No embers smoldered in the ashes. Sunlight crept along the floor and teased Celes’ face. She cracked her eyes open, staring at the fireplace with strands of hair obstructing her view. Her eyes closed and her lips parted to yawn. The warmth of a heavy blanket encompassed her nude form and the luscious scent of firewood and sex lingered in the air.

Her mind replayed memories still burning her up. Setzer didn’t delay his own pleasure, leaving both him and Celes content. He strayed from her long enough to fetch a cigarette, carefully lighting it from the fireplace, then returned to her side. Nestling into one another, their breaths evened out. He reminded Celes she was beautiful and murmured Jidoorian poems into her body. Although he offered her a smile, his eyes didn’t. Whatever flickered there was snuffed out, but still he showered her with kisses and words of adoration.

They had shared each other during their journey to seek out friends. Maybe it was to numb out reality or feel something other than sorrow and guilt. And there they were, the battle won and over, yet they chose to forget the words shared on the balcony in exchange for mutual intimacy. But when sex was involved, their actions screamed above anything that could be said. There had been a point when Setzer encouraged her to indulge for a change of pace. So she indulged with Setzer. Maybe he had a change of heart; maybe he would accompany her to Maranda, if not wait for her.

Their evening deserved to end on a pleasant note, free of complications. Come morning, they could discuss further; they could discuss everything.

But the morning was still young. Setzer didn’t have to tend to an airship and Celes didn’t have to set out with a group to track down survivors. They could tangle up with one another. She could stir him awake with gentle kisses and caresses, hoping he’d hold her just as he had before she drifted off to sleep. She wanted to hear his tired, yet content voice, to feel his hair tickling her skin. Setzer might have made the evening akin to walking on knives with a combination of her attire and their scene together, but never before had Celes felt so safe and loved.

Loved. Celes Chère felt loved.

Had she not been so exhausted after Setzer using her, she might have expressed it to him then—what she truly felt.

*Perhaps I can tell him now. That... would be okay, wouldn’t it? Would that have him think differently about the ordeal with Maranda?* Celes hummed softly before stretching down to her toes. *No, it’s silly to think like this. But... he must know, if he doesn’t already.* She rolled over, licked her parched lips, drew in a breath, and opened her eyes.

And no one was there.

Celes shot upright. Her heart skipped multiple beats. Anxious eyes darted about the room. She expected to find Setzer sitting in a corner, chuckling over her startled state. Instead, the room sat untouched and vacant; the bed was made, the chair was tucked into a table on the opposite end, and her dress was hung up with a cloth bag, presumably containing the body jewelry.

What she did find was a square piece of parchment on the floor. Celes nearly overlooked it, but black ink scribed out her name in the most elegant calligraphy. She swiped it, careful not to tear the edges as she unfolded the item. The same ink and penmanship filled up the entirety of the paper:
I’ve stared at this paper for far too long, unsure of what to say. Then I came to realize that no matter what I write, it won’t dull the torment. I never intended for any of this to happen the way it did. I did this to myself and I dragged you along with me and for that I apologize. The truth is, I wanted nothing to do with the Returners. I was content with leaving the moment we arrived in Imperial territory, but then I remembered the woman who drove me absolutely wild and how I couldn’t leave without ever seeing you again. All I wanted then was to see how far I could go before you broke, but nothing went according to plan. And that was selfish of me and I know better now; someone such as yourself never breaks. No, you turned out to be the best bet I ever lost to. I thought of you in your absence, hoping you were alive. When you did return at various times, I wanted to make you smile for a change. Since I came to realize that, I’ve wanted nothing but that for you. You deserve happiness, nothing but the most elated joy attainable, and I would gladly wish that for you, even if it meant I couldn’t share it with you. Back then, you might have won my allegiance with a simple bet, but over time you won far more with your wits, beauty, and strength alone. Know that no one could ever replace you. I could have a thousand lives and a thousand mistakes and always decide on you.

Whatever it is you’re looking for, may it be redemption or a second chance or a sense of belonging, I hope you find it, ma cherie.

Setzer

Celes read the letter a second time, then a third. The letters were but a distant reality she couldn’t reach. Teardrops sprinkled the paper while her feeble hands clung at the edges. Her eyes tore away from the paper, once more inspecting the room. Not a sign of Setzer was present, as if he was never there to begin with.

It couldn’t be true. It had to be a joke, but she knew his handwriting all too well now. Even his scent was infused into the usual paper. Doubling into herself, Celes couldn’t stop crinkling the letter in her fists.

You couldn’t have just gone up and... no, you wouldn’t. Why would you dare?

But her mind continued to trick her into believing otherwise, spurring her to jump to her feet and search the closest for the same bathrobes hidden inside, much like her guest room. Slipping the garment on, Celes burst through the door and rushed down the halls barefoot.

Few were in the corridor—servants, most likely—and Celes ignored them all. She peered through the windows. Perhaps there was time. Perhaps she could convince him to stay. But the Falcon didn’t float anywhere in the blue skies.

She ran. Some called out to Celes, nothing but echoes. Her heart thumped louder than all the voices. Her head threatened her with a vicious headache. Her lungs cracked dry as she sucked in shallow breaths.

No matter which window she looked through, it was all the same. The landscape of desert and blue skies stretched out forever. Nothing more. He wasn’t there. Not outside, not in the hallways.

Nowhere.

Her feet faltered as she caught herself along the wall.
He left.

Celes placed a hand over her mouth and shut her eyes, yet the tears still squeezed out.

He actually left.

He could have been true to his word, whisk her away to keep her for himself. All in line with his impulsive, dramatic tendencies. If it meant seeing the cocky airship pilot again, the gambler who was willing to give up every worldly possession for the sake of a thrill—even once, even briefly—Celes was willing to make the sacrifice.

A servant inquired if she was well. Celes barely registered the question. What a laughable sight she was: Celes Chère, former General of the Empire and infamous ice queen, on the brink of tears over a broken heart. After all those years, Celes convinced herself she was above it all, for she wasn’t some weak woman about to hand her heart over to any moron.

But she hadn’t. She loathed him at first, gradually tolerating him for the sake of convenience and appearances, and then slowly, but surely fell further and further for Setzer. Celes did it to herself as much as Setzer claimed to have done it to himself. No spell ever existed to reverse what had been done.

Once more she ran, retracing her steps and ignoring the eyes following her. Her mind continued to play tricks, convincing her that maybe there was something back in his guest room. Perhaps this was a game. Setzer was always fond of them. Maybe he left a trinket behind. Closing the door, Celes searched frantically.

Not a trace of him remained, save for the letter and the faint scent belonging to no one but Setzer.

Reality struck a terrible nerve within her. Doubt morphed into a sinister rage, blinding her in an instant. Celes’ pitiful sobs evolved into vicious screams as she latched onto whatever was in range to rip apart.

“Of all the fucking times you could have left,” Celes bellowed, not caring if the other side of the continent heard her, “you chose now?! Why didn’t you leave when we reached Vector?! Why the hell did you have to stay and torture me like this, you pathetic son of a bitch!” The hearth tools toppled over and spilled out. “And all for what?! Because I have a sense of duty in my life and you’d rather fucking run away from it all?! Like you always do?!” She threw the chair across the room, one of the legs snapping in half. “What the hell was this to you? A game?! Was I just another girl to keep your life interesting?”

Celes tore apart all that stood in her path, but she came to the dress last. Blue eyes glared at the garment with utter disgust.

“Did everything we go through not mean anything to you?! Did you not care?!” Tight fists gripped the delicate material. “Did you ever care?! Is that why you flew off on your stupid ex-girlfriend’s fucking airship and couldn’t look me in the eye about it?! Do you think this is supposed to be protecting me?!” She yanked at the dress, but it didn’t give. “All that bullshit about how it wouldn’t have worked because of what I am and what you are… you’re all talk. You always were! That’s all you ever were!” Her fingernails pierced through the fabric and dug deep into her palms. “I fucking hate you!”

With one fierce, sweeping movement, Celes roared and spun around, ripping the dress off the hanger and splitting it in half. She hurled it across the room, dozens upon hundreds of crystals floating midair before spilling onto the floor like shattered glass.
Despite the growls and hisses, the clenched teeth and fists, tears cascaded down her face and splashed onto the floor. Her furious breaths calmed to stuttering sobs that even Celes couldn’t hold back. No longer blinded by her anger, she witnessed the chaos she created. There was no undoing it, just as she couldn’t erase the many mistakes of the past. She couldn’t rewind back to the opera house and convince Locke and the others to take their chances sneaking onto an Imperial ship.

But she didn’t want that. Even with a thousand attempts to redo history, she couldn’t erase him. Despite the constant love and hate sparking between them, Celes wanted to have it all—the flaws and the perfections—instead of nothing.

The door creaked open and Celes’ eyes shot to it, both anxious and petrified as to who dared to enter. Edgar stepped inside and examined the premise. His eyebrows knitted together until he found Celes in the bedlam.

“He left,” she said, her voice a dismal, pathetic squeak. “He left, Edgar.”

Before she could collapse to her knees, Edgar caught her. He descended with Celes, one hand cradling her head while the other rubbed her back. With her face buried in his shoulder and her arms clutching onto him for dear life, Celes openly wept. Her chest throbbed with a disgusting pain, leaving her yearning for what once swelled there the previous night.

“I know,” Edgar whispered. “I’m sorry.”

She wanted to ramble about how much she longed for Setzer to come back, how despite her current and previous bouts of anger, it was all worth it. He always had been. He made her smile and laugh and scream and cry. They had ended on a positive note together. Then she woke up without him and all the moments shared together were forgotten.

Though she did recall walking the passageways through Narshe with the king of Figaro. The cold didn’t bother her, but the wary eyes judging her trustworthiness had. Edgar talked to her freely without hatred clouding his eyes and warned her of the treasure hunter who had saved her from her death sentence. Celes had flipped her hair over her shoulder and shot him the same glare she gave to any man attempting to speak with her on the matter of love and courtship.

Celes barely mustered a pitiful laugh at herself. “So are you going to tell me I’m wrong?”

The question craned Edgar’s head back. “What?”

Between her sniffles and sobs, Celes found her voice briefly. “That I really am some love-starved twit?”

She expected him to laugh, to go along with it for the sake of humor, anything to lighten the mood. But the confusion turned to sadness, the corners of his mouth pulled down. His blue eyes glossed over.

What he said in reply, gentle as his words were, had Celes wailing in wretched misery: “No, for sometimes even ice melts.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll leave my musical inspiration here.
Chapter 25

Celes laid on her back, staring out the window and into the night sky. By the time the blue mist of twilight replaced the darkness, Celes relinquished any further efforts of resting. She packed what little she owned—several changes of clothes, the bandana, and her rune blade—into a bag given to her by Edgar.

The crumpled and ripped letter, however, was separated. Celes couldn’t stomach reading it again, though the thought of disposing of it forever equally killed her. There it sat next to the pouch containing the body jewelry from the celebration without a dress to match its beauty. After staring at it one last time, she grabbed both and shoved them into her bag.

Celes was the second to leave, but it was the thought of the first who departed which pained her, enough to eclipse the notion of heading for Maranda.

Her heels echoed through empty halls. Upon arriving at the front gate, she was greeted by familiar faces. Edgar came as no surprise, but Terra did. Upon spotting her, Terra rushed to Celes and embraced Celes with an unexpected, staggering force.

“Please take care,” Terra whispered. “Whatever happens, know that I’ll miss you.”

She longed to comfort Terra with promises of keeping in touch, that this wasn’t the definitive end, but Celes stilled her tongue. Who was she to lift Terra’s spirits with a possible lie? Burying the thought, Celes squeezed Terra until their arms tired and slipped away.

“And you take care, too,” Celes said. “Keep both the children and Edgar out of trouble.”

At least Terra giggled. “But of course.”

Terra had to be bound for Mobliz soon. Edgar, no doubt, most likely persuaded her to extend her stay under his roof for a while longer. At least the two could part amicably.

“My men will take you to Maranda,” Edgar explained, far more serious than she had ever heard him before. “After that, they must return. I can’t keep them by your side the entirety of your stay.” He paused. “Celes, if you wish for company on the way to South Figaro—”

“That isn’t necessary,” she interjected.

Celes never asked for the boat arranged for safe departure out of South Figaro. Nor did she ask for the Figaroan guards to accompany her on the journey to Maranda. Like always, she expected to find her own means of reaching her destination. The generosity wasn’t mandatory, but Edgar insisted.

“If you are to leave my kingdom,” he had told her the previous day when she finally emerged from her room, “you are to do so without fear. Please, this is the least I can offer.”

“I don’t deserve this,” Celes had said.

She remembered the sadness swelling in his eyes, almost on par with her own. “You deserve far more and it pains me I can’t offer that. You don’t give yourself enough credit, Celes.”
But now, Edgar’s face fell further. Even Terra pouted.

“Very well,” he sighed out.

Outside the gates awaited the entourage to escort Celes, along with a free chocobo to ride to South Figaro. Edgar assisted Celes onto the chocobo while Terra fastened the pack to the saddle. Before she gripped the reins, Edgar caught her gloved hand.

“Celes,” he murmured, their eyes catching onto one another’s. “Good luck.”

She steadied her breath, doing well not to think of the weight of his words, for Edgar perhaps didn’t see the irony in them, and wore a smile for them both.

“Thank you.”

With her hand free, she tangled the reins up within her fists and sunk heels into the chocobo to ride off.

A small group was bound for Maranda, some heading there as a stepping stone in their travels, while most were returning from the celebration at Figaro Castle. Of those people was the man both she and Edgar spoke with. Celes knew more of his story than she did of his name, but he didn’t acknowledge her outside of a quick glance, filled with a short-lived rage, followed by a smug smirk.

An announcement rang through the docks of the ship’s eventual departure within the hour. Edgar’s men insisted on staying by Celes, even if she stated otherwise. These weren’t her Imperial soldiers, though, and they reminded her of their duty.

>You worry too much about me, Edgar, she thought.

Like the rest of the world, South Figaro was still rebuilding. A visit to the sparse marketplace might have been worthwhile to fatten her sack of possessions, but none of the wares were to her liking. Celes looked upon all she held near and dear to her heart and couldn’t help but feel sorry for herself; the contents of the sack were better suited to a street beggar than the woman she used to be.

>Perhaps after this, I’ll become that. Would be appropriate.

Celes meandered about the docks, never straying far. The Figaroan guards respected her space enough to leave a considerable gap; their presence remained, following like a shadow. The smell of the ocean air brought no comfort, nor did the constant breeze rolling off of the waves. She bundled up in her cloak and looked out to the skies. Gulls called out overhead as fluffy clouds floated by.

She didn’t know what she expected to find after staring into the patches of bright blue for some time. Maybe he’d come back after all to take her away, as ridiculous of an idea as it was. Her heart longed for it, but her mind convinced her otherwise.

Closing her eyes, Celes pictured being back on the airship. The appeal was exquisite: soaring high without anyone to hold back her wings. If she hadn’t been so determined on her strong sense of duty, then perhaps she’d be flying now.

The thought vanished as a voice rifled over the rolling waves, one carrying out her name. Celes
fluttered her eyes. She desired to be alone during her ventures to South Figaro—she made that clear multiple times. Still, the sight of Locke was no surprise.

The fine fabrics from the celebration were absent, replaced by his usual guise as an adventurer. Several bags clung to his body, each one weighing down from the sheer volume of contents bundled inside. Celes raised an eyebrow and Locked flashed a grin.

“I thought it was you!” His rushed steps slowed as he approached Celes. “Edgar mentioned you were leaving, but... I didn’t know when.”

“I didn’t want anyone to know when,” Celes spat out, unable to contain herself.

He blinked. “Really?” He opened his mouth, perhaps to ask why, but he didn’t. “Well... should I not be butting in? Um, with whatever you’re doing?”

“You’re here now. A moot point, no?” She narrowed her eyes. “Why are you here again?”

“Oh! Was stocking up!” He perked up and tugged at the various bags. “Figured if I’m heading out soon, might as well start preparing. That and Edgar wanted me to grab him some stuff. Which is fine; he has a few things I needed to swipe from him, as well.” Celes shot him a quizzical expression. “It’s not like that! I’m not stealing from him! Just taking a thing or two I know he could part from. He’s got an older grappling hook gun model that I could put to some good use. Better than it collecting dust in his back room.”

She gestured off to the side. “His guards are right there.”

For a brief moment, she swore his skin lightened a few shades. “What?” Locke glanced over, noting the small group of men and the royal colors they bore. “Oh, them?” He rolled his eyes and waved a hand. “Pfft, like they’re going to do anything. Please, the king and I go back. He owes me as far as I’m concerned.”

“Does he?”

Locke shrugged. “Did all his dirty work for years. Or at least that’s what he called it. Never bothered me. Not like the guy can’t build himself a new one.” Locke chuckled at his joke. Celes never quirked her lips. When the short-lived amusement died off, Locke’s frown as his eyes refused to part from hers. “I know I don’t need to ask why you’re here. I overheard Edgar discussing it the other day. I should have confronted you back at the castle, said something... but I didn’t. Was afraid of what you’d say, to be honest. You seemed like you needed the space, but... I couldn’t just let you go without saying a word.”

Celes resisted the urge to cross her arms and glare like she always had. “So you found an excuse to come to South Figaro just to see me?”

A faint laugh sputtered out of Locke. “Would you believe me if I said yes? Would it even matter? I... I’d want to go with you. To Maranda, that is. Even if you didn’t say a word to me the whole time, I’d just want to go to make sure you were alright.” His eyes cast along the wooden docks. “But I know what you’d say; you’d tell me you were alright and didn’t need anyone to come with you. Or something like that, anyways. Right? Well, whatever the case, I couldn’t have left you in the middle of the night without a proper farewell.” Locke scoffed, then muttered a string of curses.

The toxin held in his mouth upon the vague mention of Setzer’s parting harrowed Celes, though not as much as the thought of Locke accompanying her to the docks for a final farewell. She fashioned her tongue into a blade, ready to skewer him for even thinking of those words, never mind uttering
them. But Celes closed her eyes and released both a deep breath and her anguish.

“I don’t wish for anyone to be following me,” she replied. “I must go alone. Please allow me that, if nothing else.”

While reluctant, Locke nodded. “Yeah, sure. Figures. Knew you’d say something like that. Just thought… oh hell, I didn’t know what to think. Um… be safe? Take care? Damn it, this is all too weird to say.” One step brought him closer, his eyes back on hers. “I wish I could do something to make this better.”

Celes’ eyes softened. “You’ve done all you could, Locke. I couldn’t possibly ask you of anything else.”

“It doesn’t feel enough, like—”

“May I remind you that you broke me free from my imprisonment and in turn saved me from imminent death. And I do believe you have done so on more than one occasion.” Celes looked down briefly, expecting to see the bandana by her waist, only to remember it was stowed away in her pack. “You’ve done plenty, Locke.” Good and bad. Can’t have one without the other.

The slump in his posture said otherwise. “I want to do more. I don’t want to settle for just that.”

“What more do you wish to do, Locke? You can’t whisk me away from Maranda.”

He groaned, a rather pronounced sound, and crossed his arms. “I’d certainly try if I had to.”

“Don’t.” Celes hadn’t meant to growl; it came too naturally now. “I… don’t make this harder than it already is. Please.”

A distant shout from down the docks declared ten minutes remained before departure for Maranda. A few stragglers rushed towards the ship while crew members made last minute preparations. The guards reminded Celes why she was there to begin with.

“I must be going,” Celes said a moment later. As she turned on her heels, she cast one last gaze upon Locke. “Thank you again. For all you’ve done.”

With her eyes settled upon the ship, Celes marched down the docks. She covered little ground before a pair of arms wrapped around from behind and refused to let go. Celes gasped gently, the heat of a body radiating onto hers.

A soft exhale came first. “Locke….”

His head dipped down, lips hovering before her ear. “I meant what I said back on the Falcon. Nothing ever changed, I hope you know that.” He squeezed her. “I love you, Celes.”

The gentleness in his voice and embrace did nothing to soothe her taut muscles. “Please, Locke. Don’t.” And when his hold didn’t loosen, Celes huffed. “Why are you telling me this now? Again? Did I not make it clear before?” She shoved past his arms and broke free, pivoting to face him. “What the hell do you expect me to say?” Locke said nothing, thus Celes shook her spinning head. “It’s too late, Locke.”

“Celes—”

“No, stop.” Her jaw clenched and eyes blinked back unwanted tears. “I don’t want this, so please….”
She backed away before turning to face her destination proper. She didn’t look back. Not halfway down the dock, not when she reached the ship, and not when they finally departed. When Celes did cast a glance behind her, only the ocean was in sight. Miles upon miles of dark blue waves ebbing and flowing.

Gray clouds blotted out the skies. Thunder rolled in the distance, but the pouring rain was a greater threat. The firm ground softened to mud as Celes stepped onto the fresh earth. She clung to herself under the heavy, soaked cloak to keep warm. For the first time in all her life, Celes longed for a fire to dispel the chill.

But there was no time to stop. What was left of Maranda sat several miles from the coastline, a brisk trek if it weren’t for the rain slowing down travel. No chocobos shortened the distance and the extra layers of clothing offered by the guards wouldn’t help.

The group also bound for the village ventured without her. Each step she took, they took two more, soon nothing but specks along the horizon. Celes sighed, one hand resting on the hilt of her rune blade as she lowered her gaze.

She knew this walk. She had made it before, albeit under different circumstances. No rain hindered her movements while an army followed her every movement and command. Celes held her head high back then, for her pride would rally together the Imperials forces and fill them with valor. The same pride made every citizen of Maranda tremble in her presence.

This was my choice, she thought, the outline of Maranda coming into view through the thick mist. I can’t forget what I had done to them, for they surely haven’t forgotten. They deserve justice. I don’t blame them for that.

The damage dealt years ago still impacted in the village—by Kefka’s hand and her own. Most able-bodied men had been stripped from their homes and thrown into the military ranks. What remained were broken households unable to patch up the tears and holes left behind.

Hundreds crowded around the center of the village. There had been thousands at one time. Faces weathered by siege and famine stared her down. No warmth swelled in any of those eyes.

Coming to a pause, Celes turned to the guards who lingered behind. Each one stood tall, as if ready to salute Celes, though she couldn’t bring herself to reciprocate the honor. Not now. Celes nodded, the unspoken words understood by both ends. The Figaroan guards walked off, presumably to return to the ship. Completely alone, Celes swallowed the lump forming in her throat.

But the silence vanished and Celes longed for nothing but the ambiance of the rain. A woman shouted first, her voice trembling through the cold.

“You vile, Imperial bitch! So you finally decide to show up and own up to what you did to us? Are you even aware of that?! You took my husband and sons from me! And for what? They’re dead now because of you!”

Another voice chimed in. “I had to watch my children be cut down, all because they weren’t allowed to say goodbye to their father. One swing of a blade and left to bleed out!”

And another. “Half of the town was torched! Homes went up in flames and merchants lost most of
their wares! The Empire left us to die out here!"

Everyone bellowed out confessions into the cold air, all of them intermixing until it transformed into a wall of sound challenging the faraway thunder. The townspeople slung profanity and slander alike, directed at her and the Empire. It made no difference; they had someone to unload years of resentment onto.

No longer able to make sense of the hatred spewing out, Celes tilted her head back and gazed at the clouds. The darkness gave way neither day nor night—only the relentless downpour. Her eyes fell shut, the raindrops streaming down her cheeks and neck. Her teeth chattered from the bitter cold. Numbness settled in, though it was different from what Shiva chilled her with. It didn’t matter now. It never had.

With her blue eyes slowly opening and her head falling back to center, Celes gripped onto her rune blade and twisted it free. Both blade and scabbard released from her hip and without hesitation, Celes chucked it. The sheathed blade spun before crashing into the muddy ground. The villagers’ words no longer deafened Celes; all but the rain surrendered to silence. As their eyes questioned her, Celes’ palms splayed out to the people of Maranda.

“I remember the day Emperor Gestahl summoned me,” Celes began, raising her voice enough for all to hear, though the volume contained no dignity. “My task was simple and he saw me fit for the job. I never questioned him. None of us did. I believe we all thought we were doing the right thing, that the Empire was heading towards a new age of glory. I had thought at one time that the people here were cowards for not aiding the Empire. Perhaps Maranda needed to be shown how to respect others, or so the Emperor said. I took it to mean putting people in their place.

“I wish I could say I remember that day as clearly as all of you had, but no. It was a violent haze as a result from being drunk on whatever adrenaline kept me from falling unconscious. What I do remember was the night I returned to Vector and how I had never been so disgusted in my whole life. I realized then maybe something was wrong. I wanted to do something to change the direction the Empire was taking. I tried—” Celes averted her gaze for a moment. “—and I failed. The one time I spoke out, I was denounced for treason and sentenced to death. I don’t regret speaking up; it had to be done. Though I wish I could speak for the entirety of the Empire when I say I wanted there to be change.

“But I will say that I stand here today, ready to be responsible for all the Empire has done. I can’t say that I know what all of you have been through; it would be unfair of me to even begin to comprehend all of your tragedies. But I do know what the Empire did. I know of the inhumane facilities used for their experiments, the plots to overturn kingdoms to gain an upper hand, and the lies that festered in every willing mind to believe such fallacies. I had—” She paused. “—have a friend. She was manipulated by the Empire. They forced a crown upon her head to rid her of all memories and controlled her like a puppet. Regardless of the time we spent together, she doesn’t remember me before the device was removed.

