

One Small Voice

By Pappywriter

Submitted: December 12, 2005

Updated: December 12, 2005

A songfic based on the song "One Small Voice" from the Carole King album Speeding Time. Second in a series.

Provided by Fanart Central.

<http://www.fanart-central.net/stories/user/Pappywriter/24684/One-Small-Voice>

Chapter 1 - Chapter 1

2

1 - Chapter 1

“One Small Voice”

An original Final Fantasy VI songfic by Mona

Disclaimer: The characters from Final Fantasy VI are © Square. Lyrics to “One Small Voice” © Carole King

Acknowledgements: “Kefka Says” inspired by “Sephiroth Says”, a chapter from Silver Pard's hilarious “Why Waist Length?”

Author's Notes: The second story in the *Speeding Time* collection, based on the song “One Small Voice.” The first was “Alabaster Lady.”

“It is 5:30 AM in the beautiful city of Vector,” came a calm voice over the Public Announcement system. Its soothing tone was uncharacteristic of Kefka Palazzo. “Forecast is clear, save for the smog. Zero percent chance of our beloved Emperor coming in and...” the voice reverted back to its normal pitch, “...seeing what a bunch of lazy maggots you are! Get up, you worthless grunts!” An earsplitting BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT echoed through the guards' quarters, courtesy of a Noise Blaster held to the microphone.

Up in one of the suites reserved for top-ranking officers, General Celes Chere stirred. “I'm gonna kill him,” she muttered as she peeled back her blankets.

Sergeant Tedra Terrell, Celes' personal assistant, entered the room. Though her uniform was pressed and clean, she looked careworn and tired. “Are you ready for breakfast?”

“Get me the usual, Tedra. And confiscate that stupid Noise Blaster from Kefka. I'm in no mood for his

pranks.” Celes ran a comb through her cloud of blonde hair, which was now a tangled mess.

“General, you have an 8:00 appointment with the Emperor,” Tedra reminded her mistress.

Celes's comb caught a particularly recalcitrant tangle and snapped. Celes tossed it in the wastebasket with a snarl. “On second thought, substitute my tea for black coffee. On the double.”

Tedra saluted. “Consider it done.”

XXX

*The Emperor's got no clothes on
No clothes? That can't be--he's the Emperor
Take that child away
Don't let the people hear the words he has to say*

At 8:00, Emperor Gestahl and his three generals convened in the conference room. Celes put her map on the table.

“First order of business,” Gestahl began, pointing to the map. “Maranda?”

“Surrendered within two hours,” Celes reported.

“And their mayor?” Gestahl inquired.

Celes wordlessly handed him a torn and bloodstained purple cape.

Gestahl's lips curled into a smirk. "Now that we control the continent, the Returners won't be able to reach Vector unless they sprout wings. And from research and development?"

Leo read from a memo. "Necrostein says he's progressing on isolating the cause of the White Death, but the epidemic in Milay looks bad. Four hundred deaths in the past month, mostly children."

"Oh, burn Milay down!" Kefka interrupted. "That'll stop the plague in its tracks!"

"Milay's too important economically," Celes argued.

"Not to mention I can't destroy my most loyal city," added Gestahl. "Except antitoxin is expensive and Operation Hocus Pocus has already stretched the budget to the limit."

Kefka jumped up and down. "Just declare Milay a total loss and collect the insurance GP."

Gestahl held up his hand. "We'll just keep Milay under quarantine and hope Dr. Necrostein makes a breakthrough. Next order of business: Leo, I'm counting on you to put Doma down. Celes, you're to handle South Figaro. But not until tomorrow." He held up a bottle of cider. "Today, we'll celebrate our latest victory. You three have the rest of the day off, but I expect to see you at the ball tonight." Gestahl poured himself a glass. "Anyone want a drink?"

"Your Majesty, Cid advises against drinking alcohol. It can cause side effects with the magic infusion," Celes said.

