Then Came the Dawn

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Summary

_Fiat justitia ruat caelum._

In the aftermath of the king's sacrifice, a world is rebuilt and a friend is mourned. And then came the dawn, and with it...hope.

**02/12/19 hiatus until I can find my motivation for this story again *apologies***

Notes

*screaming in the background*

Considering what I usually write, this is an undertaking for me.

Anyway, this is a fill for this awesome prompt.
He woke up to a pounding in his head and a sharp, blinding pain in his chest. Gasping, he grasped at the general area of his heart, searching for the wound that was causing him grief. Nothing. He felt nothing there. His other hand sent long, grimy fingers grasping into soil. Slowly, carefully, he pulled himself up from his prone position. It took work; everything hurt in various degrees, but he eventually managed to prop himself up onto his elbows. A small accomplishment, but at least he was no longer face down in the dirt.

Blinking rapidly, he squinted around himself. It seemed to be a small forest that he’d found himself in. And luckily, the sound of water running alerted him to a stream or brook just off to his left somewhere. The wood was thick and the sky dark, leaving little light besides the slivers of moonlight shining through the leaves. Around him the sounds of wildlife thrummed, filtering through the trees softly. Nothing dangerous in his immediately vicinity, it seemed. Which was good, as he was still laid out on the ground with dirty, scrambling fingers and shaking arms, his legs useless behind him. What wasn’t so good was that fact that the surrounding area was entirely unfamiliar.

In fact, everything seemed unfamiliar. Grunting quietly, he stared down at his hands. Pale and scarred, a thin, white line around one of the fingers on his right hand, as if he’d been wearing a ring nonstop for a long amount of time. His eyes wandered further down his arms, covered in what looked like expensive black fabric. A suit? What on eos was he wearing a suit in the middle of the wilderness for? Sure enough, though, he glanced behind him and found a fine pair of slacks snugly wrapped around his legs. Said legs lay limply behind him, a throbbing soreness timed to his heartbeat encompassing the knee of one. He attempted to wiggle a toe. Only a small response. Sighing, he dropped his face into his arms, unsure of how long it would take for him to get walking. And where he would go once he did. Rolling onto his back, with much effort…and much regret once felt the stab of pain along the whole of his lower back, he lay on the ground and frowned into what little of the sky he could see. He had no clue as to where or who he was and, being in such immense pain, was unsure at this point if he’d ever make it out of the forest to find out before some sort of predator got to him. His small observations of his clothing offered no clues; the most he could guess from the quality of the fabric and the fact that, well, he was wearing a suit, was that he must’ve had money to his name. Whatever his name was.

Small and alone in the middle of the forest, however, this observation meant little. He’d simply have to wait and pray he could help himself before something else helped itself to him.

-o-o-o-o-

In the months following Noctis’ death, Gladio’s life had been a blur. Being an Amicitia, he was heavily involved in the rebuilding and reestablishment of Insomnia. From tending to the wreckage of the city’s streets to moving refugees back into their old homes…or rather, what was left of them, he’d had no time to himself. No time to think, no time to breathe. No time to mourn. Not that there was much left to mourn over in the first place, what with Noct’s body having vanished into thin air. When he and the other two had walked into the citadel, mentally preparing themselves to be faced with the dead body of their king, they’d instead found an empty, bloodstained throne. It had to have been some sort of sick joke of the gods, Gladio thought to himself, that they hadn’t even left a body to bury. Utterly disrespectful, in his opinion. He wasn’t the most religious of people out there, only so much in that he acknowledged the gods’ existences and left it at that, but even he knew the importance of laying a loved one to rest. That the gods themselves would deny him, would deny any of them this right was outright insulting.
And to be thrown into the reconstruction of the city only compounded on the issue. No one had the time to build Noct a tomb when they were too busy trying to rebuild their homes. Not that Gladio faulted the populace for wanting their old lives back. He understood wholeheartedly why so much work was being put into returning Insomnia to its former glory. But it was stressful, being pulled back and forth by the hefty duties being dropped on his shoulders. Without proper closure, he’d felt it start to wear on him far sooner than what he would’ve expected of himself. He could only imagine how Ignis felt, essentially running the country in Noctis’ place while it was still attempting to heal. He’d known Noct since he was barely school age, had been raised to remain at his side for the entirety of Noctis’ reign…now he was fulfilling Noct’s own job, literally blindly. Gladio helped where he could, but unfortunately his father hadn’t lived long enough to instill in him the more political duties of a King’s Shield. He knew quite well in theory what roles he was meant to fill politically, but in practice? Well, there was no practice. He was sent out on that sham of a road trip before practice could start.

As such, he’d found himself mechanically completing whatever tasks Ignis set him to. If he was to join in negotiations with the new mayor of Lestallum, that’s what he would do. If he was to contract Leiden construction companies to help rebuild the city, that’s what he would do. If he was to go out in the field and help with the efforts himself, that’s what he would do. It was all cut and dry, allowing Gladio to shut his mind off from the work. Yet it kept him busy, which kept him from thinking too hard, and thus he also shut his mind off from himself. He never contemplated the absence of the fourth member of their group when he met up with the others, he never dwelled on the still empty seat of the throne in a room that was still missing a piece of its roof. He never admitted to himself that he still felt an ache in his chest when his hands gripped the cold, empty sheets beside him at night. If he fell victim to his own thoughts, he doubted he’d get out of bed in the morning.

Life had been a blur, but he was thankful for it. It meant he wasn’t sitting still, moping around and hoping the past ten years had only been a bad dream.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I feel like I got run over by a bus.
Anyway, here's more Noct.

_Fiat Justitia Ruat Caelum._

It’d been a phrase penned on a handkerchief he’d found in the pocket of his suit all those months ago. He still had no idea what to make of it, even after all this time. He’d kept it either way, despite having tossed the suit when he’d found more comfortable clothing and a place to stay. It was a curious little artifact; completely unfamiliar to the man, and yet he felt nostalgic as he looked at it. The handwriting was somehow familiar to him, though he’d no idea who could’ve written it. It seemed to be in Old Lucian, a funny observation to him considering he was living in Tenebrae. Though he was told often enough by the other residents of the tiny village he’d found himself in that he looked Lucian enough. Pale skin, black hair and almond shaped eyes. Regardless, Tenebrae was all he knew. When he’d managed to drag himself out of those godsforsaken woods, he’d found himself on the outskirts of a small fishing village situated at the edge of the surrounding lowlands of the capital city, Fenestala. How he’d managed to end up in the middle of the woods in the valleys of Zoldara Henge, he’d had no clue. But he was lucky that he’d been on the side of the mountains where the villages were.

Lucky. That’s what the old couple that had found him, half-starved and utterly exhausted, had taken to nicknaming him. After all, he’d still had no idea who he was supposed to be. It was a cute nickname, but he’d shortened it to Luke after a while when he’d realized that Lucky was the sort of name one gave their dog. It hadn’t stopped the snarky old couple, particularly the lady, from calling him by it. Often in public.

He’d taken to it, though. It was his only identity at this point. Nothing else helpful to identifying him had been hidden away in his tattered suit. The cloth was as expensive as he’d guessed, and so he sold it for enough money to shack himself up in his own room at the inn, having denied the old couple their offer to house him themselves. Whatever baggage might have come with him, he wasn’t going to force on the two. The old man, however, would not take no for an answer when he offered for Luke to work for his small fishing business. He’d stated that he wouldn’t see the man on the street after what little money he’d earned from selling his suit eventually dried out. Luke found he hadn’t minded once a fishing pole was placed into his hand. He’d been a natural. He’d even gotten along easily on the boats once the old man, Caius, had promoted him to a full time worker.

It was peaceful, relaxing work for his peaceful, relaxing life. Whatever life Luke had held beforehand, he doubted it would measure up to what he had now. Eventually, he’d save up enough to earn himself a house, an easy goal considering the low population the ten years of scourge had left the village with, and perhaps even his own boat so that he might start his own business. As of now though, he was content to work for old Caius. Business was slowly and steadily booming as his runs along the river often brought food to the slowly increasing population of Fenestala, which in turn brought back plenty of gil for Luke to fill his safe with.
He tucked away the handkerchief, glad that his peace wasn’t disturbed by whatever past he’d left behind. Perhaps he was a Lucian in a different time, but as of now that was inconsequential. What his life was now meant far more to him than whatever it had been.

Luke looked up as his front door opened then, unexpectedly. He rolled his eyes as the familiar face of old man Caius popped in through the crack. White haired and wrinkled, his gray eyes shining with mirth, he grinned a sparse-toothed grin at Luke, looking for all the world as if he hadn’t just barged in unannounced.

“If you’re here to tell me I’m late for work, I’ll have you know I actually woke up early today,” Luke snorted. He hadn’t mentioned how he nearly smashed his alarm clock when it had set off. He was a notoriously heavy sleeper, with a penchant for staying in. Most times his coworkers had to drag him out of bed, usually after barging in just as Caius had done.

The old man laughed. “You’ve a few more minutes before you have to start rushing,” he replied in his heavy Tenebraen accent. It was more posh than what was commonly heard around the village, though Luke attributed that to Caius having been born in Fenestala. It was also marred by Caius’ missing teeth, but Luke supposed no one could help that. In a post-apocalyptic world, visits to the dentist were the last thing on anyone’s mind.

“Heh, sounds like I’ll actually make it in on time today then,” Luke joked. No one seemed to mind his lateness. There was no need to rush nowadays, what with the world being so much smaller now. Not that he wasn’t still teased for his perceived laziness.

“Well get a move on then if that’s what you plan to do, Lucky!”

When he wasn’t being teased for the nickname.

Luke supposed he’d earned his spot as the team’s resident buttmonkey anyway, what with being the youngest and the newest fisherman. Only able to guess that he might have been in his late twenties or early thirties, his only coworker closest in age was in his mid-forties. Luke had thus become something of a little brother to the team, and while he appreciated how easily they’d taken him in, he quickly realized it’d take a while before he escaped the constant ribbing. Especially from Caius.

“Alright, alright. If it’ll get you to stop calling me that, then fine,” Luke laughed. Caius stepped fully into the room, laughing alongside Luke. He closed the front door and leaned against it, waiting patiently for Luke to finish collecting his gear. He’d stopped for a moment when he caught sight of the handkerchief, taking a small break to admire it and the familiar feeling that washed over him as he read the words upon it, but now was the time to prepare for the rest of his day. Instead, decked out in his fishing gear and carrying his tackle box, kept with him for when the day was slow and the big equipment was unnecessary, he led the old man out of his small room and the inn it was housed in. Caius’ eyes roamed the area, both appraising and contemplative.

“You’re sure you don’t want to stay with me and mum? It’d be a right sight better than holing up in here,” he offered yet again. It came up every few weeks, despite Luke’s protests. In a way, he understood why the old couple offered for him to live with them much in the same way he understood why Caius called his wife “mum”. He didn’t blame them for wanting the company in their life after they’d lost their own son, said to be around the same age as Luke himself, to the daemons. But Luke did not want to be a replacement son for the old couple, nor did he think it appropriate to burden them further after they’d already done their best to help him on his feet.

Both figuratively and literally, Luke noted as he hobbled through the small, dirt pathway, thankful the only other thing he’d kept from his previous attire was the knee brace secured tightly around
his leg. He’d no idea what sort of life he led before, but he was more than glad he was not living it now if all it rewarded him with was a barely useable leg and an array of aching scars, the most notable one being on his back, that often let the pain spread to the tips of his fingers and toes and left him bedridden if he pushed himself too hard. It was already a hassle dealing with that on his own, he couldn’t see himself pushing it on the old couple.

“And eat Ava out of house and home? She’d sooner kick me out,” he joked instead. He wouldn’t tell the old man his true worries; not if he didn’t want to be scoffed at.

“Hah! She likes it when you compliment her cooking though. Besides, you don’t exactly hesitate to ‘eat her out of house and home’ when she bakes those ulwaat pastries you enjoy so much,” he countered. Though his tone was equally joking, he clearly did not mean to give up in his efforts to invite Luke into his home. However it did seem he’d at least drop it for now as his posture eased into a more relaxed stance. He glanced at Luke once again, rubbing absently at his scraggly white beard.

“Due for a shave soon, aren’t you boy?”

“Changing the subject are we?” Luke snorted again. “She’s the one who offers to bake them for me.”

He shrugged then, allowing his own posture to relax slightly. He was often told by others that the way he stood was more than a little uptight, what with the straightened back and upheld chin. He’d attempted to brush it off as wanting to keep his back aligned lest it start hurting, but he couldn’t deny to himself that such posture came naturally to him. If anything, it helped his back more not to strain it so much. Though outright slouching was just as bad, if not worse.

As for the shaving bit…

“Anyway, to answer your question, I’d rather just let the beard grow out.” In all the time he’d spent in that tiny village, he’d shaved all of once. And quickly decided he did not like the youthful face that looked back at him in the mirror. If there was ever more of a reason to be made fun of by his coworkers, it was opening himself up to baby-face jokes. He’d deal with maintaining the facial hair if it meant not looking like a teenager. Not to mention, the beard had stopped itching once he let it grow out more and he’d become more comfortable with it as a result.

“Hmph. You’re getting to look more and more unkempt, you know. Ava’s itching to take a pair of scissors to that crown of yours,” Caius remarked.