“And myself…..” Celes’ hands trembled, though she forced them open to the rain. “I… was an experiment. A toy for their own amusement. A perfect little doll to be displayed for everyone to know the Empire could do no wrong. They found me on the streets, starving and freezing. Maybe I had a family, maybe they had forsaken me upon birth. I don’t know. I do know they found other children like me. Hundreds. They took them away, one by one, to see if they were worthy enough for such experiments. Out of all of them, they picked me. I don’t know what came of the rest. I’d like to not think about it, but this is all I’ve ever known. It was either this or meet whatever fate they gave to those unworthy.”
Celes blinked, unable to tell if it was rain or tears cascading down her face. “But I’m not worthy. I’ve killed countless of innocent lives, affected even more, and for what? Back then I had an answer, but now I don’t. What I do know is what it is like to be awake one minute with life going as planned and then rise the next day to have it all gone. To think that there’s no point in continuing to live, for all the dreams and aspirations vanished into nothing. I’ve eagerly awaited for death to accept me. I’ve watched those I admired and respected die in cold blood. I’ve fallen victim to the traumas brushing paths with me, haunting me in my dreams and debilitating me come sunrise.” She sniffled and lowered her head. “I’ve foolishly loved and been denied that mutual sentiment. I’ve hated myself a thousand times over, enough to last me a lifetime.

“But I know my agony will pale in comparison to what this town has been through. I can only hope you all can think of me not as the Empire’s cold-hearted bitch, but as someone who knows she did wrong and tried to make amends. Kefka may be dead now and order restored to the world, but that doesn’t excuse me for my past. Still, know that I stood up against him for not just myself and my allies, but for all of those who were wronged by him and the Empire. Ending his pathetic life was the least I could do. I wish to do more. I wish to help those the Empire had rotted. I wish to rebuild fallen communities and raise them to their former glory. I wish to reunite the Imperial lands into something the Empire could never dream of. I wish to prevent all further attempts at repeating history. I may no longer be the Magitek knight the Empire forged me to be, but I would raise my blade again to protect these lands from any potential harm. I would be fierce and ruthless in my defenses. I would gladly be struck down if it meant preventing another undeserving incident like the one bestowed upon all of your shoulders.”

Her knees gave out and crashed into the sodden earth. Celes swallowed back the luxury of crying, despite the rain rolling down her face.

“But that is not for me to decide. I’m here now because I am all that’s left of the Empire, or at least anyone of superior rank who dares to step forth and take the fault. I refuse to run and hide. None of you deserve a coward. I don’t blame any of you for wishing me dead. All of your feelings are justified. And I won’t beg for forgiveness or mercy. I won’t ask for a swift or slow judgment; all I ask is for whatever the outcome may be, that it is for the good of the people. Not just Maranda, but those of Vector and Albrook and Doma and Tzen and anyone else who was touched by the Empire. If it means you enlist for my help, then I will forever be in servitude and indebted to the people and nothing else. If it means you wish for my head to be severed from my neck….” The image of Leo’s decapitation flashed before Celes, the unjust act chilling in her numb body. “Then so be it.”

After her exhausting address, who knew what the people would do. Perhaps laugh at her attempt to win over their hearts and throw rocks in her direction. No proper executioner stood out in the crowd, but it didn’t rule out someone picking up her rune blade to use against her. And yet they delayed. In the lull, Celes kept her head low, unable to eye any of them and wished the seconds didn’t expand into years. She pictured their disgusted faces twisting in slight amusement, none taking pity on her after the hell she once unearthed.

Whispers blended flawlessly with the rain. The mud and storm muted the footsteps approaching, but she wasn’t blind to the familiar scabbard extended out to her. A soft hand clutched her rune blade and dared not to unsheathe it. Celes initially dismissed what she saw as a figment, but the rain pricked through and sobered her. Blue eyes darted up to the young, yet crippled man—perhaps too damaged to be hauled off to Vector’s military ranks—standing before her with a mean glare.

“You did your damage here,” he spoke lowly. “None of us will ever forget that and some will never forgive you… but there was a reason you rose above everyone else to take the title of General. We are but common folk and you speak of rebuilding and reuniting. If someone is to stand up and take blame of an entire kingdom’s faults, then I believe that same person can stand up and lead us to a
better life. It takes a sense of humility and strength I don’t think most have seen in this lifetime.” He turned to the crowd before raising his voice to a yell. “And if not her, then who?! We asked for someone to take blame, but we also asked for help!”

Someone scoffed in the crowd. “You expect us to sympathize with her?”

“No, I don’t,” he replied. “Nor did she ask for sympathy. If her word is as good as she claims it is, then we have hope in Maranda being better than it ever was before. And for Albrook and Tzen and Vector! For everyone! The Empire is gone now! We should make sure it stays that way! So instead of killing off their remaining officer, why not use her knowledge and skills? Why not take her up on her offer?”

“She could betray us!”

Another voice in the crowd boomed. “Why?! The damn girl took down Kefka himself! She came here out of her own free will! What benefit would it be to her if she led us on?”

Murmurs washed over the group, though as the voices rose in volume, Celes plucked out the few she could comprehend. More voices spoke for the chance to reconstruct Maranda to its former glory, if not better. Their faces no longer grimaced, but lit up at the promises of hope and chance to start over. Celes was no stranger to either sentiment; nothing else in the world compared to it.

The young man confronted Celes again as the resounding voices chimed with an unexpected positivity. Once more, he held out the rune blade to her.

“Please,” he said, “help us. Lead us to something better. If what you said about the Empire was true, that you desired for change, for a better world… then prove it.”

Celes reached for her blade, clutching the scabbard tight. The man offered his hand. Celes gazed into his shaking palm, then accepted the gesture. Despite his weak constitution, he hauled Celes to her feet, almost falling in the process. She wrapped an arm around his waist to steady him. Several people rushed to her with a bombardment of questions and praise. Those who lingered in the back, only a select few, still wore bitter faces over the lack of blood spilled on the same soil where countless lives were taken.

In a brief moment, she ignored the commotion and set her sights to the heavens. Dark clouds hung above, but even if they cleared the skies, she didn’t expect to see him there. He claimed he didn’t wish to see her die, but death only brushed past her in Maranda and wandered elsewhere. Celes longed to see the familiar, scarred face, to inform Setzer he was right; she truly did have luck on her side since the beginning.

Maybe he’d stare in disbelief. Maybe he’d laugh at the ludicrous odds. Maybe he’d sweep her in his arms and kiss her lips raw. Maybe he’d offer his jacket, the one soaked in his decadent scent, as a means to combat the rain. Maybe he, too, would propose to start over, much like Maranda.

Maybe. Celes didn’t know. She never would now.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has always made me think of Various Storms & Saints. I feel in a way it would be something Celes would sing to herself.
Chapter 26

When Vector was the pinnacle of civilization, buildings dared to compete with mountains. Their technology scaled past nature’s magnificent structures, past the clouds, and even the heavens, too. It was the promise of a golden era. With all the awe-stricken eyes marveling before the city, none dared to dream of the impossible, the inevitable. But none of them were fortune tellers, either. Even so, none of it was enough to prevent Vector’s untimely destruction. Buildings could be rebuilt, as could relations and businesses, but there would never be the likes of another Gestahl ruling over those lands. Celes saw to that.

Maranda’s rebuild didn’t happen overnight, but neither was Vector’s initial construction. Celes recalled the more memorable qualities of Vector; she wished to bestow Maranda and the other villages with those merits. And the townsfolk proved to make an effort. That alone was sufficient to ensure Maranda’s flourish into a city of its own. As promised, Celes was there every step of the way. She guided with a kind, yet firm hand, filling broken hearts with hope and dreams. In time, they accepted Celes, almost like the fraternity built within military ranks through peers. However, no one marched off to battle come morning.

War was the last of everyone’s worries. A sense of security had to be established: rebuilding homes, revitalizing crops, replenishing market supplies. Celes was no carpenter or farmer or merchant, but her assistance was neither perfunctory nor lackadaisical. What else was a former officer to do? Aside from fending off the occasional monster, Celes’ blade remained sheathed, thank the gods. With her magic sapped, the runes along her weapon no longer illuminated upon command. Her time as a rune knight ended, as did her role as a military officer, though she refused to part with the blade.

But her charisma, albeit swift and blunt, was recognized. Any quarrels or misunderstandings breaking out amongst the townsfolk were dissolved by Celes, always serving as a set of unbiased eyes. The residual fear in Maranda gradually vanished; the woman who led the assault years ago was nothing more than a ghost. They remembered the Celes who upheld her promise to not only help restore civilization, but also preserve it.

And when Maranda recovered swiftly, word traveled far of the feat. Albrook heard of the former General aiding those who suffered from the Empire and begged for her assistance. Albrook was far from forgotten; many fled to the port town after the Espers’ invasion of Vector. Celes ventured to the Albrook when time allowed it and to her surprise, everyone eagerly awaited her by the docks. Not just locals, either; she recognized people from Tzen and the few survivors of Vector. While only a handful spoke, everyone’s expression screamed for help.

No different from her epiphany on the Solitary Island, Celes acknowledged that she alone hadn’t saved the world and thus she couldn’t face her current predicament alone—she, too, required help. Those stuck in tradition suggested a single leader guide them all. When her name popped up as a suggestion, Celes quickly, yet politely, declined. Silence fell over those who spoke her name, faces taut with puzzlement as they awaited another answer from her.

Back in her younger years, she perused the Imperial libraries and read books dating back before the first War of the Magi. Royalty was replaced with groups of elected people from all walks of life to discuss what was in the community’s best interest. As a child, Celes deemed it a fairytale, but now the potential of what was once tradition had an allure.

“Perhaps we are to form a republic,” Celes announced, soon having to explain the idea to those clueless of the older stories.
She was met with a mixture of confusion, anger, and amazement. It was not an attempt to please everyone, nor was she under any delusions of believing so, but to step away from the former tyrannical regime. People did stand up, though, and offered their assistance with the novel idea of administration. If Celes believed it to help, then they would try. And so would Celes.

Rubble transformed into new structures throughout the various towns and people gathered to discuss the future. Men and women from Maranda, Albrook, Tzen, and Vector dreamed of the brightest of outcomes. Together, they could wash the taint of the Empire clean and pave paths for their children to walk down. Talks of trade and education emerged, as did new possibilities the Empire never once imagined. Arguments unfolded, of course, but such was the way of politics.

“Shouldn’t we have a military?” someone brought up one session.

Celes already felt eyes drifting her way before another added, “Ah! Perhaps Lady Celes could assist? She’s—”

“As much as I appreciate the thought,” Celes kindly interjected, “I would prefer to be removed from any military operations.”

“But… you are the only one here with any proper experience. Surely you could at least advise, if leading isn’t an option.”

Even in an ideal world, peace and freedom came at a price. Should another disaster break out—their cooperative effort hopefully prevented any future atrocities—trained swordsmen were better than farmers with pitchforks.

“If my experience is needed, then I could advise.” Celes paused and a thought surfaced. “Though if we need someone to train willing individuals, I may have a candidate in mind.”

When she released the carrier pigeon out with an attached letter, Celes feared it would never be answered. It wasn’t—not by letter. A messenger ran through the halls to fetch Celes, claiming an undocumented, foreign ship set anchor in Albrook’s port. Past the windows lied the bay of Albrook and Doma’s distinct sails stood out. Celes smiled as she set aside her hectic agenda for an unexpected visit.

On the docks stood a man in a dark haori, much different from the armor Celes had grown accustomed to, though the katana he rested his hand upon never changed. Cyan inspected the reconstructed port and town, paying no attention to the woman approaching him. When his eyes did fall upon Celes, his bushy mustache couldn’t hide his grin.

He bowed deeply before he spoke, his voice proud, yet soft. “Over half a year goes by and the town is almost returned to its former days. Perhaps better than when the Empire was in power.” He nodded to Celes. “We have thou to thank for that.”

Celes held her breath and rushed towards Cyan for a tight hug. Albeit taken aback, Cyan chuckled and reciprocated the embrace.

“It’s good to see you again,” Celes whispered into him.

“And to thee, as well.” Cyan patted her back and they broke away, though still glowed in each
other’s presence. “Thou hast done well in thine absence.”

Celes brushed off the praise with a shake of her head. “There is still much work to be done, but I didn’t do it alone. You know that. It’s why I asked for your help.”

Cyan walked along Celes’ side, skimming the outskirts of Albrook in a casual stroll. “And I didn’t depart from Doma under the guise of it being a hoax.”

“Is... Doma fairing well?”

His deflated chuckle said plenty. “Not as well as Albrook. And I imagine thou hast been aiding Maranda, too?” Celes nodded. “Wouldn’t expect any less from thee. I wish I had thy talent. Thou make it appear seamless, almost easy.”

“That’s quite far from the truth.”

“Then forgive me, but one can’t help but admire what was accomplished in so little time. Still, I won’t allow myself to envy it.”

“If you needed help,” Celes said with a wrinkle in her brow, “you should have asked.”

Coming to a standstill, Cyan stared out along the watery horizon. Celes stood next to him and savored the scent of salt and the sight of fisherman sailing back with an abundance of fish. So full of life and promise; it pained her to find sadness in Cyan’s eyes even now.

“Well be told,” Cyan said softly, his words gliding with the sea breeze, “I didn’t know if thou were alive or not. Don’t believe most of us knew.”

A cold sting pierced her heart. Celes averted her gaze and smoothed her hands over one another. She damned her inability to communicate with any of her former allies of her success—not just with Maranda, but with her life. She lost track of time, she longed to be alone, and she simply didn’t know how to tell everyone it did turn out for the better. Before Celes pieced together an apology, Cyan’s hand perched upon her shoulder and his smile smoothed away any of her guilt.

“I’m glad thou made it,” he said. “I knew thou would. Be proud, Celes.”

She mirrored his smile. “I’m glad I did, too.”

Yet she forgot of the time when no one knew of her fate, somewhere lost between yesterday and a lifetime ago. And when her eyes drifted up to find an abundance of clouds and blue skies, just like always, she yearned to forget the one memory which continued to resurface in her downtime.

Celes refused to wallow in her past miseries. Not when others relied upon them for the future.

“You know,” Celes noted, “if you are willing to help train here, then perhaps I can return the favor in Doma.”

Cyan stood several inches taller, chin tilted up. “Doman warriors are in no need of western influences.”

His sincere pride curled her lips. “I meant in regards to construction, agriculture, and finances. I’ll leave the soldiers to you, but what of Doma’s residents or its current state?”

Then he lost his additional height. “Not many are left to help, thus marks the first of Doma’s problems.”
“Then let me help. You came all the way out here on the whim of a letter. The least I can do to return the favor is bring volunteers over to assist Doma. I might not have been the one who brought the decline of Doma, but I certainly didn’t help. I tried and failed.” If only they had listened. If only her cries of truth weren’t condemned as treason. Celes laid a gentle hand upon Cyan’s shoulder. “But I can help now. We can do this together, Cyan.”

After a pause, his worn hand covered Celes’. “That we shall.”

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Throughout her day with Cyan, the thought lingered in the back of her mind. His arrival reminded her to step back and breathe, for she was, in fact, still alive. She sat before her desk, skimming over notes and letters rifled with issues which demanded her attention. In the weeks to come, they would all be addressed, though it was late and her mind was elsewhere. Pushing the stack aside, Celes retrieved a handful of fresh parchment.

There were to be personalized letters addressed to every ally who fought by her side against Kefka. She crossed off their names upon completing each letter, only to pause at the final one. A single name stared back at her as the sheet of parchment remained blank.

She tapped her pen against the inkwell. The single flame from the candle flickered on and off. Distant birds of the night sang back and forth to each other. Hundreds of unfinished thoughts blazed bright in her mind before crumbling to ash.

Even if she composed a letter for Setzer, her penmanship wouldn’t compare to the eloquent and pristine calligraphy marked by his hand alone.

*It doesn’t matter now.* She tucked away the paper and pen before blowing out the candle.

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Terra responded first. Celes smiled while reading over Terra’s brief, rushed words of how ecstatic and relieved she was to know Celes was not only alive, but striving. Terra mentioned assisting Duane and Katarin with an established orphanage in Mobliz before setting forth on her own travels.

*It’s about time that I finally do something for myself,* Terra wrote. *I have no obligations to anyone but myself. For once, I understand what it means to be free. I intend to cherish that.*

Scribbled at the bottom of the letter was mention of meeting with Celes. *I’ve already made plans to set sail for Maranda as soon as I can. You better be there!*

Celes chuckled while folding the letter up. “I’ll be waiting,” she murmured to herself.

Just as promised, a passenger boat found its way to Maranda’s docks and brought with it Terra. Nearly a month passed since Celes set the carrier pigeons loose with her letters, though Terra’s elation upon spotting Celes made it seem as if she just received the news. No longer donning her red tunic and cape, Terra wore a blue and white ensemble, rather striking in resemblance to what Relm would gravitate towards. Billowing scarves draped over her shoulders and around her neck and head—a Figaroan touch. Though what captured Celes’ eye was the wild mess of thick, wavy hair no
longer tamed back into a ponytail.

Terra broke out into a sprint and Celes braced herself for impact. They both squealed and laughed and spun together in each other’s arms, not caring for those who stared at their antics.

“IT’s so good to see you!” Terra exclaimed, cupping Celes’ face, as if to confirm it wasn’t a dream.

It had been too long since Celes grinned the way she did. “Same to you, as well,” she said before embracing Terra.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” Terra whispered into her. Certainly she was pouting with that tone.

“But I’m here now.” She rubbed Terra’s back. “And I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

Cyan’s meeting had been marked with political work, but Terra’s arrival was one to be celebrated. Celes gave her a tour of Maranda and the vast progress within little time. Terra marveled at the accomplishments and vocalized her approval, despite Celes feeling unworthy of the praise.

“I didn’t do this all by myself,” she reminded Terra.

“No, but the people look up to you. Don’t you see?” Terra scanned the area. “I can see it in their eyes. This isn’t like other places we’ve been to. They respect you.” She smiled. “And I can see why.”

They exchanged a variety of candid stories in a tavern over hot cider and fresh bread. Each tale ranged from pleasant to tragic to passionate to worrisome, though they always held a captive audience with one another. Hours passed and people came and went within the tavern, but the only thing Celes noticed was the barkeep refilling their drinks. When the establishment prepared to lock up, the owner reminded the two giggling ladies to retire elsewhere.

“Do you have somewhere to stay for the night?” Celes asked.

Terra tapped a finger upon her lip. “Well, I was going to stay at the inn. I’m rather proficient in figuring that out by now. Edgar’s been making sure I have sufficient funds for my travels, after all.”

“That much you did mention,” Celes said, chuckling at the thought of Edgar showering her with gil. “Still, it would be rude of me not to extend my hospitality.” She nudged Terra. “Come on, you can stay at my place.”

Those eyes of Terra’s lit up. “Really?! Oh, I wouldn’t want to be intruding or anything. I know you’ve got your hands full—”

“Terra, it would be my honor to have you over for the night. Mind you, it’s nothing fancy, but it’s home.”

“I don’t need fancy; I got you!”

Within the town center, Celes holed up in a humble abode within a housing complex. The trek to the top floor always proved to be exhausting, but the view was more than worth it. Terra rushed to the window overlooking all of Maranda while Celes prepared tea for the evening.

“It’s not a General’s quarters,” Celes mentioned, “but I can’t complain. I can sleep on the couch if you want to take my bed. I don’t mind.”
Terra bounced about to inspect every detail in the quaint space. Decorating wasn’t Celes’ strong suit, though some of the merchants would have argued with her that the minimalistic approach was indeed an up-and-coming aesthetic. White and oak furnishings and knick-knacks were organized, yet lived in—more rustic than high art. No walls separated the kitchen from the lounge with the only doors leading to a bathroom and a bedroom. Celes crammed her notion of a study into the bedroom and made due without a pantry, as well. Nothing grandiose in terms of entertaining guests, but Celes had yet to have reason to invite anyone over.

Once she was done exploring, Terra plopped onto the couch and clapped her hands. “I love it!” Terra said. “It’s so small and sweet!”

“That’s one way to look at it,” Celes snickered.

“Oh, and who is this?!”

Celes looked up from steeping tea upon hearing a pleasant meow. A tortoiseshell cat—more like a fluff ball with legs—rubbed up against the couch while eyeing Terra.

“That’s Shiva,” she said.

Terra gasped and dropped to her knees to greet the purring cat. “Well, hello there, Shiva! Aren’t you a precious kitty!” Scratching behind Shiva’s ears, she smirked at Celes. “And here I didn’t take you to be a cat lover.”

“Well, she was a stray that kept meowing for attention in the back alley of the building and I made the mistake of bringing her in when it was raining outside about a couple of months ago.” But it wasn’t a mistake; her heart shattered upon hearing those desperate cries one evening. The poor thing was shivering and in need of a bath and a fresh meal, all of which Celes provided.

“Shiva,” Terra echoed. “Just like your Esper.”

Celes smiled sadly while bringing over a tray of tea. “Yeah. She always looked out for me and I never had the chance to return the favor, so... I named her Shiva.” With the tray settled on a table, Celes knelt down to kiss the top of her kitty’s head. “She keeps me company while I’m here and the landlord is more than glad to look out for her when I’m gone for more than a day.”

“See? I told you the people here appreciate what you’ve done. Even the cats are thankful.”

Celes laughed. “I like to think they are.” She extended a hot cup of tea to Terra, then lifted her own cup. “To new beginnings.”

Terra lifted hers, too. “And to old friendships.”

Celes smiled softly. “To old friendships.”

They clinked cups and took cautious sips. As the tea warmed Celes, she busied herself with preparing a fire to heat the chilly area. In the past, Terra always whipped together flames from her fingertips to fight off the cold for the Returners. Now, Terra sat on the couch, Celes fussed with the logs and tinder, and Shiva intently curled up in Terra’s lap, purring away. Once the fire roared to life, they shared a blanket to huddle together and watch the flames flicker.

When they exhausted both tea and conversation, they sat in silence to relish the warmth. Even the streets quieted at such an hour. Celes fussed with her cup and chewed her lip. Perhaps it was time to retire.
“Do you ever miss it?”

Catching her breath, Celes glanced over to Terra. She hadn’t flinched, gazing longingly into the fire. Its orange hue cast a brilliant light over Terra’s face, accentuating her subtle frown.

Her eyes cast downward. “The magic, that is.”

Celes twitched her hands, waiting for the familiar chill to rush to her fingertips and beg for release. Nothing surfaced. The extinction of magic was for the best, or so Celes convinced herself; it stirred more trouble than goodness within the world.

But she couldn’t lie to Terra, even if she tried. “I don’t think anyone’s asked me that.”

“Same here,” Terra breathed out, “but I figured no one else understood. Or cared.”

Those words sliced into Celes, though she couldn’t fault Terra for her frustrations. What were they to do? Convince the world to find balance with magic for the sake of two lives who grew accustomed to its gifts? The voices all rang true—Kefka needed to be removed from the picture. There was no way to do so without ripping away magic, too.

“I do miss it,” Celes whispered. “More than I thought I would. Spells aside, it would be nice to not freeze to death whenever a cold breeze passes by.”

Terra didn’t giggle at the slight joke—only stared into the flames as if brushing past a forgotten lover.

“We did what we could,” Terra whispered. “It was for the best, right?”

Even Celes hesitated with her answer. “It was and I’m simply happy we’re alive.”

“You and me both.”

Another bout of silence, another crack of the fire reminding them of what they had lost.

“But,” Terra piped up softly, slowly, “sometimes I wonder if there was another way. What if we were able to achieve peace with the Espers and live together with magic at hand? They were willing, after all. You were in Thamasa; you remember. Maybe if we had tried harder, then maybe things would have been different. They would still be alive and be happy and not suffering. Surely if we had more time, we could have figured something out. Maybe... we didn’t look hard enough. Maybe we missed something.”

Celes’ heart broke as tears rolled down Terra’s face.

“Why was everyone so intent on destroying everything?” Terra continued, her voice trembling as the tears swelled. “One person manipulates magic for the worst and everyone wants to be rid of it. No one ever stopped and asked if we were okay with it. But it was us against the world, right? What’s another two lives snuffed out compared to the masses?” She attempted to wipe away the tears, but they flowed relentlessly. “Kefka might have been beyond help, but there had to have been another way. In the end, we were no better than him.”

“Terra—”

“But it’s true!” She whipped her head to face Celes, the firelight catching in her tears. “Just destroying whatever isn’t important to us. There was already enough destruction—why create more? How does that make us good? How do we know we did the right thing?”
This time, she had no answer for Terra.

“I hate living like this.” Terra opened her trembling hands, only to claw at her hair. “I wake up every
day and feel like I’m inside a different body. I thought I’d get over myself and get used to it, but
nothing has gotten better. I... miss it. The magic. The fire burning through me. I can’t tell you how
many times I’ve burned myself fumbling over lighting a stupid candle.” She laughed at herself
through the tears. “A candle! Anyone can light a candle. Why must it be so difficult? Why does no
one understand? It was a part of me; a part of us. And now it’s gone. Nothing will ever replace it. It’s
never coming back. It’s never coming back. It’s never—”

As Terra dissolved into hysterical sobs, Celes eased herself in close to embrace her dear friend. Tears
silently slipped past Celes’ eyes; she knew Terra’s plague all too well. Together, they clung onto one
another and lamented what no longer existed within them. Saving the world came at a cost and the
sacrifice was magic. There was no sugar coating what happened.

Neither of them claimed the bed, instead falling asleep in each other’s arms with an oblivious cat by
the dying fireplace.

Terra departed days later with the promise to visit whenever she could. Edgar might have funded her
travels, but it was Terra’s compassionate determination which touched those along her path.

“I want to help others out just like you have here,” Terra mentioned before boarding her ship. “I
don’t really have any specialty, though, but extending a hand is better than nothing, right?”

“Sometimes,” Celes said, “extending a hand and offering to help when no one else does is the best
gift you can give.”

Determination filled her as she nodded. “Then I’ll do just that!”

As they exchanged farewells, Celes looked forward to the future tales of the lady once touched by
fire, now spreading that warmth through kindness and sincerity to those in need.

“We will find our place in this world,” Celes spoke to the wind once the ship disappeared beyond the
horizon, “and we will carry on without our magic.”

Shortly after Terra’s visit, Celes received a scroll sealed with a brilliant blue wax. She smirked upon
recognizing the intricate signet burned into the wax. Unfurling the letter, she allowed herself the time
to sit down and read over the contents written within.