A drop of blood fell from Gestahl's nose and splattered on the map.

"Like spontaneous nosebleeds," finished Celes.

"It's nothing, my dear," Gestahl answered, holding his handkerchief to his nose. "I'll get you a new map. You three are dismissed."

The three generals bowed and left.

XXX

Kefka often worked on his days off. Not from dedication, but because he enjoyed his job. His current assignment was to train recruits. To make basic training more fun (at least, for him), Kefka had invented a game: "Kefka Says." The rules were simple: each soldier would be given a task, and by the end of the day, the soldiers would be rewarded if they accomplished their goals adequately, or punished if they failed. The assignments ranged from humiliating to dangerous to nearly impossible. One recruit had to pin a "kick me" sign on Leo's back. The soldier was smart enough to affix the placard when Leo was taking a nap, and that spared him from being on the receiving end of Leo's shock ability. The ensign assigned to put a sign that read "turn me around, I'm going the wrong way" on Gestahl's back was not so lucky: all that remained of him was a pile of ashes. Another private had to pour a bucket of gelatin on Cid's head during a scientific presentation.

Now Kefka faced another row of privates. "OK, greenhorn," he said to the last one. "I want you to bring me a lock of General Celes' hair. Should you manage to shave her whole head, I'll personally make you a corporal."

The private shivered.

XXX

"My liege, that ridiculous game has to end," Leo commented, taking a sip of coffee. Three of Kefka's recruits had burst into the room wearing dresses and begun singing the chorus to 'Oh, Maria.' Leo dismissed the soldiers, then continued. "It's unprofessional."

Gestahl shrugged. "It drills mindless obedience into the soldiers. Besides, you're still sore about that 'kick me' sign."

The doors opened. Tedra Terrell pushed a cart into the room. On the cart was a block of ice in which a recruit was frozen, holding a pair of scissors. Tedra curtsied. "Your majesty, I have a message from General Celes."

"Proceed," Gestahl said.

"If you can't tell General Kefka to stop 'Kefka Says', at least make sure the recruits don't interrupt General Celes while she's practicing ice magic."

XXX

One small voice,

Speaking out in honesty,

Silenced, but not for long,

One small voice,

Speaking with the values we were taught as children

Upstairs, Celes stormed into her room and immediately rang for her servant.

Tedra appeared, puffing and panting. "You summoned me, ma'am?"

"My dress uniform needs to be ironed." Celes pulled a garment bag from her closet. "Before tonight's ball."

"And a new button," Tedra pointed to the jacket.

"I'd sew it back on myself, but the last time I tried to sew, I pricked my finger so often I almost needed transfusions."

"That's what we're here for. Menial tasks." Tedra's we referred to her division in the Imperial Army, the Women's Auxiliary Noncombatants. They were officially enlisted in the Army but never allowed in combat areas. The WAN women worked as seamstresses, cooks, and nurses. Their rankings were less rigid - there were only Privates and Sergeants.

Tedra threaded her needle. "Is something wrong? Kefka's stupid pranks again?"

"Yes." It was partially true.

"I'm just glad I never have to interact with him. You know I get nervous around men. And the emperor's jester just creeps me out."

"Don't ever call him that to his face, Tedra. Kefka's notoriously unstable. I don't trust him. I never have." Celes headed towards the door. "I'm going for a walk. Mind the office while I'm out."

XXX

Vector was an industrial metropolis. The factories across the skyline perpetually spewed out black smoke. Most of the buildings were new, made of concrete and steel. Celes crossed Christophe Boulevard and turned on Chere Avenue, bypassing a bookstore, tailor, and post office. She finally stopped in front of a quaint wooden building. Its colored stained-glass windows were covered in soot, obscuring the words "I Scream Shoppe." The little ice cream parlor looked as out of place as a diamond in a pile of coals. Celes opened the front door and went inside. *How long has it been? Ten years? No. Twelve, at least.*

The black and white checkered tile floor was scuffed, but intact. The glass hurricane lamps on the wall

sconces shone brightly on the red leather booths. Even the stools lining the counter looked unchanged. Everything was as it was over a decade ago.

