
At a time like this

THE boy was delivered safely into the arms of his mother, the burning house was left to collapse in its own time, and then it was just the two of them again.

“Trust you,” said Sabin, “to be able to go in there and do that.”

“Trust *you* to hold up a whole house,” Celes replied.

A strange expression came over Sabin that was somewhere between a grin and a frown, and then the grin won out, and he said, “Well. That’s me. Did you hear about the train?”

Celes rolled her eyes. “Cyan was talking about the train for a whole week. *Lo, forsooth, yonder prince did turn the infernal engine upon itself, and –*”

She stopped. Sabin was barking with laughter, in an odd way that made her wonder if he was actually choking. “A joke,” he said, when he could speak again. “You made a joke.”

“I am *capable*,” said Celes.

“Yes,” said Sabin. “Just – not many of them these days, you know? We need jokes at the moment, right?”

Celes nodded.



They had dinner in a little place on the other side of Tzen, the part of the town that seemed to be doing marginally less worse. Part of the eating space had been converted into a soup kitchen for the needy; Celes felt guilty for not being able to support them, but she wasn't carrying much gil, and the staff waved off all offers of practical assistance.

“They're proud,” Sabin muttered to her. “It's the one thing they've still got. Let them have it.”

Celes understood that.

They sat in a corner to eat their dinner: it really wasn't too bad. There was even a little candle on the table, although it was a bit bashed up and the staff had been too preoccupied to light it. Celes gave it a quick flick of fire when none of them were close enough to see, just in the hope of improving the ambiance slightly. She looked at Sabin's face, his surprisingly neat beard softly illuminated by the candlelight, and shrugged.

“So,” he said, “how many of us do you think made it?”

“Business so soon?” said Celes.

Sabin blinked. “Oh, sorry – if you don't want to –”

“No, no,” she said. “It’s fine. We need to discuss it – make plans, all that. Just – when I found you, I almost relaxed for a while, but –” She laughed uneasily. “No, like I said, it’s fine.”

They went through the list of their comrades. The moogle, fearless and terrifying as he was, was surely indestructible. The same went for Gau, and probably Relm; and Setzer, judging by the stories he had regaled them all with, about the airborne exploits of his youth. Strago and Cyan, their two oldest companions, were more of a cause for concern.

“Strago’s *tiny*,” said Celes. “If he fell in the crash, he’d have had no chance. I always thought he might trip and break something, you know, back when we used to fight –”

Sabin swallowed his spaghetti with a gloomy expression. “Yeah, not sure he’d come though. Cyan, though ... I can’t see it. The end of the world stopping him, I mean. He was always really driven, by revenge more than anything.” He shuddered. “Scary, sometimes.”

“Well, you knew him best,” said Celes. “So, we think he’s out there – that leaves ...”

There were two names they had both been avoiding, and which became more conspicuous each time either of them mentioned another. Sabin, having evidently decided to prolong the suspense, said, “Shadow.”

Celes shook her head. “No idea. You spent more time with him than I did, didn’t you?”

“Even if he has survived,” said Sabin, “there’s no guarantee he’ll help us.”

“That’s true,” Celes agreed. “I suppose we can’t count on him.” She crossed Shadow’s name off the mental list. “And Terra ...”

“Yeah,” said Sabin.

Celes was drawing a blank: Terra was fierce, and remarkable, but still so naive, and somehow fragile – she had been doing better than when she escaped the Empire, but that might not have been enough for this. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I hope we find her.”

Sabin nodded, huffing out a long breath. “You got that right. OK ...”

They looked into each other’s eyes, unwilling to break the stalemate.

“You can go first,” said Sabin in the end. “What about Locke?”

“What do you think?” Celes said carefully.

“You tell me,” said Sabin. “You know him better.”

“I think he’s alive,” she said.

Sabin nodded. She could tell from the nod that what she’d said hadn’t been enough to convince him.

“Well,” he said slowly, “he was always good at ... getting out of ... tricky situations. So I’m told.”

“He was,” said Celes. “He’s alive.”

“How do you know?” said Sabin, abandoning all pretence.

She didn't want to tell him about the bandanna. It would feel stupid if she said it out loud: really, it was more symbolic than anything, the fact that she had happened to find it at that particular moment, when she had been feeling that awful. Even if it really was his, that didn't prove anything: he might well have survived the crash, but met some horrible end afterwards, doing something desperate and daring like he always did, and with no friends to pitch in or talk him out of it –

“It's just a hunch,” she said, with a careful shrug.

“OK,” said Sabin. “That's fine.”

She glared at him, until he added, “Really, it is! We need hunches at a time like this, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Celes.

They sat in silence for a moment, and then she said, “So. Edgar.”

Sabin looked down at his empty plate, and then said, “I don't know. He was never good at ... fending for himself. Brilliant with machines, of course, but the moment you put him in a situation where he can't rely on that stuff ... I don't know,” he said again.