*I’ll have you know that it’s not exactly customary to go all silent after the note we left on. You had
me worried sick! The guards informed me you arrived at your intended destination—and yes, they
also informed me of Locke “borrowing” an invention of mine—but that wasn’t enough to ease my
mind. I don’t think I slept for a whole month until I resorted to other methods to put myself to sleep,
but I won’t bore you with those details.

I may not be able to punish you for never writing me, of all people, until now, though my reign is outside of where you currently reside. Instead, I can only extend my sheer excitement and relief now knowing that you are both alive and well. None of us truly knew what would come of you after that day, but I couldn’t have asked for a better scenario. The people were right to place their trust in you. What you did... it’s inspiring. You’ve set quite the example of what people should do in such situations of injustice. Hopefully we never have to experience madness like that again, but you did the right thing. It brings me joy to call you a friend, knowing what you did.

And everything you’ve done for not just Maranda, but Albrook and Tzen and Vector and what was this something about Doma, as well? Do you have some secret about being in more than one place at once? You best not be keeping any secrets from me, in that case! But truly, I’m in awe of what you have accomplished in under a year. The people are lucky to have you. I hope it helps put your mind at ease. I hope you can finally call someplace your home. You certainly deserve it.

As for myself, I do wish I could be bouncing around as often as you are. Unfortunately, I had to retire the guise of adventurer to return to my royal duties. Such is the life of a king, I suppose. It would be rude of me to claim Figaro was a mess to return to, especially knowing what you had to work with, but it also wasn’t a midday stroll. Every hour is crammed full and I’m exhausted by nightfall, but again, I’ll spare you the details; truth be told, it can bore me, as well. But if I had it my way, you’d be receiving a visit from me instead of this blasted letter. Sadly, I don’t have an invention to send long-distance hugs, but I’ll jot that idea down for later.

I’m starting to ramble and there’s only so much room left on this damn parchment, so I’ll get to the point. I’m glad you’re alive. I’m glad you’re doing well. I hope you’re happy and that you’ve found a place for yourself in this world. And Celes, please, if you ever need anything, whether it’s political assistance or an unbiased ear to vent to, know I am always here for you. I always was, always will be.

Regards,

Edgar Roni Figaro

Celes read over the letter multiple times, imagining each sentence in Edgar’s voice. Maybe one day their duties would even out and timing would be on their side, for then they could see each other in person. For now, they had parchment and pigeons. She rummaged around for a fresh page to scribe a reply for him, only to be interrupted by a messenger with another letter.

This one was sloppily folded, but with a similar wax seal. Celes bit her lip to hide her amusement as she opened it up.

Hey, long time no see! Or read, I guess. Can’t really see each other in a letter! That’s just silly. I knew you’d be okay and I kept telling Edgar that, but you know him. At least he’s got that royal mumbo-jumbo to keep him busy. Me? Eh, not so much. If it wasn’t for the good food and Edgar’s company, I’d probably be bored to tears. I’ve been thinking of heading back into the mountains and pick up where Duncan left off years ago. A lot of people could benefit from his teachings and well, who else is better to do that than me! Oh and Gau’s with me! He’s going to tag along and maybe learn a thing or two. By the way, he ate the letter you sent him. Said it wasn’t very tasty. Kids these days! Well, Edgar’s got a grip on this king thing, so it won’t be long before I head out. Don’t you be
a stranger, Celes, and keep that head of yours high. And if you’re ever in the area, you’ll always be welcomed in my home!

Sabin

At the bottom of the letter was a crudely drawn picture of both Sabin and Gau fighting monsters, complete with their names underneath them in case Celes forgot. It might not have been Relm’s handy work, but it had charm and brightened Celes’ face—especially those angry eyebrows. She admired Sabin’s loyalty to his brother; from the sounds of it, Edgar needed the support more than he let on. At least Edgar wasn’t setting himself up to repeat Emperor Gestahl’s mistakes.

She wrote back to both, but only Edgar responded, soon starting a cycle of letters between the two. They shared their hardships and successes, sometimes exchanging words of wisdom in the game of politics. She hung onto every word Edgar said and with each letter she received from Figaro, she made sure to respond in time to send out a pigeon the following morning. Edgar never missed a beat, as if he was sitting right next to her the whole time.

The remaining responses came over the course of months. Mog returned a letter to Celes, hiring a scribe to jot down his reply. All was well back in Narshe and the plan was for him and Umaro to track down any other moogles hiding out there since the world was torn apart. Celes contemplated returning a letter, only to think better of it. One reply was enough to know the tiny dancer and his yet pal were set.

Even Gogo responded, though the letter she received was a near perfect duplicate of her original letter, save for the ink. She took it as a good omen.

Strago wrote on behalf of himself, Relm, and Interceptor, though his message was even briefer than Sabin’s. His letters trembled on the page and didn’t match the resilience which always resided in his voice. While he never suggested it, Celes opted to initiate instead; within a month’s time, she stepped off a ship and made her way to the reconstructed town of Thamasa.

The townsfolk opted to build around the rubble, leaving the blackened homes as monuments of what had transpired instead of burying the past. Stuccoed walls and red-tiled roofs spanned across Thamasa with overgrown gardens blessing the air with a sweet aroma. Kids played on the streets while the adults greeted Celes with smiles.

She never needed to ask for him. Upon reaching the town’s center, she smirked at the distant yell of an old man scolding a girl who didn’t know better. Following the racket to its origins brought her to a public garden blooming with more foreign flowers than ones she recognized. She found who she was looking for there.

Interceptor perked up and barked at Celes’ arrival. Relm peered past Strago and gasped with delight. And when Strago finally turned around to see what the commotion was about, her nearly dropped his cane. They both held each other’s stare as Relm barreled forward to tackle Celes and Interceptor ran around them in circles.

“It’s good to see you,” Strago offered with a warm smile.
“And you, as well,” Celes said.

“Hey!” Relm pouted. “Aren’t you happy to see me? And Interceptor missed you, too!” He barked, as if to emphasize her statement.

“I’m happy to see all of you,” Celes laughed out. “I’m glad you’re all well.” She looked back to Strago. “I couldn’t bear to reply with just a letter. There’s... so much I want to...”

Strago nodded, his wisdom sparkling in his eyes. “I know. Come.” He beckoned for all of them to follow. “Let’s get you settled in. We have much to discuss.”

“A little bird stopped by recently,” Strago explained as he prepared tea and cookies, “and told me of your efforts and success.”

Celes raised a brow. “Is that so?”

“Quite so,” Strago chuckled. “Little Miss Branford is still the spitfire I recalled her to be, despite her current predicament. She helped set all of this up.”

He motioned to the massive garden sprawling along one side of Thamasa. Celes sat underneath a canopy of vines and blossoms, the dry, summer sun peeking through. Cid would have loved to spend weeks lost in it all.

“She’s been busy traveling and helping those along the way,” Strago said, setting the tray of tea and cookies down at their table. Relm swiped a handful of cookies before running off to play fetch with Interceptor. “Though I’m sure you’re more than aware of that.”

Celes carefully picked up her porcelain cup to sip at the herbal blend marked with honey. “She visited me some time ago. I’m glad she’s well.” Her eyes wandered past Relm to view the buildings in the sweep distance. “All of you seem to be holding up well in Thamasa, too.”

“As well as we can be!” Strago laughed before soaking a cookie into tea to munch on. “We don’t have our magics to rely on. Makes rebuilding a bit tricky, but don’t you worry.” He winked. “We still know a thing or two when it comes to fixing a place up. Still needs some work, but we take what we can get. Don’t have the numbers we used to have.”

A shudder passed over Celes; she tried to ignore the memories of flames and smoke. “If there’s anything I can do to help—”

“Oh, nonsense. You have plenty on your plate already. Thamasa has a long history, none of it without turmoil. We’ll get back on our feet in no time.”

At long last, Celes relished in her conversation with Strago. They sipped tea and ate what Strago called mantecados while diving into deep conversation. Within Strago was a wealth of knowledge that Celes basked in. His stories dated back to before the War of the Magi and Celes did well to memorize every word of his. Her only regret was never speaking with him sooner on such matters, but the world had died and no one was willing to return it to balance, save for them. Now, they sat in peace with no worry of destruction looming behind them.

“And how are you faring?” Strago asked in a soft tone.
After a pause, Celes found her voice. “It’s been quite a struggle. All I’ve ever known is the ice that
would pulse through my blood. I thought I’d grow used to not having it by now. It’s like a limb was
severed from me.” She shrugged. “But what else am I to do? We can’t fix what we destroyed; magic
will never come back. It’s best we keep marching forward.”

Strago opted for silence, yet his expression spoke of knowing more than he let on. When his eyes
drifted, Celes followed. They fell upon Relm, who settled down on a bench to sketch her
surroundings while Interceptor napped at her feet.

“She spent a whole month worried about Shadow,” Strago began. “Did you know that? It bothered
her that no one else mentioned his sudden disappearance upon leaving Kefka’s Tower. I tried to tell
her that maybe he stayed behind to make sure Kefka was, in fact, dead, but she never bought into it. I
don’t blame her. She has, at least, promised to be the best puppy mommy to Interceptor ever.” He
chuckled. “Then she and I fought as to whether or not we’d return to Thamasa or Jidoor. That’s
where you found her, isn’t it? Gave up on saving the world and took up painting in the affluent
town. I tried to tell her we needed to take care of home, but she wanted to continue her
apprenticeship as a painter. I might have told her otherwise in the beginning, but perhaps it’s in her
best interest to pursue her one mundane love.

“The images of hers still come to life, though. Not like how they used to. Those days are long gone,
but there’s a new sense of magic there. Relm has a sense of wisdom in her young hands. She can
capture emotions in a way no one else can dream of. I must make sure she never lets go of that gift. I
also wish for her to be happy. And she is. I know there will come a day when I’m no longer here to
look out for her, but I’m content knowing that if I die tomorrow, she will be set for life.”

Then his eyes returned to Celes. “And I’m certain you will also find that one, mundane love to
pursue, whatever it may be. The magic may no longer exist, but your passions and beliefs do. Let
that light your way, Celes. I know you’ll find peace with yourself soon enough.”

Once their plates and cups were empty, Celes excused herself. She walked past the garden and the
edge of the town. Her memory was shaky of the exact location, but her heart urged her to push on.
The earth staggered and split, all proof of the destruction Kefka had laid waste onto the world.
Despite the uneven terrain, the tombstones persisted, some merely crooked while others stood in
shambles. At the very edge of the graveyard, she came upon his.

The sword still marked his grave. Moss crept its way up the blade. Flowers blossomed around the
weathered metal. The wind picked up as Celes dropped to her knees. The echoes from Thamasa
faded into nothing until only the breeze shifting through the nearby trees remained.

“I’m sorry what took so long,” Celes whispered, pushing windswept hair out of her face. “Life has
been a bit chaotic and I lost track of time... but I haven’t forgotten. Not about you or the promise we
made so many years ago.” She smiled as her eyes averted. “I suppose we didn’t exactly shake on that
promise, but it felt like we did. You swore to make things better, even if it meant forsaking your title.
I’m... sorry you couldn’t be alive to see it all today.

“I’ve been doing my best to lead the way, hopefully down a better road. Not the easiest task, but no
one else was going to stand up and do it.” She brought her eyes back to the sword. “I know it’s what
you would have done... what you would have wanted. Not simply for me, but for everyone. You
inspired me to want it, too. I like to think you’d be proud with the progress we’ve been making in all
of the towns. If only you could see how far we’ve come. The towns have united as the Republic of
the Free Lands. They’ve even elected me to be a Consul. Lady Celes... can you believe it? I don’t
imagine I’ll ever get used to it.”

Her smile persisted, even as she brought a loose fist up to brush away the tears. “I hope I can be
Celes kissed her fingertips and rested them along the sword’s hilt. She steadied herself on an inhale, dragging her fingers down the cold steel. “Rest well, Leo. I’ll never let your death be for nothing. We will rebuild and strive for something better. For all of us. I promise.”

Celes departed for Albrook once she exhausted her stay in Thamasa. Relm made her promise to stop by in Jidoor once she had her studio up and running and Strago packed her with plenty of those crumbly, almond cookies for the long boat ride.

“Now, Relm,” Strago told the young lady as Celes boarded her ship, “Celes has plenty of work to do. She can’t stay forever.”

Relm pouted. “But why not?!"

“Because,” Strago said, poking her nose, “she can’t always be your painting model.”

Strago trailed off with his lecture as Celes drifted out to sea. While enjoying the salty air and the cookies, she rummaged over notebooks detailing her agenda for Albrook. So much to do and so much had already been accomplished. Playing politics was never her intention in life, but she slipped into the role of assisting others with her quick mind and sharp tongue better than she imagined. Celes poked her pen against her lip while staring out to the sea; as long as the people were happy, then she was happy to serve.

Scribbling notes and emptying her mind onto blank pieces of paper sped up her trip tremendously. Gulls called out from above as the bustle from Albrook’s marketplace hummed in the air. Celes exited the ship with the rest of the passengers, lost in her own world as they touched down onto the docks.

“Lady Celes!” A strong, yet rushed voice reached her through the thick crowds.

She scrunched up her face until she found the young attendant scurrying to her. “Yes?”

“Please forgive me, I thought you were already in town and I looked all over for you.”

Celes kept walking and the attendant matched her pace. “Well, I’m here now. Is there a problem? I must be on my way. I have several meetings to oversee.”

“Someone asked to see you. By the docks.”

“I don’t exactly have time to be making personal appearances outside of—”

“He also mentioned that you would be quick to brush this request off and that he had traveled quite a distance to come here just to see you. He promised he’d make it worth your time.”

Her feet froze. Maybe she misheard, but the attendant looked upon her with a steadfast posture. “Will you inform the assembly of my tardiness?”

The attendant nodded and darted off for the town’s square. As for Celes, she turned back into the
crowd and pushing against the flow of foot traffic and emerge back onto the docks.

On the other side, the crowds lessened; only a few sailors tended to the ships there. The sun radiated in the cloudless sky and glistened off the unsteady ocean. It was there she came to a dead end and gasped.

It was there she found him.
Chapter 27

She reminded herself not to be foolish. To get her hopes up would only break her heart. A full year passed since her departure from Figaro Castle. She had changed—everyone had.

The oceanic breeze flowed through Albrook as the waves lapped at the dock’s wooden supports. The sun sat high in the blue sky and warmed all it touched. No shadows fooled her; she recognized who stood before her now.

His back faced Celes, though he no longer wore the jacket he once possessed. A short-sleeved tunic billowed with the wind, the neutral colors a striking contrast with his leather pants. Rings and bangles adorned his fingers and wrists as blades dangled from his loose belt. He allowed his hair to grow, now barely pulled back into a low ponytail. And every last one of his bandanas tied around his left bicep.

“Locke,” she said his name, almost too softly.

Though he caught her voice in the wind and turned. Still the same face, the same wide grin. “Hey, there you are.”

Their eyes latched onto one another and said nothing more. Celes held her breath longer than she intended and stepped forward. The two embraced, Celes’ cheek rested upon Locke’s shoulder.

“It’s been so long,” she spoke into him.

His chuckle vibrated through her. “Yeah, it has, hasn’t it?” Locke squeezed her. “Sorry what took so long. Been a hectic year, but I can spare you the details.”

Celes shook her head. “I’d love to hear all about it.”

“I promise I came as soon as I could. Figured it was in better taste to actually show up than write a lousy letter back.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.” Patting her back, Locke pulled away, palms resting on her arms as he looked her over. “So? How have you been?”

She shrugged. “Well.”

He blinked and gestured to the thriving town of Albrook. “You call this well?”

“All things considered, yes.”

“Look, Edgar caught me up to speed, and I’m not exactly cut out for this running a kingdom thing, but what he told me was better than well. Celes, you’ve been amazing!”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m telling the truth! Wow, have you seen all of this?!” He beamed before the town. “And to think there’s more like this... all because of you! Give yourself some more credit, yeah? People are probably beyond thankful you did this for them.”

“I didn’t do all of it.”
“But if it wasn’t for you, then what? I mean, for what it’s worth, I think it’s awesome, so you know, that just trumps all the critics, right?”

Celes bit back a smirk and averted her gaze. Locke eased in with a sly expression of his own, nudging her side.

“See, what did I tell you?” Locke teased her. “You got it all figured out in the end. Nothing to worry about.”

“You’d be surprised what there is to worry about when you’re helping run and maintain a republic.”

“Hey, as long as no one decides to go on a rampage to ascend to godhood, it can’t be that bad.”

After a pause, laughter bubbled forth from both of them. Celes tucked hair behind her ear and Locke continued to smile.

“I’m glad you’re well, Celes. It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you again, too, Locke.”

As promised, Celes met up with the assembly awaiting her once she returned from Thamasa. They wrinkled their noses at the mention of a guest accompanying her, though upon realizing the man with her was one of her allies who helped vanquish Kefka, their demeanor shifted on a pleasant note. A small crowd formed around Locke. Questions bubbled forth of his time beside Celes along with his recent ventures. Locke simply puffed up his chest and enlightened them all with answers.

He hung back when the group finally addressed their matters for Albrook. Celes did her best to provide solutions to remedy each problem or at least make amends before coming to a permanent outcome. It was by no means a quick affair, but each time Celes glanced to her side, she found Locke still in a corner, resting against a wall with his arms folded loosely, either gazing out the window or watching her. All with a smile on his face.

The sun had set by the time Celes finished her meeting. Locke vaulted himself off the wall, nodded to a few who walked by, and made his way towards her.

“I hope you weren’t bored to death,” Celes spoke, keeping her volume low.

“Pfff, hardly,” Locke offered. “You forget the nonsense I have to put up with when it comes to Edgar. This was nothing.”

His smile flowed through her until she mirrored the expression. “But I’m free now.”

Locke nodded. “Know of any good places to sit down and catch up with an old friend?”

“I might.”

The tavern by the water was more akin to a shack than a proper building, but the common folk who frequented the establishment were beaming with laughter and full bellies. Lively music hummed past the boisterous crowd as servers weaved through the masses to deliver meals and stout. Celes led Locke towards the back, where a few open tables were available on the dock.
“Now this,” Locke said, grinning from ear to ear while absorbing his surroundings, “is my kind of place. Gods, I don’t think I’ve been some place like this since Kohlingen, back before I met Edgar. Not on the water, but still the same atmosphere.” He narrowed his sights onto Celes as they sat down. “Didn’t think you’d be suggesting a place like this.”

“Why’s that?”

“Military types such as yourself are typically above a local tavern such as this. Too rowdy and not exactly gourmet cuisine.”

“I’ll have you know there were plenty of soldiers who frequented seedy pubs off duty,” Celes spat back, albeit a touch playful with her words.

“Okay, sure, but you weren’t just any soldier. You were a Magitek knight and a General. And apparently, now you’re a local food connoisseur.”

Celes shrugged. “For what it’s worth, the owners here were once from Vector and are kind souls. Not to mention their calamari is divine.”

“Geez, twist my arm about it.”

Her smirk grew. “So is their octopus.”

Celes nearly laughed at Locke’s expression. “Oh, don’t you dare, no. If I find octopus or mushrooms on my plate, I’m going to swim out of here. Fuck waiting for a boat.”

“But I hear the raw octopus is such a delicacy,” Celes teased.

“Yeah and I bet it talks, too,” he responded through a grin and laugh, “so fuck you.”

They exchanged stories over plates of steaming seafood and hard drinks. Lanterns provided an orange glow over the tables, but the moonlight scattered across the ocean and brought the night to life. Celes shared her ventures about the towns and uniting them for the best, even detailing some of her frustrations with a chuckle upon her lips. As for Locke, he wove tales of his travels and newfound treasures, just as he promised he would do.

“Whenever there was a lull,” Locke explained while he finished the last piece of calamari, sucking his fingers clean, “I’d head back to Figaro Castle. Edgar always had work to be done. Never a dull moment, yeah?” He polished off his ale and licked his lips. “That’s when I got your letter. Edgar held onto it until I came back. No tracking me down when I’m out there adventuring.” He smiled. “Guess that’s a good thing. Would be a rather crappy treasure hunter if just anyone could sniff me out! But once I read it over, I knew I had to come right away. Writing back... didn’t feel right. I much rather wanted this—” He gestured to the table, the surroundings, and herself. “—than anything else.”

Celes offered a soft smile. “You haven’t changed much at all.”

“You’ve changed.”

She blinked and cocked her head; she didn’t expect the tenderness in his comment. “What do you mean?”

He wore a nervous smile, barely able to meet her stare. “I mean, of course you have, what am I saying. You’ve... done so much for these people. It’s damn impressive. And I’m proud of you. I knew you could do it. Knew you’d make it out alive and figure something out.” His fingers traced
the rim of his glass. “But you’ve changed in other ways, too. Nothing bad, I can promise that.”

“How so?”

The redness in his face could have been from the alcohol or perhaps nerves eating at him. Celes preferred the prior.

“You’ve… softened,” Locke said as he dropped his voice. “You were always so intense, so serious. I guess not being an Imperial General anymore does a number on a person, yeah?”

Celes shrugged. “I still have my responsibilities. I haven’t completely abandoned that role.”

“No, I guess you’re right.” He motioned at the table. “This suits you, though. The way you are now. I like it, anyways.” After an apprehensive chuckle, he added on, “Oh, but who am I fooling? It’s not like you’ve turned into someone completely different! You’re just—”

“Locke, it’s okay. I get it.”

His smile faltered. “Yeah. Of course.”

Their server replenished their empty steins and Locke returned to his storytelling. Celes perched her chin upon a loose fist and listened. It was less talk of herself and more about the wonderful places he had explored. She felt like a young cadet once more, sneaking off to Cid’s garden in between training sessions for him to recount another myth.

“Do you have some place to stay?” Celes asked as they departed in the early hours of the morning. “If not, you can—”

“I was just going to see what the inn had available,” Locke said with a shrug. “Worse comes to worse, I just camp outside of town. Wouldn’t be the first time. But thank you for tonight. I’ve enjoyed myself.”

“As have I.”

Celes parted ways with Locke, returning to her travel quarters within Albrook. Before collapsing into bed, she paused before her mirror and examined her nude form. The lack of a military regiment softened her lean muscles. She couldn’t squeeze into her old officer uniform even if she tried and she pinched and poked at the extra layer of fat lining her body, especially her fuller thighs and breasts. No armor could hide the apparent curves of her feminine form, for it was all replaced with crisp garments suited for those fighting battles with diplomacy than with swords. The sharp edges of her face smudged and relaxed. She hadn’t woven her hair back into a tight bun in ages; the blonde waves flowed around her like a shimmering veil. She was no longer a rigid, intimidating military officer.

I’ve softened, she thought while retiring to bed.

Just another vague comment from Locke, which left Celes guessing. Another old habit of his that had yet to die off.

And when he boarded the ship the following afternoon, he paused to gaze back at Celes.

“Would you… be opposed to me visiting again?” Locke asked. “I know you’re a busy woman, trying to rebuild and run multiple villages, but—”

“Locke, even if I said no, you’d still find a way to do it.”
He laughed. “I take that as a yes?”

She had no reason to say no. Nothing he did warranted suspicion. He was simply an old friend coming for a visit. Terra and Cyan had done as much, same when Celes visited Thamasa. They crossed paths and shared each other’s company. It was what friends did.

Celes nodded. “Of course.”

Once Locke’s ship drifted off to sea, Celes’ gaze wandered towards the flawless clouds floating above and waited. Nothing ever happened.

Just as promised, Locke returned. Every month he sought her out, staying for several days before returning out to sea. Each visit came with a new story and sometimes gifts from his travels. No matter where Celes was, Locke tracked her down. Such behavior warranted paranoia, but she expected no less from Figaro’s stealthy informant. He never once alluded to anything past friendship when he brought Celes antique figurines from southern islands or unreadable tomes from northern jungles.

Another year passed as quickly as the first. The villages continued developing, some close to flourishing into cities. Even Doma recovered under her supervision, which Cyan was eternally grateful for. In return, he trained willing people to be not only warriors, but protectors of peace in their settlements. Terra returned multiple times, donning a different outfit of complex, vibrant fabrics. Each piece flowed as if the wind carried her forward with each step, enhanced only by her radiant smiles. Even Strago and Relm visited at one point, the latter bored to tears over the lack of art galleries and museums, insisting Celes to fix that.

But it was Locke who always returned.

There was a time they crossed paths in Narshe when Celes ventured to the old mining town to discuss trade routes. Snow lined the cobblestone streets as Celes walked with Locke. She bundled up in thick furs and shivered with every breeze kissing her face. As Locke discussed personal matters running amok in Kohlingen, her eyes fell upon the row of flowers jutting out from the snow to line their path.

She stopped and gasped, enough to justify Locke’s concern. “Is everything alright?” he asked.

Celes approached the flowers and smiled. “Just as I thought—snow lilies.”

She bent at the hip, closed her eyes, and inhaled the strong, decadent scent swirling within the ice-covered petals. The same scent as the perfume she wore with the golden dress. The one she lacerated in the end.

“I didn’t know you liked flowers,” Locke mentioned as he stood by her side.

“They’re my favorite.” Celes touched the petals, her mind elsewhere.

Nothing more was said of the flower and they continued their walk and conversation. The next time Locke visited, however, Celes’ eyes widened as Locke presented to her a single snow lily.

“For you,” he said.
Of all the gifts he gave her, this was the one Celes wished to decline. All he knew was that she adored them and not a word more. He couldn’t have fathomed the true meaning behind those special flowers. Celes didn’t possess the heart or energy to explain any of it, so she smiled and accepted the token of affection. No one had given her flowers before that fateful night in Narshe. Then again, no one did half the things Setzer did.

Each month following over the course of the year, Locke returned with a snow lily for Celes. They wilted and thawed slightly by the time they reached her hands, always a reminder of memories better left forgotten. And Celes accepted every flower, holding onto them after Locke departed. If only it hadn’t been Locke bestowing lovely gifts to her.