The shop was almost but not quite deserted. A woman sat on one of the counter stools, sipping a soda, while a little girl perched on another stool worked on an ice cream cone.

Celes headed to the back wall where the proprietor of the shop, Mr. Belden, had painted a mural. The painting depicted a sunny day at a park. A man - Mr. Belden himself - sold ice cream to passersby, while another vendor handed out balloons. Children of all ages ran around and played. A little blonde girl leaned against the base of a tree, reading a book of fairy tales. Mr. Belden had been putting the finishing touches on the mural years ago, and was painting some of the children in the shop. It had been a hard day of lessons and training, Celes recalled, so she had found it relaxing to sit still for Mr. Belden while Cid finished his ice cream.

Feels strange. Like I don't know that little girl anymore. And the other children in the picture. They're gone too. Grown up and scattered. She touched the mural. The colors were bright, as if they had been applied yesterday. There wasn't a single sign of peeling.

"May I help you, Miss?" asked the counter boy as he returned from the back room.

Celes turned. "One sundae with triple fudge."

"10 GP, please."

She handed him the money. He thanked her and ducked into the kitchen.

The little girl who had been eating the ice cream cone was reaching across the counter for a silver napkin dispenser. The area around her mouth looked sticky and gooey and probably tasted like chocolate. Celes reached over and pulled out a napkin and handed it to the girl. She wondered if the girl was curious as to how the napkins came out of the little slot perfectly folded. As a child, Celes had pondered that very question; she was delighted when she one day examined one and found the little

latch that opened the dispenser and revealed the pocket.

“Thank you,” the girl said.

“You're General Celes, aren't you?” the woman asked. “I'm such a big fan of yours.”

Fan? I thought I was a soldier, not an actress.

Not waiting for an answer, the woman continued. “My baby wants to be just like you.”

“Really?” Celes asked, looking at the little girl, whose pigtailed bounced as she turned her head. “What's your name?”

“I'm Nissa. I've seen your picture in the paper. You're really pretty. You look like a princess.”

“Do you go to school, Nissa?”

“Yes. Five days a week.”

“Well, keep working at it.”

“I will, General,” Nissa said. “I make straight A's.”

Celes couldn't think of anything to add. She tried to picture Nissa several years older, in a Woman's Auxiliary Noncombatant uniform, but couldn't. Conversely, she tried to imagine what Tedra looked like at

that age, but she couldn't manage that, either.

“Come, Nissa,” the mother said. “We've had our treat for the day. Let's go see Daddy.”

“Goody!” Nissa followed her mother out of the shop.

Soon, the counter boy arrived with Celes's sundae.

Celes pulled the silver spoon out of the ice cream glass. “Is Mr. Belden in?”

The boy looked stunned. “Mr. Belden passed away two years ago. Breathing problems.”

“Really?” Celes bowed her head.

“It's the smog here. I kept telling him to move abroad, but he refused to budge. That was my grandpa. Stubborn to the end.”

The fudge sauce on the vanilla ice cream looked enticing. Celes picked up the spoon, but hesitated. *There's probably more calories in just one scoop than a week's worth of mess hall fare. But it looks so good...I'll just substitute a salad for dinner the rest of the week.*

XXX

Social functions usually bored Celes, and Gestahl's military ball was no exception. Celes had long ago given up dancing after a clumsy three hundred pound dignitary from Milay nearly crushed her foot at a

similar soire, and anyone she could otherwise tolerate talking to was wasting breath on gossip. She sat at the ballroom's window seat, observing the people.

Leo came toward her, his dress uniform covered in medals. "Celes, would you oblige me with a dance?"

"I'd rather sit out a hundred dances than share one with you," was her reply.

Leo's expression remained placid, though there was a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. He bowed and left to find a more willing dance partner.