Luke ran his fingers through his hair. He’d let it grow out as well, not having been up to putting in the effort to cut it himself and not trusting Ava and her shaky fingers with scissors anywhere near his head. It wasn’t too much of a bother when he tied it up, so why worry about it, he figured.

“No way in hell is that happening. I’d sooner fish up Leviathan.”

Caius cackled at the answer, his head thrown back as the laughter bubbled up from his core and burst free explosively. That was the sort of person he was. A free spirit, uncaring of what others thought. Luke admired that in him.

Though he could do without the stares.

“Settle down, old man. You’ll catch flies with your mouth open like that,” Luke chuckled, discreetly looking around him at the caught attention of the other villagers. This early in the morning, not many were out and about, but there were still a few running their morning errands and
preparing for work.

“Hah! Make a better meal than this morning’s breakfast. Piztala radishes on toast. ‘Twas like chewing bark…”

Luke laughed as well. Gifted as Ava was in most areas of cooking and baking, some foods simply weren’t meant to be swallowed down. Like carrots. Gods, what Luke wouldn’t do to never see another carrot again. It didn’t help that both Ava and Caius were fond of them.

“I’m guessing the reason I got a visit from you was to escape the ‘nightmare breakfast’?” he asked, still smirking slightly. Caius’ face, however, straightened out into a more serious expression.

“No, no. It’s actually something a little more important this time around,” he said. Luke dropped the smirk, worry replacing it.

“What’s wrong?”

Caius held up his hands defensively at the intensity of Luke’s emotional shift. “Nothing that warrants such a grim look, Luke. Just a job we’ve been contracted into.”

So he said, but rarely did Caius ever call Luke anything other than “Lucky” or “boy” (which he supposed the old fossil had the right to call him at his age) unless it was something incredibly important. Luke didn’t let up on his expression, prompting Caius to sigh.

“It’s a city contractor. He’s offering to pay big money for a large haul of fish directly into Fenestala. That means I’ll need the whole team, including you, taking care of the catch and transport. We’ll all be away from home for a few weeks, so I’m rounding up the stragglers now.”

Luke’s brow creased and he turned on his heel, ready to head back to his room for his, admittedly meager, possessions.

“Shouldn’t I be packing then?”

Caius raised an eyebrow. “And just what have you to pack?” He waved his wrinkled hand dismissively.

“We’ve got you covered on gear,” he continued, knowing full well that Luke was only equipped for small time jobs. “You just head on over to the docks. We’ll be heading up river in a few hours and I want everyone to be there.

“This is a big job for us, you understand? The money’s well worth it, but I want you and the rest of the boys to be prepared for a long rest of the month.”

“Seems weird that we’re being contracted now, of all times,” Luke noted. He’d wondered why such a situation hadn’t popped up sooner, not that he hadn’t minded the lack of hassle that came with staying along their small stretch of the river. Still, he figured the city could use all of the help it could get in supplying its slowly growing population.

“I’d heard lately there was a mass of refugees who had fled to Lucis coming back home. Such a large explosion of people means more hands on deck and more mouths to feed. We, being the closest to the capital, were first in line for pickings, although no doubt the other villages will be sending out their goods and services soon enough.”

Caius looked over Luke then, a small worry line appearing in between his eyebrows.
“I do hope you’re up to the task,” he quipped after a moment of silence. Luke fought the urge to grimace. Was he looking forward to the impending stress this would put on him and his leg? Certainly not. But he was up for the task. If it meant helping those in need, he’d grin and bear it. Besides, this was his job after all. He knew better than to say no to his boss.

“I’ll be fine. Let’s get going.”
Chapter 3

Ignis frowned as the reports were read to him.

The entirety of Meldacio had been caught in a blaze that had razed newly rebuilt homes and shops to the ground. It was as if the world wanted to work against Lucis, if only for the simple sin of wanting to rebuild itself. Incidents had popped up all over the kingdom—former kingdom, what with towns having shortages of supplies or villages falling victim to natural disasters. Some people even reported being attacked by what was left of the wildlife, possibly hinting at a negative side effect of the scourge on the creatures.

Though that would be impossible, Ignis would think, considering the entire reason for Noct’s sacrif—for Noct’s deeds was to eliminate the starscourge and the blanket of darkness it had brought along with it. And yet the signs of something gone awry were hard to ignore. If not the starscourge, then something else must have been affecting the animals. And if there was something, was it possibly in the food. He’d hoped there wouldn’t be a food born epidemic on their hands. So soon after emerging from the seemingly endless darkness, the last thing Lucis, and the rest of the world in fact, needed was a sickness picking off what was left.

As if to compound upon the veritable torrent of problems, many Lucian citizens were calling for any surviving residents of Niflheim to suffer reparations for their emperor’s crimes. It was an understandable anger the people felt, but it was far misplaced. Many of those Niflheim citizens were simply ordinary people, like the rest, who wished to live in peace. They’d had no choice in the matter of Emperor Iedolas’ decisions, and many of them were lucky to make it out of their homeland alive after the fallout of his actions. Those who weren’t…well, Ignis didn’t want to think about the number of broken families and missing loved ones left in the aftermath. These people were hardly deserving of Lucis’ ire, and Ignis was finding himself suffering migraines more and more frequently with each angry complaint from a mob of Insomnians calling for anyone who so much as carries Niflheim ancestry in their blood to be immediately thrown in prison. Never mind that the legal system was still in disarray what with the prisons having either been destroyed in the attack over a decade ago or having crumbled whilst the world was in ruin. The entire debacle had left Prompto terrified to even go outside, despite the fact that the only people who knew of his origins were either dead or standing in this very room.

Speaking of Prompto, the man had gone silent after a while, causing Ignis to raise his head in the gunner’s direction.

“Something wrong, Prompto?”

“Hmm?” There was a short pause. “Oh, nothing wrong. Just looking over this letter from Aranea. Says she’s been busy taking refugees back to their homelands.”

A rustling of paper was heard as Prompto likely set all of the reports down, having finished reading the most important ones to Ignis. His presence was felt beside Ignis as he sat down on the desk. Ignis had long since stopped protesting it.

“I’d say that solves the complaints about the Niflheim residents hanging around Lucis. Once they go back, everyone can refocus on rebuilding their homes instead of rioting in the streets,” he laughed lightly. His words were far from joking, however. There had been more than enough unrest in the streets in protest to Lucis having become a haven to people all over the world, including those of Niflheim.
Ignis sighed. “I’d hoped to avoid any rioting in the streets, but any news that might possibly disperse the angry crowds is good news.”

“You can say that again,” Gladio added. “The police force is still scrambling to figure out which criminals went missing from their systems and which kicked the bucket during the scourge.”

Judging by the direction his voice came from, he was standing by the window looking out over the city. He’d had a lot on his own plate, what with his attempts to reorganize the crownguard…or rather, what was left of it. Cor, Monica and Dustin had all managed to survive the ten years and were using all the resources they had to set up a new city security system not only within the police force but within the new crownguard. If that was even what it was called anymore. Without a king, there wasn’t really a crown to protect. And in honor of Noct, Ignis refused to take the title upon himself, even if he was essentially fulfilling all of the royal duties.

Gladio’s help had been invaluable the entire time. Though the older man had expressed doubt in his ability to serve in his political role, he’d done so smoothly and without complaint. His help in restoring the city, his advice in handling the complaints of the common folk and his frequent correspondence with Cor and Monica kept Ignis in the loop without overloading him with work. Not that Prompto had been a slouch either. He handled what Ignis’ disability did not allow him to, making the entire group effort more than necessary. Ignis was beyond grateful for his friends…brothers for that alone.

Unfortunately, though, even their help never kept every issue under control.

“I’m sure that can be added to the list of ‘problems the police will focus on for a few months until the trail runs dry and they’ve realized they’ve wasted their time’,” Ignis sighed. Prompto snorted.

“Oh yeah, like that zombie behemoth frenzy a couple months ago,” he chuckled. Ignis didn’t even want to hear about that fiasco again. An utter waste of resources, that’s what that had been.

“Rumors about undead behemoths aside, the whole force is in complete chaos. Most former officers are either missing or dead and there’s been barely any opportunity to train new recruits in the academy. The crownguard ain’t doing much better. Cor’s been off searching for any more ‘holes’ people may have hidden in during those ten years, so it’s only me and Monica training any newbies. Dustin disappeared with Talcott about a week ago, so that’s extra help we no longer have. Gods even know what they’re up to,” Gladio grunted. His voice, Ignis noted, sounded distant. An observation that had slowly become more frequent throughout the past few months. It was only slightly more bearable than the silent anguish Gladio had suffered through following Noct’s…well, following the events that occurred to win the city and the sunlight back. It was still worrisome, however. Gladio kept busy with his own work, and he did so quite diligently, but his attempts to lock away his feelings were only hurting him more than helping him.

Ignis only wished he knew what to say to ease the pain. But there was nothing. No words came to him. He could only play along and hope that, with time, Gladio might start to heal. Perhaps, eventually, they all might start to heal.

“I’m sure whatever it is,” Ignis responded quietly, unconsciously acclimating his own tone to fit Gladio’s, “it must be important. Dustin’s not the type to up and leave without warning under normal circumstances.”

“…Maybe he found more refugees too,” Prompto added tentatively, likely having noticed the shift in atmosphere.

“Doubt it,” Gladio said. “He’d have clued us in if that was the case.”
Undoubtedly, though that still left the question of what he was doing that was so important. And why he’d taken Talcott with him, leaving even fewer hands to manage the remains of the crownguard. They would need more hands on deck if they wanted the law system to be in a functioning state.

“Gladio, have you asked Iris if she might be interested in joining the crownguard?”

Iris the Daemon Slayer would have been a more than welcome addition after all. And an inspiring one at that. Being the youngest Amicitia, not much was expected of her beyond what a normal teenage girl might get up to, especially one of nobility. She wasn’t expected to shield any Caelum family members, she wasn’t expected to hold a place in court, and she certainly wasn’t expected to fight daemons. That her efforts during the scourge had kept safe the lives of countless Lestallum residents and refugees had earned her the respect of the entire city of Lestallum, and even beyond. Her mere presence in the crownguard would’ve not only inspired the people, but possibly encouraged more to join.

“If you’re wondering if she’d help in getting Insomnia’s streets under control then I doubt it. She’s too busy trying to clean up Lestallum to bother coming back home just yet. Honestly, I’m not even sure she’s planning on coming back at all.”

Ignis exhaled through his nose, resisting the urge to rub his temples. They really could use all the help they could get. Gladio’s words were a bit of a blow to the small sliver of hope that had crepted up on Ignis. They’d have to only hope that Iris might later consider joining the crownguard, on top of waiting for Cor, Dustin and Talcott to come back.

And that was only a small section of the multitude of subjects that called for Ignis’ attention. On top of the Meldacio incident, the wildlife sickness and the street riots, he’d had a whole other group of people vying for his attention. What little of the former council’s family and successors survived wished to reestablish Lucis’ legislature, what with their parents and grandparents having been killed in the initial attack on Insomnia. They’d been slowly but surely worming their way into the forefront of Ignis’ mental list of concerns. And he was sure they had some opinions he would not agree with.

It was going to be a long day.

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Luke wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, squinting into the sunlight. It wasn’t a particularly hot day, but the moderate temperature stacked with the amount of physical activity he and his team had been up to added up quickly. They’d lost one of their nets along the river, likely due to the stress of such old netting being used extensively for the first time in years and the added issue of any plant life under the water snagging the bottom of the net. The river lining the valleys of Zoldara Henge was well known for a number of things, including its multiple waterfalls and the array of exotic wildlife that survived off of its banks. As well as being known for its particularly fast waters. Perfect for utilizing large fishing vessels on, but unfortunately it meant the net was lost to the crew the moment it left the vicinity of the boat. With no hope of getting it back, they hadn’t even bothered to try and were instead using their remaining net for double duty. Which meant working double duty to ensure the haul they promised to bring into Fenestala’s docks was according to contract. Otherwise they could kiss their paychecks goodbye.

It was beyond tiring, but the promise of relaxation once they reached those docks, and the accompanying gil that would fund their stay, was enough of an incentive to keep working. If there was one thing Luke was grateful for concerning whatever his old life was, it was that he had certainly worked out enough. He doubted he’d still be on his feet if he hadn’t kept in shape.
even that was starting to stretch thin. All of the bending over and scurrying back and forth across the deck had his back and his leg screaming for relief. He was doing a well enough job of pushing through it, but he felt as if his energy was slowly and steadily being sucked out of him. Eventually he’d run dry. Just the thought made him grit his teeth. He couldn’t afford to complain now, not if he wanted to conserve what energy he had left.

He wasn’t the only one feeling the strain, however. The rest of his team was huffing their way through the repetitive motions as they, too, ran about the boat fulfilling their individual duties. All on double time and in this climate. Not to mention, everyone was incredibly cautious about losing their remaining net. Caius would have to buy a new one, possibly more than one if he could afford it, as well as putting any maintenance into the boat to ensure that it would handle the trip back. Something to worry about once they reached the city, which, if Luke was correct, would be in a few more hours.

