

C ELES was in the business of knowing things, so she was fairly confident she'd got all her companions sussed out by now, if only on a broad level. Still, it wouldn't hurt to run through the roster again, as she'd formerly done for her lieutenants in advance of a skirmish. Knowing Lt Pasco wasn't entirely competent with some of the more subtle elements of his Magitek armour had saved the whole regiment on more than a few occasions. This was different, of course – she was the new girl, she was hardly in charge here – but she always made sure to be aware, just in case.

She cast her eyes around the campfire and considered each of her fellow travellers. First, to her left, were Sabin and Edgar, using a handful of mismatched stones to play what appeared to be a crude imitation of checkers. In the firelight they could hardly have looked more alike, even though Sabin's face bespoke years of arduous physical training and Edgar bore the rarefied manner of a king, as well as everything that went with it: the opulent clothes, the frankly medieval armour, the long, elegant hair that had somehow managed not to become a total mess while he'd been on the road. In personality too, there were common factors: both of them genuinely cared for others, even though it wasn't always obvious from a first glance. Sabin was unpretentious despite his royal upbringing, and had become the closest thing she had to a friend in the group; and even though Edgar liked to show off a little, and had said things to her that he'd have been regretting for days if she was his gen-

eral, he was steadfastly loyal to his subjects and his brother, and the Returners.

On the other side of Edgar sat Cyan. He was quiet, as he was most evenings, staring into the fire. She could guess what he was thinking about. When Sabin had told her what Cyan had been through, she'd understood why he'd reacted the way he did when they first met, and why he couldn't quite look her in the eye for days afterwards. Since then, they'd fought together a few times, and begun to form a mutual respect for one another. It helped that he was the only member of the group who was half as good with a sword as she was. He wielded it differently, of course, and she undoubtedly had a slight edge over him, but that was the result of being trained in Magitek swordcraft since before she could talk.

Then there was Gau, actually with them for once instead of running about on the plains somewhere, and what was more, sitting relatively still next to Cyan. He drew patterns in the dust on the ground with his thumbs, grinning at the result before he rubbed each one away and began anew. She watched him for a while. Like her, he'd been deprived of a normal childhood. But then, so had most of them.

That left Terra and Locke: the most complicated of her companions to figure out, Celes thought. In Terra's case, the poor girl had the excuse of not even knowing herself. Celes remembered catching glimpses of Terra when they were younger; usually at ceremonies, occasionally in battle. In the former case,

Terra had stood out for being seated among the highest-ranked officers even when she was a child. It had been generally understood that that was where she belonged, even though she clearly held no office, and Celes had never dared question this received wisdom. When she herself had reached the appropriate rank to sit at the officers' table, she had passed by Terra and attempted to exchange pleasantries as one of the few other women so close to the Emperor, but had been swiftly moved on by one of Gestahl's personal guards. When she'd looked back at Terra, the other girl had a vacant expression, her eyes unfocused, her mouth hanging open slightly. She hadn't eaten any food or made any conversation at that or any subsequent ceremonial banquet; Celes had watched. And when the whole process was over and everyone dispersed in rank order, the same guard had quietly appeared and discreetly helped Terra off her chair before guiding her to her quarters, his hand tightly gripping her elbow.

Celes had always been unable to spare the time to pay much attention to Terra during battle – the girl wasn't part of her regiment, or any regiment, as far as Celes was aware – but as far as she had known at the time, there was never anything out of the ordinary about her. She was good with the Magitek, but not remarkably so.

And since then Celes had come to understand why Terra had been that way, and why she was how she was now: present, but confused and naive, unsure of herself even in

battle – that was new. Anyone who hesitated that much under Gestahl would have been earmarked for sacrifice, left as bait for a desert monster while the rest of them worked on something more important. Celes wanted to help all her companions, of course, but above all she was determined to protect Terra. They were the only two who'd been part of the Empire and experienced that cruelty from the inside; Terra didn't remember it, but that was immaterial.