Cid, in a tuxedo instead of his usual orange biohazard suit, sat down beside Celes. "Why did you turn him down? He likes you. I can tell."

"Leo and I both know our careers are too important to jeopardize with relationships."

"But would obliging the guy with one dance hurt?"

"With Leo?" Celes shrugged.

"What, the age difference? He's only about five years older."

"It's not that. Even if I did have time, he's just not the one."

Cid decided to change the subject. "By the way, congrats on Maranda."

Celes' answer was half-hearted. "Thanks."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm very happy."

"You don't sound happy. Is something bothering you?"

Celes stood up. "I can't discuss it here. Let's go somewhere we can talk in private."

XXX

*So you walk away and say, Isn't he divine?
Don't those clothes look fine on the Emperor?
And as you take your leave, you wonder why you're feeling
So ill at ease--don't you know?*

"I've been a little depressed lately," explained Celes. She and Cid were in her suite. "I have no idea why. I'm about fifteen years too young for a mid-life crisis. I haven't told anyone about what happened at Maranda yesterday."

"Something happened?"

"Maranda has rarely been a trouble city. Their mayor was an obedient leader, even if Gestahl thought she was too lenient. Until her latest letter, that is. I saw the Emperor read it. His face was red when he finished. He showed it to me and asked if it was the writing of a traitor. I read it and agreed."

"What did the letter say?"

"It complained that Gestahl was a bloodthirsty tyrant, and that Maranda was going to sever all ties with the Empire. She wrote that she had already sent letters to every other major city and asked them to do the same. So I was sent to put down the rebellion. When I got to the town hall, the mayor was there. On the balcony. I could see she was wearing an expensive dress under her trademark purple cape. Even was wearing makeup and jewelry - which I had never seen her wear before."

"You've met her before?" Cid interrupted.

"Once or twice, at state dinners. I have to admit I was impressed. She knew her city couldn't possibly hold out against my soldiers, but everyone was posted on the high buildings. Whenever a building was set on fire, there was some attempt to extinguish the flames. Some of the townspeople were using crossbows. And somehow she evacuated the children and the elderly.

XXX

Celes drew her sword. "The Emperor is at supper. He longs to see your head."

"I don't want to fight you," the mayor yelled from her perch on the balcony. "But I can't let Gestahl suck this city dry. They deserve better!"

"They certainly deserve better than to be led into a pointless rebellion by a common traitor!"

"A traitor? To Gestahl, yes. But I'm not afraid of him. Or you, General Chere!"

"Then come down and fight like a man!"

A private appeared behind the mayor and shoved her forward. For a few seconds, the mayor tried to keep her balance, but she eventually fell facedown into the mud below.

XXX

Celes continued. "I knew everyone was watching me. And I knew the townspeople were drawing strength from her. The hunting dogs came toward her. She tried to fight them off. Then she gave me this look. I went toward her, but then I noticed the hunting dogs coming toward her. She tried to fight them off, but she could barely move. I think her leg broke in the fall. I let the dogs attack. Then the screams came. She screamed until death silenced her." Celes shook her head. "And I keep hearing them. Her screams mixed with the gasps of the townspeople. I feel so... what's wrong with me? I'm not going soft, am I?"

"Do you feel sorry for the mayor?"

"No! Why should I? She was a fool and a traitor."

"But what a horrible way to die. The dogs tore her to pieces?"

"Yes."

"That's not like you. You're not sadistic."

"I wasn't being sadistic. The townspeople were drawing strength from her. Killing her would send a message to them. When she died, they just dropped their weapons and surrendered. But you should have seen the mayor's husband; he was the only one who still had any spirit."

"And what did he do?"

“He screamed at me. Called me several things: monster, murderer, demon, and a few others I shouldn't repeat. You should have seen him, Cid. He was only about four and a half feet tall. The way he hopped up and down as he ranted made him look like a little kid having a temper tantrum. He looked so ridiculous! I gave him the standard treatment for hysterics: a slap in the face. It didn't help. Even as I left, he was still cursing me out.”