If only it had been Setzer.

She found herself thinking of him more often than not, her eyes drifting to the skies whenever she believed herself to be alone. Her wandering mind numbed the time spent with Locke. She never expected more than empty gifts and fumbled words. A friendship, maybe. Something akin to two siblings looking out from one another. But nothing more. Nothing to titillate her senses or rekindle ashes burned out long ago. At least she told herself as much.

Floating lanterns decorated Maranda’s skies. The cluster of lights meandered over the water as the town folk celebrated around bonfires with food and drink in hand. The night marked the second annual remembrance of Kefka’s reign coming to an end. The spectacles fell short of the entertainment once held at Figaro Castle, but the cheer and excitement remained across all of the Republic of the Free Lands. It was in those times the people remembered Celes as a hero instead of their Consul.

Locke sat beside her as one woman concluded her praise of their valiant efforts in stopping Kefka. “Did you ever get used to this?” He turned to Celes. “Hero this and hero that?”

“I don’t think I ever allowed myself to grow accustomed to it,” she replied, “though I suppose it’s better to be remembered as a hero than as an Imperial General.”

Locke quirked his lips to the side. “Yeah,” he groaned out, “you have a point.”

She leaned in and smiled. “Though for all the running around you do, I can’t imagine you’re ever in one place long enough to have people realize you are said hero.”

“I pride myself on that, you know! Would be bad business if I exposed every damn thing I did. Goes with the job demands and all.”

“Then would you rather be called a th—”

His eyes flashed wide as he flailed about. “Don’t say it! Don’t even think it! I know you are! Shush, you!” Though it didn’t prevent Celes from laughing. “And for your information, missy Consul, the correct, technical terminology is treasure hunter.”

Celes resisted the urge to snort. “Is that in the fine print?”

“Damn right it is.”
Together they laughed and shared memories of the times before the Floating Continent, some dating back before the Returners existed. The rest of Maranda blazed beneath drifting candlelights with no signs of dying out. Late into the night, the festivities continued and Celes’ body begged for rest.

“I feel like I’m getting old for this late night celebration,” Celes muttered.

“Hey, you got a few more years before you can truly complain about back pains and younger generations having it too easy.” Locke snickered as Celes whacked him. “Want me to walk you back to your place? The inn’s right down the road from there. I’ve seen my share of festivities, too.”

Celes didn’t object to his offer.

The buzz of celebration never died out. It echoed in the emptier streets and finally muffled through thick walls upon reaching Celes’ building. They trekked up the dark stairs, not a soul stirring in the building, save for them.

“Thank you,” she murmured while fishing out her key. “I appreciate you coming out tonight. I know Edgar is keeping you busy.”

“Yeah, he’s good like that,” Locke responded, leaning against the door frame.

“And I appreciate your company walking me home. You know that I—” She cursed under her breath as she dropped the key to the floor. Upon recovering it, she pawed for the keyhole. “I can fend for myself. I might not wield magic anymore, but....” Damn darkness wasn’t making unlocking the door any easier. “I’m glad you have my back.”

A hand fell over hers and stilled her actions. She never noticed Locke stepping closer to cradle her chin. Celes inhaled and stared at him through the shadows, discerning the distinct outline of his face. His nose bumped hers and she nuzzled back. Only then did he dare to meet her lips with his own.

She perched her hands on his chest as Locke’s hand trailed to her lower back. Their bodies brushed together as lips moved softly, gently. Her arms inched up to wrap around his neck and Locke embraced her.

The door opened somewhere in between the kisses. Celes busied herself with his mouth to even bother figuring out how he manipulated the lock. As she backed into the dark room, the door closed behind them, leaving them alone together. Celes had never brought Locke to her home before; he always opted for the rooms provided by the local inns instead of invading her privacy. Still, he maneuvered around the layout despite the unfamiliar space in the shadows. They inched to the bedroom until Celes bumped into the side of her mattress. A perturbed meow sounded behind her; Shiva jumped down from the bed and shuffled elsewhere to enjoy some peace and quiet.

Each kiss, each touch, each action of Locke’s was a soft flutter. A butterfly’s wings devastated more. He held her like a glass statue, almost in fear of flawing her beauty with his rough, weathered hands. He lowered her onto the bed with care, her blonde hair splayed out and spilling over the edge. He shrugged off his jacket to drape over a doorknob before crawling up to meet her with more delicate kisses.

She opened her mouth to his to break from the tenderness and found nothing. Not a spark to set her off or an intoxicating taste worthy of being drunk on for the delightful haze. What Locke greeted her with was akin to lukewarm bathwater lapping at her body. A safe comfort, one lacking variety each time she dipped bare toes in.

But Celes had tasted fire. She had climbed to exhilarating heights, only to be thrown off the edge and
experience the intense, endless fall. She indulged in the most exotic flavors, enough to spoil herself. Everything else tasted bland since. All she craved for was explosive, consuming, and dangerous fire. Even when she nipped at Locke’s lip or yanked at his clothes with a sense of urgency, it was never reciprocated.

His lips trailed down her neck, unbuttoning the jacket she wore, a new staple in her closet which covered as much skin as possible. With her bodice exposed, Locke purred and leaned in to kiss at the sweet flesh below her clavicle, only to stop. Celes ceased to paw at him, her body frozen beneath his, and her eyes fixed elsewhere.

“Is something wrong?” he whispered. The festivities were all but a faint echo from the inside. No one would care to eavesdrop on their conversation, yet he spoke as if the world listened. “If… if this is going too fast for you—”

Celes didn’t try to hold back her blatant scoff. Several choices words came to mind, but when she looked to Locke, his embarrassed expression silenced her.

“Locke, please,” Celes said.

He shifted and sat at the end of the bed. Celes propped herself onto her shoulders, peering over to Locke. He hung his head into his open palms. She laid a hand upon his shoulder, but he didn’t react immediately.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a soft tone. “I thought it would be… romantic this way. I thought it’s what you wanted.”

Celes’ hand slid away; would he ever entertain what she truly desired?

The silence persisted and Celes sat upright to button her jacket back up. “Um... I can make some tea, if you’d like. Maybe a fire for us to relax by and—”

“You still think of him, don’t you?”

Celes paused, fingers tracing the last button by her throat. Locke turned to her, searching for the answer in her eyes. The very thought of meeting his gaze tossed her stomach upside down.

“You do.”

“Locke, it’s—”

“No, I get it.” No poison soaked his tongue, not like the times when he disapproved before. “To some extent, anyways. I... was never really able to let go of Rachel. Every woman I met, I managed to find her in each of them.”

“That’s not the same.”

He sighed. “No, it’s not. What you experienced was different. I just... shit, I was trying to offer empathy.”

“You don’t need to.”

The silence bothered her more than anything.

“I... still don’t get it,” Locke mentioned with a slight scoff.

Celes narrowed her eyes onto him, finally accustomed to the darkness. She knew what he spoke of,
yet she opted to humor him. “Get what?”

“Him? Of all people? Why did it have to be him?”

“I don’t need to explain myself, Locke. Especially not you.”

“I’m not asking for an explanation. I—” Locke turned away and heaved out a stressful sigh. “I didn’t want to believe it, okay? Back on the Falcon, when he asked to speak with me in private and just... said it. I thought maybe it was a joke, because how could you possibly like him after all he had done to you.”

She shot a wicked glare Locke’s way. “Excuse me?”

“First with all that happened at the opera house—”

“You were the one who came up with the plan, unless you wiped that from your memory. All of us went into it knowing he planned to kidnap Maria.”

“But that doesn’t change the fact he was keen on kidnapping someone and forcing them into marriage.”

“You don’t understand.”

In the instant the words left her lips, Celes was no longer sitting on her bed, but standing in the dark hallways of an airship. The windows framed the night sky, the plush bathrobe comforted her, and the scent of those signature cigarettes rolled about as he chuckled.

“You don’t understand,” he told Celes after her attempt to berate him.

No, she hadn’t. Not then. It wasn’t until well over a year later when he pinned her to a poker table with a ravenous stare in his eyes when she understood, when she dared to taste what he had to offer.

“What?” Locke whipped around to match her glare. “I don’t understand? Are you trying to defend him?”

Despite the magic being long absent from her blood, Celes swore the old chill surfaced to soothe her. “I’m glad to see you still hold a grudge. And yet the both of you were two sides of the same coin. I fell for one side over the other. What is so hard to see about that, Locke?”

“He hurt you.”

Everyone knew better than to bring the topic up to Celes. Everyone but Locke, apparently.

She hitched her breath, recalling the tears she wept the morning she awoke without Setzer. “And so did you at one point,” Celes snapped back. “Do I need to remind you of your inexcusable demeanor back in the Magitek Research Facility or Albrook or—”

“No,” he said and shook his head, “don’t you dare confuse me with him. He....” Locke’s lips trembled. “That... that night? You were screaming. You were crying. We all heard it. And he... he just....”

That night. That night.

Well... fuck.

No one had confronted her or Setzer about what happened behind the closed door. She could have
reminded Locke of his verbal and physical assault on Setzer, but the point was moot. Celes better recalled the memory of her wrists and arms bound behind her back, her torso slammed into a desk, and her entire body experiencing a sensation worthy of fear. Instead, Celes enjoyed herself. Despite the tears and gut-wrenching pain, she loved it.

“Yes,” Celes responded, calm as ever. “Yes, I was. Because I wanted it, Locke. Because we both wanted it.”

He paused, blinked, and stared. The darkness couldn’t hide the deep shade of red his face reverted to. Confusion turned to horror, then a mixture of the two.

“You… what? Are you… no, you’re not joking.” A hysterical chuckle squeezed out, though Celes found no amusement. “You are sick. Why the fuck would you ever want that?”

“Why does it matter?”

“I found you bound against your own will with men belittling you. I can only imagine that was but a fraction of the fucked up shit you went through.”

“They didn’t rape me, Locke.”

“Okay, sure, but those bruises and cuts didn’t spontaneously appear for no reason.”

Celes said nothing.

“And yet after all of that,” Locke persisted, “you let him—”

“Yes, I let him,” Celes boomed back, “because he didn’t judge me like the rest of the world had. Because he was never afraid of the infamous General from Vector when what he saw instead was wildly different. Because we trusted each other enough to experience something so intense and dark and emotional and beautiful. So don’t tell me that I’m sick. Don’t deny me of what brings me pleasure and joy just because you can’t begin to comprehend it.”

Bewilderment returned to Locke’s features, though by the time the sadness sunk in, he rose from the bed and retrieved his jacket. “You could’ve told me to stop, you know.”

“Yeah,” Celes breathed out. “I could have, but I didn’t.”

“Why? Did you think if you pretended I was him that—”

“For fuck’s sake, yes. Is that what you want me to say?” Her blue eyes glossed over as she held his somber stare. “I thought I had moved on, but obviously I haven’t. I’m sorry, Locke.”

The silence tortured her.

“Yeah,” Locke muttered back, the weight of his words heavier than the sum of everything else spoken. “Sorry.”

He left shortly after, the gentle creak of the door assuring her solitude.

Sinking back into the bed, Celes stared at the ceiling, lost in a daydream instead of succumbing to sleep. Shiva returned to bed and curled up beside her with a content chirp. Combing shaking fingers through the fluffy, purring cat’s fur did little to ease her troubled mind. Neither did her fantasies.

Locke hadn’t been the first to seduce Celes. Plenty of men approached her, most fumbling with words to compliment her or engage in intelligent conversation. Few succeeded in capturing her
attention, which led to brief courtships and nothing more. They lasted weeks at best, all of them involving former nobles or members of the Republic, who were either genuinely interested in her or wished to manipulate her power. Whatever the case, Celes bowed out shortly after the novelty wore off.

A select handful made it past courtship, only because it was skipped entirely. Celes hadn’t been a stranger to a quick affair; on the rare occasion growing up in Vector, she passed the time and released unwanted tension with her peers, never to speak with them again. This time, Celes welcomed the intimacy far too quickly for her liking. While her touch-starved body begged for the warmth of flesh, her heart longed for something else.

None of them treated her the way she wished to be treated. Celes tried to be more assertive, whether it was a lingering bite on a lip or nails sinking deep into a shoulder, but nothing clicked. No one desired what lurked in her mind. So instead, she didn’t dwell on the strange men in her bed; she did her best to imagine the shallow breaths, the clumsy caresses, and the desperate movements were all Setzer’s.

It never worked.

When Celes was alone, she had nothing but her thoughts to comfort her. It would be after a meeting within one of her offices, the other participants closing the door behind them as they left. She had other matters to attend to, but no pressing obligations. Nothing to persuade her to go elsewhere; not when the sight of her desk seduced her.

Her heart always raced, palms sweaty as she pressed them into the wooden surface. His voice almost filled her ear, the rich tone driving pleasant chills across her skin. Bend over. Catching her breath, Celes obeyed the distant, mental echo. She braced herself, chest crushed along the desk. And she paused, as if waiting for a phantom hand to run up her back and tangle up in her hair or tighten around her neck or grab her face before forcing fingers into her mouth. Or perhaps she would be indulged with a swift, relentless slap to her rear, either with a bare hand or another item, such as the thick, hardcover book on a nearby shelf.

Setzer had spoken of those in Jidoor catering to his tastes, the same ones who produced both the dress and body jewelry for her. Had the odds been in their favor, maybe he would have spoiled her with more outfits to wear for him and objects to use on her. He always surprised her, always left her guessing. The rush of it had to rival the thrill he experienced with every chip tossed into another gamble.

And she certainly hadn’t forgotten about their own wager. Throwing knives, if she recalled correctly. Whoever lost would be at the service of the victor, a submissive for the dominant, but Celes never saw it as winning or losing. They both won; it was simply a matter of who went first.

What did Setzer have in mind if he won? Would she wear something else for him? Something provocative? Maybe made completely of leather or more delicate chains? Would he blindfold her again and force her to sit by his side like an obedient pet? Celes bit her lip, bringing a hand around to cup her breast and pinch her nipple as hard as possible. It still didn’t compare to the clamps or the knowledge of him watching as she undressed and bent over for him, but it was all she had.

Or perhaps she would win and Setzer could have a taste of his own treatment. In the rare moments she was able to exert her power onto him, Setzer melted. The tugs on his hair, the severe pressure applied to his throat, the humiliating words she spat at him. All of it aroused him. Every instance of frustration in her life swelled up within and Celes channeled it through her inflictions upon Setzer. And he would moan, thank her, and ask for more.
One hand clung to the edge of the desk, the other already fiddling with her pants. She sucked in shaky breaths upon stroking over what had been long ignored. Celes recalled the memories of Setzer pleasuring her, whether by his own fingers or tongue. All those moments shared together washed over Celes: the tangled sheets, the breathless cries, the indulgent kisses. Completely and utterly insatiable. What she desired above all else was for him to stand behind her, hands ghosting over her hips while she struggled to get off.

*Having fun?* she imagined he’d say. But Celes was always gasping for air, always at a loss for words. Begging was redundant when she presented herself to him, though Setzer still would have asked for it to witness her squirm and scream.

She longed for his lips on her neck, his hands clinging to her hips, and his body pumping into hers. When not a single ghost of a touch enlightened Celes, her mind dove into fantasies. She concocted scenarios where he gagged her and bound her ankles to the bedposts before ravaging her. Or with him tied and blindfolded and forced to lap over her clit until she deemed they were finished. Whatever emerged from Celes’ imagination left her panting and quivering more than any other man could coax out of her. And when she refused to bite her tongue while her body pulsed with a long-awaited vibration, she let his name flow from her lips.

But it didn’t matter. She couldn’t mimic stubborn memories. Her longing to experience everything again was only accompanied by emptiness. No one could replace Setzer.

She always stood from her desk despite her weak legs and tried not to be disgusted with herself. Just like how she turned over in her bed, curled up into herself with Shiva, and tried to forget both the conversation with Locke and the dull burn between her legs. Though for the first time, Celes wasn’t disgusted with what she desired.

What did disgust her was the notion only one person could properly please her. The one she still owed a game of throwing knives to. The one she wanted to explore more than just the world with. The one she promised to sing for when it was all said and done.

But he was gone, like a bird retreating to warmer climate for winter time, though never bothered to return.

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Celes headed to the docks first thing in the morning before sunlight broke across the horizon. A few workers cleaned the docks and fixed boats, though no one else wandered at such an hour after a night of festivities. One vessel prepared to leave, more of a merchant ship than a passenger ship, and she found Locke waiting to board.

She held her breath as the ocean breeze flowed over her. Upon an exhale, she marched up to him.

“Locke,” Celes called out.

To her luck, he turned, astonishment lining his tired face. With the space between them filled, they froze before one another.

His eyes drifted elsewhere. “About last night—”

“Locke, you don’t—”
“No, I wanted to say I’m truly sorry.” He paused. “And not just last night. For all the other times, as well. I tugged you along far longer than you deserved. I was never fully honest or straightforward. I did you a disservice. I fucked up a lot. Even last night. I can’t change what I did or said in the past, but I can make an effort to be a better person for the future. Still, I don’t expect you to forgive me. I... just wanted to let you know. You deserved at least that much.”

His bluntness stunned Celes as she tugged her cloak around herself. Locke brought his eyes to her, the slight breeze playing with the loose strands of his hair.

“I… still don’t understand what it is you had with him,” Locke continued softly, “but I can see he made you happy. I saw how you were at Figaro Castle dancing with him that night and the days leading up to Kefka’s Tower. I guess all I ever wanted was for you to be happy. I wanted to be the one who made you happy, but... as long as you are happy, it doesn’t matter if I’m the reason or not.”

Celes walked past Locke to the end of the dock. She hugged herself and stilled her tongue. A hand eased into her shoulder, yet she never flinched.

“For what it’s worth,” Locke whispered, “none of us have seen Setzer since that night. Or heard from him or of him, for that matter. It’s like he took off and vanished like some—”

“And this is supposed to comfort me?” Celes retorted, head spinning to eye Locke.

Though he didn’t back away when she snapped. “It’s… I don’t know what it’s supposed to do. Just that… all of us knew he had eyes set on you. That was the only reason he stuck around, right? If any of us knew he came back, I don’t think any of us would hesitate to let you know.”

She did her best not to glare, though the attempt was half-hearted to begin with. “Even you?”

Her sarcasm was greeted with honesty. “Yeah.”

With an uneasy inhale, Celes averted her gaze. How could someone not notice the massive airship flying by? The worst of scenarios circulated through her mind and her heart raced while imagining the Falcon crashing, much like it had with Darill. Setzer could have been met with a similar fate, with no one to know if he was suffering and in need of help. No one. Celes closed her eyes, desperate to vanish the nightmarish vision.

A second later, Locke’s arms slid around her for a hug.

“I wish I could give you wings,” Locke whispered into her ear, “just so you could fly off and find him. I’d do it to make you happy. You deserve that much, Celes. I’m sorry I can’t do anything.”

His hands trembled while clutching her. She sighed and turned into Locke to envelop him.

“I hope this doesn’t change anything about us,” Celes said.

“What do you mean?”

“We’re still friends, right?” She tossed her head to the side to catch his eye. “I’ve always respected your companionship and I’d hate to lose you over trivial matters.”

After hesitation and a tiny scoff, Locke smiled. “Still friends?”

Celes found the irony in her statement and backed away. So did Locke. They both fidgeted before the other until Celes broke the silence.
“This has never been easy for either of us,” she began. “You came to me when I was prepared to die and treated me fairly. It still perplexes me, but I owe you my life because of your compassion. Neither of us were in the right headspace to ever pursue something past comrades in battle. We had our personal demons to battle and a world to save. I could never decipher what your true intentions with me were, but then again, I wasn’t the easiest individual to deal with.

“I was quiet in times when I should have spoken up. I was furious when sentiments were bottled up for too long. I was starved for acceptance and loathed being dragged around under false implications.” She squeezed her eyes shut and ignored the tears wishing to poke through, then held Locke’s gaze again. “Setzer never did that with me. He was forward, yet respectful. I didn’t need to keep a wall up around him; he simply understood. There were no mind games and no hurt feelings. I... I was happy. Even if it was short, I was truly happy. Now my heart lies elsewhere and I don’t believe anyone can comb the world to reclaim it.” She shook her head as tears trickled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Locke. Maybe in another life, this could have worked out. I never meant to lead you on, either, and you deserve to know the truth.”

She lowered her head to rub her eyes. A gloved hand brushed away the stray tears she missed before stepping in to hug her tight. Celes returned the sentiment as quiet tears slipped off her face and onto Locke’s shoulder. They stood in silence until a shout pierced the skies, announcing the departure of the merchant ship.

“If I ever find him,” Locke murmured into Celes, “I will drag that bastard’s ungrateful ass back to you.”

She coughed up both a laugh and sob. “You don’t have to do that.”

“No.” Locke pulled away, flashing her a smile. “But I want to. That’s what friends are for, yeah?”

Celes waved to him when he boarded the ship. So did Locke as he drifted out to sea. His previous arrivals were predictable, always monthly and always with flowers in hand. Four months passed before Locke returned not with flowers, but with stories of his journeys. Always exciting and refreshing. Always without a word of Setzer.
Chapter 28

Celes strolled beneath sculpted hallways. Finer, natural materials replaced the sheets of metal within Vector. But more than the architecture changed; so did the people. The once, stark split within the social ranks bled and blurred until an eclectic mix of people walked the streets of the now budding city. The days of research facilities and military policing on every corner were but a long, forgotten dream. Echoes of laughter and barter filled the hallway as Celes came to a loggia overseeing a majority of what people now called New Vector.

Five years passed since Kefka’s fall. Villages flourished from the economy and high spirits while the citizens reclaimed glory and a sense of home. No one spoke of the days when magic flowed through the air with the threat of another War of the Magi looming nearby. The people, instead, greeted the future with bright smiles.

Many bestowed merit upon Celes for not only the explosion of urban development, but also inspiring faith within everyone in the former Imperial lands. She never claimed full credit; she merely helped plant the seeds while everyone else ensured the saplings blossomed.

Celes chuckled at herself. There she was, a military officer turned politician. Her peers from a previous life had plenty of reasons to laugh at her, but that ranked supreme. The rune blade dangling from her hip served more as a decoration than a fighting implement, unsheathing it only to spar with willing participants. Sometimes she rested a palm upon the hilt to send shivers through the more argumentative folk—a simple reminder for them to not test whether her tongue or blade was sharper. But the blade no longer molded into her now softened hand and the untouched runes along the metal turned cold. Still, Celes couldn’t bear to part with it.

Leaning into a pillar, Celes reminisced about the days when she wielded her rune blade more regularly. It was enough of a distraction to leave her blind to the courier rushing for her.

“Lady Celes!” she called out and bowed. “We have a visitor for you.”

“A visitor?” Celes cocked her head. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“Yes, he said you would mention that, but he still seeks an audience.”

Celes cocked an eyebrow and followed as the courier beckoned. Before leaving the loggia, her eyes flicked to the skies, only to find puffs of white clouds marring the blue skies of summer.

Down in the Republic’s courtyard, banners of bright blue and gold waved in the breeze. From a distance, the intricate crest stitched within the fabrics was difficult to discern, yet oddly recognizable. Men in uniform stood at attention upon seeing Celes. Though past the guards, she noted the voice attempting to woo a gardener—a familiar voice. She dismissed the courier and marched towards the small crowd. The men parted for Celes until they revealed the origin of the voice.

She was already smiling before she saw him. “Edgar?”

And there in his luscious blue and gold silks was the king of Figaro himself. He spun around and stared like a child caught red-handed on a midnight excursion for cookies.

“Ah!” Edgar beamed. “There you are!”

“What are you doing here?”
Edgar gestured to the poor gardener, who averted her blushing face and hurried her task of watering the flowers. “Praising the lovely women of New Vector for their hard work. What else would I be doing?” He quickly brought his attention back to the gardener. “Forgive me, love, but I have other matters to attend to.” Edgar faced Celes again while the gardener scurried off.

Celes concocted a response, one to rival Edgar’s wit, but she had no retort when he rushed up to yank her into a longing hug. Her lips curled up as she reciprocated the sentiment.

“Gods damn it all,” Edgar breathed into her hair, “I can’t express how good it is to see you. And alive and well, at that.”

“As well as I can be,” Celes murmured, tilting her head to eye Edgar, “but same to you.”

He hadn’t changed much, save for his hair, now somehow longer since she last saw him. Five years ago, Celes reminded herself. Time blinked by and all their interactions were held in letters. Finally standing before him, the sentiment sank in—she missed the flirtatious idiot’s company.

“Told you long enough,” Celes teased.

“Oh, please,” Edgar drawled out while gradually pulling back, “the moment the fighting was over and everyone had left, it was back to the good ol’ days of royalty: busy and dull as ever. You leave the throne room for a day to tend to yourself and everyone churns up hilarious notions about how the king was kidnapped or poisoned or something other than the real explanation.”

Celes giggled. “And what stories are they saying of you now, seeing you’re here?”

“Oh, this? That’s easy. Been working on a few contraptions to show off to a few willing buyers. Mostly to help with production for workers as opposed to military upgrades.” He shook his head. “Thank the gods those days are over. Except said contraptions are still blueprints and not yet tangible.” When Celes raised an eyebrow, Edgar shrunk by an inch. “Honestly, Celes, what do you want from me? I took whatever excuse I could get my hands on to come out here. Do you know how difficult it’s been to leave?”

“Trust me,” Celes assured him, “I do.”

“Well, of course you do now, Lady Consul.” And he bowed gravely before her. “And I must say, all of this?” He gestured to the courtyard, but also out to the prosperous streets where merchants, artisans, and families walked down, every single one of them at peace. “Incredible. Absolutely incredible. At the rate your Republic is progressing, Figaro will start wanting one of its own and that’ll have me out of a job.”

“You always have your machines as a back-up plan.”