Though at the rate time was moving, Luke was almost half certain it’d take them a few months to reach the docks. Minutes were starting to feel like hours to him, and the fast pace at which he had to force himself to keep moving was making the wait unbearable. He was sure his hands were shaking as he helped pull in the newest catch. His fellow fishermen sent him empathetic looks as they helped haul the net onto the boat. Being men in their middle age, Luke was sure they understood the fatigue that was starting to set in quite well. And they had been doing this all their lives. Then again, situations like this were rare for such a small fishing business from a tiny village just down river of the city, nearly tucked away in how inconsequential it was. They may have lucked out with this contract due to the money, but they’d never had to work this hard with such little time on their hands, despite how slowly it seemed to be moving.

When they’d finally reached the docks of Fenestala, it had felt like a blessing. After the boat was docked, Caius hopped off of the deck with plans to search for his contractor. He’d told the team to sit tight and take a break for a while until it was time to start carting the fish off. Luke easily took that moment to sit on a crate, rubbing his knee as he looked over the city entrance. It was mostly flat terrain, lined with buildings and bustling streets. This being the easiest entrance into Fenestala by boat, the docks also served as a port, and thus were generally rife with activity. Even after the scourge, newly returned citizens found a way to thrive. Shops and parlors had found their anchors here, and many schools and businesses preferred to operate here as opposed to higher up the mountains where the trains ran. In fact, now more than ever, people tended to avoid the highest points of the city, tucked away in their fairy tale-like splendor and housing the remains of Fenestala Manor. Luke had heard from many in his village that no one dared touch the Manor after the deaths of Lord Ravus and Lady Lunafreya. There was no need to disturb the resting place of the royal family further.

Though he’d also heard that there’d been a statue of the late Oracle erected in the streets of the port after the Dawn arrived. Luke considered visiting it, if only to pay his respects. While he’d never known the Oracle, he knew that many respected and adored her. She must’ve been worth her salt to have elicited such a response from the people.

Luke looked up as a shadow hovered over him. The second youngest of the team at the ripe age of forty four, Teran Roux sat down next to Luke, sighing tiredly.

“Y’know, I ‘aven’t been to Fen’stala since I was a lad,” he sighed, holding up a flattened out hand level with his chest, “When I was ‘bout yea high. Came t’ see the Oracle w’ my gran. My da’ had been attack’d by a daemon, y’see, an’ end’d up w’ a bad case o’ starscourge.”

Luke nodded along to the story. He’d heard many a people from his village mention their own unfortunate encounters with daemons, especially during the decade of scourge. Though he’d never
heard this particular story from Teran.

“Th’ Oracle at the time was Queen Sylva, jus’ crowned at tha’. She’d taken one look at gran’s long face and immediately asked t’ be taken to th’ village. Kind woman, tha’ was.” Teran looked out into the town wistfully, likely reliving this memory in his mind. “I ‘eard her daugh’er was jus’ as well. Would’ve liked t’ meet the girl. A sad end she met, I’d say.”

Luke grinned wryly. “I’m sensing an ulterior motive here. You’re not usually one to sit me down for story time.”

They both glanced over at their fellow teammate, Grier, a hulking giant of a man born in Cartanica. The resident storyteller. Half of the time, no one was even sure if the tales he told were true. He certainly enjoyed making a spectacle more than anything.

“That’s usually his job,” Luke continued. Teran burst into laughter, his ginger curls bouncing with the movement as he patted Luke’s shoulder. Well, it was likely supposed to be patting but it felt more like getting hit with the wide end of an oar.

“Nothin’ gets pass’d you, dun’it? I’m just sayin’ maybe speak a pray’r to the young Oracle’s statue. She deserv’s it. An’ who knows, maybe the gods’ll ‘ear it and give ye some o’your mem’ry back!”

Luke only nodded, having planned to do so anyway. His grin thinned out however, an unsure expression at Teran’s words. He didn’t particularly want his memories back. At first, standing at the edge of the village grimy and run down, he did harbor a small, instinctual curiosity as to who he was. No one in the village had recognized him, not a surprising thing as Syldra Village had kept to itself without much outside intervention aside from the occasional immigrant, for centuries. But Luke wanted some sign, no matter how small, that would lead him to a clue about why he’d ended up in a Zoldara forest in an expensive suit and burdened with immense pain. He’d gotten none from his clothes, aside from the fact that he’d probably been someone at least somewhat important to have been able to afford it. Hell, his knee brace was gold plated, hence why he kept it under his clothes. The suit had no indication of his identity, no wallet or I.D. or even a piece of technology like a cellphone. Odd, considering he had since started to guess that he may have been born in Lucis, considering his physical appearance and the Lucian brand of the suit (so said the village tailor when she bought it off of him, wide eyed and frenetic). There had been no name on the suit, and while the leg brace had initials carved into it, they’d been wholly unhelpful. He had no idea who N.C. was supposed to be. Even the handkerchief had been unhelpful, with only the handwritten message to offer. He’d wanted to know more.

Then the nightmares had started. They were infrequent, but they were still violent and despairing. He’d see the faces of the gods looming over him, hear the calls of daemons in the night, and experience the flashing of blue light as a dozen or so weapons pierced his body over and over again. He saw swords and fire and blood, and listened as the cackling voice of a faceless enemy taunted him while he lay helpless. He wondered if these were the sorts of memories he had to look forward to, should he get them back. He thought to himself, bitterly, that maybe he didn’t want them back after all if that was the case. He’d never told anyone about this, though. Not even Caius and Ava knew. He’d keep these nightmares closed off from everyone, and hopefully, eventually maybe even himself. Luke was happy where he was now. His past would only ruin that.

“I’ll make sure to give the statue a visit,” Luke told Teran. And he would. He’d offer a prayer up to it, admire the artwork for a bit, and then move on with his evening. There was nothing he needed to ask for. He’d get what else he needed from his own hard work.

“You do jus’ tha’. I know I’ll be seein’ the lass. Got’a pray f’ the family, y’know. If it wa’n’t for
“th’ Lady’s mum, I wouldn’ still have m’ da’,” Teran said. He stood up again, holding a hand out to Luke. Luke gratefully took the offered help, knowing that if he tried to stand on his own he’d be at it all day. He doubted he’d be out in the port for very long, likely ending up at whatever cheap hotel Caius would’ve chosen for his crew. As long as there was a shower and a bed, he didn’t care what sort of place it was. As much as Luke loved fishing, he didn’t exactly want to smell like it.

He and Teran both stepped off of the boat, followed by a few of their teammates. Grier, bronze skinned and tall as a mountain, nearly glinted in the little bit of sunlight left over from the impending dusk as he strode in front of the rest. He’d work as a beacon to the rest of them, a sign that if they ever got lost in the city, they’d only have to search the streets for Grier. And likely listen out for his booming voice as he recounted some tall tale to whatever unlucky listener he managed to drag into his pull. He always liked having a new audience too, mostly because the rest of the crew tended to roll their eyes at him. Behind Luke and Teran, on the other end of the spectrum stood the short and round Jacque, bespectacled and pale skinned. A native to Syldra village, like most of them. He muttered, particularly loudly, to himself about how ready he was to dive into a bed. Despite his appearance, he was a particularly hard worker and Luke knew he deserved his rest. He’d all but broken his glasses a few times attempting to lug the net onboard. Beside him, the second oldest of the crew just behind Caius himself. Montblanc. He stared up at the skyline of the city with a certain amount of disdain. Never liked big cities, he’d always say. Too many people, too smelly, too stuffy, too cramped…the list could go on. And he’d made it clear, even after all these years, that he despised the Empire. Which, of course, had blatantly occupied big cities such as Fenestala, Gralea and Altissia. Luke was surprised Montblanc had even stepped off the boat this soon, considering it was likely the white-haired man would have avoided setting foot in the city for as long as possible. Then again, he too was likely too exhausted to care.

Luke broke off from the group once they’d reached the streets, waving to the other men as they continued on. He’d take the time to explore Fenestala for himself; after all, he’d never been there before what with his small company staying closer to the village waters rather than taking trips up to the city. Syldra had little to offer a city such as this besides food, which was usually picked up by city cargo boats as they made rounds through the collection of mountain villages, and so the residents usually kept to themselves. That there was even the small number of people there that weren’t born in the village was a surprise to most. Syldra was so out of the way, even Niflheim hadn’t bothered with it.

Luke having not known, or rather not remembered, anything other than that tiny village, was in awe at the sights of Fenestala. He’d heard stories from Caius about what the city looked like, but those descriptions hadn’t matched up to the real thing. The architecture of the buildings was clearly centuries old, with many important structures built from marble or stone. A courthouse stood tall at the end of the main street, blocked off slightly by a procession of busy citizens, milling about as they completed their daily tasks. Syldra had little to offer a city such as this besides food, which was usually picked up by city cargo boats as they made rounds through the collection of mountain villages, and so the residents usually kept to themselves. That there was even the small number of people there that weren’t born in the village was a surprise to most. Syldra was so out of the way, even Niflheim hadn’t bothered with it.

And speaking of the royal family…

Luke knew that Lady Lunafreya’s statue would lie somewhere along the main road. He started slowly on his path down that very road, limping slightly at the pain in his leg. He’d half a mind to leave the prayer and respects for the next day and just find that hotel, but he knew he’d feel bad if
he didn’t see the statue after promising both Teran and himself. It’d just be a quick look anyway. He’d keep the prayer short, likely only addressing Shiva as she was said to have been the kindest to humanity, and then he’d head to whatever room his boss had set him up in. Maybe he might sit somewhere and admire the statue for a bit, just to catch some rest for his leg…

Ah. There she was.

Just off the side of the main road, halfway to the courthouse, stood tall a gleaming white statue of Lunafreya Nox Fleuret dressed in her holy robes and holding an intricate trident. A circular fountain surrounded her at her feet, keeping the populace from touching the statue but still allowing them to sit at its edge as they viewed her. Regal though she looked, her face was carved youthful and open. Luke looked up at the statue with a saddened, furrowed brow. He’d heard she was only twenty four when she died, protecting the young king of Lucis from the wrath of the Hydrean. A shame, really. One was still just exiting the budding stage of life at that age, and yet she was fully prepared to die for her cause. Maybe he’d pray a little longer for her and her family. None of them deserved what happened to them, from what he’d heard. Even after Lord Ravus had joined the Empire, his entire goal was solely to protect his sister. And Queen Sylva herself had apparently died protecting her son. They all deserved his respects as far as he was concerned.

“—ad enough of all this loafing around. C’mon, we’re heading back to the ship.”

Luke barely avoided bumping into someone as they briskly walked in front of him. Tired as he was, he’d still managed to brush them. Her. ‘They’ were a woman. A bit too irritated at the almost-collision, he didn’t bother to excuse himself and kept walking forward. That must not have been enough for the other, though.

“Watch it, Clumsy, I’m not in the mood to…”

She trailed off when he turned to growl a response back at her. He stopped in his tracks, however, when he noticed her appearance. Dressed in black, draconic armor, complete with a barred helmet, an old remnant of Niflheim stood before Luke. Though she was less associated with the Empire nowadays and more concerned with transporting refugees back to their homelands, or so he’d heard. He knew nothing about the woman otherwise, except for her name.

Aranea Highwind pulled off her helmet to stare with wide greens eyes at Luke, her jaw dropping open.
“Well fuck me sideways. You’re supposed to be dead.”

Luke blinked, completely at a loss of what to say. After all, how did one respond the Infamous Dragoon Highwind accusing them of living when they were supposedly meant to be otherwise?

“Well?”

“Um?” she mocked. “‘Um’ my ass. The hell are you doing in Tenebrae?”

Aranea Highwind, one of the strongest former officials of the Niflheim army, crossed her arms and cocked her hip to the side, conversing with him casually. Luke, struggling to stand straight at all when he was so close to getting to rest for a bit, stared in utter confusion at the woman. Why would Aranea Highwind want to know why some random fisherman was in Tenebrae?

“I…live here?” he told her, though the questioning inflection was an unintentional side effect of his perplexity.

“Ha! That’s rich!” she snorted. “Wait ‘til the guys hear this.”

She turned to the two men behind her, both also dressed in Niflheim uniforms belying stations of high caliber. And both also staring at Luke as if they’d seen a ghost.

Well, he supposed they must’ve been seeing one, if he was supposed to be dead. Now the question was, just why was he supposed to be dead?

“Biggs, Wedge. Send word out to Lucis. I get the feeling those three are in for a surprise.”

As she turned away, Luke took the opportunity to sit down at the edge of the fountain, watching quizzically as Aranea and her two men negotiated just how they were supposed to send this message to Lucis. A small part of him entertained the thought that Aranea actually knew him, but that was ludicrous. What would a Niflheim Dragoon have to do with him, a small fisherman living in Tenebrae?

He felt a headache coming on.

“Well, Your Highness? You comin’ or not?”

Luke raised both eyebrows now, unsure if she was being sarcastic. If she was, he had to wonder what he did to deserve that. To her, at least. If she wasn’t…he had to wonder how she hasn’t realized by now that she seriously had the wrong guy.
“I think you have me confused with someone,” he told her, slow and unsure, as he wasn’t entirely sure what to expect from her.

She only snorted though.

“Please, Noct, you can drop the act. I don’t know why you’re hiding out in Tenebrae—”

“Who the hell is Noct?”

Aranea paused then, her own brow furrowing. Silently, she looked Luke over, seeming almost to second guess herself. A hand was placed at her chin contemplatively and she narrowed her eyes at him, studying him closely. Finally, she shook her head.