“Aren't you being a little harsh on him?”

“I could have killed him, but I didn't. You know I don't kill unless I have to. I'm not excessive.”

“And feeding your rival to dogs wasn't excessive?”

“It's just as I said. Just chopping off her head wouldn't have been as effective in scaring the townspeople. What else could I have done?”

“I don't know. I'm not a soldier. Is that it?”

“Not really. I met a little girl at the ice cream parlor today. She said she wanted to be just like me. I should have been flattered, but I just didn't have the heart to tell her a military life isn't as glamorous as it looks. Maybe I wish I was a kid again. Remember when you used to take me to that shop?”

“Of course. Every Sunday. And we'd order a sundae with triple fudge? And you were so little, you had to sit in my lap to reach it?” Cid smiled. “Well, I can't turn back the clock, but I can tuck you in and read you a story.” He walked to the bookshelf and pulled out a worn anthology of fairy tales. “How about ‘The Emperor's New Clothes’?”

“Sure.”

“Once upon a time, in a faraway kingdom, there lived a vain emperor...”

XXX

*Lies take your soul
You can't hide from yourself
Lies take their toll on you
And everyone else*

There was a knock on the door. Celes yawned. She had fallen asleep just as the little kid had announced to everyone that the Emperor was indeed wearing no clothes. She glanced at the armchair. Cid was still in the armchair, snoring loudly. She answered the door.

It was Kefka. “The boss wants us to meet right now.”

Celes nodded and followed. “Where's Leo?”

“The little jerk left for Doma halfway through the party. Looks like it's just us three. We won't even have to split the chips and dip.”

Kefka and Celes went down the empty corridors of the palace and entered the conference room.

Gestahl was already seated. “Kefka had the most wonderful idea tonight.”

Kefka scowled. “Let me tell it. I like telling it!”

Gestahl conceded. "Go ahead."

"What is it?" Celes asked.

"It's brilliant." Kefka waved his arms frantically. "You see, Doma doesn't have a modern plumbing system. They still get their water from the Sapphira River. Dr. Necrostein has developed a water-soluble poison that causes a horrible, agonizing death in seconds. No waiting around for the victim to croak! So if we were to dump a barrel of this wonderful stuff into the river...bam! Problem solved."

Celes shook her head. "You do realize Leo wouldn't like it."

"Oh, forget that party pooper!" Kefka hopped up and down. "He's such a sissy!"

"She's got a point," Gestahl commented. "If I backed the plan, everyone would be mad at me. But I still love it. Hmm...what if I recalled Leo and sent you over? And then it'd look like you came up with the idea on the spot. We'll keep it on a need-to-know basis, so let's keep it from Leo. What do you say, Celes?"

"I think it's a good idea." *What? What am I saying? That's horrible! Has Kefka's insanity become contagious?!*

"Are you okay, Celes?" asked Gestahl. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine." She lied. "Just a little tired."

"Are you sure you'll be up to taking South Figaro this afternoon?"

"Of course." Celes lied again. "I'll even leave early."

Gestahl clapped his hands. "Wonderful. We'll resume Operation Hocus Pocus once we finish off those two parasites. Dismissed."

XXX

What have I done? I said wiping out a whole town was a good idea. Never mind it was two against one...I still should have said something. But it's too late now.

Celes recalled a court case a few years back. An errant schoolteacher accused of treason for refusing to teach an Empire-backed curriculum. Gestahl had allowed the educator a trial to make an example of her. Celes couldn't remember the teacher's name, but recalled that the jury had immediately found her guilty as charged. Both the teacher and her defense lawyer were sentenced to death. The mayor of Maranda had fared no better: she died slowly while her horrified husband watched. But what could he have done? If he had resisted, he would have died too. *I watched the teacher burst into tears after the judge sentenced her to death. Didn't feel a twinge of sympathy. I didn't even care enough to remember her name. I let the mayor die without a second thought. Their blood is on my hands. I've only acknowledged responsibility, but now I know. I'm guilty.*

I can't change the past. But to change the present? I can't do that either...or maybe I can. If Kefka wants to be underhanded, I can match him.