“He's a king,” Celes pointed out. “There must be people out there who would help him.”

“Or assassinate him,” said Sabin.

“Sabin,” she said.

“It's happened before,” he countered.

“The only person who’s going to be assassinated,” she said, “is the clown.”

Sabin just about smiled. “Right.”

He was resting one arm on the table. She reached out for his hand, and clasped it, and felt a strong squeeze back. They shared that determination: they could do this.



They resolved to start their search on the western continent: both Edgar and Locke seemed more likely to be there, even if neither Celes nor Sabin acknowledged that that was the reason for their decision. The Serpent Trench, apparently, was accessible on foot now, so that meant a long journey up the Trench to Nikeah to take the ferry, assuming the service was still running; and if it wasn’t, the two of them might have amassed enough gil fighting monsters on the journey to charter a boat.

The monsters were tougher now. Celes had seen a fair few of them in her travels, both with the Returners and on army sorties before that, but she’d never previously come across the ones they had to deal with now. Some of them seemed like grotesque parodies of their predecessors: the undoing of the world had clearly had some effect on the process of monster genesis, something that Celes had never had much inclination to learn about, although she knew there were scholars of the subject in Vector. Perhaps not anymore – the great Imperial

library was probably gone too. Celes had never been much into reading, but it was a shame, she reflected.

So the monsters were tougher, but so was Sabin. His blitzes had the telltale sign of magic in them: she'd never noticed that before.

"You're a mage," she remarked, as they caught their breath after a drawn-out battle.

Sabin shook his head. "Not really. There's magic in the blitzes, sure, but I'm not a *mage*, not like you are."

"Is it the espers?" she asked. "Or were they always like that?"

"Always," he confirmed. "Guess you never paid me much attention before?"

"I suppose not," Celes said sheepishly. It was true: before the crash, Sabin had been one in a sea of faces. Trusted and beloved faces, of course, but a sea nonetheless. Most of her attention had been directed towards Locke during fights – and, admittedly, at most other times – but now that his whereabouts were unknown, she found that her thoughts were able to turn elsewhere. She was noticing Sabin for the first time: she had probably done him an injustice in not doing so before.

They camped on the Trench that night, talking for hours before they finally slept, lying close enough to feel each other's breath on their faces.



There were a few more days of walking, and a few more nights of camping. The journey to Nikeah was of not unremarkable length. Fortunately, they both had the stamina for it: Celes was used to gruelling military exercises, and Sabin (not unlike Locke, she realised) had plenty of experience in living off the land, away from all human civilisation. They'd spent too much time in Setzer's airship for her to notice his proficiency in such matters before. She was learning all sorts about Sabin now, out of necessity: he liked to meditate at dawn when he thought she was still asleep, and he cooked an excellent meal on the campfire, and he laughed like a lunatic when he was hit by Confuse, which would have been endearing if the status effect hadn't made him so incredibly dangerous.

Simple things. That was what the world needed now.

A few nights in, Celes was awoken by the sound of quiet sobbing. Sabin had turned away from her, his back making a big arch in the darkness, and she laid her hands on it and gently pulled him towards her until he rolled over to face her, looking at her with wet, red-rimmed eyes.

"Sorry," he said, his voice only slightly hoarse. "Thought you were asleep."

"What's the matter?" Celes asked. She still had an arm around him: it would be more noticeable if she removed it, so she left it in place.

"I was just thinking," said Sabin, "about how everything went so wrong, and the world's like this, and we don't know

if any of our friends are alive.” Celes watched as a fresh tear trickled from his eye. “Sorry,” he said again.

“No,” said Celes. “I get it. I hate this, too.” Sabin cried easily, Edgar had once told her, but this was the first time she’d seen it happen. She felt almost as if she was about to break down herself, but that would have been most unbecoming of a former general, so she held onto Sabin tightly to prevent it from happening, reminding herself that he was here and real and ready to fight beside her.

“Just – have to let it out once in a while, you know?” he said.

“Yeah,” she agreed, and she kept her arm pressed against his back, gently kneading into it with her fingers as they both drifted back into sleep.



They awoke entwined that morning, and they slept in each other’s arms from that night onwards. It was never discussed. Now that the elation of encountering a friend had worn off, they both needed comfort, and that became more apparent the longer the journey went on: despite their being accustomed to long walks, this one was notably hard going. Every evening they were sore and exhausted, lacking the mana reserves even to heal their own blisters, and being physically run-down made it harder to ignore their worries. A little physical

contact, when they were both too tired to worry about the consequences, was a welcome relief.

The eventual arrival at Nikeah lifted their spirits. It was almost nightfall when they got there; Sabin had suggested camping outside the town, thinking they wouldn't make it there before dusk, but Celes had insisted that they push on. They almost found themselves needing to camp anyway: the inn was about to close its doors for the night by the time they got there.