Edgar chuckled. “True enough. Suppose it could be fun.” He offered a small, proud smile. “But you did it. There was nothing to be afraid of. I knew you would pull through.”

Celes read those exact words in nearly every letter of his, along with the complications which came with wearing a crown, but to hear the words come to life in his rich tone left her smiling.

“Thank you,” she said and meant it. “There have been hard times, regardless of how everything looks on the surface, but isn’t that how things work? Calm on the outside and bustling on the inside? Still, I don’t know whether or not to be insulted that you took so long to make an appearance.”

“I’ve been busy,” Edgar insisted. “I told you as much. You should know—”
“And yet you come here and start flirting with strangers while waiting for me.” Celes shook her head. “What would Terra think? Even *she* visits me almost as frequently as you send your letters.”

The particular shade of red his face turned each time she brought up the particular woman never bored Celes.

“I—I’ll have you know that I was simply praising that talented woman’s gardening skills. I don’t know what you take me for these days!”

After her relentless teasing, they retreated to one of the corners of the courtyard and sat together on a marble bench beneath the shade of a willow tree. There they discussed what couldn’t fit on a single piece of parchment and did so with far more ease than the ink could ever convey. The guards, both Edgar’s and those keeping an eye on the Republic building, left them be to share laughter and compassion.

She scrunched up her face when she caught him eyeing their surroundings for the tenth time. “What are you doing?”

“Hmm? What, can an engineer not marvel at the feats this city has reached?”

“Maybe I’m not used to others staring at the city in such a way.”

“Then allow me to be the first! Truly, Celes, you still don’t know how to take a compliment. Some things never do change, do they?”

She rolled her eyes as they chuckled together. “I’ve done my best, though. To change, that is.”

Edgar patted her shoulder. “You’ve done more than that. All of this? It’s like a dream in comparison to what Vector used to be. I remember when I first visited the old city. Just formalities under the guise of an alliance, of course. And while a part of me loved the engineering, a part of me broke inside seeing how much was sacrificed for the sake of power. Everyone suffered for the luxury of a privileged few. That’s all in the past, though. What you’ve created is peace and community.”

“I can only hope it will last,” Celes sighed out.

“Maybe it will, maybe it won’t. What matters now is that the people are happy. Cherish that. It will make the harder days easier to manage. For now, people at least recall what the days of ruin were like. They’ve seen hell. This is not that.” A slight smirk flashed across his lips. “It reminds me of how Doma used to be, though even they’re fairing better than before.”

“You’ve been to Doma?” Celes asked with wide eyes.

“Only to solidify ties,” Edgar replied. “Figaro never had the eastern city as an ally. Figured it was time to change that. It was excellent to see Cyan’s spirits bolstered. He kept singing high praise of your efforts in the city’s progression.”

She sighed. “He honestly needs to take credit every once and a while.”

“As should you.” He nudged her for emphasis. “Everyone has been making valiant efforts to better the world. The least we can do is support one another. I know Cyan has offered military aid for your people and Terra has done more than enough of her share to aid those who suffered from the catastrophe. Both speak highly of you.” After a pause, he added, “And I know where Locke has been those random times he claimed he had a new treasure to locate.” Edgar rolled his eyes while shaking his head. “Please, that notion grew old fast.”
Celes nearly forgot the monthly visits Locke made to see her, now counting on one hand the times per year he sought her out. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Never said it was,” he replied, almost offended. “Besides, it’s none of my business as to what happened with you two, but… I did try to warn him that whatever treasure it was he pursued was perhaps not a wise venture.” Edgar sighed. “I suppose he learned the hard way.”

*He did.* “And he’s still your informant?”

“But of course. If it wasn’t for Locke, my ties with the Returners wouldn’t have existed. He’s been more than useful and I keep him busy. Can’t keep him out of trouble, but that’s almost his doing and not mine. I… assure you he’s well, Celes.”

“I had no doubts, but I’m glad he is.” She paused. “What of your brother? He left a while ago, hadn’t he?”

“That he did. Both Sabin and Gau returned north to finish what Duncan started. The life of a monk… Not something I could ever aspire to be, but I admire the hell out of his determination.” He grinned. “I’m proud of him. Miss him, but at least now I’m not worrying about where he is. He’s traveling for the time being, along with mentoring Gau. Think I heard he was south of here temporarily. Only one way to find out.”

“And Terra?”

The color drained from Edgar’s face. “What?”

“Is she well?”

She had teased him relentlessly on the topic both in writing and now vocally, yet when she brought up Terra, Edgar looked past her, frozen and speechless. After a pause, he released a nervous sputter of laughter and rubbed his neck.

“Ah, Terra! Yes, she is… she is well.” Edgar cleared his throat and clutched his knees to steady himself. “I… don’t see her nearly as often as I’d like, but she’s happy. I’d rather that be the case, even if I’m not a part of her life.”

Throughout her visits, Terra never spoke ill of Edgar. Then again, Celes’ time with Terra was spent *not* talking about men in general. But surely if Terra was displeased, she would have spoken her mind. Or Edgar would have mentioned it in one of his many letters, or so Celes hoped.

“Edgar,” she whispered and extended a ginger hand to rest on his back.

With a shaky inhale, his explanation rushed out on an exhale. “There’s pressure back home about an heir to the throne when my time ends. I’m not exactly *old*, but I’m not a strapping, young man anymore, either. You may be on the up-and-up with the new traditions in this Republic of yours, but the people of Figaro are used to monarchy. And… they expect the king to have a queen by his side to then produce a proper heir or two or twenty, I don’t know.”

His eyes blinked at the horizon until they fell into his lap. He clutched his head and Celes scooted closer to soothe him, only to hear him murmur more. “The people expect a queen of noble blood.”

Celes hitched her breath and hung her head, as well. She saw the way he looked at Terra; they all did. Perhaps he wooed every woman that crossed his path, but there was a glimmer in his eyes which he saved for Terra alone.
“Does Terra know?” Celes asked in a gentle whisper.

Edgar laughed, both disheartened and spiteful. “How could I do that to her? I’ve already tried my best not to lead her on or act clingy each time she leaves.”

Furrowing her brows, Celes smacked his back. “You do it to tell her the truth, Edgar. She deserves as much.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Then he sighed. “It’s just...” He brought his pained eyes to Celes. “How much has Terra told you?”

“About... what?”

“About her and I?”

Celes shrugged. “She rarely speaks of you, but I never thought of it. Was never my place to judge.”

“Well... it’s not exactly odd, but it’s not traditional by any means. She goes about her life, I go about mine. Whenever we bump into one another, we’re sure to treasure it, but... it’s never turned into something more.” Edgar chuckled, perhaps more at himself than anything. “I’d love it if we did flourish, but I’d never force her to stop traveling and relishing in the world. She’s so... happy. So carefree and spontaneous. I envy it at times, but it pleases me to know I can fund her travels and pleasures. I never did it hoping to get something out of it, yet I’m beyond humbled each time she expresses her gratitude.

“I wish I could oblige the people of Figaro so easily, but the thought of not having Terra as my wife and queen... it kills me. And I’d never ask her in a million lifetimes to be a mistress. Even then, I don’t think she wants marriage or children. She’s content just the way she is, but to have another layer of separation between us...” After a pause, he breathed out a light chuckle. “You know, if your Republic’s influence spreads to Figaro, maybe I won’t have to worry about it. Maybe I can step down and finally be with her with no qualms. I could set up shop as an engineer, like you mentioned, maybe travel the world with her.”

“But is that what you want?” Celes asked.

“I know I want Terra to be happy. Outside of that? I’m not sure what I want. I do wish I had my brother’s sense of freedom. Sabin never thought twice about leaving when we were still kids.”

Celes pulled Edgar into a hug, happy he didn’t shove her away. “I hope the two of you find happiness, whatever that may be.”

“I only wish for her happiness now,” Edgar spoke without a second of thought. “After all she’s been through, Terra deserves to be free. I could never bind her to my own problems.”

“We’ve all come so far,” Celes reminded him. “We all deserve our freedoms and happiness.”

Edgar acknowledged her with a nod as they returned to silence. An occasional breeze sifted through the gardens, bringing tree limbs and flowers alike. Edgar reached out to the patch of tiger lilies by the bench while gentle wind chimes rang and songbirds chirped past the faint bustle of the streets. The hot, summer sun hovered high in the sky.

“You know,” Edgar uttered, breaking the silence first; his lips were always quicker than hers, “I didn’t come all the way out here just to exchange stories with you.” His mouth drew out into a flat line while his blue eyes held back something Celes couldn’t comprehend. “I wanted... no, I needed to speak to you about something. In person.”
Celes reverted back to her military demeanor, hanging onto every word life a command from a superior officer. As for Edgar, he struggled with his words, eventually rising from his seat to pace about the immediate vicinity.

Then he paused, his back to Celes while he tilted his head up. “I saw Setzer recently.”

A sharp ring swelled in her ears, accompanied by the beats of her heart now choking her. Numb hands clutched for the bench while she stared at Edgar. His words echoed in her head: I saw Setzer recently. Celes blinked and the world blurred, but it was still reality. Her mouth dried out along with the words once soaked into her tongue, leaving her thoughts to haunt her.

“It was three months ago,” Edgar explained softly upon accepting Celes’ silence, then scoffed. “And more like he came to see me, if I’m to be honest. Nearly five years go by and I’m told I have a visitor waiting for me. I didn’t expect it to be him. Not a single smile, not a bit of gratitude, not even a simple, ‘What the hell has been going on since I’ve been gone?’ I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so serious, like a businessman. Except I guess he was always like that before we showed up. Quick and to the point. He was looking for engineers and said that if he trusted anyone with airship machinery, it would be those under my employment. If it wasn’t for the fact I knew you were still fond of him —”

“Edgar.”

“Oh, for the love of—” He whipped around to face Celes, a mix of frustration and sadness tugging his muscles taut. “Don’t tell me that you ever got over the man. I know we’ve never spoken of him, but I know, Celes. I know how you were when we left and I can read it in your letters. You’re a woman who has moved on, yet holds onto sentiments she’s too terrified to voice. If you had truly moved on, you would have told me long ago or am I wrong?”

She failed to match his stare. The truth didn’t pain her as much as knowing Setzer popped back into her life.

“I knew how you felt about him,” Edgar continued, a hint of compassion threaded in his words, “and if it wasn’t for that, I would have struck him down and told him to get the hell out of Figaro.”

Celes bit her lower lip, the only defense mechanism to restrain whatever stung behind her blue eyes. Then the words trickled out of Celes’ mouth, the sound more pathetic than she wished for them to be, “Where is he now?”

“I wish I could say, Celes, but I’m afraid I don’t know. The man kept to himself for so many years and resurfaced simply to strike a business deal with me to complete the finishing touches on his second flying casino.”

“What did you tell him?”

His answer didn’t come immediately. “I told him, ‘Why the hell are you coming to me when we very well know who would rather see you?’”

She clamped a hand over her mouth and curled up into herself. Memories she wished not to relive surfaced. Back then, he stood by her as a loyal companion, patiently awaiting for her to open up to him. When she did, she feared her heart would burst from her chest from the sheer elation. And now that gambler—that fucking bastard—stole her heart and flew off into the night.

Where the fuck have you been all these years? Celes swallowed back to fester within her mind. You fled when I needed you the most. And I lived, almost to spite you. Why didn’t you come back for me?
I was always waiting for you, like the pathetic, lovesick wench I’ve always hated.

“Celes.”

Edgar repeated her name several more times before she locked eyes with him. He knelt before her, gripping her hands within her lap.

“The night of the celebrations,” he said. “Five years ago… I saw him then. I was barely in the proper mindset to be making any reasonable judgment call, but it was late, the festivities were over, and he was walking alone with his belongings towards the main gates. When I realized he was leaving, I tried to stop him, tried to tell him he was making a massive mistake. All drunkenly, mind you. Not exactly one of my finer moments, but I do remember he said I didn’t understand, that you and him were not meant to have a happily ever after. I said plenty of things to him. Well... more like I screamed at him, but that’s besides the point. Again, not my finest moment... but I told him that he was a coward, that he needed to get over himself, that he needed to turn around and go right back to you. I tried to show him his wrongdoings, Celes, but all he could make sense of was what he was doing was right. That you were better off that way—without him holding you back. I’m so sorry. I wish I could have done more.”

Both of their hands shook within one another’s as the memories of that night repeated in her mind. “I tried, too,” Celes whispered. “It didn’t matter, either.”

Edgar squeezed her hands. “But I told him right as he was about to leave... that you loved him. I could see that clear as day back when we were on the Falcon. Don’t think anyone else did. Even when he came back recently, I reminded him once more.”

Celes swallowed hard. “And? What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything.” And after a beat, “but he didn’t need to say anything. That hesitation in his steps and slight tension in his face was enough of an answer. I may not be as daft as reading people as he is, but when he’s not quick on his feet or with his tongue, I know his mind is at least churning. I wish I knew what he was scared of that has prevented him from reaching out to you. He came to me. Me. Of all people.”

“He was your friend,” Celes reminded him.

“Yeah, alright, but he wasn’t seducing my pants off while bent over a poker table.”

“That’s... not what—

“Look, the point is that you were more than a friend to him. You always were.” Edgar sighed. “The man I saw recently wasn’t my friend, but again, we met him when his business was nonexistent. He operated as our pilot and ally, not our casino owner. It’s... strange. I only hope the Setzer we all knew is still there.”

Celes hissed in a breath. “He’s always been there,” she mused. “He was all business back then; he simply tagged along because he lost a bet. Nothing more. He held no allegiance elsewhere. I was a pleasant distraction.” Her eyes fell. “Strictly business....”

“Though speaking of business.”

Celes lifted her head to catch a glimpse of Edgar plucking out a folded poster from a pouch. As he smoothed out the paper, he unveiled a lithographed advertisement of Jidoorian expertise, complete with hand-painted embellishments and calligraphy. It spoke of the arrival of the Falcon, a premiere luxury airship sporting a high-end casino and other facilities available to those with plump gil
“Regardless of whether or not I gave him engineers,” Edgar spoke, “he brought up how he wished to use South Figaro as one of the docking stations for the Falcon. That alone would attract all sorts of people, good and bad. He’s not making a show out of it, so I imagine it will only be a matter of weeks at most before the Republic receives a letter inquiring whether or not he is allowed to fly over such territories. It sounds to me that he doesn’t want a repeat of what happened between him and the Empire, whatever it was.”

And Celes hadn’t blamed him; they threatened to claim the skies and thus endangered his freedom.

“I thought I’d tip you off so you weren’t blindsided by the mention of his name.”

Celes nodded, still holding back the urge to shatter into millions of tiny shards. “Thank you. This means a lot to me.”

“It was the least I could do.” Settling the advertisement on the empty spot on the bench, Edgar proceeded to rummage through his pockets. “Whatever it is the Republic decides, that is none of my business. I can’t imagine many of the people would be pleased to have such an attraction available to the diligent, upstanding citizens. Whisk them all away for who knows how long. Some folk believe money should be earned through hard work and not luck… but whatever the case, the Republic may wish to speak to Setzer directly. And who would be better to seek him out in person than the woman who once fought by his side to take down the Empire and Kefka.”

Celes narrowed her eyes onto Edgar. “And what the hell am I supposed to say to him? After everything the two of us have been through, am I to just walk up to him as if none of it had happened? What if our reunion mirrors your recent endeavor with him?”

“You won’t know unless you confront him.”

“What if I don’t want to?!?”

Taken aback, Edgar softened his tone in comparison to Celes’. “Would you be happier never knowing, then?”

The truth was what brought the few tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’d sooner greet death with a smile than be content with erasing him from my life.”

She ignored Edgar while he dried her eyes with an embroidered kerchief, though what caught her eyes was a glimmer of something in his hands.

“I think you should hold onto this,” he told her.

Celes inspected the gil he slipped into her palm. The distinct Figaroan gold shimmered in the sun. Engraved on one side was Edgar’s proud profile, though as she flipped it over and found Sabin’s visage, she gasped.

“Edgar, I can’t—”

“Take it.” He closed her hand over it. “For so many years, I held onto it. The coin always reminded me of Sabin and the promise we made together. But Sabin and I are well. Now whenever I look upon it, I think of the opera house and that horrible plan somebody insisted on and how much I wanted to shake some sense into Locke. But I also remember how you outwit the gambler yourself, like an actress improvising on stage. And how Setzer always looked at you like he had never found someone so captivating before. He didn’t stay because he lost a bet. It wasn’t strictly because of
business; he stayed because of you. Don’t fool yourself otherwise. So go. Find him. Say it’s under the pretense to speak of his flying casino. You won him over twice already, Celes. Third time’s a charm, isn’t it? So please, hold onto it for me.” Then he smiled. “For luck.”

By the time the sun brushed along the horizon, Edgar was bound for departure. The two exchanged an embrace worthy of close, dear friends. He kissed her temple and squeezed her hard.

“If I was a betting man,” Edgar whispered to her, “which I’m not, but I would wager your man in question would be frequenting the newly rebuilt opera house. Just finished refurbishing a month or two ago. I swear, people from Jidoor will take their time so long as it’s damn perfect.”

“The opera house?” Celes pulled away. “You think so?”

“We found him there before, did we not?”

Edgar backed away and mouthed, “Good luck,” before mounting his chocobo and heading south to seek out his brother before nightfall.

Had Setzer heard him, he would have corrected Edgar—Celes didn’t need wishes of luck when it was always by her side. But I never felt lucky, Celes thought while walking the halls at night, pausing at an open balcony to marvel at the faint moonlight dazzling in the dark sky. Not until I realized what we could have had.

Two weeks later, a courier quietly placed a parchment scroll in the main hall. Other members of the Republic read its contents, their distant conversations buzzing about how a prompt meeting was in order to discuss pressing matters. Celes ran her fingers over the neatly folded letter accompanying the set of posters before opening it.

She knew the penmanship.
Chapter 29

Peace persisted within the Republic, yet fires sparked to life on and off; everyone differed in their beliefs, enough to scream and butt heads with allies. Celes longed to be a General once more in those instances. No one faulted her back in her military days for bellowing as a means to end a group’s idiocy. That luxury was absent, though, leaving Celes with no other option than to witness her peers bicker over the finer details of allowing or denying the Falcon docking privileges to various ports.

Pros and cons danced on people’s tongues, yet neither side yielded an inch. Celes swallowed her sentiments, thankful Setzer had avoided Vector outright years ago and thus sparing her endless headaches. Still, the soldiers found ways to sneak out to the famed Blackjack; civilians were no different, even now.

The more selfish side of Celes favored giving the Falcon docking access. If neither of them was busy, they could easily see each other. Celes frowned. If he even wishes to see me at all.

The arguing persisted for a week and talks of a compromise came forth—a plan Celes doubted Setzer would approve of. Heavy restrictions on not only where he could dock, but also how often, were one of the many regulations scrawled out on the parchment.

Setzer would sooner laugh and toss this offer out a window, Celes mused with a wrinkled nose.

“So how exactly are we to return this to Mr. Gabbiani?” one of the members raised upon completion. “He didn’t bother to leave any notes as to how he preferred to be reached. What does he expect us to do? Just hope we find a random airship flying around and wave it down?”

As the discussion carried on, Celes brought Edgar’s suggestion to mind. She would have left that night after he planted the seed in her head, but Celes’ sense of duty chained her down. Like Edgar, she, too, needed a reason to leave. Now she had it.

“I know where he is,” Celes spoke. Voices silenced as all eyes settled upon her. “We… the two of us fought together against Kefka. He was—” An insufferable bastard? A sly gentleman? My… lover? “—a good friend of mine. If he were to give anyone the time of day—”

“Oh! Lady Celes! You must go, then!”

Another member chimed in. “Yes, surely you can speak with him to see our side of things.”

She feigned hesitation. “If you all believe that to be wise—”

“You already keep ties with so many of the others from back then, do you not? King Edgar, Sir Garamonde… oh, and that girl who’s recently helped establish the soup kitchen in Albrook. Terra, was it? This mustn’t be much different.”

“No, I suppose not.” After a deep inhale, she said, “I’ll go, then.”

And none of them protested.

The following morning, Celes spent more time fusing over which outfits to pack than going over the terms of the compromise in her head. And she traced the edges of the two-headed gil Edgar bestowed upon her. Shiva purred and rubbed up against her leg.

“Oh, you always know when I’m lost in my thoughts.” Celes scooped up the fluffy cat and kissed
her head. “Mommy’s going to be heading out for another trip soon.” Shiva swiveled her ears and let out a discontent *mrrr*. “Don’t give me that face, fluffy butt. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Those words summoned dread within Celes. The idea of meeting with Setzer once more, followed by his swift rejection of the compromise and her shattered her heart into millions of shards all over again. Shiva batted at her face until Celes snuggled in close.

“I’ll be fine,” she whispered into the layers of fur, more so to herself than to Shiva. “And the landlord will stop by to feed and play with you. I hear he has a gyshall-nip toy with your name on it.”

With a final scritch behind the ears, Celes lowered Shiva to the ground to resume packing. Again she flipped Edgar’s gil between her fingers. Memories best forgotten stirred within her heart.

The piece of gil didn’t join the bandana and folded-up letter still residing on her desk. It hid in the inside pocket of her jacket right before she gathered her pack, fastened her rune blade to her belt, and headed for the docks.

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A single glance of Jidoor alone left the impression of a settlement never scarred by the horrors of five years ago. Celes set foot into the bustling, pristine town with not a speck of rubble in sight. The citizens continued living life with a sense of entitlement and prestige. Nothing marred that image.

“And where are you heading, mademoiselle?” the stable boy questioned with a thick accent as he prepared a chocobo.

“I’m heading to the opera house,” she explained.

“Ah, a lovely choice indeed! Newly rebuilt and not far from here, either. Used to be a day’s trek from Jidoor, but those days are no more.” He raised his brows while tightening the saddle. “Don’t think you’ll catch the show in time. It starts in thirty minutes.”

“The show is not my objective; I’m meeting someone there.”

The boy shrugged. “It’s a gorgeous building, though. Rumor has it a dragon occupied the old one. No one ever found a means of removing the beast. This newer establishment, though, is closer to home. It all worked out in the end, no?” He passed the reins to Celes. “About a two hour ride from here. Shame… the new production they have is all the rage with the ladies. You’ll be lucky if you catch the last act.”

Celes arrived at her destination in a little over an hour. Her body ached as she approached the valet outside the opera house. Dismounting with a massive exhale, she cast her sights to the extravagant, reconstructed building. Her eyes wandered past it to the horizon. She held her breath; a massive airship lingered not far from the opera house.

“The show has already begun, mademoiselle,” the valet explain, gathering her chocobo’s reins, “though I’m sure you can sneak in for act two.”

She gestured to the airship with her chin. “Have you crossed paths with the owner of that?”

The valet followed her gaze and blinked. “Can’t say I have, mademoiselle. Plenty of faces pass
Celes scoffed lightly. “I don’t believe he’d be thrilled having someone else tinkering with it.” With that, she tipped the man a handful of gil and headed for the doors.

As she scaled up the vast set of stairs leading to the entrance, Celes tucked her hair back into a loose bun. Gloved hands smoothed out her attire, the stiff, white fabric blemished with a few scuff marks and nothing more. Her attire varied from her previous adventuring outfits: gold pants; a long, double-breasted riding jacket with gold and green trim and embellishments of modern Vectorian design; matching knee-high boots; a simple blouse underneath; worn, leather gloves; and the simplest of earrings. It was tailored more for ventures across the windy seas than a casual chocobo ride, every last inch of skin covered. Not the most flattering of looks while surrounded by Jidoorian socialites, but it suited Celes.

Two men wielding polearms stood vigilant on either side of the doors, nearly causing Celes to trip over her own feet. Guards, she thought. Now they invest in them. They nodded and allowed Celes entrance. She stepped through the opening and marveled at the fine artistry and craftsmanship only found in Jidoor. Oil paintings covered the ceilings, illuminated by multiple chandeliers. Marble floors paved the way into the massive foyer as a grand staircase lined with gold and velvet overwhelmed the space. Through the thick walls, the faint echoes of the opera hummed.

Celes eyed a small group standing in the middle, lost in casual, yet jovial conversation. One of them, perhaps an usher, caught sight of Celes and his smile faded.

“May I help you, mademoiselle?” Before Celes could answer, he added on, “The opera has already begun. You must wait until intermission before—”

“T’m actually not here for the show,” Celes confessed. “I was hoping… if it wasn’t too much trouble, that you could help me find someone.”

The usher didn’t blink. “The patrons of the opera house are many and most importantly, highly revered. We would prefer not to disturb our guests as they enjoy the show. They have spent a pretty gil to bask in the luxuries of the opera house.” He paused while tilting his head. “My apologies, who did you say you were again?”

Perhaps mentioning her name would help. Surely they knew of the Republic that formed in the Empire’s absence. “I’m Celes Chère of the Republic of—”

“It’s you!”

Another voice burst through the spacious room. A furious man stomped through the group, shoved away the usher, and stormed for Celes. She held her tongue as the plump, red-faced man skidded to a halt, mere inches left between them.

“I thought I recognized you!” he fumed. “How could I possibly forget when you and your idiot band of imbeciles ruined me and the opera house! My life! My hard work! All of it ruined because of you!”

One hand dropped to the hilt of her rune blade on instinct alone, but Celes loosened her grip upon recognizing the man—the same one who had mistaken her for the opera house’s lead soprano.

“And now you have the audacity to come back here? And for what?” Impresario scoffed. “To mock me?! Do you even know what happened here after that sad excuse of a production was shown to the
masses?! I became the laughing stock of Jidoor! Who would want to come see a show run by a man who had let amateurs take control of a masterpiece?"

Celes dared to interject. “It wasn’t in our interest to ruin—”

“Oh, spare me your pity!”

Narrowing her eyes at him, Celes did little to heed his words. “Whatever the case, the opera house seems fine now. I can’t imagine your travesties were on par with what the rest of the world experienced. You’re alive and thriving again. Isn’t that all that matters?”