“I’m not seeing things. You’re definitely standing in front of me, and you’re definitely Noctis Lucis Caelum. So what the hell happened to you?” she mumbled to herself, though Luke could hear her loud and clear. Noctis Lucis Caelum? Now _that_ was rich, confusing him with the dead king of Lucis.

“Heh, right. Noctis Lucis Caelum. And I guess that makes you Aldercapt’s long lost daughter, huh?”

She rolled her eyes at his comment, but otherwise didn’t budge. Still she stared at him, as if trying to piece him apart and then puzzle him back together. It was unnerving. And, frankly, unnecessary. Whoever he was before he was Luke, he doubted it was the godsdamned king of Lucis. Who just so happened to be…dead…

_You’re supposed to be dead_, she’d said.

Now this was getting weird, on top of being nonsensical. Groaning a bit with the effort, he stood from his perch, his knees bent as he tried stubbornly to muscle through the aches.

“Look, this was an…_interesting_ experience meeting you Ms. Highwind, but I need to get going to the hotel.”

Her hand shot out as he tried to pass, grabbing his arm tightly. Behind her, her two men stared owlishly at him, flabbergasted.

“Blimey, ‘e just called ‘er _Miss,_” one of them whispered to the other.

Aranea herself was also wide-eyed once again, watching Luke as if he was some sort of confused, maddened animal. Her hand squeezed his arm harder when he tried to pull away, though it seemed she’d done it unconsciously. Her mouth opened for a split second, as if she wanted to speak, before closing again. Still holding on to him, she turned to the two men behind her and nodded to them. They walked off back down the main road with determined steps. Finally, Aranea slowly loosened her grip on Luke’s arm.

“You’re seriously…you really don’t know who you are?”

Again, Luke started to grow worried. One trip to Fenestala and all of a sudden someone was claiming to know who he was? And that this past identity was that of a Lucian king? This was too much…

“Look, I’m just Luke. Whoever I was before, it just… It doesn’t matter,” he told her as he backed away. With one last glance, he walked off, feeling the Dragoon’s eyes on his back the entire time. He didn’t turn back. Instead, he kept his eyes peeled for any of his coworkers, hoping to find
someone who might point him in the direction of whatever hotel Caius might have chosen for the team. Though he’d be paying for his own room, he knew Caius wanted them to stay together so he wouldn’t be searching for anyone come time to leave. As of now, though, all Luke wanted was a warm shower and a bed. He didn’t want to hear anymore nonsense about being King Noctis or coming back from the dead. Utterly ridiculous. King Noctis died on his throne, leaving naught but a bloodstain and a broken country behind. Luke was just a fisherman from a small Tenebraen village.

That’s all he wanted to be.

-o-o-o-o-

Aranea watched Noctis hobble off, clearly favoring his right leg. Under his baggy workman’s clothes was a slight outline of something around his knee…a brace it seemed. But Aranea didn’t need any other identifiers to come to the conclusion she had. Despite having not seen him in over a decade, she easily recognized his face. That was the King of Lucis alright; back from the dead to boot. Though he may have been going by another name, he may have looked far scruffier than the pretty-boy face she was used to seeing on him, and he may have finally grown into himself from the scrawny kid he used to be, he still spoke the same, still held himself the same, and still gave the same infuriating lip, the snarky little hobgoblin.

Now the big questions were: how did he live, why was he in Tenebrae, and why didn’t he know who he was?

Aranea put a hand to her chin, puzzling through the situation she was presented with. When she’d heard from the boys again, sans their King, they’d told her that all they’d found at the scene was a spatter of blood on the throne. No body. She’d no doubt that Noctis’ disappearance and subsequent survival were the work of the gods, after all she’d seen the brat summon one of them in the middle of a daemon fight so she couldn’t deny Noctis had their favor, but why would they save him if he was meant to die? And why take his memory away?

Sighing, she shook her head through the migraine starting to sprout between her eyes. She had honestly come here to do her good deeds, rack up some good karma and leave it at that. She’d been taking refugees back to their homelands for the better part of half a year now. That was her purpose here, not investigating dead kings come back to life. She’d tell his friends about her discovery…if there really was a discovery, after all maybe Noctis did have some freaky look alike wandering around Tenebrae. But this wasn’t something easily brushed off or ignored. Lucis was running on fumes. It could use its king, if only as a symbol of hope.

“Biggs, Wedge, c’mon,” she told her men, jerking her head in the opposite direction of where Noctis had gone. They had their own set up deeper in town, away from the noise. An easy spot to stow a bunch of magitek engines.

“We ain’t going after ‘im?” Wedge asked, glancing back down the road.

“Nah. If he wants to be ‘just Luke’ then we’ll let him. We can tell the boys, after all I’m sure they’ll wanna know, but we have more important things to do than chase him around.”

And she meant it. She was getting too old to split her attention between so many things at once, loath as she was to admit it. Her priority would be the refugees, just as it has been. If anything, those boys were lucky she’d be making a run back to Lucis soon. They’d get to hear the news in person. Goodie for them. No need to waste resources trying to send a message. Not when technology suffered one hell of a blow during the last ten years. That magitek even worked at all was just as mystifying as it was encouraging. Unfortunately, it was one of the few things left that
Plenty of children were now growing up not even knowing what cellphones or televisions were. Those who still had access to such things were few and far between. And to even hope for a decent cellphone signal meant living in Lucis was a necessity. Which meant Aranea would’ve had to fight for a proper radio signal or send another damn letter. Better she just tell them anyway. They deserved to hear this directly. She wouldn’t begrudge them that.

“We’ve gotta head out in the morning anyway, so as I said before, we’re heading back to the ship.” Though it barely qualified as an airship, but she’d take what she could get. It carried passengers back and forth well enough and, frankly, that’s all she needed it to do.

They would check their supplies, refuel with their reserves, maybe finally clean the thing a little because gods could those refugees make a mess, and rest up for their trip halfway across the world. This week’s was only one batch of Tenebraens brought home, and most of them lived in Ulwaat. She hadn’t even gotten around to those who lived in Piztala, though to be fair, most who lived out in the boonies before the scourge were dead now anyway. The few that lived in Piztala wouldn’t take much effort to transport. She’d save them for last, let them recoup their losses and make decisions on how to revitalize their farmland. She’d likely be making another trip into the mountains for those that either lived in the capital city or close to it, after all she wasn’t making trips to every little village along the river, but hopefully that would be the last. She’d feel more relieved about that if not for the obvious losses Fenestala and its surrounding villages had taken to their populations. This city used to be vibrant, from what she remembered. Now it was only barely scraping by. Aranea doubted all of her ships would be filled by even the next round of refugees.

She supposed, once they took off, that before she worried about all of that, she’d better plan a detour to Insomnia. Or what was left of it.
Gladio rubbed the skin between his eyebrows, exasperated. He stood silently behind Ignis as the blind man attempted to puzzle through yet another pointless council meeting. This new council was young, filled with a lot of inexperienced members who had been pushed into the former positions of their elders after the old council was killed in the invasion. It certainly showed in how they conducted themselves. The oldest members were maybe in their late thirties to early forties, having only barely started training for their eventual positions on the council. They knew how council meetings were meant to be held, but they sure didn’t know how to actually hold them. What they’d observed during their sit-ins left them barely knowledgeable and incapable of handling themselves like adults as they quickly devolved into shouting matches. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the youngest member was sixteen. Gladio let that speak for itself.

This time they’d all found the subject of their ire to be the lack of expansion outside of the metropolitan area. Which would have been pointless, Gladio thought, as there was barely enough population to even cover the inner city. Who would possibly want to leave the comfort of human interaction to go venture out into the skeleton that was all that remained of the suburbs? Sure some might find their homes intact, some might find their workplaces standing sturdy and their supermarkets stocked full with the rotten remains of produce and their streets whole, safe from the ripping and tearing of gunfire. These areas had not been attacked by Niflheim all those years ago. What wear they suffered mostly came from daemon attacks. Gladio doubted anyone out there survived those. Despite this, the new council debated over whether or not it was time to start kicking people out of the inner city, more than likely to encourage civilians to start making their own living and stop sucking up resources the citadel could barely keep in supply. For the most part, Insomnia had enough stored up in warehouses around the city to remain self-sufficient, but soon enough they would need to start ‘importing’ from the rest of the kingdom. Which was worrisome after new reports trickled in of the sickness infecting the animals now spreading to humans. Likely through eating their meat. It had left more than a few bedridden, vomiting uncontrollably and lapsing periodically into unconsciousness. It was only a matter of time before this reached Insomnia.

“We can’t afford to keep housing an entire city’s worth of people in one little area,” Primus, the now-head Lord of House Fiducia and a distant relative of N—the late king’s on his mother’s side. The man was a pain at the best of times, shrewd and demanding. He’d been arguing his case for the past half-hour now, overtalking any and everyone who dared oppose him.

“That’s nonsense,” responded Aurelia, now-head of House Bellum and the calmest voice amid the chaos despite her name. At only thirty five, barely older than Gladio himself, she been able to keep her cool better than most. But even she was starting to show signs of the meeting taking its toll. She glared down her nose at Primus. “You expect a handful of lost, homeless and hungry civilians to suddenly pick themselves up on their feet and sustain themselves? Sending people out into the suburbs is the perfect way to lose trust in our city’s populace, especially once they realized we’ve sent them out there with nothing.”
Before she’d even finished talking, Primus was practically growling at her.

“The only nonsense I hear is you spouting on about taking care of these multitudes of families out of our own pocket. And more and more of them are popping out of the woodwork by the second. The citadel coffers may have been untouched by the empire, but they’ll run dry all the same by the time we’re done giving out handouts!”

Immediately the entire table erupted once again into arguments and insults. Plessia Giounanus, the sole teenager of the group, quietly hunched further in her chair as if she was trying her hardest to disappear. Gladio felt bad for the girl. At only six, she’d lost her entire family to the invasion and just barely managed to luck out on surviving. She’d spent most of her life in darkness. Now, having already lost out on a normal childhood, she was the head of an empty house and stuck on a council deciding on the future of a city she barely remembered. It made Gladio sick to his stomach to think of the number of kids who’d suffered similar fates. Being left without homes and families and growing up having barely known what sunlight felt like, if ever. How many of those children had to wander, cold and alone, through the daemon infested landscape of Lucis or beyond until they eventually found a haven? How many of them never made it to that haven. He thought of his sister, of how thankful he was that she’d escaped the worst of all of the disasters in her life. That she’d trained so hard with Cor while he was out in the wilderness fighting daemons and feeling sorry for himself, upset at the sour note he’d left off with his king before N—before he disappeared into the crystal. That she’d become the true daemon-slayer, protecting Lestallum when she wasn’t off looking for survivors. He was proud of her. And he certainly never told her enough.

Maybe he ought to call her after this mess was done with.

He looked down as he heard Ignis let out a quiet sigh. Ignis had been through the ringer and back this entire meeting. After having attempted to gain control of the meeting, a fruitless endeavor for even past kings from what Gladio remembered, he’d instead silently let the madness unfold. He’d had a number of solutions to present to the council, all flushed down the drain the moment the rest of the table had started talking. A suggestion of sampling animal blood to find the source of the sickness, or of gathering farmers that were capable of breeding crops in rough environments, or of forming training programs to help the populace learn to be self-reliant, or of opening trade routes with other countries. None of them were heard over the sound of raised voices and inappropriate insults. Even his suggestion of letting Plessia sit out meetings until she was older was entirely ignored, despite the fact that she clearly had nothing to contribute and didn’t even want to be there.

On Ignis’ right, Prompto yawned and shifted yet again. He’d long since grown tired of the entire mess. Though he’d also been offered an out by Ignis, having not been obligated by any means to oversee Lucian politics, he’d stuck around anyway for the sake of offering support. At first Gladio had thought, rather crassly, that Prompto had just wanted to be in the know. But having watched his dedication to involving himself in meetings, reading reports and paperwork to Ignis, and overall legitimacy trying to make a difference in the streets, Gladio had easily admitted that Prompto deserved to be there just as much as anyone. Well, figuratively speaking. No one really deserved to listen to this load of chocobo crap they called a council. If anything, Gladio was impressed Prompto was still there after they’d been stuck in this meeting for what was now starting to breach six hours. Even Gladio was starting to feel exhausted and he hadn’t even bothered joining in. He wished he could say he cared enough to. Not that he didn’t care about his city, it was home after all, but it was missing some of the key components that give it its soul.

He grit his teeth as a certain face flashed across his mind’s eye. No need delving into those sorts of thoughts.

Instead, as the meeting finally ended when Primus threw his hands up and stormed out of the room,
he laid a hand on Ignis’ shoulder, hopefully giving the man some small amount of comfort. Ignis’ head turned towards him and he sighed once again. Prompto wasn’t far behind him.

“Glad that’s over. Gods, that was like sticking cats and dogs in a room and watching them fight over scraps,” Prompto said, stretching his arms over his head and yawning once again.

Gladio could’ve thought of worse things to call whatever that meeting was. Way worse things.

“The scraps of our city are worth fighting for…but not over,” Ignis answered. “That entire meeting was a disorganized mess. I’ll have to devise an agenda for the council to follow, speak with them individually on their concerns and attempt to salvage some sort of solution that all can agree upon so that we can start getting people off of the streets.”

“We’ll have to,” Gladio added, damn sure to not let Ignis try to do all of that on his own. “And I doubt that’ll make much difference. Not with Primus constantly trying to assert himself over everybody else.”