XXX

*(Lies) One small voice speaking out in honesty
(Take your soul) Silenced, but not for long
(Lies)One small voice*

(Take their toll) Speaking with the values we were taught as children

"General Chere?" came a voice.

Celes looked up from the desk. "Yes?"

A man in a black trenchcoat stood at the doorframe. He held out an ID card and badge. "Jasper Bloodstone, Imperial Bureau of Investigation."

"What brings you here?"

Bloodstone dropped a set of dog tags on the desk. Celes could read the engraving:

Terrell, Theodora

Women's Auxiliary Noncombatant #451208.

B Pos

"The name ring a bell?" asked Bloodstone.

"She's my personal assistant."

"She's in the morgue, if you wish to stop by and say hi."

Celes' heart sank. "What happened?"

"Well, General, when something funny happens, I get called in. Sergeant Terrell was caught driving a wagon of stolen supplies." Bloodstone set down a map. "This was found on her. A standard-issue Imperial Officer's map with the easiest route to Doma marked in red. Your map." He pointed to a brown stain. "Dried blood. The drop fell straight down. Like someone was standing over it and got a nosebleed. The Emperor tells me your new one is on order from the cartographer. Your handmaid either stole your

map, or you gave it to her.”

“Why would I do something like that?”

“It didn't make sense. This is just the sort of cheap trick the Returners would pull. As if I didn't have enough headaches. Toss me that bottle of aspirin, would you?”

Ignoring the bossiness in Bloodstone's voice, Celes pushed a bottle of pills toward him.

Bloodstone promptly swallowed four pills. “I've pulled her records. Not much. Thirty-four years old, married at twenty-two. Kid two years later after marriage. Widowed recently. Coworkers all agree that she was quiet and always seemed melancholy. Unlikely candidate for a Returner, but I guess people surprise you. But here's where it gets strange. The torture squad couldn't get her to talk until they threatened her son. But then she said you told her to go to Doma to warn them. Now why would you let her do that? To steal supplies and help our enemies? I talked to your subordinates. They all said you smiled when you killed Maranda's mayor. It doesn't make sense.”

“Do you have any idea why Tedra was trying to warn Doma? Kefka plans to wipe them all out.”

“How did she know that, though, General? Did you tell her?”

“You'll arrest me for treason if I said yes.”

“No, I have no intentions of having you arrested. I have a proposal for you.”

Celes was taken aback. “What?”

“You see, if I went around saying that you betrayed the Empire, everyone would think I was crazy. The Emperor's attached to you. If he lost you, why, all his military power will shift. There isn't another who could fill the void. And then look at the state of affairs. All the military might divided among General Leo and that mad little clown Kefka. You might as well summon the Returners right now. But if I were to say that your handmaid was lying to protect her Returner friends and that our incompetent torturer killed her before she could tell the truth, then we can pretend this never happened.”

“You think I'm a traitor, and you'll let me walk...?”

“It's a grueling life, being a soldier. Being a servant to a fickle Emperor. Constant blood on your hands. Rewards few and far between. Your sudden compassion for the enemy was a mere moment of weakness. If you promise not to do it again, I'll believe you. And since you know I'll be watching you, you won't do it again. You need your life, and I need your help.”

“My help in what? Do you want money? Are you trying to blackmail me?!”

Bloodstone clutched his chest with both hands. “Ooh! That hurt! I'm saving your neck, and all you accuse me of wanting money? What kind of lowlife do you take me for?”

“An opportunistic one.” Celes folded her arms. “If you don't want money, what do you want? A promotion?”