The color drained from his face as his jaw dangled open. “What? Everything is… fine? Fine?! Are you mad?! Nothing is fine! You think I gladly rebuilt this with spare change from my pockets?! Don’t even get me started on the financial woes of resurrecting this haven of the visual and performing arts. I owe more people my life at this point than you can imagine! Everything must be perfect now! One slip and this whole place goes under! So I don’t need the likes of you showing up and ruining it all.”

“I’m not here to—”

“I don’t care why you’re here! What I want now is for you to leave! You are not welcomed here, do you understand?! You are not welcomed here! Guards! Escort this vile woman out immediately! Right this very instance before I—”

“Impresario! What in the name of the gods is going on?!”

The guards retreated to their posts and the ushers sprung upright, rushing aside. Impresario spun around and gasped, then flinched. Celes didn’t move, though she glanced at the origin of the voice. And when she did, her eyes widened and lips parted ajar.

The woman approaching them with a leisurely stride wore an exemplary silhouette of Jidoor’s massive, elaborate gowns, paired with an overabundance of diamonds and rubies. Her braided, blonde hair wove and twisted back into a perfect chignon. Every step brought forth a click of her heels, thus demanding attention from all as her head held high.

For Celes, it was like looking into a mirror.

Impresario held his hands out to her. “M-M-Maria! My dear! It is n-nothing, I—”

“You what?” The curve of her red lips pointed down. “No, please, go on with whatever excuse you have this time. I’d be delighted to hear every word of it.” She rolled her eyes, casting her stare off to Celes. “And who is she? Is this why everyone is screaming for no reason?”

“Maria, please, it’s—”

She approached Celes like a feline examining her prey. A delicate eyebrow quirked up. She huffed in disapproval. Celes reciprocated the notion, though now closer, she realized the subtle differences between them; Maria, despite her sharp demeanor, retained softer and rounder features than Celes. Yet the two easily passed as sisters. Or with enough magic with the help of make-up artists, pass as each other flawlessly.

Amidst Impresario’s prattle, Maria froze and locked eyes with Celes.

“Oh,” she said softly. “It’s you.”
Celes didn’t respond, afraid to ask of what nasty rumors circulated the opera house since her impersonation of Maria.

“S-she was about to leave,” Impresario tried to explain.

“I wasn’t asking you what she was doing,” Maria snapped back. “Now if you would be so kind and stay out of this.” She scoffed loudly. “I cannot hear myself think when you’re around.” Eyes back to Celes, Maria tapped a manicured finger along her jaw. “But you… why are you here?”

“I was looking for someone,” Celes answered, defeat ringing in her voice. “I’m here on behalf of the Republic of the Free Lands.” That didn’t seem to faze a single one of them. “It’s business related,” she clarified.

Right as Celes prepared to take her leave, Maria feigned kindness and smiled. “Right,” she said. “Of course you are.” Maria extended a hand and beckoned Celes over. “Come along, dear. We have much to discuss, you and I.”

Impresario flailed his hands while skittering to the woman’s side. “B-but Maria—”

“She’s my guest now,” Maria hissed. “Are you going to deny me the privilege of having such people around? Do you wish for me to be bored?” He shook his head frantically before she finished her first question. “Very well.” One last look at Celes and Maria chuckled. “Well, don’t be shy, dear. I don’t bite.”

_I know you don’t_, Celes refrained from uttering.

With no passing glance to Impresario or the ushers, Celes followed Maria, who wore her kindness more as a mask. She led Celes away from the foyer. The muted echoes of the opera still vibrated in the walls, though the clicks of Maria’s designer shoes reigned supreme.

Halfway down the corridor, Maria glanced over her shoulder and slowed her steps. “You know, when they told me they found a double for that evening’s performance,” Maria spoke quietly, yet still rigid, “I didn’t exactly believe them. ‘She looks just like you, Maria!’” She scoffed. “Suppose I wasn’t ever going to believe until I saw you for myself.”

Memory served Celes well to remember that night was more than an implied kidnapping; Maria had asked for it.

“But if I hadn’t switched places with you….” “Maria, I’m sorry for—”

The woman snapped a hand up while tut-tutting. “Please! Do not give me your sympathy! You’re just as bad as those groveling men back there.”

Celes furrowed her brow. Setzer’s recollection of Maria had been neither an exaggeration or a jest. Her over-dramatic, high-maintenance attitude served enough to warrant strangulation.

“What’s done is done,” Maria huffed out. “No point in dwelling on it.”

“Still,” Celes said once Maria kept quiet for more than five seconds, “it could have been avoided. I know that—”

Maria’s eyes widened with an unnecessary rage. “You know what?” She wrapped her arms tight around her frame. “No, you don’t know anything. Not a damn thing.” The bout of anger washed away as quickly as it burst forward, though the tightness in Maria’s features remained, save for her eyes. “Or maybe you do know.”
Celes opted not to entertain her with an answer, not after that last outburst. Instead of snapping, Maria sighed, loosened her arms, and motioned for Celes to follow.

Further down the hall was Maria’s personal dressing room, distinctive from the room Celes had prepared in years ago. Lavish amenities stuffed into the space to appease a woman of Maria’s stature, comfortable enough to spend hours in. Costumes and gowns lined one wall with show posters plastered along another. Everything smelled of roses, yet not a single stem was in sight. With the door closed, Maria sauntered to her vanity mirror and braced herself against the back of a chair.

“I know why you’re here,” Maria said, the hostility missing. “Or at least I know why you should be here and it certainly has nothing to do with seeing the performance of Les amours de Ragonde.”

Celes approached from behind, catching a glimpse of their reflections together. Maria cast her eyes to the side, her lips quirked down.

“I still remember,” Maria continued after the silence persisted for too long, “when I found out what happened; that he took you instead of me.” She shook her head. “All I could think of was, ‘That poor girl. I hope she either doesn’t mind or knows how to crack a whip herself.’ Suppose an Imperial General would know a thing or two about putting someone in their place. But those were rumors and nothing more. I didn’t hear from Setzer after that night. Even when word traveled from Vector of the sightings of the Blackjack, I never knew what the hell to think.

“But he returned to me several months after the whole damn world went to shit. Wanted to explain what had happened and I refused to have any of it. Aside from the fiasco that was you being my double, I couldn’t… do it anymore. It had been fun at first. Intoxicating, really.” Maria closed her eyes while releasing a deep breath. “We were each other’s drug of choice. But when people started talking about us and how our not-so-secret affair would be the end of my career and—”

Her head fell and body shuddered. Celes folded her arms, an unamused expression stitched upon her face.

Eventually, Maria stood upright as if her moment of weakness never happened. “I couldn’t have any of it,” she insisted. “If they had known what was truly going on, I… I don’t know what would become of me. I prefer not to think of it. And I told him exactly that.” Maria paused. “Granted, it involved a slap to the face and a few colorful words, but he didn’t question me. Went on his way without a word. Off to save the world, of all things. Almost breaks the illusion; world-class gambler and hero of the world. What a joke.” Her eyes met with Celes’ in the mirror. “Perhaps you had something to do with it. He had spoken of the woman pretending to be me…..” That cat-like stare narrowed. “You stirred quite the intrigue in him, didn’t you? I don’t believe I could have him crave me in such a way even if I tried.”

Celes held her breath. “Have you spoken to him since?”

Initially, Maria laughed. The sound pained both her and Celes. “He returned only recently. A year ago, was it? Perhaps a little more. Hmmm… it doesn’t matter. I recall seeing that thing outside of Jidoor and while it wasn’t the Blackjack, I knew but one idiot brave enough to pursue the skies, so it had to be Setzer.” Maria turned on her heels to face Celes, voice and eyes softening alike. “He wouldn’t even look at me. Every time we spoke, he… looked elsewhere. And the few times he did, it was as if he was disappointed with what he saw. I made the mistake of asking him one night after he—we—had been drinking. Asked him what the hell was wrong with him. Why was Setzer Gabbiani unable to look me, of all people, in the eye?

“And you know what? He told me. He told me everything. About you, about your… relationship. And he said that looking at me was like looking at you and it pained him beyond words. I tried to
reason with him. He needed to stop being so sorry for himself. If this woman he still yearned for was truly the masterpiece he painted for me, then he needed to get on his damned airship, seek you out, and be done with it. But he droned on and on, insisting that the two of you were like star-crossed lovers written for the stage—never to be together under normal circumstances. He said it wouldn’t work out, that you were better off without him. And to think… he mistook you for me at one point.” Maria placed minimal effort into her chuckle. “Funny, that. Life has a demented sense of humor.

“Even though I told him to get the hell out of my life, I still missed the attention. Oh gods, was I stupid. It didn’t matter what I did, because he wouldn’t budge. I… I told him he could pretend I was you, if that’s what it took. He never entertained the idea for a second.”

Lost somewhere between wanting to storm out and strike an open palm across the woman’s face, Celes stared down Maria and balled her hands into fists. “And why exactly are you telling me this?”

“Why?” Maria fluttered her eyes. “Isn’t it obvious? The damn bastard loves you. In all my time I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him like this. Setzer might not ever say it—I don’t even know if he’s aware how to—but you know him; he doesn’t need words to get his point across. So,” Maria spoke with a hand on her hip, “are you going to see him or not?”

“That was my intention from the beginning.” Celes narrowed her gaze. “You led me here.”

“Don’t say it as if I was torturing you; I’m only trying to help. Besides, who else was going to help you freshen up?”

Celes blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Oh please, you’re not fooling anyone. What did you do, walk the entire way here? You look dreadful.”

“I came by chocobo.”

“What, one of the carriages drawn by them?”

“No, I rode one myself.”

Maria stared, then forced herself to laugh. “Right. That would explain the stench.” She released an annoyed sigh. “But that doesn’t explain why you don’t even have a hint of a face on—”

“What?”

“You and I have similar complexion—obviously—so it shouldn’t be hard to find some blush and eyeshadow to match your—”

Celes shook her head violently. “I am not wearing make-up.”

Maria gazed upon Celes halfway over to her make-up kit. “Are you joking?” The unamused expression Celes offered said it all. “Oh fine, have it your way. Suppose that means I can’t talk you into doing something with the moogle’s nest that’s your hair. At least put some perfume on.” Maria waved a hand at a table off to the side. “The just-rolled-around-in-the-stables aroma isn’t going to start any trends in Jidoor, I can tell you that right now.”

Finally, something they could agree on. She made her way to the small collection of perfumes. Each bottle varied in shape and design, the colorful liquids within hinting at their appropriate scent.

“So he’s here?” she ended up asking Maria.
“What’s that?”

“Setzer. He’s here?”

Her wide eyes sunk into an unimpressed stare. “No, the airship outside flew here all by itself. Of course he’s here. Why wouldn’t he be?”

“Excuse me for asking.” Celes muttered to herself.

As Celes examined the bottles, two fingers jabbed into her arm. Maria stood behind her with a deep emerald waist cincher in hand.

“Take off your jacket,” Maria insisted.

“What? Why do you—”

“I could tell a mile away that you’re not wearing anything proper underneath, so do yourself a favor and take off the jacket. You can thank me later.”

With no other option available, Celes sighed through a clenched jaw and slipped off her heavy jacket. Once her blouse was exposed, Maria instructed her to lift her arms up to properly fasten the item around her waist. Celes winced and grumbled as Maria tightened the laces.

“Not so tight,” Celes growled.

She could almost hear the roll of Maria’s eyes as the woman loosened the garment enough for breathing to not be a chore. Though once she was finished, Celes glanced at her reflection in the distant mirror and perked up. The color suited her as much as the garment accentuated her waist and hips. Not that Celes needed it, but it was a classic touch, one she hoped would capture Setzer’s attention. Then she tensed her shoulders and glared at the reflection; she was on business matters first and foremost. Maybe he would never see past her jacket, anyways.

Before shrugging her jacket back on, Celes plucked out a bottle of perfume. The blue tint of the liquid appealed to her, though it was the scent that captured Celes.

“Bleck!” Maria exclaimed. “Are you joking? That one?! You truly don’t have any taste, do you?”

“It’s snow lilies.”

“Yes, yes. I know what it is. I’m always receiving gifts from my admirers and I received that garbage a few months ago. I thought I threw it out. Ugh, I hate lilies. Everyone knows that! And that scent is plain horrible! Bleh!”

All Celes could do was smile before spritzing it about. Maria stared as if a fire started in her room.

“Unbelievable,” Maria huffed out. “Now you best be getting out of here before my entire room reeks of that filth.”

“Gladly,” Celes said, biting back a grin.

Before she could exit, Maria latched onto Celes’ arm. When their gazes met, the tension wore out in Maria’s blue eyes.

“It’s... Celes, isn’t it?” And she nodded it. “Right, well… is this what you want?” As Celes’ face hardened, Maria explained herself. “I’ve heard of people speak of you—the former Imperial woman who has united those once under the Empire’s thumb. You are as much a star to them as I am to this
opera house. Politicians aren’t much different from us thespians, my dear; word travels fast and everyone is dying to watch the lead actor fall to his demise so the understudy can take his place. It would be a shame if word spread of a gentleman rogue planning to kidnap the Lady Consul for his own devious desires.”

Celes yanked her arm free. “Why? So you can claim him for your own?”

Maria’s lips pursed together. “Did you not listen to me a minute ago? I tried already. He wouldn’t think of me like that if I bound and gagged myself for him on the Falcon. I’m on your side, Celes dear; I only wish to warn you as someone who’s been there before.”

“I’m not afraid nor worried about what people would have to say about us.”

“Oh?” Maria raised an eyebrow. “You say that now.” She hummed to herself. “I can see why he favored you.”

“What?”

“You’re everything I’m not.” Her painted lips frowned. “And yet we’re the same in some regards. It’s strange, but now that I’ve met you, I understand. I only hope you two can find happiness before reality catches up.”

“You believe he’ll take me back?”

Maria nearly doubled over from laughter. “How the hell am I supposed to know? It’s not as if Setzer speaks to me daily, let alone about you. I’m only speaking from knowledge of a conversation we had some time ago. Nothing more. I can’t tell you if he’ll accept you with open arms or if he’ll run away like the coward he is. Whatever the case, you seem woman enough to try it. You came here all the way from where? Tzen? Albrook?”

“New Vector.”

“Such an original name,” she sighed out. “The point is you didn’t come here for afternoon tea. I’m sure you’ll make some sort of an impression. You already have before. But I’d hurry, if I were you. Intermission will be here before you know it.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Not off the top of my head, though if you take a right out of here and another right at the end of the hall, you should find an usher. Let him know Maria sent you along with who you’re looking for and he should help you. If not, well… come back here and I’ll see to it that someone does their damn job around here.”

Celes couldn’t help but smile, albeit a small one. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet! You haven’t even walked out the door.”

On her way to do just that, Celes paused and looked to Maria. “Aren’t you… supposed to be in the performance?”

The stare said it all, but of course, the prima donna elaborated. “Do you know nothing of Jidoorian opera? What uncultured hole in the wall did you come from?” Maria rolled her eyes. “It’s a comic opera, my dear.” Then she enunciated every word through her teeth. “I don’t do comic opera.”

Never would have guessed, Celes thought as she nodded and exited the premise.
Heeding Maria’s words, Celes followed her directions until she crossed paths with the aforementioned usher. He greeted Celes with a nod and confused expression, only to further contort his face when Celes mentioned her search for Setzer. It was when she dropped Maria’s name that his noncompliance vanished.

“Ah! Yes! Right this way, mademoiselle!”

Past several patrolling guards, the usher led her up a small side staircase to the third floor in silence, save for the music living in the elaborate walls. Each painted mural and marble sculpture she passed by added to the aesthetic of the opera house, but she never let the art deter her. Not when her heart thumped in her ears and her chest throbbed akin to stage fright. And she wasn’t even gracing the stage with a performance that evening.

The entire walk, Celes matched the usher’s pace, slowing down when he did, as well. She lost herself to her thoughts, hitching her breath as negativity reared a hideous face. What if Setzer wasn’t actually there? What if he didn’t wish to see her? What if someone else accompanied him to the opera? A thousand questions surfaced with not a single answer.

“Here we are, mademoiselle,” the usher whispered and gestured to the door to her right.

“Intermission will be coming up soon. I hope you enjoy the rest of the performance.” And thus he left without another word.

Celes stared at the door, each passing second emphasized by her heartbeats. What was she to say to him after so long? If they ever entertained discussing the matters of the Republic, they’d be lucky; all that consumed Celes was the notion of reuniting with the man waiting behind the door. If he’d even allowed it.

She never bothered to knock, tested the handle, and granted herself access to the private box.
Chapter 30

The once mute melodies exploded to their fullness. The resonant orchestra wove melodies for the talented singers. Spotlights aimed at the stage, brightening the players while plummeting all else into darkness. Down below and within the mezzanine, every seat was occupied and everyone was entranced with the performance front and center.

Everyone except Celes.

Through the darkness, a faint sliver of light outlined the seated figure before her. One hand clutched a burning cigarette and the other cradled a short tumbler of scotch. The details of his dark attire were lost to the shadows, but the wisps of long, silver-white hair were undeniable. And the smell. That smell. She inhaled it and held her breath, never wishing to release that mix of cinnamon and cloves she had all but forgotten.

An annoyed sigh overwhelmed the orchestra and snapped Celes back to reality.

“Look,” he said while turning to face her, “I don’t know how many times I need to make it clear, Impresario, but you’re not doing yourself any favors by interrupting—”

The darkness blurred Setzer’s face as he paused. Celes inhaled deeply and stilled her fidgeting hands.

“I hope you wouldn’t mind if I interrupted,” Celes said, her voice shaking far too much for her liking.

With a final, desperate drag from his cigarette, he found a home for the smoldering nub and his drink by a nearby table. Smoke funneled through his nostrils as he rose to his feet. Setzer ambled towards Celes, not a sound escaping the tight line of his lips. And when he chose to stop past arm’s reach, Celes’ breath dragged in her chest like a dull knife.

For countless nights, she imagined this very meeting. Setzer embraced her with a grin in those fantasies and Celes returned the gesture in kind. Sweet nothings passed through their ears until they forgot why they parted paths to begin with. She should have known better than to lose herself to delusions of grandeur.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Setzer murmured.

Celes lengthened her spine upon inhalation. “And yet here I am.”

“How did you... there are guards hounding people for—”

“Maria helped me.”

She thought he broke out into a smile, albeit briefly. “Oh. I see.... My apologies, then.”

“It’s fine. What’s done is done.”

He said nothing. Neither did Celes. The music persisted along with the trill of a seasoned tenor. Setzer stepped backwards. Celes’ lips trembled and eyes fluttered.

“What are you doing here, Celes?” he finally asked.

She furrowed her brow. “Isn’t it obvious?”
“Is it?”

A deep, forced breath filtered through her lungs. “You’re not exactly an easy man to find.”

“Wasn’t exactly hoping to be found,” he mused with a half-hearted crack of a chuckle. “So I can only assume I’m doing something right.”

He deserved to be slapped for that brazen tone. After everything they had been through together, this was how he welcomed her. Though as much as Celes yearned to strike his ego down, she longed to follow it up with a hard kiss. But this wasn’t a lover’s quarrel fit for a playbill; the Republic depended on Celes to deliver their compromise. Nothing more, nothing less.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” Setzer pressed on. “I should know my manners, but... I wasn’t expecting you.” He swallowed hard. “Ever.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Celes whispered to herself.

This was all a stupid, pathetic mistake.

Amidst her mental rebuke, Celes plucked out the letter from the inner folds of her jacket and extended it to Setzer. “I came on behalf of the Republic of the Free Lands to answer your message in regards to your plans for the Falcon.”

Setzer’s stare hardened, piercing through Celes instead of the parchment she presented. “You’re joking.”

Holding back her tongue, Celes remained frozen. He snatched the letter and turned towards the railing. Celes held her breath as Setzer carefully unfolded the meticulously scribed offer. His violet eyes twitched back and forth. The orchestra boomed its final fermata. The audience roared with applause. Setzer froze. Celes maintained her vigilance. A voice from the stage announced intermission and bright lights flooded the vast interior to fully reveal Setzer.

Five years had done little to age him. His hair swayed inches above his hips, just as long as Celes’, though more unruly. A new, signature jacket draped over his chair, predominantly black with white, gold, and purple trim. Setzer himself wore a variant of his old suit with a waistcoat added to the mix, brandished with gold chains and pins. A second, elaborate piercing dangled on his left earlobe and another small scar ran parallel to his jawline. Nothing else changed.

Setzer folded the letter back up, the motions calm and gradual. His eyes found hers, a grave expression weighing down his face.

“You and I need to talk,” he said.

“I could have told you that.”

“Not here.”

“Then where?”

Setzer was in the process of slipping his jacket back on with ease while moving to the door. “Somewhere else,” Setzer answered. “Besides, the performance was beginning to bore me. Impresario has been on this kick with trying different genres and it’s not exactly doing him any favors. Too light-hearted for my tastes. If anything, I suppose I should be thanking you for giving me a reason to leave.”
But his tone was more begrudging than indebted.

“Are you trying to mock me?” she tried not to growl out.

Setzer raised an eyebrow. “Celes, I couldn’t even if I wanted to.” He motioned for her to follow with the simple curl of his fingers.

Like a lost pet heeding its master, she complied without a second thought. Setzer opened the door for them, the hallways bustling with polite conversations about the opera. Some patrons recognized Setzer and tried to engage with him. With a few select words, he entertained them briefly before excusing himself. The crowds thickened all the way to the foyer; Celes kept an eye out for both Maria and Impresario, finding neither in the chaotic mix.

Both Celes and Setzer held their tongues throughout their escape from the opera house. Celes braced herself to resume the flow of conversation upon exiting the building. The cool breeze calmed her heated nerves and fewer bodies loitered on the steps—less eyes and ears soaking up a voyeuristic opportunity. But Setzer barreled onwards. Past him, Celes spotted the Falcon along their path.

“Is this really necessary?” Celes began. A private room would suffice, if not a quiet space outside.

She almost collided with Setzer as he spun on his heels to face her. “Is this really necessary?” He flailed the letter at Celes while a flash of anger lined his face.

Celes swallowed. “Depends who you ask in the Republic.”

Setzer scoffed and muttered something in Jidoorian, pivoting away to continue his march for the airship. Celes rushed to keep up, though her mind sped faster. There was more than mere business to discuss between the two of them, but the surface of Setzer’s emotions spoke volumes. Then again, his hurry to return to the Falcon was questionable; surely he wasn’t that eager to talk of a pathetic compromise.

Or perhaps he wished to speak of something else. Maybe there was a chance after all.

From afar, Celes recognized the distinct mix of metal and gears consisting of the Falcon, but once closer, it was an entirely different entity—a mixture of the best of the best that both the Blackjack and Falcon offered. Up the hatch and past several floors of engine rooms and visitor quarters, Setzer opened a door and Celes gasped.

Luxury draped the premise from the crystal chandeliers to the hardwood, marquetry floors. A smoky haze filled the vibrant room, as did spirited music and drunken laughter. Interspersed through it all were the shuffle of cards, the spin of roulette wheels, and the delightful clink of stacked chips being placed for a corner bet. The Blackjack was a ghost town when Celes first entered it; whatever images she had painted of the flying casino in its prime paled in comparison to the boisterous sight before her now.

Setzer’s initial letter had stated the Falcon was only beginning to open the doors to the public, though it didn’t appear to be at the beginning of anything. The seats filled, each patron emptying their pockets for drinks and gambling alike. If anyone back in the Republic deemed Setzer a lazy man for not earning his pay in life through strenuous labor, they were wrongly mistaken.

“You’ll have the excuse some of the appearances,” Setzer noted during their walk, stepping down into the middle of the sprawling gambling floor. “Still have some finishing touches to make.”

Celes scanned the area, unable to pinpoint even a single, crooked painting. While not as traditionally classy as the opera house’s renovations, the Falcon showcased far more luxury than it did in the
“Is this what you’ve been doing for the past five years?” Hostility lined her tongue as the words shot free, much to Celes’ dismay.

Setzer paused to consider her question. “Not quite. Perhaps two or three. Wasn’t keeping count.” He mingled with select individuals, much as he did in the opera house upon their exit, still weaving through the wandering crowds. Celes was keen to follow, wherever it was Setzer was taking her.

At the end was a deep alcove with an extensive window overlooking a grassy expanse. No one strayed far from any of the tables, more entranced with doubling their gil than peering out the windows, never mind peeking over to the Falcon’s owner alone with a strange woman. Celes inched into the alcove with Setzer, though kept her sights on the window.

“It’s lovely,” she offered. “The airship… or the casino, whatever you wish to call it. Both, I guess. Whatever the case, it’s impressive. I know plenty don’t agree with me when I say that this wouldn’t be detrimental, but if they could see first hand what a marvel this is, maybe then they—”

The abrupt rips of paper silenced Celes. She caught Setzer from the corner of her eyes tearing the letter to shreds. Once satisfied, he chucked the handful of parchment to the side like a burst of lackluster confetti. Celes blinked and Setzer leaned into the wall with crossed arms.

“And that is what I think of in regards to whatever control this Republic believes it has on me,” Setzer spat out. “Honestly, they could have signed it as Emperor Gestahl and I wouldn’t have doubted the authenticity.”

Her eyes drove ice through him. “So that’s it? No room for discussion or further developments?”

“Celes, you should know by now that I’m not keen on asking how high when people demand me to jump.”

“Then should I assume this conversation is over?” With no immediate response, Celes rolled her eyes and spun on her heels. “In that case, I’ll leave at once and let the Republic know of your decision.”

“I’m not stupid.”

His voice cast a spell over Celes; she ceased to leave and gradually turned to face him. Setzer had yet to flinch, those violet eyes haunting her.

“You and I both know why you’re here,” he continued, not a trace of amusement on his tongue, “and the fact you came under the guise of political business is admirable, albeit thin. So yes, that conversation is over, though I’d be shocked if you have nothing else to discuss.”