“Hmph. Primus is another problem to deal with entirely,” Ignis noted, a hand on his chin.

Primus was another problem, just to compile onto the mountain of problems they already had on their plate. Being the distant cousin of Aulea Lucis Caelum gave him a closer claim to the throne than Ignis had. Hell, technically Gladio himself had a closer claim than Ignis, not that he’d ever try for it. Primus had made it clear how well he knew this too. Considering how obnoxious he was when it came to holding a simple meeting however, it was no wonder no one really trusted him with a kingdom. All he’d done at this point was make himself a bigger thorn in Ignis’ side, something Ignis really didn’t need right now.

“We’ll have to leave him be for now, though,” Ignis continued. “He can’t take much action without the consent of the entire council. Our priority is Insomnia and its residents.”

“True that. I know we were supposed to do this whole meeting thing to get the council to agree with your plans, but I figured I’d at least try and get a volunteer center together to help people get back on their feet. It’s not the professional training you wanted Iggy, but it’s a start,” Prompto said.

Ignis raised his eyebrows, glancing in Prompto’s direction. “You’ve been busy.”

Prompto laughed sheepishly. Despite his words, Ignis held no ire in his tone. If anything, he seemed pleased. Gladio could agree with that sentiment. Prompto had been busy, which was better than Gladio could say for himself. He’d done what he could where he could, but he’d done it so automatically, so emotionlessly, as if he was completely detached from reality, for what had been months. He was sure he could do more, push himself more. He needed to let go. He was only hurting himself and his city at this point. If he could be as proactive as Prompto, carrying out some of Ignis’ plans on his own time, he was sure he’d accomplish more than the bare minimum.

Exhaling a huff of breath through his nose, Gladio moved away from Ignis and clapped Prompto’s back as he walked by. He was aware of the eyes on his back, watching as he left the room. While Gladio was sure they were only worried about them, he couldn’t help the small amount of exasperation at being monitored so closely. As if he’d run himself off a cliff if they weren’t careful. He wasn’t that out of it, nowhere near in fact. He had a promise to keep, and he couldn’t walk very tall if he let himself fall that far. Hence why he kept himself so busy. It made things so much easier to focus on improving life for those who survived the scourge. To make himself useful. What with everyone around him trying their hardest to do the same, it wasn’t so hard to fall into step fixing every little problem that crawled out of the woodwork in Insomnia. And beyond.
Speaking of…

Pulling out his phone, he searched through his contacts for Iris’ number. Lucky as he was that the service towers still worked, their signals were weak and he’d be lucky to even get a call to go through, that is if he caught Iris when she wasn’t busy. Gladio could only wait patiently as Iris’ phone rang, standing outside of the meeting room as citadel staff occasionally passed by, nodding to him in greeting.

The signal dropped.

Sighing and rolling his eyes, he waited for it to come back and tried again.

“What?”

And there it was.

“Iris.”

“Oh, Gladdy. How are you?”

Gladio felt a smile pull at his lips. That was his little sister alright, always checking on him before he got the chance to play the overprotective brother role. Not that he wouldn’t anyway.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

Iris’ responding chuckle was a bit farther from the receiver. He raised an eyebrow as she seemed to say something to someone else, her voice a bit muffled.

“Yeah, I’ve been doing good,” she said, returning to the phone. “I’m at the plant with Holly right now. It’s gotta undergo some maintenance, so I thought I’d lend a hand where I could.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Uh huh. It’s just routine maintenance, nothing big. But anyway, you never answered my question. How are you?”

Tired? Slightly removed from reality? Still struggling to associate the last ten years with true life? Still struggling to accept it? Accept that he was filling a role his father should have been for a few more years yet? Accept that his home was in ruins? That the world’s population had dropped dramatically and wouldn’t see the same level of prosperity for decades, if ever? That the gods, for all their power, hadn’t protected humanity from the scourge? That they’d instead taken an innocent man from the world after forcing him to do their dirty work? That Gladio wouldn’t see, hear, touch that man again in this lifetime?

“I’m doing alright.”

Iris sighed, her breath blowing loudly into the receiver to the point where Gladio had to pull his cellphone away from his ear.

“I know when you’re lying to me, Gladdy,” she said. Gladio huffed out a short laugh.

“Perceptive as always. Seriously though, you don’t need to worry about me. Got work to do after all.”

“What you need is a break,” she told him after a small beat of silence.
“Come visit me in Lestallum some time. Take a load and hang out with your lil’ sis. Unless you’re too cool for that,” she continued, her voice playful at the last sentence.

Gladio snorted at that. He did think seriously about the offer however. He tended to feel better being around his remaining family, Iris’ peppiness and vibrancy rubbing off on him and everyone else around her. He might just take her up on that. Not now of course, but soon.

“Yeah, I guess I will. Take the guys and make it a road trip.” He winced internally at the thought of a road trip, but refused to let something so simple scare him off. “We could all use the break.”

“I’m sure. I hear Ignis is running the kingdom. That’s gotta be stressful.”

“You bet. You lucked out staying in Lestallum. Imagine if you had to hang around here listening to the new council scream at each other.”

“Ouch,” Iris laughed. “Yeah, I’ll stay right here, thank you.”

“Heh. I don’t blame ya.” Anywhere was better than being in that room.

“Hey, I did offer for you to stay out here. But I do get why you want to be in Insomnia. It is home…” Iris trailed off. Gladio understood why she wanted to stay away in Lestallum. No needing to adhere to Amicitia duties, no needing to stress herself out with the reconstruction of the city. No needing to see her former home torn apart. But he couldn’t leave it, even knowing he could escape all of that too.

“Yeah, it is home,” he finally agreed.

“Hmm…”

Iris was silent for a moment, just keeping Gladio company over the phone. He was glad for it. She didn’t really need to say anything for him to appreciate her presence, despite their distance. She may have been his baby sister, and in his mind always would be, but she truly had grown and matured, and her ability to become Gladio’s rock was, slightly guiltily, appreciated.

“Oh!” she said suddenly. Though she couldn’t see it, Gladio raised an eyebrow in question. “That’s Holly. Sorry Gladdy, gotta go. But I’ll talk to you later okay?”

“Yeah. Talk to you later.”

Gladio would look forward to it.
I read through this chapter over and over again and I'm still kinda iffy about it, but it's a thing now so...
A little warning about midway through the chapter for descriptions of blood/violence. Nothing big and it's not very long but I'll leave a note for it anyway.

Luke grimaced at the tiny hotel room, in total disbelief that he’d paid so much gil to essentially sleep in a box. Not that he was vain enough to ask for more, not when he didn’t need excess, but he’d have been quite happy to have paid less. Just saying.

Sighing, he sat down on the bed and rubbed at his leg just above his knee. He’d take a rest for a moment before washing himself up and pulling back the covers, fully intent on sleeping until noon the following day. They’d leave the day after tomorrow, after Caius had finished his business with their contractor. In the meantime, the team would be allowed to roam the city as they took a break before it was time to head out back onto the water. Then it’d be another few days down river, catching more fish for the village. Once they got back, everyone would divvy up their remaining portions of their payment and spend it on whatever necessities they found themselves lacking. Luke didn’t want for too much. He wasn’t exactly the best cook around, and Ava spoiled him too much to give him a chance to learn, so he wasn’t much in need of food. He’d buy the most basic ingredients with which to make the most basic meals and leave it at that. He might restock on any other household amenities he was missing or would soon be in need of, and then take what was left of his earnings and go to the tailor with it. Staying at an inn meant he didn’t so much have bills to pay, but rather a monthly “fee” for staying in his room. He’d be glad when he could finally rectify that.

Slowly, Luke gathered himself as he made his plans for when he and the rest of the team returned home. He slid off his work clothes, wrinkling his nose as the smell of fish clung to them. They’d need to be cleaned once he got home as well. And he’d have to thank Caius for having them on hand. He’d had only one set at home, only needed one set, and they wouldn’t have really survived the trip up river. They were better for leisurely rides up and down Syldra’s stretch of river where the team usually fished. And they were a little tight on him, on top of that. He’d bulked up quite a bit in the past few months, a far cry from the near emaciated form he’d appeared in at the edge of the village. He still limped from the weakness in his knee, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as his initial inability to walk without help. Sliding off the golden knee brace, he rubbed at the skin, red from use and lined with indentations from the metal. The brace was set aside as he stood, wobbling slightly as pressure was placed on his knee, before shuffling into the bathroom. It was, expectedly, miniscule but he only needed running water and a bar of soap so he didn’t quite mind. He washed himself lethargically, barely paying his surroundings any mind as his hands mechanically went through the motions. It was all muscle memory, a blessing considering how tired and detached he felt.

Ready to crawl into bed once he was finished, he made sure he was clothed in a fresh set of clothes, another impromptu gift from Caius (who admittedly also liked to spoil him), before making a beeline for the small mattress.
Just as there was a knock to his door.

Huffing, exhausted and exasperated, he turned and went to answer it. Outside of it stood Caius, grinning his typical toothless grin and perfectly accustomed to Luke’s patented brand of tired grumpiness.

Leaning against the door frame, Luke gave his senior an unimpressed frown. “What is it, old man?”

“Well that isn’t any way to greet your boss, boy,” Caius snickered. Luke rolled his eyes, grinning slightly. Straightening up, he stepped aside to give Caius a silent invitation inside. Caius only shook his head however.

“I’m not here for a long visit, Lucky. I’m just checking up on you for a bit before heading off to bed. How have you been?”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re not supposed to play favorites?” Luke asked instead, an eyebrow raised.

“You expect me to check up on the rest of those blokes? They’re all men grown, they can handle themselves.”


“I don’t mean any slights against you, my boy. You’re just as grown as the rest of them, but none of them showed up on my doorstep without a memory and nothing to his name but a fancy suit.”

Luke huffed out a small laugh at that. He wasn’t so insecure in his age…whatever that age may be, to feel doubtful over whether or not he was perceived as an adult. Everyone in the village treated him as such after all. Caius and Ava tended to baby him, however. They blamed it on their need as old people to take care of others or on their doting personalities, but Luke knew they simply wanted to care for him because they could no longer do so for their son. It was a sobering thought once he’d realized it, months ago, but it let him relax around their tendencies to care for him a little more than the others. And he had to admit, they had a point in him being a little more helpless with no memory. No identity…

“You look troubled, Lucky. Something on your mind?”

“Ran into Aranea Highwind today,” Luke sighed, rubbing at the back of his head. He wasn’t planning on putting much thought into the encounter, preferring to write it off as simple mistake on the Dragoon’s part, but it had nestled into the back on his head and remained there for the rest of the afternoon. If anything, it was bothersome that he couldn’t simply put it off his mind. After all, the very idea of him being Noctis Lucis Caelum was beyond ludicrous, so he had no reason to put stock into her words. Or so he told himself.

“Really now? The old Dragoon Lady? I’d heard she was back in Tenebrae dropping off more Ulwaatees in those Niff ships of theirs. Glad to see the Lady doing our country such a service. But what had she to say to you to trouble you so, I wonder?” Caius asked, catching on quickly that running into Aranea had caused the troubling look on Luke’s face. Despite his age, he was sharp as ever.

“She told me…” Luke trailed off, unsure if this was a revelation he should bring to light. Sure, it was ridiculous that he could be a Lucian King. Absolutely. But what if…

He didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to think about it.
“She said she might have known who I was,” he answered finally, brushing the issue off. “I doubt it though. Can’t imagine what I would have had to do with a Niflheim Dragoon. She probably mistook me for someone else.”

Caius raised an eyebrow at that, waiting for some sort of elaboration. There was nothing more to say, as far as Luke was concerned. He’d go home with his team and forget this ever happened, so there was no reason to dwell on the woman’s words.

When it was clear Luke wasn’t going to speak on the subject anymore, Caius straightened himself and readied to leave.

“Well…if you say so. I’ll be off to bed then.” Caius turned to go and do exactly that, stepping away from the door and heading in the direction of his own room. He stopped in his tracks however, and turned to Luke once again.

“Just you know, Lucky, that if you ever need to talk…I’m right here.”

And with that, he continued on his way. Luke watched Caius for a moment, the frown back on his face. Maybe he shouldn’t have brought Aranea up at all. He could expect to hear more about this from Caius later, and then Ava once she caught wind of it. That would get irritating fast, Luke knew, and he hoped that the two might drop the subject entirely instead of badgering him about it.

Closing his door, Luke went back to readying himself for bed. He pulled back the plain white covers, a representation of the royal family and a recurring color throughout the city, before sliding into them and pulling them over himself. Picking absently at the sheets, he thought of their meaning. Something Ava had told him when he first arrived in the village. That the color white meant a connection with all gods, very different from Lucis’ focus on the Reaper and Accordo’s focus on the Tide Mother. White meant protection from that which was unholy, a sign of faith in the gods that they might protect Tenebrae. Many of the small communities that had managed to survive the ten years without leaving had thanked that very protection for allowing them to continue on. That the white color that represented Tenebrae meant there was always a light within the darkness was a hopeful sign to those that had spent a decade in that very darkness. Luke only hoped that for now that same protection might extend to him. He was happy where he was. He didn’t want anything to ruin it. And as he settled down and closed his eyes, his breathing evening out, he let thoughts of his meeting today and his past drift away from his mind.