Finally, on the other side of Terra, there was Locke. In a way, Celes knew him best, but she hadn't quite managed to pin him down. He was a kind soul, undoubtedly, but that was coupled with a levity that sometimes rubbed her the wrong way – although at other times, she found it delightful, and the unpredictability of her reaction annoyed her. Celes had always prided herself on her rationality – it was a useful asset in battle – but there was something about Locke that threw the sense off balance. And what was more, his lightness of spirit sometimes seemed feigned: there were times when she looked at him while nobody else was, and noticed a more solemn demeanour overtaking him – almost as if he was suffering, but was trying his best to hide it from everybody; perhaps even from himself.

Part of Celes wanted to believe the best of Locke, but another part was uncertain. It had been a long time since she'd met someone who caused her to think such contradictory thoughts. His insistence on protecting her seemed

undeserved, even embarrassing, but maybe also somehow endearing – was that the problem?

No, that was too much reflection: knowing was one thing, speculating quite another. She forced herself to focus on the present. Locke and Terra were sitting close together, talking in low voices; the crackles of the fire masked their words. As she watched them and observed their quiet closeness, Celes felt a surge of concern for Terra: she was only beginning to learn how to navigate this world. And was Locke ... did Locke have designs on her? Celes observed the way he spoke, his eyes focused intently on Terra, hands moving in quick, sharp gestures, almost skimming Terra's arms as she sat engrossed in whatever he was saying. This wasn't the first time the two of them had had what appeared to be such an intimate conversation. And now that Celes thought about it, Locke always seemed to take a special interest in the other girl, attending to her after battles, explaining the situation to her while the rest of them charged ahead – was he doing all that just so she would let him –

A crude military metaphor came into her head, and she scowled.

“Everything OK?” said a low voice to her left.

She hadn't noticed Edgar and Sabin finishing their game, but the stones had been put away, and Edgar had turned to inspect one of his machines; Sabin's attention was on Celes.

“I'm not sure,” she admitted to him. “I just don't want

Terra getting hurt. Or being persuaded to do anything that she doesn't really understand."

Sabin frowned. "You know she's already agreed to help us?"

"I don't mean that," said Celes. "I just hope there's nobody here who tries to take advantage of her."

Sabin looked past her towards Terra and Locke. She hoped he had understood what she was referring to; she would feel foolish spelling it out, and really, it was beneath the dignity of a general to try to intervene in whatever might happen between others.

"Oh," said Sabin, and – was that a grin? "I really don't think that's something you need to worry about."

"Why's that?"

"I mean, I can't be sure, but I think Locke's attentions are elsewhere."

She still didn't know what he was talking about, and feeling ignorant embarrassed her. "What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

Sabin must have noticed her discomfort, as he shook his head and reverted to a serious expression. "Sorry. I just meant ... look, Locke's a good guy. He worries about Terra. He was the one who rescued her from the Empire, and according to my brother, he thinks he's singlehandedly responsible for protecting her. And teaching her about ..." –

he looked around. “This, the whole world. Apparently they kept her under complete control –”

“Yes,” said Celes. “They enslaved her mind. This is the first time she’s been able to think for herself in years.” She thought back to those ceremonies again, and recalled more details: the ugly, functional head brace Terra had worn; the sheen of drool on her chin ...

Sabin seemed more cheerful again, and asked her, “You know, would you be as worried if it was another man so close with Terra? My brother, for instance?”

“Edgar?” Celes frowned. “Hardly. He’d be like that with any woman.”

He chuckled. “You’re right. That was a bad example. But what if it was me, say, or Cyan? Would you care so much about one of us getting close to her? Maybe think about it, that’s all.” With a warm smile, he turned away.

She took Sabin’s advice, trying to picture him sitting in Locke’s position and conversing with Terra in the same way. And he had a point: that image didn’t jar in her mind at all. She imagined Cyan in his stead, and even Gau: still no issues.

Was it that she didn’t trust Locke? To be fair, she didn’t trust anyone – her military training had ensured that. There was something odd about Locke, but her trust in him was no lower than in anyone else; in fact, no less than her trust in Sabin. So what was it about him that singled him out? Why was the sight of his intimacy with Terra so objectionable to

her?

This isn't rational at all, she thought, as she watched his quick hands, his slender face, his captivating eyes.