“Protection. You see, I'm smarter than everyone else around me. The Emperor knows I'm smart. So do Kefka and Leo. If they think I've outlived my usefulness, it's over. But if you put in a good word for me, golden girl that you are, I'll have a chance.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because both our lives are in the balance.” Bloodstone rubbed his temples wearily. “I always keep my promises. And I'll keep this secret. My honor as Jasper Chalcedony Bloodstone.”

*Tell the truth
You can change the world
But you'd better be strong*

“Kefka wants to wipe out Doma. And Gestahl backs his plan, even though he knows it'll outrage even the loyalists.”

“Doma's siding with the Returners. They have it coming.”

“Politically, it's a stupid move. Morally...”

Bloodstone was unfortunate enough to be taking a sip of water. He burst out laughing, spewing water on the desk. “Ha ha ha! `Morally'? You care about morals. You're a soldier.”

“I may be a soldier but I'm not interested in being that low.”

“I've got news for you, princess. What you've done is far lower than anything I've ever accomplished.”

“You've got a heart of stone.”

“So you're calling me rock-hearted. What does that make you? A hypocrite? We're all swimming in the same cesspool. Kefka. Leo. The Emperor. You. Me.”

“Ever heard of Milay?”

“Of course I've heard of Milay. The land that gave us the great General Leo.”

“They're loyalists.”

“Quite.”

“They're dying, too.”

“Apples and oranges, General. If you had an infestation of snakes in a playground, would you set traps and kill them one by one? No. You'd want to get them all at once.” Bloodstone pushed forward a sheet of paper. “All you have to do is sign this, saying you agree with my findings. Your dead handmaid gets all the blame, and you be a good little girl. In return, I look the other way and I can sleep easy in my bed at night.”

Celes took the sheet of paper and read it over. Read it again. It was just as Bloodstone described. *If I agree to this, I'll have to live with everything. Including guilt. I'll have to sit and let Kefka destroy thousands of lives. Who am I kidding? How many people died because I blindly followed orders? A couple hundred at Maranda? How many more towns will I crush? And can I ever say I'm sorry? Sorry is just a word. My life in exchange for people who deserve to live.* Rip! She folded the report over and over, tearing until the contract was nothing but confetti on the ground.

XXX

*The Emperor's got no clothes on, no clothes
He doesn't want to know what goes on, though everyone knows
One small voice: The Emperor's got no clothes on
One small voice: The Emperor's got no clothes on*

The boat cruised through the ocean, heading toward Crescent Island.

Celes sat in the cabin, and stared out the window. *I should have said something. Why couldn't I speak in Albrook? The setting was right out of a fairy tale - the moon, the stars, the balcony, the handsome guy.*

Except this isn't a fairy tale. And there's no happy ending in sight.

"Celes?" It was Leo. "Mind if I join you?"

"Sure."

"Good to have you back. I missed you."

Back? Who said I was `back'? "You did?"

Leo nodded. "We all make mistakes."

He thinks my change of heart was just a mistake. Was it a mistake to get involved with the Returners? They probably think I was a spy, thanks to that liar Kefka. Locke says we're still friends, but I can't even look him in the face. And the others have reasons to hate the Empire. Especially Terra. She doesn't remember anything that happened when she wore the slave crown, and I had free will. Her crimes are forgivable, and mine aren't. I tried to redeem myself. I tried to save Doma, but I failed. I got Tedra killed. Her son's dead by now, too.

Celes turned to Leo. *I blew him off when I knew he liked me, and the boy I like is in love with Sleeping Beauty. Maybe we have more in common than I thought.* "Mind if I ask you some personal questions?"

"Sure. What?"

“Why did you join the Army?”

Leo shrugged. “My father was a soldier, and his father before him. My four uncles are soldiers, and my two brothers. It made sense for me to be a soldier too. I'd see my father's medals hanging on the walls at home in Milay and I wanted some of my own. I guess every boy wants to be a hero.”