-o-

His eyes opened to an orange glow. It flickered across his eyesight, creating shadows that jumped and danced across the ground. Somewhere, further in the distance, there were faint sounds of tires screeching across asphalt and the shrill, pained cries of people he could not identify. The back of his throat was thick with the smell of smoke and burning rubber. His breathing was ragged, sucked in unevenly and expelled in shuddering breaths.

His vision was blurred and hazy, unable to make out anything besides simple shapes and colors at first. Not until, gradually, the scene in front of him cleared. He looked down at his small, stained hand, almost sluggishly. Red. They were stained red. It was everywhere; pooled under him like a blanket laid out on the ground. He lay in it, staring uncomprehendingly at the liquid as his hand lifted from the pool, shaking in phantom pain. The red was only broken up by wisps of brown locks of hair, curled in the liquid as it soaked through the strands. Though he couldn’t feel anything, still in shock and barely in tune with reality, he was somehow aware of the weight of an adult body lying on top of him. He knew this person. She’d been checking up on him in the car just moments before. Then she dragged him out of his seat and pushed him in front of her, shielding him with her body. The body that now pinned him to the ground as he awaited his fate. It dawned on him then
that something else held that fate in its hands. Something dangerous. Slowly, uncomprehendingly, he looked up from his hand and the pool of red that grew under it.

Before him floated a shade of what was once a man. He heard heavy breathing, his breathing, and felt the burning pain of a dozen stabs to the chest. A barrage of weapons, blue and translucent, replayed in his mind. His form was slumped forward as this blue shade held a finely crafted sword above its head, primed to attack. It observed him for a moment, unmoving. Through the blinding pain that prickled behind his eye lids and squeezed his chest tight as if wrapped with bindings, he peered up at this shade. There was a visor hiding the face of this ghost of a man, but he could see the person behind it. He could see the tormented eyes, the quivering features. This figure’s face was so clear and yet not, all at the same time. As if no matter how much he squinted, he’d never be able to make out who this shade once belonged to. And as he lifted his head to try harder, in a flash he was met with steel to his chest. He hadn’t even had the energy to scream, taken quickly by the blow.

Luke sat up in his bed, his chest heaving as he breathed just as heavily as he had in his dream. His hand instinctively raised to his chest, fingers running over the raised skin of an old, unidentifiable scar. That dream again. He’d had it only a few times, but it never got any less terrifying. He didn’t know why he had these nightmares. A part of him, small and scared, whispered in his mind that he was experiencing memories. Ones of a past life that he had no current interest in. After all, if his nightmares were his previous reality than he truly had no reason to want anything to do with it. So the larger part of himself simply wrote the nightmares off as just that. Nightmares.

Sighing, Luke ran his hand over his face, his fingers continuing on into his sweaty hair as he pushed it back from his face. His other arm wrapped around himself, his skin raising with gooseflesh as it caught up to him just how chilly it was. The mountains of Tenebrae were no joke when it came to temperature, and while the country itself had a generally moderate climate, residents of the capital city and the villages bordering it were exposed to the effects of thin, chilly mountain air. Luke’s abrupt awakening hadn’t helped matters and he found himself shivering slightly as the cold slowly crept over him. Groping blindly for the blanket, his eyes searched in the direction of the window. It was pitch black outside, meaning it was also far too early for him to be up. Upsetting for Luke, who could never manage to fall back into a peaceful sleep after having such vivid nightmares.

They weren’t always so clear and descriptive. While the dream he had was a recurring one, it was also one of the few in which he could make out every detail and recall them equally as easily once he woke. Most of the time, he saw flashes of events, blurred and swift as they faded in and out of his subconscious. He’d see faces he could never quite make out, or imagine long expanses of marsh, forest or desert. He’d see images of events that he somehow knew to attach a feeling too. He’d see a large figure looming over him and think of blistering heat, or he’d see the remains of a city adrift in an ocean and feel the weight of anger and regret in his chest. He’d see the figure of a person helpless on the ground as they were swiftly stabbed with a small weapon, or a group of people who lay wounded and bleeding in the ground, surrounded by unseen monsters. In each and every one of these dreams he was incapacitated, unable to act. He couldn’t move, could barely breathe…

He didn’t want to think about this.

With a huff, he silently cursed the previous day for bringing such thoughts to mind. While he doubted the talks of his mysterious previous life had truly brought forth the nightmares, which always came to him regardless, he couldn’t help but feel miffed that the topic of his past was brought to the forefront in the first place. He was tired; tired of the nightmares, tired of the past looming over him, and tired of the disruptions to his life. He hoped Aranea Highwind was the first
and last.

In the meantime, he’d lay back in bed and pray that sleep might come back to him eventually. A peaceful sleep.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I will freely admit that while writing this chapter, I got sidetracked looking at concept art of Insomnia. Seriously, it sucks that we can’t explore more of the city, especially before it falls.

Prompto hummed to himself as he waited in the lobby of the Stella Center. It hadn’t been in use for years, even before the fall of Insomnia, due to the construction of a larger community center closer to the heart of the city. But that one had been destroyed in the attack, so this one was the best bet for the new volunteer group. He’d hoped to speak to the main organizer, some lady named Patti, sometime before dusk hit, but she was a no-show at this point. No sign of the woman, and Prompto wouldn’t have missed her. Not with all that hair piled on top of her head like a big, sun-yellow beacon. Obviously and badly dyed, at that. Prompto couldn’t begrudge her that, though. He couldn’t begrudge anyone finding simple pleasures in this post-apocalyptic world. If Patti wanted to look like an upside down beehive, then Prompto say let her. He’d never stopped using hair gel after all. And no, despite what the others said, he wasn’t shaving the goatee. They could deal.

Sighing, he leaned farther against the desk, glancing over it at a dusty analog clock proper up on the wall. It really was getting late…

“Hey,” Prompto shouted down the hall leading into the collection of conference rooms and an elevator to the upper floor. Still not in use. He hoped someone would hear him. He needed to leave, but he didn’t want to just up and disappear on Patti. She had asked if he was willing to wait and he had said yes…when he hadn’t known he’d be waiting an hour.

He almost wished he had left this to Ignis, but then that would mean actually leaving it to Ignis and that man did not need more on his plate.

Someone eventually popped their head out of one of those rooms, raising an eyebrow at him in question.

“Tell Patti that ‘Prompto’s gotta go’ for me,” he told them, his voice raised so they could hear. Whoever they were, they must’ve known Patti because they easily nodded and popped back into the room, presumably to pass on the message. Satisfied with at least that, Prompto turned on his heel and headed for the exit.

Outside, the city was looking dreary as usual. No longer anywhere near its former glory, Insomnia had suffered greatly from a decade of neglect and abuse. There were still storefronts smashed in from daemon attacks, burn marks in the streets and sidewalks from gun fire and even entire skyscrapers leveled by Niflheim’s weapons. Prompto had heard that the city went through a great battle involving daemons larger than the buildings and the statues of past kings come to life. With what he’d seen, he’d believe it. He could even guess what sort of daemon it was that Niflheim had let loose on the streets from the research notes he’d remembered finding in the magitek production facility. He found himself guiltily thinking he was glad they weren’t there. While he was sure the others, especially Noct, would have disagreed, Prompto knew none of them were on a level in which they could handle such a thing. It hurt, losing his home and his life so swiftly and without warning. But at least he was here now fixing the leftovers, trying to rebuild at least a speck of what
they once had. Had they stayed in the city he would bet the group was guaranteed to not have made it out.

It would take a while to start getting anything like the former Insomnia back though.

While the area he was in was farther out from the center, it certainly hadn’t escaped damage. Especially from the daemons. No one drove in the city, not with the streets torn up as they were. If they could even get car tires to maneuver the ruined asphalt unscathed, they’d likely still be a hazard to themselves and those around them due to the uneven road. Where shops once thrived, there were now husks of empty fronts, the glass smashed in and the wares either ruined or missing. Along the sides of the street, twisted skeletons of cars and crushed bikes lined both sides of the street. Power lines overhead were either severed or missing entirely, along with the devices they powered. No street lights on the intersection ahead. Not even a crosswalk. What little nature that had grown within the wall all those years ago was long dead now. Though Eos and the power that flowed through it had tried its best to maintain the plant and wildlife in the face of the scourge, it had only focused on larger ecosystems. The wilds outside of Insomnia still barely functioned and would take a few years to start thriving again under sunlight. Within the city? Plantlife was a luxury at this point.

Underfoot, the soles of Prompto’s boots crunched against the crushed, fine remains of window glass, leading in a trail through the sidewalks. A few miscellaneous items dotted the ground, some unidentifiable. Prompto was only glad that the city, after a thorough cleaning on part of the whole community a few months ago, was no longer housing the remains of those unfortunate enough to have not escape the initial attacks. That had been more than a little uncomfortable the first time he’d joined in on a sweep of the city. He’d take unidentifiable over what had been clearly human bones, some blackened from fires that had erupted throughout the city.

Besides, he’d been using the assortment of objects as landmarks during his trips to and from the Stella Center. He could no longer use shop names and company buildings like he used to. And he rarely had reason to venture into this section of the city when he was younger, considering it was in the opposite direction of his school and his house. Before these last couple of weeks, the most recently he’d been to the Stella Center was during a field trip in high school just before it closed down. He and Noct had spent most of the trip hanging behind the class and goofing off in King’s Knight…

Anyway, now that he was re-familiarizing himself with the area, he used what he could to keep the route memorized. A rusted red bicycle meant turn right, continue down the road until the collection of burnt of cars in the middle of an intersection showed up then turn left, follow an alleyway in between two blocks of row houses and he’d be out by the main street. That would lead him straight to the citadel. As he got closer to the center of the city, the sights only started to look more abysmal. There were construction sights dotted throughout the city, clearing up debris a fixing up buildings that would likely have a use in the near future, but the destruction was still widespread. In the darkness when he, Noct, Iggy and Gladio first returned it hadn’t seemed that bad. Now the sunlight illuminated every ugly piece of ruined architecture. Where there were bridges, skyscrapers and neon lights there were now only ruins. The ghost of a particularly large one, the Calex Velum headquarters if Prompto remembered correctly, was missing the entire top half of its structure. Farther beyond it, a temple almost as old as the city was crumbling. Along the skyline, the yuppie areas had all suffered heavy damage. Large screens imbedded into the faces of buildings were blown out, unlikely to ever work again. Hotels and malls had fallen in on themselves, and Prompto was sure the fountain square was entirely ruined.

If he closed his eyes, he could perfectly picture his home just as it used to be. Bright and grand, a sight to behold. The streets were jam packed with people hustling and bustling. Businessmen and
women in their nice suits clamoring to get to their nice offices in their tall buildings, some even headed to the citadel for political business or audiences with King Regis. Tourists from the mainland pointing up in awe at the flashing lights and advertisements. Young people rushing to the shopping districts to spend as much money as they could in a short amount of time. Prompto could see in his mind the route he and Noct took to get to their favorite arcade, one still in the middle of the noise but not so big and flashy that they had to fight their way through other patrons just to get to the machines they wanted to play. Expensive cars would barrel down the streets, showing off their powerful engines and sleek builds, the sorts of cars one only saw in the Crown City. Vendors from up north on the mainland selling their ethnic foods and trinkets. Immigrants, some would call them, but Prompto never understood how they could be when they all lived in the same kingdom. Along the shop fronts, employees would stand outside and advertise their products to the masses. Above them, commercials for the supercenters and all of the products they had to offer would play on large screens.

Sure the city had its fair share of problems at the time. It was overcrowded and kind of smelly, especially in back alleys like the one Prompto had just gone through. Taking a ride on the subway was a nightmare and driving was even worse. His first experience driving on Insomnia’s streets was something he didn’t like thinking about. At least he hadn’t almost run over someone like a certain prince nearly had. The people could be a little rude and certain neighborhoods were known for being dangerous, particularly at night. No city was perfect. But it was home. Prompto wanted to do all he could to get even a shadow of it back. He wanted future generations to have the same sorts of memories of this city that he had.

For that reason alone, for the opportunity to turn this sad husk of a city, these pitiful, broken leftovers, into something not only livable but magnificent, was motivation enough to go out and create the volunteer group. He wanted to help in some way that wasn’t just standing behind Ignis and reading papers to him. Not that he’d stop doing that, as he knew how much it helped, but he wanted to get his hands dirty. He and Gladio had been out in the field at the very beginning, when the Crown City wasn’t even suitable to live in yet, but once people had started fixing it up slowly and moving themselves in, he’d taken to staying in the citadel with his friends, handling a political situation he was in no way trained for. It meant a lot to Ignis who, at the very least, could use the support, but even Prompto was starting to feel a little frazzled watching the country get slowly pieced back together from behind the citadel walls.

Yet, as he walked, he found himself wanting to stay out longer. Just for a bit. His steps slowed and he took in his surroundings, dreary atmosphere and all. Around him, small buildings that used to be shops and restaurants loomed overhead, blackened and crumbling in their spots. Apartment buildings sat on corners, taking up blocks of some streets. One building in particular Prompto recognized as the bank, placed strategically in a business district just across the street from what used to be an outdoor shopping center. And of course, along the road leading to the citadel so that people could fund their trips to and from the building. Maybe even buy merchandise inside, after all it was open to the public in some areas. Prompto cracked a small grin at the memory of Noct’s complaints at the groups of middle schoolers that were herded through the visiting areas, given history lessons that Noctis had known since he was small. He’d throw a fit about the noise, but Prompto knew he didn’t really care. By that point he didn’t even live there anymore.