Whatever composed words she plotted out in her head, whatever calm strength she harnessed before stepping foot into the opera house vanished. Who stood before Setzer was not an Imperial General nor the Lady Consul, but a silly woman with a broken heart, still clutching the fragments together.

“Edgar told me you visited him not long ago,” Celes began. The subtle shift in Setzer’s posture was enough to assure the king spoke the truth. “And I know what you’re going to say: it was for business. Am I wrong?” He didn’t answer. “You left five years ago without a trace, only to return when it suited you. Was business all that filled your mind? Did you… not think of me? Did it not occur to you to find me instead of Edgar? He told you I was alive. Wasn’t that your initial fear? I lived and persevered more than either of us could have imagined. You must have heard the stories about the former Imperial nations bonding together with a newly formed government. For gods’ sake, even Maria knew.”
With her pause for breath, Setzer spoke. “I knew, yes. There’s been plenty of stories circulating about how an Imperial General is running the whole operation.”

“And?”

“And I chose to disbelieve whatever was told on the matter.”

Celes’ mouth hung open. “As opposed to what? Did you truly wish I was dead?”

“Celes, no—”

“Then what?!?” Her voice was a soft murmur before, but the gradual rise in both volume and intensity dared to rival with the ambiance of the casino. “What the hell could you possibly—”

“I was under the impression that maybe you had forgotten me and moved on,” Setzer explained with a firm tongue. “That things were better for you without someone coming into your life to mess it all up.”

She stared, part incredulous and part seething. “Forget you?” Celes scoffed and blinked back tears. “Why would I ever do that? How could I? After all we shared, after all we’ve been through, you expected me to forget? I tried to move on, but I learned all too quickly that nothing could fill that void. Not after the impression you left. If I had known where you had gone to, I would have tracked you down—”

“And give up your Republic?”

“I wouldn’t give them up just because I went out in search of something lost. I wasn’t the one who ran away due to cowardice.”

Setzer sucked in a long breath and narrowed his eyes onto her. “I won’t deny that. Yes, I was scared and maybe I should have gone with you to Maranda, but what of afterwards, hmm? Was I supposed to stand by and watch you flourish as a politician while I sat back and did… nothing? You were always destined for greatness, Celes. You’ve paved your own road and led people down it as a shining beacon. I’d rather fly off in hopes no one followed so I could live my damn life as I see fit. People like us… it doesn’t work.”

“Don’t say that,” she said with a crack in her voice and a shake of her head.

“Then what would people say if they knew this was more than a discussion over business dealings? What if they knew the Lady Consul was intimate with an unruly rogue, who did everything in his power to avoid the law? I can’t take you away with me and I certainly can’t clip my wings. Even if we came up with a compromise with each other, we’d be risking both of our reputations.”

“So you’d rather run away and forget about me? Forget about everything we ever had? Forget about whatever promises and fantasies we had about a future?” She closed her eyes, refusing to cry. “So I really was a brief dalliance just to tide the time before we faced our enemy.”

“No.”

As her eyes shot open, Setzer closed in on her. The emotions swirling in his eyes matched hers.

“Don’t say that,” Setzer lowered his voice, but never softened. “Don’t ever think it meant nothing to me. I made the mistake once of cherishing something so much that I couldn’t bear to part with it. I couldn’t gamble her, not if my life was at stake. But she died when I least expected it and I thought I swore off becoming attached to anything ever again. But then you came along. So witty, so fierce, so
untouchable. You changed my mind. But we don’t live in a perfect world, Celes. I knew what kind of woman you aspired to be and the kind of man I am doesn’t fit in that puzzle. I thought if I left, then I wouldn’t be putting your life at risk, for the idea of knowing you were alive and blossoming somewhere eased me more than the thought of putting you in danger.”

Somewhere behind his words was logic, even if it was a meager sliver. Celes never found it, lost in a self-induced rage boiling over.

“But you still left,” Celes reminded him. “You left me with nothing but a pathetic note to remember you by. And you thought I was going to take well to that? Every single day I hoped to catch a glimpse of your stupid airship while everyone assumed I loved to cloud gaze. I wanted you to come back. I needed to know that I still mattered. But you never came back. You just took off and did as you damn well pleased! None of us knew where you went! For all we knew, you had died in a crash, Setzer. But when you did come back, you turned to Edgar for selfish needs? You couldn’t bother searching for me?”

“Celes, I didn’t think you would have wanted—”

“I did want that!” she spat out with clenched fists. “Damn the Republic and damn everything I’ve done for the past five years! You could have taken me with you, you know. We could have—”

“You know damn well you would have been miserable in a matter of weeks, if not days. What were you going to do while I reestablished my business? Sit by and watch? And I know you did a lovely job on stage, but a life of entertaining isn’t suited for you.”

Celes scoffed. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Making all of this difficult! That’s all you’ve ever done since you came around. Gods, I came here all the way from New Vector and for what? I refuse to let my time be wasted, but you’ve been nothing but a reckless handful ever since the beginning. Why did you have to waltz into my life?!! Always being a nuisance, a pompous asshole, a complete waste of time. It was like it was always a joke to you. Did you just make it up as you went along?”

“Celes—”

A swift hand cracked across his face. Both her palm and his cheekbone alike burned.

“Why did I bother with you?! Why would I ever do that when you were just going to chew me up and spit me out?! You’re horrible! Just the worst!”

“Please—”

Setzer attempted to reach for her, but she flailed and pounded her fists into his chest.

“Don’t! Just don’t!” She glared at him. Setzer staggered backwards, yet Celes continued her attack. “Don’t act like you’re right and anything I’ve ever felt was wrong. I don’t want to be wrong! All this time I tried not to think of you, even from the start. How the hell was I supposed to when you kept looking at me and teasing me and—” Her fists slowed down despite her persistence. “I hated you for it! I hated you so much! I wished I had never met you, that we never asked for your help! I wanted you out of my life.” Her voice faltered and hands trembled against Setzer’s chest. Celes dropped her gaze. “Why do you have to be so unbearable? Why do you make me feel this way, even now?”

Celes snapped her eyes back to him. “Why does this have to be complicated? Why can’t you just let me in?”
Calm hands closed over hers as she quaked, though the anger burned in her eyes.

“I can’t stand you at times,” Celes uttered. She didn’t flinch when Setzer directed her to shift, her feet moving on their own. “I don’t know why I ever put up with you. But still—” Her back met with the other side of the alcove. Setzer slowly stepped into her. “—what I hate the most—” He kissed away the tears rolling down her face, the ones she refused to acknowledge. “—is that for all the times you made me angry, you’ve—” His nose nudged into hers. By then, Celes already closed her eyes. “—you’ve made me just as unbelievably happy.”

He tested the spaces between her fingers before pressing into her palms to pin her into the wall. His body brushed over hers with room to spare and his lips floated above hers. Joyous cheers broke out in celebration of a gambling victory, though all Celes registered was her erratic pulse and shallow breaths. She had forgotten how vibrant his violet eyes were or how delicate his eyelashes were each time he blinked or how both his last cigarette and drink marked his breath or how his hair turned pure white under certain lighting.

Her eyes flicked open in the stillness. They locked stares, just as they had before. Celes recounted those moments, each one another regret of not pursuing him sooner. Maybe they could have explored a disparate life together. They would never know now.

Setzer rested his forehead upon hers. “Celes,” he barely whispered, the movement alone almost enough to taste his lips again. “We... shouldn’t be doing this.”

The wrath within Celes agreed, but that rage was smothered for something else.

“Fuck you,” Celes uttered. “I don’t care what we should or shouldn’t be doing. That never stopped us before, so why the hell should it now? I didn’t come all the way out here from New Vector only to—”

Gentle lips coerced her into silence, yet she managed a coo and parted her lips for more.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She had forgotten what he tasted like, forgotten the caress of his lips, forgotten the sheer bliss when his tongue dipped into hers. Setzer consumed Celes and every quivering inch of her body begged for more.

“Is this....” He stepped into her, pinning her further to the wall and reminding Celes of the first instance he dared to do so with her. “Is this what you want?”

Celes was drunk off of his question. A thousand fantasies flooded her mind. Not enough time in the world existed for them to act out each one. Though they could start somewhere. She nodded into him, unable to part from his lips to vocalize her opinions.

He released her hands and they clung to each other. Celes threaded through his hair while he reacquainted himself with the curve of her back. Each trace of his fingers brought forth another purr. Their bodies crushed together, yet they clawed one another as if they fell apart—the very intoxication her memories and fantasies couldn’t live up to.

“Please,” Celes pleaded quietly along his lips, “don’t let me go. Don’t walk away. Just let me in.” A small gasp fluttered out as a tongue teased the edge of her lips. “Let me be yours again.”

The hard kiss was a sufficient answer, though as abruptly as Setzer initiated, he brought an end to it. Reeling back, he tossed cautious eyes outside of the alcove. Voices trickled in, belonging to a few gamblers strolling about, sipping pink liquid, and discussing drunken nonsense. They passed without a care in the world, though opted to loiter nearby.

Setzer sighed and stepped back, but Celes latched onto the lapels of his jacket. When his gaze returned to her, she recognized the devious glimmer there. Rigid fingertips caressed the soft patch of skin by her thumb.

“Perhaps we should continue our negotiations elsewhere?” he said, his voice nothing but a beguiling timbre.

“What negotiations?”

A soft chuckle escaped him, as did a sly smirk. “The ones you wished the discuss? You came here all the way from New Vector, if I recall correctly.” He extended a hand to Celes. “I’d hate for it all to go to waste.”

There was no reason for them to be doing this. Setzer said so himself. Then again, they shouldn’t have done so many things, yet they persisted and found themselves not in shambles in the aftermath. How was now any different? Thus Celes gave Setzer her hand and he cradled it with utmost care.

Back through the gambling hall, Setzer guided her to the opposite end. He caught a worker’s attention before reaching the small staircase. “If anyone’s to be looking for me for the remainder of the evening,” he said in passing, “tell them I’ll be busy until morning.”

His word wasn’t challenged, but accepted with a grave bow. Before Celes questioned him further, they scaled the stairs and returned to a familiar location.
At one point, she had lounged on the couches in the foyer while the others peered over the railing above to drown out the boredom and dread with hopeful dreams. What had once been a harsh, unwelcoming atmosphere was transformed by Jidoor’s finest aesthetics. New couches, tables, and rugs furnished the area. Even the artwork was a refreshing addition. It exceeded at being suitable for entertaining lavish guests, but the room resembled more of a museum—untouched, barren, and sterile.

Celes released his hand to better examine her surroundings. “You really redid everything, didn’t you?” She could see him now, slaving over the minute details along with refashioning the original sections of the Falcon for his own personal use. “I see you’ve been at least living comfortably while —”

She paid no attention to the rushed feet behind her or the hands upon her waist. Celes’ back crashed into Setzer. She stumbled and gasped, thankful to not lose balance. His hands traversed the curves of her body. Velvety lips found a home along her jawline. Needy, desperate touches, none of them prompting Celes to question his intentions. Her own hands darted backwards to grasp him, content with whatever she touched.

Hot breath tickled her ear, accompanied by a tongue to trace her lobe. Celes shivered while Setzer diligently undid the buttons of her jacket. To her surprise, none of them were ripped from their threads. Not yet. With a contained alacrity, he peeled the jacket from her body. Anywhere else and the slight chill of the room would have bothered Celes; for now, her body was aflame.

His moan flowed through her, one hand releasing her blonde hair from its bun to tangle up in her locks and snap back. Celes yelped, her neck on display, yet his lips ghosted over her, as if tempted at first, but then distracted elsewhere.

“And what is this?”

That rich purr brought forth a whimper within Celes. She stilled her breath while he skimmed over the cincher. Perhaps if she and Maria crossed paths again, Celes would humble her with gratitude, for Setzer was literally grinning into her neck.

“This is new,” Setzer mused, tracing the laces. “Though you’re not wearing it right.”

Celes furrowed her brow and parted her lips. Before her thoughts came to life, he yanked the laces together to tighten the garment far more than his hold on her hair. Celes gulped down a labored breath, unsure of whether the reaction was due to the cincher or her arousal.

“Much better,” Setzer said after fastening the laces.

To emphasize his approval, he dove into her neck to inflict both tongue and teeth along flawless, pale skin. She gladly moaned for him, the corners of her lips curling up.

He released her hair and cupped her breasts through her blouse. Her hips tilted forward as he teased her with swift, intense pinches and pulls. Instead of removing her top, Setzer tugged down enough for her breasts to spill out. Once more he groped her, his hips rocking back into her.

“You’ve filled out quite nicely,” he said while rolling her nipples between his fingers. “I wonder if anyone else has bothered to notice. Well... how could they not? Even with all these pesky layers, I could tell what you were hiding underneath. And I must say....” He squeezed her breasts until she cried out. “I’m more than fond of it. Would love to see you in a dress, though I imagine you’d be practically spilling out of it. Not that I’d complain.”
“Like hell I’m wearing a dress again for you,” Celes whimpered out.

He snickered. “But I have admired that bite of yours far more.”

Another roll of his hips and another moan gushing from her mouth. *Damn these clothes separating us.* “You’re going to make me beg, aren’t you?”

“For what?”

She licked her lips. “You know what I mean.”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” he hissed, his hands on her akin to electricity. “Care to enlighten me?”

Five years without his touch or body or voice deprived Celes more than she wished to let on. Each time his hands barely contained her breasts, she swore her heart dared to burst forth. Every muscle threatened to snap from the never-ending tingles caused by those hands and that silver tongue.

Her breathless words flowed easier than anything else she had spoken that day. “Please, Setzer, you don’t need to play with me. I’ve needed this for too long—need you. Whatever you want, just... please, I can’t wait.”

Setzer nuzzled into her cheek. “You always were such a good girl.”

Celes turned in time for Setzer to claim her lips as his own. She relished the sharp bite lingering behind every nip, adding fuel to her already burning need.

After sucking hard on her upper lip, Setzer’s displeased hum fell upon her mouth. “But *this*?” His fingers lined the top of her pants. “I don’t approve of this.”

Parting her lips to offer a half-hearted response, Celes flashed her eyes wide and gasped. Setzer dragged her by the waist to the closest, most stable surface. She connected with a table purposed more like a desk with its various books, glasses, parchments, ice bucket, and other trinkets. All the while, Setzer busied himself by forcing her pants off.

“You keep wearing these contraptions,” he moaned into her neck, “and they’re not exactly the most convenient invention in the world.”

“You wear them yourself,” she retorted.

“I stand correct: not the most convenient item when you’re trying to fuck a gorgeous woman who waltzed back into your life like a dream.”

As his hands hurried to rid her of the garment, he inevitably fumbled and muttered a curse. Celes couldn’t help but smirk.

“What’s wrong?” she said and wiggled her hips. Those tiny, yet frustrated groans of Setzer’s delighted Celes. “Too complicated for you?”

“*Hush.*”

“You can work complex machinery like an airship, yet you’re bested by a pair of—”

Setzer’s flat hand smacked her rear and her words morphed into a sharp cry. The crack of the impact rivaled her own voice. She immediately doubled over and sprawled her arms out to brace herself against the table. The waist cincher pinched her figure, further complicating the need to breathe.
“I wasn’t asking for your opinion,” Setzer stated. “Do you understand?”

She didn’t reply quick enough for his liking—another slap crashed into her body and another yelp jutted out. Celes bit her lip and withheld her response, just to experience it one more time. That delicious sting surged through her until she moaned.

_Gods, how I’ve missed this._

“You little slut,” Setzer growled into her ear, no longer concerned with removing her pants. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Celes nodded, too busy panting to say otherwise. His hand rubbed along the curve of her posterior and left Celes waiting.

“Do you want more?”

“Yes,” she whimpered out, lacking strength. Before Setzer could instruct her further, Celes yelled out, “Please! I want more!”

His hand ceased stroking, the anticipation electrifying her. A mixture of her deep breaths and rapid heartbeats clogged her ears.

Hissing in air, Celes tried again. “For fuck’s sake, Setzer, please—”

Another cry cracked out of her gaping mouth. Past the initial throb of the strike, nothing but decadent warmth washed over her. She gave into moans and whimpers, solid arms bracing the table for impact with each round of spanking. Searing heat pulsed through the right side of her lower body, the pain mixing well with her arousal. The attention touched her beyond a physical level; it was as if Setzer stroked past her many layers and brushed along her heart.

“You,” his voice rang through her again, still spanking, still displaying no mercy, “are such a good girl.”

Nothing but a ragged gasp gushed out of Celes when Setzer tugged her upright. She spun in place until she faced him, until his lips crushed against hers. Her hands bolted to his chest; she restrained herself from tearing off the damn jacket he still wore. To Celes’ delight, Setzer pulled back long enough to shrug it off. There were far more layers needing to join the jacket on the floor, but Setzer distracted Celes with sitting her on the edge of the table.

Celes had been a fool not to brace herself again. The moment he situated Celes upon her new perch, those hands upon her hips jerked at her pants in hopes to remove them. She stumbled backwards, startled breaths caught in her throat. Pawing for stability, Celes knocked into various glasses and trinkets. Some toppled and fell off the table, thankfully cushioned by a rug below. Those items burrowing into her back added a new flavor to the mix, but none compared to the ice bucket toppling over.

The frozen cubes scattered across the table, several nestling into her arm to instill goosebumps down to her toes. Celes whimpered and dug her teeth into her lip. Setzer finally ripped the pants off and chucked them elsewhere, leaving her clad in her boots and top. Once done, he paused and stared, a smirk gradually formed on his lips.

“Look at you shivering,” Setzer said. “And I’ve barely touched you.” Though when Celes shifted away from the ice cubes, his eyes darted to the spilled bucket.

“I-I’m sorry,” she uttered. No doubt there would be water damage to the books once the cubes
melted. “I didn’t mean to—”

But Setzer scooped up a single cube and pressed it into her lips. Despite her gasps and shudders, he didn’t back away.

“Shhh,” he cooed. “I nearly forgot that you’re vulnerable to the cold now.” He forced the ice further onto her lips and Celes whimpered. “How does it feel to experience something new?”

She breathed easier when he removed the ice cube, though her discomfort transformed into moans when Setzer licked her lips. He consumed the traces of melted ice before darting his tongue into her mouth. Moans spilled forth from both of them. Celes eased into him, only to have Setzer retreat. The ice cube replaced his lips and once more she squirmed and whined. It was when he ducked back in to lap where the ice lingered for a second time that Celes comprehended the new game.

It didn’t end when the ice fully melted. Setzer acquired another one sitting on the table and teased her once more with the sharp, chilling sensation. The next cube pressed into one of her nipples, already stiff from anticipation. Again he removed the ice to please her with a warm tongue and mouth. Again he pulled away before Celes could express delight. Even when she expected the cold to kiss her vulnerable skin, a tiny cry cracked out of Celes and encouraged Setzer to not stop.

The ice slid across her other breast before tantalizing her neck. The tingle of ice on exposed skin was a treat in of itself. By the time Setzer plucked the last, fully formed ice cube and parted her legs, Celes fantasized a thousand times of the ice’s next venture, along with his tongue.

The biting cold eased into her clit. Celes flinched, only to have Setzer nail his spare hand into her thigh. The longer she awaited his tongue to replace the chill, the longer Setzer drew out the moment. She suppressed a trembling gasp and he simply smirked.

The ice outright melted before Setzer retracted his hand. Celes steadied her breaths, paying no attention as he repositioned himself, a hand on each thigh and lips brushing along her slit. This time, Setzer was quick to lick up the melted remains. Celes closed her eyes and clung to the back of his head. The sweet sounds flowed past parted lips as she drank in every flick of his tongue, every exaggerated lick washing waves of welcomed chills throughout her body.

And he was more than welcome to stay and finish her off, maybe ease a finger inside of her. Celes contemplated within her lusty haze to beg for just that as Setzer returned to standing. Ravenous eyes pierced her. Both gulped down air, the unspoken words swallowed with it. When he shifted Celes the edge of the table, she yearned for more than his fingers pumping inside of her.

In a fluid motion, Celes clung at his shirt collar while Setzer darted to his belt. Both fumbled and hesitated intermittently like two lovers sharing each other for the first time. Celes reacquainted herself with his body with one hand while the other hand tugged the intricate buttons of his top, not caring for the few which popped free from their threads.

She ceased ripping apart clothing to sink both hands into his chest. Faded scars met with her soft, yet firm hands. Those wounds were scattered like stars in the sky—she waited so long to be this close again.

A frustrated sigh gushed out of Setzer. He snatched one of her hands and directed it elsewhere. Celes didn’t complain as his erection slid against her palm.

His forehead fell upon hers and Setzer lost himself to a string of moans. “Do you know,” he breathed out, “how many countless nights I spent trying to mimic your touch?”
Celes tightened her grip around him, still marveling at how well he reacted to her hand alone; his hips moved with her and his moans intoxicated the air around them.

“You’re not the only one who tried,” she confessed.

Setzer grinned. “What did you think about?”

“What didn’t I think about?” she teased. “Mostly about you giving me a new reason to scream out your name.”

“Wouldn’t expect any less from a perfectly good slut such as yourself.” Setzer caught her lips with his, their kiss hard, but brief. “And did you scream?”

“Not nearly loud enough for your liking.”

“Well then... we should work on that.”

A hand rested on the small of her back. Celes settled both hands onto his shoulders while spreading her legs. No need to beg or prove she was ready. Setzer wasted little time in filling the space between them and sank deep into her body.

True to his word, Setzer gave her plenty of reason to cry out.

Her nails clawed his back and her legs wrapped tight around him. A mess of silver and pale gold hair fell before their faces. Neither kindness or gentleness flowed through their actions. If her legs weren’t out of commission afterwards, Setzer wasn’t doing a damn thing right. This, she knew, was right.

Something relentless and carnal, completely drunk off of one another’s arousal while simultaneously feeding each other’s lust.

“Is this what you wanted?” Setzer hissed. “Is this what you came all the way out here for?” Lost in the moment, Celes hummed back and nodded. His breathless chuckle teased her lips. “Did the Republic think if you offered yourself to me that I’d change my mind?”

Had he not been busy trying to split her in two, Celes would have reacted differently. “No,” she moaned back, “they don’t know I’m doing this.”

Setzer groaned into her neck, sinking his teeth in long enough to coax a yelp out of Celes. “If only they knew how dirty your mind is….” Celes didn’t struggle when he grasped her shoulders and pinned her back along the table to loom above. “Always been such a sly little minx.” He grinned into her lips. “I wish all my negotiations were settled like this.”

“Are we still negotiating?”

“We can be,” he replied before opening his mouth to hers.

Despite the pain from the random objects lodged into her back, despite the discomfort from readjusting to each other’s bodies, despite the table cracking out threats of collapsing beneath them, and despite knowing the sex couldn’t last forever, Celes succumbed to the sweet euphoria in between all of it. After five years of hollow relations with fleeting strangers, Celes submitted once more to Setzer and he tended to the fire ignored in his absence.

But his movements slowed down and his groans heightened upon achieving his peak before her. Celes relished the sight of him coming undone, though her body ached with something new when he ceased his brutal thrusts.
He kissed her neck and collarbone, the sensation too soft for her liking. Her hand ran through his hair and gripped on tight, snapping his head back from her. Setzer whimpered and flashed his eyes open. A combination of discomfort and intrigue resided in his features.

“I wasn’t done,” Celes growled.

He licked his lips. “You’ll have to forgive me for—”

“I don’t want your excuses.”

Celes released his hair and pulled a knee to her chest to lift up his chin with the toe of her boot. Setzer froze, eyes on hers, and awaited her next order. The familiar power rushed through her veins; once more she was a superior officer with an eager soldier at her command. Though this soldier was also disobedient.

“Sit.”

Drawing her leg back, Celes slammed the heel of her boot square into his chest, enough of a force to startle Setzer backwards. Her aim hadn’t been perfect, but he still collided into the arm of the couch not far away and collapsed into the cushions, albeit clumsily. As he recuperated, Celes touched to the floor and stabilized her near-gelatinous legs.

“You’re a rather shitty negotiator if you don’t even let the interested party finish their side of the fun,” Celes spoke coldly. She spotted Setzer shivering from her voice alone. Good. “You don’t exactly have me convinced.”

A hand dared to touch the inside of her thigh. “I could convince you,” Setzer said.

Celes smacked it away on instinct, the swift crack akin to her prior spanking. She suppressed the coo she wished to utter from the delightful sting in her palm.

“If you want to convince me, why don’t you shut up.” At first, Celes straddled him, only to realize they required time and effort for Setzer to recover.

“Please,” Setzer whispered, “let me take care of you. Just you. I promise I’ll—”

A hand slapped over his mouth and pinned his head against the arm of the couch. Nails sunk into the side of his face. He whimpered into her palm, but those eyes nearly smiled at her.

“Didn’t I just tell you to shut up? Did I not make myself clear?” Celes loomed above, hips grinding into his as her hair cascaded over her shoulders. “I didn’t come all the way out here from fucking New Vector to have you get me off with your fingers. If I’m going to come, it’s going to be while using you for my own fun, do you understand?”

Setzer nodded before she even finished the sentence.

Her lips curled up. “Good boy.” She removed her hand from his mouth, leaving a single finger pressed into those lips. “The only words I want coming out of your mouth are either moans or addressing me with a yes or no ma’am. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he moaned out softly.

The sight of Setzer lying back with a coy expression left Celes momentarily quivering. She couldn’t discern which she loved more: being submissive or dominant. For now, she was sure to relish torturing him for believing it was a brilliant idea to finish before her.
“If you keep being a good boy,” Celes murmured, “I’ll need to give you a new pet name as a reward. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

After Setzer nodded, she traced the outline of his lips with her thumb. His panting alone entranced Celes. It tempted her to prolong the moment, though sharp jolts stung her body and begged for release. Nails scrapped down his neck and raked across his chest. Setzer hitched his breath as long, red marks surfaced with tiny sections of broken skin with speckles of fresh blood. Setzer failed to stifle his moans and restrain his body. Celes smirked amongst it all.