“Has any order ever bothered you?”

“It shouldn't. It's my lot in life to serve the Emperor. You know the Army's motto. ‘Ours not to question but ours to do or to die.’ Besides, we do more than fight. We also protect the general populace from the monsters that appear out of nowhere.”

But who's going to protect the people from the Empire? “Leo, have you ever read the story ‘The Emperor's New Clothes’?”

“A long time ago.”

“What do you think of it?”

“I don't. It's just a fairy tale.”

No, it isn't. It's a moral wrapped in a simple children's story. If you can't see it, where does that leave you, Leo? As skilled a diplomat you are, you're not afraid to spill blood when diplomacy doesn't work. Kefka is power-mad and dangerous. Gestahl also wants power, but is more interested in material wealth - he's sunk almost the entire treasury into magic research so he can dominate the world. If he controls the entire world, he can tax all he wants. That indoor swimming pool and those silk robes didn't come cheap. Where does the most highly-decorated soldier in the Army fit in? Of course. Heroism and glory. The three enemies of the human soul: power, greed, and glory.

Where does that leave me? Celes gazed out the porthole. The sea looked dark and inky. *I wish I had*

died in South Figaro. Then I wouldn't have to deal with this nightmare. She rephrased her thought. No, maybe not die. Then I'd have to face those I killed. Just forget. Forgetfulness would be bliss.

But would you want to forget Cid? A voice seemed to ask. It sounded like Tedra's voice, but without the innate sadness. Soft, gentle, motherly. But that was impossible - Tedra was dead.

Or Locke? The voice asked again.

No, she thought. I wouldn't want to lose the good memories.

XXX

The Floating Continent levitated dizzily high above the earth - high enough for the air to be noticeably thin. Celes wondered if she'd run out of breath. "Emperor Gestahl! Please! You're the only one who can stop this madness!" *You saw what the Espers did to Vector, you saw what the infusion did to Kefka. Operation Hocus Pocus has created more problems than it's solved.*

Gestahl looked amused. "Celes! Come to me, my pretty! You and Kefka were given life to serve me. It is your birthright to rule the world with me."

"Kill the others and we'll overlook your treachery." Kefka laughed. "Take this sword! Take care of them! Immediately!"

Celes took the dagger. The blade glinted in the sun. *What about Leo? He was convinced he was born to serve you, Gestahl. The years of regimentation did their job - he saw no more than you wanted him to see. He won over his own perception - saw clothes where there was thin air, saw honor where there wasn't any. He could have been a much better person.*

Gestahl spoke again. "Celes...together, we can rule an entire world. Think of it!"

I am thinking. Leo was Glory, and there is no glory in war. Gestahl is Greed - wanting more espers despite the consequences. Kefka is Power. All are deadly, but the worst by far is Power - for what's greed but the want of power? "Power only breeds war," she finally said. "I wish I had never been born." Her fingers curled around the hilt of the dagger. Leaping forward, she thrust it into Kefka's chest. Only the tip of the blade penetrated Kefka's body armor, but the cut was messy.

"Ouch!" His hand flew to the wound. His fingertips were stained red, as was his chest plate. "B...blood?!" He leaped up and down, growling the words with each hop. "You...vicious...brat!" Kefka's painted face contorted in rage. "Grrr! Aaargh! I hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate *hate* you! Grrr!"

Gestahl watched the confrontation, not knowing what to do. His expression was clear: *this was not supposed to happen*. His face seemed to gain about a hundred new wrinkles. His expensive silk robes hung limply on his frame, as if they were several sizes too big. The Mighty Emperor was now little more than a helpless and feeble old man.

That's all Gestahl is. A foolish old man. Celes jerked the dagger from Kefka's wound, leaving a jagged edge to the laceration. Blood droplets splattered on the ground. Adrenaline was still flowing through her, but she felt different. Lighter, yet taller. Not relief, but release.

*One small voice can change the world
But you'd better be strong*