Prompto internally sighed at the thoughts of his best friend. The memories would flood back to him, in small, nostalgic chunks, every time he went out into the city. He didn’t want to do what Ignis and Gladio did, pushing Noctis’ memory to the back of their minds to focus on work and mask their melancholy. Prompto felt he owed it to his best friend to be remembered as something more than just the last king of Lucis. He wanted Noct to be remembered for his silly moments, his bouts of laziness, his dumb jokes and goofy pranks, his near addiction to video games, his love of fishing and his shared fondness for chocobos with Prompto. Sure, there were some moments he
hadn’t shared with Noctis that the others had. Ignis had known him since they were very small, and
knew him better than he knew himself. Gladio shared a relationship with Noctis beyond just
friendship, one of trust and love and raw emotion. Prompto couldn’t make up for those memories,
but he’d damn sure try. There were so few people in Prompto’s life that he had to care about
already, he couldn’t afford to let one fade into the background and become only a figure. A
symbol. It wasn’t right.

Prompto jumped a bit then as a loud sound met his ears. He looked over to find one of the city
residents cleaning up a section of the street, sweeping glass and debris aside and dumping large
chunks of concrete into a dumpster. This man looked up at Prompto then, greeting him with a nod.

“Say, I know you. Didn’t yous help with the city restoration?” he asked. He had a thick accent, one
Prompto recognized from the southern parts of the city. It sounded a lot like Dino’s had.

“Uh, yeah. I guess I did,” Prompto answered. He really did, but he wasn’t trying to toot his own
horn.

“Yeah. Yeah…I remembers you. You an’ the big guy. You guys was helping clear out and fix up a
few apartments for the rests of us to slum in. Eyt, I oughta thank ya for that. I didn’t care so much
about me, but my little girl needed a place to stay,” he said, leaning against his broom. Prompto
raised his eyebrows involuntarily at the admission before straightening his expression back out.
The other man caught it anyway.

“Yeah I knows that look. It was a shit world to raise a kid in, but sometimes we’s gotta keep movin’
forward with our lives. Don’t matter what gets in our way, y’know?”

Prompto had to agree there. It was best to just keep moving forward, regardless of the obstacles.
He smiled at the man, nodding.

“Yeah. You’re right. And no need to thank me. It’s my home too, I’m just doing what I think is
best for it,” he added, his grin turning sheepish.

“Heh, a humble one ain’tcha? Say, you work at the palace, right?”

“Um, yeah. How did you…?”

“I see you walkin’ this street every day. I live in these buildin’s here,” the man said, pointing to
one of the apartment buildings Prompto had noticed as he walked. “Figured you was one o’ the
higher ups. Thought you oughta know, there’s some imperial ships up ahead. Don’t know why
they there, but keep an eye out, ey?”

Prompto’s eyes widened at that, a worried feeling settling in his gut. Imperial airships? Sure, the
empire was no more, but Niflheim’s new government still had access to all of the tech and research
Emperor Iedolas had poured resources into. The new government hadn’t had any reason to appear
on Lucian soil as of now, still sorting itself out over the mess Gralea was left in, but they had the
means to travel to and from Niflheim quickly. Why would they show up at the citadel without
warning? Nodding his thanks to the man, Prompto rushed off down the street, intent on getting to
the citadel quickly. He didn’t know what use he’d be to the guys, but he wanted to appear as back
up either way. If they needed him there for any reason, he would be.

As he approached the citadel gates, he did indeed see what looked like a magitek engine sitting in
the middle of the traffic circle. Thankfully no one drove in that area quite yet, the streets of the city
still too ruined to be safe for cars and all, otherwise whoever that belonged to would have been
entirely in people’s way. Jogging past it, Prompto hurried into the building, heading straight for the
If Ignis and Gladio were where he thought they were, he’d find them easily. The wait on the elevator itself was grueling, making Prompto more and more anxious with each floor he passed. What would he find once he reached his friends? Who would he find with them? A Niflheim diplomat, perhaps? A messenger? The new emperor? An elected one, Prompto remembered with a small amount of skepticism (after all, how did one choose their own dictator?), but one nonetheless. A replacement for Aldercapt. Hopefully a far better one. Not that Prompto wanted to see him; he should be in Gralea trying to heal the remains of Niflheim’s own broken capital.

When Prompto finally reached his destination, however, at the fifth floor in one of the meeting rooms, the one Ignis preferred due to its ease of access, he didn’t exactly find a Niflheim representative. At least, she wasn’t one anymore.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Aranea said as he opened the door, peering in the room with wide eyes. Ignis was there, sitting down at the long table with a hand on his chin, visibly slumped over for once. He seemed exasperated, the skin between his eyebrows creased with irritation. Gladio stood on the opposite end of the room, leaning against the wall with crossed arms, tapping his fingers against his biceps in what appeared to be impatience. Were they waiting for him? Now Prompto felt a little guilty having taken his time reminiscing.

Aranea herself stood in the middle of the room, her helmet off. She looked a bit harried, her hair out of its usual ponytail and simply braided at the nape of her neck, and her armor a bit askew as if she’d been moving around a lot and hadn’t had the chance to adjust it. Although her face was, in contrast, smooth and expressionless. In fact, she didn’t seem so much like she was in trouble or needed help or anything. It just looked as if she was tired and a bit rushed. So, no dilemma. What with the meeting then?

“Prompto,” Ignis said. “It’s good you’re here. You must not have had your phone on you. I couldn’t get in contact with you…”

Prompto sent him an apologetic look despite the fact that Ignis couldn’t see it.

“Sorry. I do have it, but it probably died while I was out.” Not that Prompto expected calls often either way, so he wasn’t paying much attention to it.

“Shit, that’ve made this easier, having a phone,” Aranea laughed, rolling her eyes. It was a sarcastic expression, rather than a humorous one. All three men looked away at her words, unsure of how to respond. They had to focus on Lucis, they couldn’t exactly start making worldwide communication easily accessible again. And besides, Aranea had been fine with sending them letters before, so…

“What’s this all about?” Prompto finally asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I’d like to know,” Gladio added. “What’s so important that we all had to be here?”

Aranea smirked slightly before her expression returned to the controlled mask.

“You might want to sit down for this, big guy.” She nodded her head at Prompto. “You too.”

Gladio made no move, but Prompto went to sit down next to Ignis, curious as to what the Dragoon had to say.

“There’s something important we need to know,” Ignis said. It wasn’t a question, after all Aranea wouldn’t be there otherwise.
“Important enough,” Aranea shrugged. “Something I think you all might like to know though.”

She grabbed a chair and took her own seat, turning it backwards so that she could rest her arms against the backrest. She placed her head on top of her arms, slowly looking each of the three over. Whatever she had to say, it must not have been dire. She seemed almost…amused?

What was going on?

“So get this. I’ve got all my men handling refugee transportation to and from Tenebrae as of right now. We’ve still got Ulwaat citizens to take back to Zoldara, and then we’re moving on to the boonies in Piztala.”

“Get on with it,” Gladio grunted. “What’s your point here?”

“Calm down, Amicitia. You’ll ruin the surprise,” she smirked again. Gladio only glared at her, waiting for her to continue.

“As I was saying, we’re taking refugees back to Tenebrae before we move on to Accordo. I hear word there may have been havens there, areas protected by Leviathan’s power, that other humans might have hidden in. But getting to my point…” She sat up straighter then.

“Oh one of my trips to Fenestala, I came across something interesting. Or should I say someone.”

She paused for a moment, probably for dramatic effect, as everyone waited for her to continue. It was working. Prompto was on the edge of his seat now, curious.

“Some fisherman named Luke that I ran into under Lady Lunafreya’s statue,” she continued.

“A fisherman? I can’t imagine what he has to do with us?” Ignis said.

“I’m getting there Specs. This fisherman looked pretty damn familiar to me. Didn’t recognize me, but I’d know that face anywhere. Hell, even Biggs and Wedge figured out who he was pretty quickly. I think you guys might know him. Black hair, blue eyes, finally grew a beard. And a knee brace on his left leg.”

The room was silent as Aranea paused again. Dead silent. No one even dared breathe as they processed the information.

“You guys said you never found the body of your king, back when the dawn came?” she asked. Ignis sucked in a breath loudly, answering her in a shaky voice.

“Well, yes but… That’s not…”

Aranea’s smirk only grew wider then.

“I think I found it.”
Ignis shook his head, in complete disbelief. There was simply no way… That night, the last they spent outside of Insomnia, Noctis had told them exactly what Bahamut had told him. That the king must sacrifice himself to free the world from the grip of the Accursed and the starscourge that came with him. Ignis remembered it clear as day, how Noctis’ voice shook, how the mood grew somber, how he tried his very best to hold in his emotions, only to cry when he was sure no one else was around to see. He remembered the cries of dismay when, in the light of dawn, the throne was found empty of Noctis’ body, only a bloodstain left as proof of his death. And yes, certainly, there was no body to be found. Anywhere. But they assumed the Astrals had simply taken him, body and all, into the afterlife.

There should be no reason whatsoever that he should be walking around Tenebrae as a fisherman.

“That’s not funny,” Gladio said, his voice low. Ignis had to agree, Aranea’s voice sounded rather amused when she delivered the news.

“Nah, it’s not. The looks on your faces are though.”

Ignis heard shifting fabric as Gladio pushed off from the wall, more than likely infuriated and upset at what seemed like some sort of elaborate prank.

“Don’t fuck around, Aranea. You come here just to tell us this bullshit and then laugh in our faces?!!”

“Again, calm your shit, Amicitia. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t telling the truth. You think I got time to mess around with you guys like that?” she answered, rather calm in the face of Gladio’s anger.

“But how can you be sure?” Ignis asked. “What proof do you have that it was truly Noctis and not just a random fisherman you came across?”

“You guys seemed to recognize the description I gave you. Remember it’s been over ten years since I’ve seen the royal brat. How would I have known what he looks like now?”

She…she had a point. Last she’d seen of Noctis he was clean shaven and had no need of a knee brace. Even during their battles in Insomnia, it was more a decorative piece than a necessary support. But the fact that he still had it, if this was even him they were talking about, led a bit more credibility to Aranea’s claim. But still…

“It all makes no sense,” Ignis mused. “Last we saw of Noctis, he was walking up the citadel steps to fulfill his role as the king of light. How would he end up in Tenebrae of all places? And why wouldn’t he have attempted to contact us?”

“Wait,” Prompto spoke up, “You said…he didn’t recognize you, Aranea? Why is that?”
And there was that. Ignis had picked up on that tidbit as well. There was no reason Noctis would have forgotten who Aranea was, ten years or not. While he couldn’t tell for himself, he doubted she’d changed enough in that decade to be unrecognizable.

“Heh, I thought he was playing games at first. But this ‘Luke’ looked at me like I was a complete stranger. I don’t think he’s hiding or anything. I think he legitimately has no idea who I am. Or who he is.”

Another long pause of silence followed Aranea’s words. Ignis’ brow furrowed in frustration. The idea of this ‘Luke’ person being Noctis was already farfetched, but that he had amnesia as well? If Aranea’s words were true, what did that mean for Lucis? A king living as a fisherman in Tenebrae…that didn’t even know he was king?

“This sounds more and more like you didn’t find anything more than some lookalike fisherman,” Gladio said, his voice tired and equally as frustrated as how Ignis felt.

“You can choose to believe me or not. Like I said, I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t serious. I may not have been best pals with him, but even I know his face. Who I saw wasn’t some random fisherman.”

The sound of wood groaning met Ignis’ ears, before the legs scraped across the floor. It seemed Aranea was done with her business as she stood and put the chair back where it belonged.

“But hey,” she continued. “You guys could always prove me wrong. See for yourself, I’d say. If it’s not your king, then it’s not your king. But do you really think I’d be here if it wasn’t Noctis?”

There was an uncomfortable feeling in Ignis’ gut now, doubt settling in his mind with the Dragoon’s words. Aranea wasn’t a time waster. She was a woman who stuck to schedules and pay rolls. When her job was done, she essentially ‘clocked out’ and made herself busy elsewhere. With the work she was doing transporting refugees back to their homes, ‘clocking out’ wasn’t much of an option. Ignis doubted she would have even considered making this detour, cutting into her time and resources, if she didn’t mean what she said. While this by no means meant that the man she ran into was irrefutably the king, it lent credence to her words. It was something worth checking out.

But that led to another problem.

“I can’t imagine how we’re supposed to ‘prove you wrong’ if this ‘Luke’ is all the way in Tenebrae,” Ignis said, rubbing his chin in what was more annoyance than thought.

“Well lucky for you guys, you caught me on one of my ‘not going to be an asshole today’ days, so I’m willing to let you hitch a ride with my next batch of refugees. But you gotta remember I’m on a schedule here. You don’t show up the day I leave, you find your own way to Tenebrae. Or you could just not go and leave the guy alone, it’s up to you. I’m just the messenger,” Aranea told them. Ignis could imagine how she held herself, likely with her arms crossed, an impatient and expectant look on her face. She seemed to be serious about the offer. Which was kind of her, but impractical for them. She’d be leaving by the end of the week. Ignis, Prompto and Gladio couldn’t just up and leave with little warning just to travel to Tenebrae chasing a rumor.