Shifting down his body, Celes brushed her lips along his semi-stiff arousal. He was warm, though she desired the blistering heat from inside of her not long ago. Impatience toyed with Celes as she lapped up his length to coax him back to her liking. Each stroke of her tongue brought forth another sound from Setzer. The hand resting on the back of her head approved of her actions, but Celes seized his wrist and twisted his arm into a lock. She ignored his sharp yelps and waited for the limb to fall limp before releasing him.

Her tongue teased him, driving him to insanity each time her lips closed around him. When his desperate breaths pounded through the room, his hips established a steady rock into her, and his arousal throbbed in her mouth, Celes pulled back.

“Better,” she purred while licking her lips.

As she scurried back on top of him, Setzer shifted beneath to accommodate her. Celes braced a single hand upon his chest and in a smooth movement, she lowered herself onto him and exhaled out a content breath.

A selfish haze clouded her thoughts as her hips moved with utter abandon. Lost in an insatiable state, she slid her hands to his shoulders to ride him, despite her body protesting from recently being ravaged and the damn cincher still clutching her waist. She cursed between breaths, focusing on the jolts rushing within her thighs and surging into her core each time their hips met.

But her body struggled to maintain the vigorous rhythm. She never expected Setzer’s hands upon her hips to aid her movement. Everything else vanished. She focused on the thrum of her body and the elicit moans overflowing the airship.

“Harder,” she ordered.

And he sipped in sweet air before responding. “Yes, ma’am.”

Celes peeked behind her when Setzer shifted, noting the position of his booted feet planting into the couch for leverage. He thrust into her and held her in place each time he completely filled her. Celes inhaled abruptly, grasping for firmer ground to brace herself. She found it in the arm of the couch, the only immovable object in reach. And she smiled at how absolutely blissful the overwhelming passion was, a decadent sin turned into addiction with a single taste.

And yet she still begged for more.

His mouth closed over her breast and Celes didn’t complain, especially when he tugged at her nipples with teeth driving into the perky flesh. Her eyes glossed over and tears trickled down her cheeks. She cried out to no one but Setzer.

It was what left her tossing her head back, his name on her tongue within a shriek of ecstasy. Every muscle tightened, quivered, and released. An onslaught of sounds flooded from her parted lips. She struggled to move harder and faster in an attempt to intensify the sweet moment she yearned for. It
suspended upon a fleeting moment and died out. Sweat beaded along her trembling body. Celes feared if she released the couch, she would shatter into a million pieces.

Though when she collapsed, Setzer caught her. Warm, soft arms embraced her lifeless body. She twitched against him and reality blurred around her. A hand ran down her back and toyed with the laces to her cincher. Once he loosened the contraption, Celes sucked in fresh air. A moan laced within her exhale as she nestled into his chest. The beating of his heart greeted her ear.

“Better?”

Setzer stroked her head, fingertips tickling her face on and off. In time, she found the energy needed to respond.

“Yes,” she breathed out.

He kissed the top of her head, his words lost in her hair. “You’ve always been a good girl. So beautiful. I’m proud of you.” He emphasized with a squeeze. “Are you alright?” Celes barely nodded. “Do you need anything?”

Plenty of thoughts surfaced. She needed a bath after riding the chocobo in haste, let alone to wash off the aroma of sex seeping into her pores. Her stomach would growl in another hour and she imagined the Falcon was outfitted with a cooking staff to accommodate her hunger. The obvious answer was rest. After rising at a dreadful hour, Celes never stopped to relax until now.

But right then, Celes desired his hands on her body, reminding her that this was real. It meant more than all the faceless men she allowed to touch her.

“Stay,” she whispered into his neck. “Love me.”

She thought she imagined those words, that it lived in the depth of her mind and not in the small space between them. For even Maria confirmed that a dangerous, flawed man such as Setzer couldn’t admit out loud his own complex emotions.

Though when he tucked a hand beneath her chin, tilted her head back to greet her with an affectionate smile, and kissed her like the goddess she was to him, no words were needed.

She had a dream upon drifting off to sleep. Darkness encompassed Celes as soft lips caressed her temple. She purred, pawed through the shadows, and found his face to bestow a tired kiss. Their mouths consumed each other in passionate, yet gentle motions. Together they spun in the black space. Setzer had never been so gentle with her before, treasuring each second spent exploring her. As for Celes, she clung onto him, afraid he’d disappear if she loosened her grip.

Quiet pleas trickled out of Celes and Setzer responded with feather-light fingertips across her skin. Nothing but a ghost of a touch remained. Her voice caught in her throat as she cried out, arms empty and body starved for attention. She witnessed him fading into the shadows with a hint of a smile. Celes flailed in the darkness, catching nothing worth holding onto.

Once more she was alone. Misery replaced pleasure and Celes plummeted to her knees with clenched fists beating into her lap.
Before she could scream, Celes flinched and cracked open heavy lids.

The familiar fear gripped her as she jolted semi-upright. She winced as the recent bruises from their merciless, yet delightful session seeped into her bones. With a groan, Celes collapsed back into the couch.

She held her breath as a chuckle filled the room.

“Forget where you were?”

Pushing the matted mess that was her hair past her eyes, Celes found Setzer sitting at a table, clad in pants and boots and nothing more. He leaned back, legs crossed and lips quirked up.

“Forgive me,” Setzer said, “I didn’t wish to wake you. Seeing that you didn’t twitch when I slipped out from beneath you, I thought it was best to let the lady have her well-deserved rest.”

Celes yawned and stretched, wincing again, only to discover the waist cincher and her blouse still graced her body, albeit disheveled. “I could have done without the unpleasant dreams,” she muttered.

“That I’m afraid I can’t help with, though I do apologize. Is everything alright?”

After a pause, Celes met his gaze. “I had a dream that you left me.”

His lips faltered, but only briefly. “I assure you I’m still here,” he purred to her.

The way his eyes regarded her left Celes blushing and chewing her lip. One could get used to such charm. “That you are,” she replied.

“Can I get you anything?”

The change in topic left her tilting her head. “Um... you wouldn’t happen to have access to a hot bath at all, would you?”

To that, he grinned. “People come for more than gambling here. They also bask in the many spa features, which I can have ready for you.”

“That seems... a bit unnecessary—”

“Let me pamper you, Celes. It is but a fraction of what I wish to extend as an apology to you.”

She paused and blinked. Instead of questioning him, she rolled those words in her head and came to smile softly.

While Setzer departed to send word for a spa room to be prepared, Celes tore her cincher off to throw across the room. She searched the premise for her other boot that she apparently kicked off in the middle of the night. Upon discovering it behind the couch, of all places, Setzer returned and plodded back to her.

“A bath will be ready any moment for you now,” he said, eyes lingering over her mostly nude form. “I’m sad to inform you that your pants didn’t survive our... little session.”

Said pants were exactly what she was trying to track down and failed to do so. “Didn’t survive?” Celes asked.

“Damaged, I’m afraid,” Setzer elaborated. “I’ll be sure to replace them for you. I’d offer you a pair of my own in the meantime, but I don’t believe we’re the same size.”
Celes crossed her arms while his sights lingered on her pronounced thighs. She smirked and shook her head. “So long as I have something suitable before returning to New Vector.”

“Oh, you will.” His eyes returned to hers. “For now, I believe I prefer the sight of you without them.” Setzer stopped inches before Celes. “Maybe just wear my jacket and those boots….” Licking his lips, his voice dropped to a seductive rasp. “I could get used to that.”

He brushed over her neck before cupping her face. Celes already stepped into him as he leaned in to taste her lips. Their noses touched and a knock from the entry past the stairs.

Sighing, Setzer still managed a smirk. “That would be your escort to the bath. Here.” He stepped away to swipe a throw blanket from a nearby chair to drape around Celes. “I don’t mind if you walk down there naked, but I’d rather you be comfortable in your own skin.”

“Thank you,” Celes chuckled out and headed down the stairs to travel to the spa level of the Falcon.

The spa room designated for Celes made her bathroom in her Imperial officer quarters appear more like a closet. The grand space housed the largest bath she had ever seen. More than four people could soak in that bath along with room for personal massages and other treatments. The worker who guided her to the room poured various oils and salts into the steaming water. She even wrote down a request for breakfast, all personalized for Celes’ preferences. Once the worker closed the door behind her upon leaving, Celes stood in the cozy room with nothing but the dozens of candlelights keeping her company.

Vanilla and lavender soaked in both the water and air. Celes rid herself of the throw blanket and blouse to ease into the warm water. It flooded her with a sense of relief as she submerged. She reclined in the tub, leisurely plucking the nearby, complimentary toiletries to wash up. Every aching muscle calmed, though knowing Setzer was behind the divine experience brought forth a smile.

The worker returned with freshly baked brioche, jams, juice, and a pot of coffee. There was, however, an item Celes didn’t request, but she withheld her amusement upon recognizing the scent coming from the steeping tea.

Celes lazily soaked in the bath while munching until her angry stomach ceased growling. In time, she reluctantly retreated from the lovely water to dry off and make herself presentable. She lathered rich body butters over her skin and combed floral oils through her hair. Once done trying out the few offerings in the room, she found a plush bathrobe to curl up inside and retraced her steps back to the former foyer.

The rest of the Falcon was sound asleep, but a familiar rumble vibrated beneath Celes’ bare feet. She smiled. He must be flying.

Upon returning, Setzer was nowhere to be found, much to Celes’ speculation. She disrobed and slipped back into her boots, then paused. Her riding jacket was folded up on a seat cushion, but Setzer’s jacket sprawled over the arm of the chair, as if waiting for her. His suggestion echoed in her head and Celes took great care in wearing his jacket. While buttoning it up, she stopped only to inhale the decadent scent soaked into the fabrics. Celes cooed and nuzzled further into it.

The Falcon might have received extensive renovations, but the aspects Celes was familiar with remained untouched. She scaled up the steps leading to the upper deck and cracked open the door.

A misty blue hue swallowed the world up in the ephemeral time before dawn. Stretches of land rolled by below as the Falcon cruised through the skies. And there at the helm was the pilot himself, donning everything but his jacket.
The heavy jacket provided enough warmth where magic once had, though the bite of a breeze still chilled her cheeks. Celes approached Setzer, the wind playing with his low ponytail. Even through the wind and churning gears, he picked up on Celes’ footsteps and peered over his shoulder before she reached him.

“Well, well,” he called out with a grin. “Wasn’t expecting you to be braving the outdoors at such an hour.” His eyes ran over her, lingering at the patches of skin peeking out past his jacket. “Was the bath to your liking?”

“As was the breakfast,” Celes said, nodding her thanks. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Too late to take it back now. I can only imagine after the ride you had that some relaxation was in order.”

“Well, I was determined to arrive at the opera house promptly, though the poor chocobo was more exhausted than I was.”

Setzer blinked, then smirked. “I wasn’t speaking of your chocobo ride, ma cherie.”

Celes blushed furiously. “Oh.... Oh. Right.”

Her flustered state left Setzer laughing. “You still are so easy to tease.” He snaked an arm around her waist and eased her into him. A kiss landed on her cheek. “How are you fairing?”

She clung onto Setzer, cheek resting upon his shoulder as she stared out to the horizon. “Quite well.” A beat passed. “You?”

Setzer drew out a hum. “Never felt better.”

A soft smile tugged at her lips as she stayed by his side. Setzer continued to pilot single-handedly. Where he was headed, Celes didn’t know, nor did she care.

“You know,” Celes muttered, “you can’t keep showering me with baths each time I’m upset with you.”

“No,” Setzer agreed, though a playful tone flavored his words, “but there are massages and body wraps and I can’t speak highly enough of manicures and pedicures.”

She whacked him, for old time’s sake. They chuckled together, but once their amusement died out, Celes drew in a deep breath. “I... need to know where we stand, Setzer.”

“I suppose pointing out that we’re on an airship won’t count.”

“You know what I mean.”

After a pause, he sighed. “I know quite well what you speak of.”

More silence, but at least he never loosened his hold of her.

“It’s been lonely up here,” Setzer confessed. “With everyone gone, you could nearly hear a pin drop from the other side of the engine room. I’d spent months flying alone. Every time I headed downstairs, I expected familiar faces and found nothing. I... couldn’t go with you, Celes. I couldn’t bear the thought of watching you die, even if I knew Lady Luck blessed you from the beginning.

Some games you simply don’t wager on and I was content with folding before anyone showed their hand. I knew you’d fight me if I told you what I was doing, thus I left when you were still basking in
bliss.”

“Don’t you ever do that again,” Celes growled.

“Ma cherie,” he said, those words cradled with a gentle tongue, “if only I could rewrite history to ease your pain... but I cannot. I don’t expect you to forgive me or even take my word that I’ll never leave you again. I can only hope to be nothing less than a gentleman to you until you tire of me. Truly, I am sorry.”

Celes thought over his apology and nestled deeper into him. “Did you... what did you do when Darill disappeared?”

“Looked to the horizon every sunset until fear pushed me to track her down,” he responded in an instant.

“Then why didn’t you look for me?”

“Because I feared I’d find yet another corpse of a brilliant woman I admired.”

Her heart broke when he uttered those genuine words.

“I know I needed space,” Setzer continued. “I convinced myself it was to clear my head, but it didn’t dull the pain. Even when I focused my efforts on reconstructing the Falcon into what the Blackjack once was or even lending money to Impresario for the opera house—”

“You gave him money?”

Setzer nodded. “And he still owes me. Probably will for the rest of his life.” He chuckled. “Rather nice to have someone else owe you for a change of pace. But regardless, no amount of money or material possessions shifted my train of thought.” The hesitation in his voice rang clear. “I should have gone after you, Celes. Is that stupid of me to say now?”

Celes eventually shook her head against him. “I would have welcomed you.”

“After smacking some sense into me, I imagine.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Gods, I truly sound pathetic, don’t I? Like I’m some dramatic protagonist in an opera singing for fifteen minutes of how desperate I am to reunite with a certain lady.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“No, I suppose not.” He embraced Celes tighter, lips pressed into the top of her head. “Though cowardice doesn’t exactly fit a leading role. The white knight characters never interested me; I’ve always been more of a fan of the scoundrel who goes along with the plot for the sake of riches and the lady.”

“Nothing for glory?”

Setzer almost choked on his own spit. “Oh, please, don’t make me laugh! Do you know how difficult it’s been with people recognizing me now? ‘Oh, aren’t you the one who helped save the world from destruction?’” Annoyance filled his heavy sigh. “Gods, it’s been a nightmare. I was the laughing stock of Jidoor for some time. Setzer Gabbiani: full-time gambler and part-time slayer of evil and bringer of justice. Inquire within. Yes, that does wonders with my reputation.” His fingers
jabbed into her waist. "You’re lucky you’re as beautiful as you are or else I would’ve left you all behind in Vector."

Celes glared at him and Setzer laughed. "I’m glad you didn’t.” She kissed the corner of his mouth. "And I’m glad you’re still around. And alive.”

His violet eyes glowed before her. “As am I, ma cherie. As am I.”

Another bout of silence washed over them. The sun had yet to creep over the horizon, but the skies warmed with the promise of light. Not once did Setzer loosen his hold on Celes.

“I want this to work out,” he said at one point. “Whatever this is between us... but I don’t know how.”

“We’ll make it work,” Celes said.

But he shook his head and scoffed. “You’re a politician now and I’m still a businessman with a penchant for sin. Don’t you get it? This is what I meant when I said we would forever be living separate lives. I’m not made for your world and neither are you suited for mine.”

“And yet here we are,” Celes shot back.

“And yet here we are,” Setzer hummed, stroking her side. “But your Republic would rather I’d be hanged than come within the vicinity of their docks. To make matters worse, their laundry list of rules to abide by are no better than a Jidoorian parent’s expecting their four-year-old to behave like a well-groomed adult. And people wondered why I avoided the Empire when I did. I wasn’t joking when I said it was bad for business.” Setzer raised an eyebrow. “They will find out about us and they will not like it.”

“If they find out.”

“I can guarantee they will. Need I remind you that we don’t exactly have a glowing record of being secretive together.”

“Then I suppose we’ll have to do our best and see what happens.”

Setzer flashed a wry smile. “It would destroy your reputation. The second they have proof you’re fooling around with the one thing they want to keep in check, they’ll turn against you. I’ve seen what gossip and politics do to people; Jidoor taught me well in that regard. I’m not the sort of man who should be by your side. You’d deserve a proper man, one who’s not piloting a flying haven catering to every sin known to man.”

Ignoring every damn word he uttered, Celes cupped his cheek and forced a deep kiss upon those blabbering lips. “Damn it, Setzer,” she murmured, eyes locked with his, “do I need to write it in the stars for you? I don’t want anyone else. I spent the past five years getting by with mere memories of you. I tried to move on, but it wasn’t you. None of those boys would ever compare to you. And I didn’t come all the way out here to say hello and be on my way. Yes, I’m aware of the damn risks that come with fooling around with you, but the thought of ending all of this... ending what we have together...” She shook her head. “I can’t. I won’t. I’d rather you be my dirty secret than not have you at all. So fuck them. Let them talk if that’s what they desire. No one was ever going to understand us, anyways.”

They didn’t break stares for some time, the wind flowing between them. Eventually, Setzer turned away with a smirk, releasing his hand from the wheel to sink teeth into his fist. Shaky inhales and exhales flowed through him.
“Fuck,” he uttered upon returning his hand to a spoke. “By the gods, you do not make this easy.” He flicked his eyes to Celes. “But you like it that way, don’t you?”

The way he purred those final words left Celes licking her lips. “You always knew how to set me off, for better and for worse.”

He snickered. “So... a forbidden affair. How appropriate. Gods know there are dozens of operas built around the very premise. Can’t say I’ve fooled around with an upstanding citizen of society like that before, though I have charmed a former Imperial General, so I can’t imagine it’s that difficult. Even kidnapped her once upon a time, too.”

Celes tried not to roll her eyes when he winked. “So long as you don’t have me wearing a dress again.”

“Only if I get to watch you tear it to shreds this time.”

Celes whacked his arm, albeit laughing alongside him. “You still owe me, anyways.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Do I? What debt is this you speak of?”

“I believe we once discussed a game of throwing knives some time ago.” She nuzzled into his neck. “Or have you forgotten?”

His violet eyes shot wide open, matched with a devilish grin. “Oh,” he moaned, “you mean that. Now I remember. Ah, ma cherie, I would be honored to entertain you with such a gamble. Though I must say, if we are to continue down that path, it would be best if we made it more... well, official.”

“What do you mean?”

“A contract of sorts, naturally. Outline all the details, make sure we agree what we’re signing up for. Establish roles, limits, and whatever else we feel needs to be in writing.”

“Is it... common to have one?”

“Darill and I had a contract. Same with Maria. Only when our sessions became more of a regular occurrence.” He kissed her cheek. “I’d very much love that with you.”

“If we’re already sneaking around, might as well go all out.”

Setzer laughed at her boldness. “My, my! I believe I’ve been rubbing off on you. Though truth be told, it gives me more reason to outfit some of the spare rooms below to our liking. Not that I didn’t like you spread out on the table from the other night, but you deserve a playroom.” He moaned, drawing circles into her side. “And outfits and toys to match.”

Celes squirmed against him. “That... would be delightful.” She paused. “Though if I win that game of throwing knives, I fully expect you to be in similar outfits.”

She couldn’t recall a time when Setzer blushed as hard as he did before her. “Is that all you have in mind?”

“No.”

“And?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”
Setzer breathed out several foreign words. “Ma cherie, don’t be such a tease. You’ll spoil me.”

“And yet you spoil me.”

“How can I not? A woman such as yourself? Hard not to be distracted.”

“Even now?”

Setzer kissed her forehead. “Always.”

After a moment, Celes kissed Setzer’s jaw and withdrew from his embrace. Setzer focused on piloting the Falcon and Celes meandered the upper deck to bask in the view she secretly longed to gaze upon again. By the bow of the airship, the sun gradual ascended into the waking world. The bright rays blinded and warmed her. Steady hands rested on the railing of the bow. Celes ignored the chill living in the metal for her mind was elsewhere. A similar light had engulfed her before, along with hundreds of eyes waiting for her. Only one pair of eyes watched her now—the ones that mattered.

The one she made another promise to.

With her head up high, Celes inhaled deep and projected her voice, the lyrics flowing from her lips like she was center stage.

Oh my hero, my beloved
Shall we still be made to part
The promises of perennial love
Yet sing here in my heart
I’m the darkness, you’re the starlight
Shining brightly from afar
Through hours of despair, I offer this prayer
To you, my evening star

Her voice wasn’t as magnificent as Maria’s, nor was her stage presence demanding the entire world to revel in her, but empathy guided every word. Celes continued the aria, glancing over her shoulder to find Setzer stalling the Falcon to allow his undivided attention to fall upon her. Smiling to herself, she gazed back out to the horizon and finished the melody.

No one applauded. No stagehands awaited her to dart backstage and prepare for the next scene. Instead, a warm embrace captured her from behind and a tender kiss grazed her neck.

“You remembered,” Setzer murmured. “I swore you had forgotten.”

She leaned into him, clinging onto his arms while smiling. “I couldn’t even if I tried. I know I’m no opera singer—”
“Please, you’re more than I ever asked for. My mind might have been on Maria when I first met you, but since that little wager of yours, I never stopped thinking about you.” Then he chuckled. “I almost feel obliged to challenge you to a bet right now for nostalgia’s sake.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you. Dare I ask what you have in mind?”

“A coin toss,” Setzer offered. “Fitting, is it not? Let’s say that if I win we’ll have ourselves a little detour before returning to the Republic of the Free Lands. You can be my honored guest on board the Falcon, though I’d only return you until I had my fun with you.”

“But you would return me, yes?” Celes emphasized.

“But of course! Eventually, anyways. Besides, my original intent with Maria was to bring her back. I’m not that terrible.”

Celes mulled the gamble over in her head. “And what type of fun did you have in mind?”

His voice dropped to a decadent whisper along her ear. “Something that involved binding you, gagging you, depriving you of nearly every sense... then test to see where your peak pain tolerance lies.”

Swallowing hard, Celes nodded. “And if I win?”

“You can have whatever it is you desire. Those are always the terms, are they not? So what would the lady desire?”

Celes chewed her lip, then craned her head back to eye him. “If I win, we return immediately to the Republic of the Free Lands.”

“But of course,” Setzer replied, albeit defeated. “Anything you—”

“And when we arrive, you won’t be allowed to return to the Falcon until I have my fun with you.”

His face fell flat, but then his eyes were colored with intrigue. “What sort of fun?” he asked cautiously.

“The sort that allows me to see where your pain tolerance lies.”

He visibly trembled and Celes bit back a grin.

“Then it’s settled,” Setzer said. “Heads if I win and tails if you win. Only fair enough, seeing you picked heads last time. And tricked me.”

“I don’t hear you complaining.”

Celes patted her pockets for a bit of gil, only to remember she donned Setzer’s jacket with her own folded neatly down below. It didn’t matter; Setzer procured a coin from thin air, or so it seemed.

“So,” Setzer said, “do we have a deal?”

Celes squinted at the coin in between his fingers. “Let me see that.”

She lunged out to snatch the gil and Setzer jerked his hand away. “Oh, what’s this now? Do you not trust me? Ma chérie, may I remind you that even I didn’t ask to check your silly coin back when you challenged me. I think it’s only fair that you don’t check either. For the sake of nostalgia, no?”
It pained her that he had a point. It always had. Still, she held her breath when she caught the slightest glimpse of one side of the gil.

“Is it a deal?” Setzer asked once more.

Through her chaotic mind, she found her answer as clear as day. “It’s a deal.”

A grin flashed across Setzer’s lips. He tossed the coin with a flick of his thumb, the metal glinting in the rising sun.

Chapter End Notes

This started years ago in my head during college, a mere “what if” which revolved around Celes and Setzer both having feelings for each other and not knowing how to express said sentiments. It was pure escapism on my end (isn’t all fiction, though?) to ease the stress of my then-studies along with filling the hole that was the utter lack of content for this ship. But the oneshot expanded into the aftermath of said scene and I speculated on what happened that led up to the initial scene I planned. My thoughts were everywhere, but in the end, I never wrote it back then, partly because college happened, but mostly because I was afraid no one would give a shit for a novel-length fic on a rarepair for a small/old/semi-active fandom.

Even when I decided to write this for NaNo 2014 purely for myself and figured out which plot holes to fill in within the canon, predominately the choice to make Maria’s kidnapping a planned, consensual BDSM play and thus shifting the entire tone of the plot, I stopped multiple times to ask myself—who the fuck is going to read this? Are people going to see the BDSM tags and disregard it as a shameless, plotless kink fic? Am I wasting my time?

For whatever reason, I kept writing and editing. And what started as my desire to make Celes/Setzer content for this fandom where they eventually banged turned into a story of discovery and liberation for a young woman who never had a chance to do so in canon, along with learning to trust and communicate with someone so deeply that it only strengthened their bond, because imo, no matter the relationship—vanilla or otherwise—those elements are key.

And I’m so glad I revisited this idea and breathed life to it.

Thank you to my local NaNo group, who not only supported my dive into fanfiction writing, but have always been fellow partners-in-crime for the ridiculousness that is writing.

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And last, but by far not least, to everyone who is reading this right now—thank you. Whether you were here from the beginning or jumped in towards the end, whether you commented every chapter, only once, or never at all. Whether you reblogged a tumblr post of mine or saw it by chance. Every last one of you—THANK YOU. I literally thought maybe two people would give half a shit about this story. The amount of feedback I’ve gotten from people, either in words or kudos, means the world to me. All of you proved me wrong in the best way possible. This story is for all of you.

Thank you. A million times—thank you. It's bittersweet knowing all the time and effort poured into this has come to an end, but better to come to an end than to have never started in the first place. It's been a crazy journey; thank you all for sticking around for it. This story belongs to all of you now.

♥ Runic ♥

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