"Sorry," said the innkeeper. "Hardly a choice of rooms at the moment – times are hard, you understand."

The one room available was a double: Celes was almost relieved at the sight of it. They'd been sleeping in each other's embrace for days, and she had got used to the feeling. Sabin evidently had too: when she got into bed beside him, he wrapped his arms around her without a moment's hesitation. She nuzzled her head against the side of his face.

"Do you want to talk about this?" he said after a while, his low voice resonating against her.

"Not really," she said.

"Celes," said Sabin, more sharply. Reluctantly, she drew back and looked him in the eyes.

"You love Locke," he said.

She frowned. "Maybe. We never discussed it. Still less even did anything like this –" She nodded down at where they held each other.

"I just want to be sure that this is OK with you," he said.

“Depends what you’re thinking of doing,” said Celes.

Sabin sighed. “Come on. Don’t joke about it. We’ve already been doing enough.”

“Hmm,” said Celes, and she turned in place until her back was tucked against Sabin’s chest, his hands clasped in front of her stomach, holding her secure. “I love Locke, I suppose,” she announced to the room.

Nothing about Sabin’s posture changed. “You don’t love me.”

“No,” she said. “Should I?”

“Well, the feeling’s mutual, I guess,” he said.

“That’s good,” said Celes. “Stops things getting too complicated.”

Sabin shifted so his face was close to hers, then leant forward and kissed her lightly on the mouth.

“Not complicated at all,” he said.

They were both asleep soon afterwards.



The next morning was when they found “Gerad”, looking somewhat the worse for wear with an obvious limp that didn’t appear to be fake, but dressed in an outfit that might just about have suited a king, and, most tellingly, unable to put aside his usual mannerisms. Sabin dragged Celes down a side road, past some empty beer kegs and crates that had once been stuffed

with agricultural produce, to complain at great length about his brother's ridiculous disguise and his insistence on pretending not to know them. Celes nodded frantically along in an effort to placate him.

"I don't know what he thinks he's doing," said Sabin for about the third time. "If he wants to sneak into Figaro without anyone recognising him, I get it, but – he clearly knows who we are, did you see the look on his face when he first turned around and saw us? He's being deliberately obstinate –"

Sabin's vocabulary always seemed to centre around words of several syllables when he was talking about his brother, Celes noted with interest. She caressed his arms to calm him down. "Look on the bright side. He's alive, right? One out of ten already – and Edgar, of all people – come on! All we have to do is wait for him to drop the act. That's the easy part!"

Sabin stood there, and then he smiled, and said, "You're right," and kissed her, grinning against her lips.



They took a few days' rest in Figaro Castle, after Edgar had finally stopped the charade and they had helped raise the place back to the surface. Now that Edgar and Celes were reunited, they could get working on a more concrete roadmap for what was to come: she'd tried discussing it a little with Sabin, but he wasn't the kind of person to have the patience to come up

with plans and backup plans and emergency plans.

“Let’s take a break,” said Edgar, after a particularly intense session. “I wanted to ask you something, anyway.”

“Go ahead,” said Celes.

“Well,” Edgar went on, and then he suddenly became hesitant. “Not that I mean to pry, but – you and my brother? Really?”

“How did you find out?” she said.

“I heard the maids gossiping,” he replied nonchalantly. “About how the guest bedroom you’re *supposed* to be staying in is untouched. Really, if you want to hide it, you should go in there at least once a day, move the pillows around a bit – a trick I learnt from a lady I used to frequent, back in –”

“Thanks,” she said, to shut him up.

“The point is,” he said, clearly not to be deterred, “they thought you were sleeping with *me*, and I hated to put them right, but there have been enough lies put out about me recently.”

“I’m not *sleeping* with him, anyway,” said Celes. “Not in that sense. We – I don’t know. We were the first to find each other after the crash, you know? And we just started – well –”

“Go on,” said Edgar, beaming, “do tell.”

“You’re hideous,” she said.

“No, no,” he replied, waving a hand in lazy protest. “This is all very sweet.”

“Ugh,” she said. “We both needed comfort. Is that so hard to believe?”

Edgar’s expression was serious again. “No, it’s not,” he said. “I understand. I can see why you’d be drawn to him – he’s rather like Locke, in many ways.”

“Maybe,” said Celes.

“Speaking of which –”

“This is nothing to do with Locke,” she said. “It’s separate. My feelings for Locke are still the same, but – he’s not here. I don’t know when I’ll see him again.”

“But you will,” said Edgar.

“Yes,” said Celes. “I will.”

But until then, there was somebody to hold, and to be held by; someone who understood what it meant to wake up in a ruined world, and to think oneself alone; someone with whom it was possible to commit wholeheartedly to rebuilding that world, and to righting those wrongs.