

TERRA hated pubs; that had been one of the few things she had been sure of as soon as she left the Empire. The stench, the noise, the way she'd get jostled from all sides by opportunistic strangers – it was all awful. But sometimes visiting the pubs was the only way of learning the news, getting an ear on the ground. Besides, there were fewer people around than before, and those who were there tended to be a bit more subdued these days.

She had worried, after the world changed, that people might recognise her, and even blame her for what had happened. She didn't exactly blend in easily. But it seemed that her appearance had not become common knowledge, or perhaps nobody cared enough to remark on her presence. She sometimes thought she saw someone frown a little when they spotted her; they maybe remembered that she had something to do with the late Empire. But they never seemed to consider it worth pursuing the matter.

It was a surprise, therefore, when on one such pub visit, she heard a voice behind her, very distinctly, say her name.

"Terra," said the voice, and she turned, with a little apprehension. It occurred to her that perhaps she should be preparing to defend herself. It had been such a long time; she wasn't sure she remembered how.

She met her interlocutor's gaze, and relaxed. "Strago."

Strago seemed tense, coiled, as if he still expected the attack that Terra had been baselessly anticipating. "Have you seen

her?” he demanded.

Terra frowned, and then understood. “Oh – Relm? No, I haven’t – I’m sorry.”

His face tightened still more: the wrinkles seemed to deepen for an instant. He exhaled, and managed to unclench his jaw. “Right. I’ll be on my way.”

He had turned and actually taken a few steps back before she thought to call after him. “No, wait. Won’t you share your news?”

“News?” said Strago. “You think there’s news, child? Everything is hopeless – that’s the news.” He scowled at her for a few seconds before his expression softened, just a little. “What about you?” he asked. “Do you have news?”

She tried to ignore the sceptical tone of the question. “Not really,” she admitted. “That’s why I came here. I’m trying to find out if I can help, anywhere. I need to be of some use.”

“Tzen’s been hit badly,” said Strago bluntly. “I’m sure they’d appreciate your assistance.”

“No,” said Terra. “I don’t mean help with that sort of thing – not disaster zones, rescuing people – I won’t be able to do it. But if there’s anywhere quiet, anyone who just needs a bit of work done –”

Strago hoisted himself onto the stool next to hers, a feat made remarkable by his small size. “You’re strong,” he said. “You’d be an asset in Tzen. Do more than most, I daresay.”

"I was strong," she corrected him. "This – whatever this is – it's changed me. Hasn't it affected you, too?"

He made no response. There was no need, really; she knew the answer. It was in his face, the tone of his voice, the way he drummed his fingers erratically against the bar.

"Where did you end up, when we all fell?" she asked him.

"Mobliz, eventually," he said. "Awful place. Full of children, all crying and running about like dogs – can't stand them."

Terra couldn't help thinking about the obvious exception to Strago's claim, the very girl he was looking for, but she declined to pass comment. She wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like to have someone so close – someone to really care for. She had never felt that way about anyone. Even Strago, one of the only truly good people she had known in her life, was no more than an acquaintance; she felt no particular joy at their reunion, only muted relief that he too had survived. But she knew most people found it easier to form bonds with others. Strago probably considered Terra a true friend: did he expect that the two of them would do something? Did he see this as the first step in reuniting the whole group of them, and bringing down Kefka?

She turned to him, and said reluctantly, "Do you think we should look for the others?"

He seemed almost amused. "Do *you*?"

"Maybe it's our duty," she said. "Now that two of us have reunited. There probably isn't anyone out there better at magic

than we are. If we can find the rest, we might have a chance against Kefka.”

“Is that what you want? Get involved in all that again? You just said you weren’t strong anymore.”

“It’s not what I want,” she admitted. “I never asked to be caught up in any of that – the Empire or the Returners. I said no to Banon three times and he still persuaded me to join them. I just want to be free of all that – I’m not meant for that kind of responsibility.”

“And yet you just suggested we go and find all the others,” he remarked. “Sounds like a lot of responsibility to me.”

“It’s what they’d expect,” she protested feebly.

“That doesn’t mean we have to do it,” he said. “Look, I’ll let you decide. For what it’s worth, I think Kefka’s going to be extremely difficult to defeat, and I wouldn’t say I’m the man to do it. Maybe twenty years ago –”

“What will you do instead?” she asked him.

“Keep looking for Relm.”

“And what if you don’t find her?”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“What if she’s –”

He slammed a bony hand onto the bar with surprising force. “Do you really think we can get rid of Kefka?” he snarled. “Is it really worth wasting our energy pretending to resist? Shouldn’t we just try to fit into this world we’ve been left with?”

“That’s not what Relm would say,” she pointed out.

“That’s why I need to find her,” said Strago. “Convince myself there’s some hope left worth holding onto.”

If it had been two of the others in this pub – Celes and Edgar, say – they’d have been making plans by now, plotting the best route around the world for finding everyone again. But, Terra thought grimly, the two of them who had happened to meet were a scared, hesitant girl and a desperate, tired old man.

“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t want to do it.”

“Then don’t,” said Strago. “Find what joy you can in this ruined world. Live your life the best way you can until your time comes.”

Terra nodded.

“I should be off,” said Strago. “You know that girl – never stays in the same place long.” He wasn’t smiling.

“Good luck,” she said, and she meant it.