“Will you give us time to think about it?” Ignis asked. Aranea sighed, her armor clanking as she must have shifted.

“You’ve got until Sunday. Think all you want, you don’t need my approval.”

The sound of footsteps then and the opening of a door. She was leaving.
“See you when I see you,” was her final statement. And then she was off.

The room was silent once again, this time in bewilderment and a tinge of indecision. The news in and of itself was overwhelming, the thought that Noctis could still be out there somewhere, somehow. But it was also inconceivable. Why would the gods lie to Noctis about his role in purging the scourge? If their plan was not to take his life, why would they take his body from his throne? Place him in Tenebrae? Take his memory? What was the intent behind the gods’ actions? What purpose did it serve to deprive Lucis of its king, only to leave him without identity in a country halfway across the world?

The idea was so ludicrous, Ignis had trouble putting any sort of stock into Aranea’s words. And yet…

“What do you guys think?” Prompto asked, breaking the silence at last.

“I think it’s horseshit,” Gladio snorted. Ignis raised his eyebrows at that, turning his head in the other man’s direction.

“You don’t think she’s telling the truth?” Prompto questioned him.

“Nah, Aranea’s not the kind to lie. But I don’t believe she saw what she thought she did.”

It seemed Gladio had his doubts as well. Understandable, in Ignis’ opinion. And yet a part of him didn’t want to write her words off completely. If there was any doubt in Aranea’s mind that the man she saw wasn’t Noctis, she never would have shown up in Insomnia to deliver such news. She would have likely written the meeting off as an odd coincidence. That she had not only deigned the fisherman’s likeness to Noctis uncanny enough to bring attention to it, but she personally delivered the news to Ignis, Gladio and Prompto… As small and unlikely as the possibility was, she may have truly had an encounter with Noctis. And that there was a possibility at all, no matter how improbable, meant to Ignis that this might have been worth investigating.

“You don’t think there’s a chance?” Ignis asked. Gladio scoffed softly, and Ignis could easily imagine him shaking his head, could guess at the annoyed knit in his brow.

“Noct—he’s gone. We’re gonna have to get over it, not chase some fairy tale in Tenebrae.”

“But what if it’s not a fairy tale?” Prompto spoke up again. “What if he might really be there? You think we should just ignore it and leave him there?”

“Are you listening to yourself? The King of Lucis, some random fisherman in Tenebrae? And you think we should just up and leave so we can disappoint ourselves and waste our time?”

Gladio’s voice was getting heated at this point. Ignis doubted that a full blown argument wouldn’t start if he didn’t try to bring the tension down.

“Gladio, we don’t know for sure—”

“Exactly, we don’t know. We don’t know anything beyond Aranea’s word, and that doesn’t mean shit without proof!”

“But she gave his description,” Prompto pressed. “She hasn’t seen him in ten years, how would she have known what he looked like? I know it’s been a few months, but if he’s still out there he might not have changed much! What if it really is him—”

“And what if it isn’t?!”
Ignis stiffened a bit at the loud sound that rang in his ears. Gladio had hit something, likely the wall considering the fact that nothing broke. At least, nothing tangible. Gladio’s voice had, however, just at the end. A small, near imperceptible hitch in what was usually a strong composure. Ignis had wondered, momentarily, why Gladio seemed so adamant to deny the idea of Noctis still being alive. Now he understood.

“Gladio…” Ignis started, though he was unsure exactly how to steer this conversation. He didn’t want to further upset the man, but he couldn’t bring himself to drop the issue entirely. He wanted to hope. He wanted to believe that maybe, possibly, there was a chance they could have Noctis back.

“If there’s even a small chance that it could be Noct…would it not be worth a shot to confirm Aranea’s words for ourselves?”

Gladio let out a long sigh.

“You seriously believe this, Iggy?”

“No,” Ignis said. “I can’t take Aranea’s words at face value without proof. However, it is not her job to provide that proof to us. Nor is it to bring this sort of news to us in person, and yet she did.”

“Ignis—”

“I understand your apprehension, Gladio. It seems ridiculous to me as well that Noctis might still be alive, and in Tenebrae of all places. Yet I cannot write off Aranea’s words either. I don’t believe she would have told us this if she was not sure. Should we not see for ourselves if she’s right, then?”

“…Are you sure, Iggy?” Prompto asked, his voice small and hopeful.

Ignis was not sure at all. Aranea truly had no proof beyond her word. Ignis had too much work to do to up and drop everything just to take a last minute trip to Tenebrae, and he was sure the others were in the same situation. He had more and more problems piling up in the form of papers on his desk, on top of meetings with the new council and plans to oversee…or overhear, rather, the reconstruction of the ruined sections of the citadel, a feat he might finally accomplish now that Prompto had started the volunteer work at the Stella Center. He had an entire city to fix and an entire kingdom to look after, and the thought of leaving all of this work to ‘chase after a fairy tale’ put a sinking feeling in Ignis’ gut. But the thought of not learning for himself whether or not Aranea had truly found Noctis had him feeling even worse. Certainly, a trip to Tenebrae could turn out unfruitful. But there was a hope that it might not be, that he might find his oldest friend alive and well. He couldn’t ignore this opportunity.

“I mean what I say, Prompto,” he finally answered. “I want to find out for myself if Noctis is back.”

“And you, Gladio?”

Again, Gladio sighed.

“We can’t just up and leave…”

“I’ll tell the new council we’re speaking to delegates in Fenestala. Forming new relations and such,” Ignis told him, thinking on his feet. He’d been planning on doing so anyway, though through letter. It was a believable excuse.

“And all the work we have to get done?”
“It’ll still be here when we return. If anything, we could use the vacation.”

Gladio let out a short laugh. “Never thought I’d hear you say that.”

Ignis only shrugged a shoulder. It was true after all. They had been working nonstop since the return of the dawn. Noctis or no, a trip away from Insomnia would be good for all of them either way.

“And the council? One of them would have to be in charge during this little ‘vacation’ of ours,” Gladio added.

That…was a problem. Ignis was well aware of his vicarious position as regent, as well as what families were technically next in line for the throne should the Caelum family no longer be able to seat it. As much of a relief as it would be to shift the weight of a kingdom from his shoulders, he didn’t trust anyone else to handle it quite as competently. And if he was being honest with himself, he was somewhat glad to take up the position in Noctis’ place. He’d been training his entire life to advise Noctis in his role as king, so the work was no stranger to Ignis. He figured, or at least he hoped, that Noctis might trust his kingdom in Ignis’ hands should the situation demand it.

Although he supposed that the whole issue was a moot point now, what with the possibility of Noct being alive. Until that was proven true however, he’d have to find someone trustworthy to handle affairs until they returned. And he might have just the person in mind…

“If it’s any consolation, I don’t believe the new council will argue too much if Lady Bellum was left in charge for the length of our absence.”

“Ha. The only thing that’ll stop them from arguing is if we pull a time machine out our asses and stop Niflheim from invading,” Gladio snorted. Ignis had to concede there. He had a point.

“Nevertheless, she’s our best option. She’s level headed despite her inexperience, and she’s—”

“A better option than Primus. That’s all I need to hear.” The sound of wood creaking met Ignis’ ears then as Gladio sat down to his side, opposite of Prompto. “So we’re really doing this? Just up and leaving?”

“I thought you’d be on this more than anyone, big guy,” Prompto joked, attempting to lighten the mood. Ignis couldn’t tell exactly what affect it had on Gladio, but he doubted it was what Prompto intended.

“Yeah,” Gladio said after a moment. “I thought I would too.”

“Gladio. None of us want to get our hopes up. If it turns out that this fisherman is truly some random stranger then that’s that. We chased our fairy tale and came up with nothing, as expected. But if we truly find Noct…” Ignis started.

“It’s worth a shot,” Prompto finished. “It’s like Iggy said. We have no proof, so we might as well find out for ourselves, right?”

All three quieted down once again at the thought of setting off for Tenebrae with nothing but word of mouth driving them. No one wanted to admit that, despite how impractical this trip would be, not to mention inconvenient, they wanted so badly for it to turn out worth it. For them to be able to see their closest friend, their brother again…it was cathartic. The sadness that weighed them down might finally be lifted. And Ignis was sure Gladio needed this more than Ignis and Prompto did. Noctis was more than just his friend, just his charge, just his king. What had started as a small fling between the two that they intended to keep short and secret became something far more powerful
within only a small amount of time. Gladio’s strong aversion to the idea of going to Tenebrae, only to find that Noctis was truly gone and they really had chased a fairy tale, was a source of protection for him. A shield for the shield. Ignis didn’t want to aggravate that wound, but he couldn’t ignore an opportunity for all of them to have Noctis back.

If this ‘Luke’ wasn’t the king, they would leave Tenebrae with their heads held high and continue on with life just as they had been. And if he was the king…

Ignis may thank the gods for the first time in years.

-o-o-o-o-

Luke huffed as he and Teran carried one of the tanks off of the boat. The fish inside had to be kept fresh for their small market, which would then freeze the majority of the catch before cleaning and selling the rest. In the meantime, once Luke was finished clearing the boat, he’d be heading straight to the inn to clean the stink of fish off of himself. He was sure the entire trip to and from Fenestala had made the stench stick to him permanently. And as much as he enjoyed fishing, he didn’t want to smell like it.

Thankfully for him (and his back), clearing the boats only required the bare minimum on the part of the fishermen. As long as the tanks were off the boat, Viridis and his sons would haul the rest off to their market on their own. Or at least, they would try. Knowing some of Luke’s teammates, they’d be quick to help the old man and his boys either way. Luke raised his eyebrows as Grier made quick work of doing exactly that, carrying one of the tanks by himself. Gods knew what people in Cartanica fed their children to make them strong like that…

Luke was decidedly not anywhere near that productive, and as he set the last tank down he was just about ready to hightail it back home instead of getting back on that boat.

“Tired are ye?” Teran chuckled. Luke let out a small laugh of his own, nodding. He and everyone else on that boat. Travelling to the city was positively exhausting, especially for a bunch of small fishermen from an equally small village. And Sylbra residents were the closest of the surrounding villages of Fenestala. Luke could only count his lucky stars he didn’t end up on the edge of Quina village. Their miniscule population and isolation from the rest of society made it a wonder that it had managed to survive the ten years. The villages in general could only thank the river for providing hydroelectric power so that they could keep the lights on and the daemons out.

Unfortunately, that didn’t mean they were back on par with technology before the scourge. No motor boats. So yes, tired was a bit of an understatement.

“You tell me. It’s a wonder I haven’t passed out yet.”

“Oh?” Teran snorted. “And ‘ere I thought you were sleepwalkin’.”


“I feel like that’s your subtle way of telling me I’m not working hard enough.”

“I don’ need subtlety for tha’, ye lazy bum!”

Teran, as well as a few other fishermen nearby, burst into laughter. Luke himself chuckled. He could admit he had his lazy days. Though today was more sluggish than lazy. After another long trip down the river, though faster than up river as they weren’t fighting a current, Luke was grateful for the chance to stand on dry land again, ready to rest himself after such prolonged work. Even the team’s usual trips up and down the river rarely took longer than a day. Luke was
surprised his older coworkers weren’t feeling it quite as roughly…then again, they probably were and just weren’t complaining about it. Even Teran, with all of his exuberant energy, was starting to sag his shoulders and slump his spine.

“Now what are you all cackling about?” Caius shouted from atop the boat, crossing his arms. Though, despite his attempt to be intimidating, it was clear he was smiling as well.

“We’re all jus’ ‘avin’ a laugh at li’l Lukey, it’s nothin’ to huff about!” one of them waved Caius off, still laughing. Luke rolled his eyes at embarrassing nickname number two. Li’l Lukey. He’d been waiting months for that one to get old. No such luck.

“Well quit making fun of him and get your arses back to work! We’re almost done,” he shouted back. Everyone did exactly that. As he set the tank down, Luke looked up to see Viridis, a tall, lanky white haired man dressed in his signature green smock, hobble over to the boat. Behind him were his six sons, the oldest five hurrying over to the rest of the fisherman to start grabbing tanks, while the youngest –far younger than his brothers– hung back behind his father, trying his hardest to make himself seem small. He had been born during the scourge, just after it had started in fact, and was still very timid and withdrawn as a result. Viridis stepped aside, not indulging in his youngest son’s shyness, before waving over to Caius.

“You ol’ dodga!” he spat. Literally. He was even more toothless than Caius and it made him incredibly difficult to understand. “You owed me all this fish a week ago. Where were you when the village was starvin’?”

He also had a tendency to over exaggerate. His oldest son, Prasinus, shook his head and covered his face with a hand. The fishermen erupted into laughter once again.

“Pay up, ol’ Caius!” “Ye owe the man ‘is fish!” “You ‘eard ‘im, the village was starving!” and other shouts were directed at Caius, who looked half amused and half exasperated.

“Just for that, all of you get to help Viridis carry these tanks back to the market!”

The laughs were quickly replaced with groans.

“If I were you,” Teran whispered over to Luke. “I’d make a run fer it now. I know I’m not stickin’ aroun’ with these bligh’ers any longer. ‘Ve already spen’ enough time’ aving t’ see their ugly mugs.”

“Oi, I ‘eard that!” came a shout from the small crowd of workers.

Grinning, Luke took the out right then and there. He’d be happy to help Viridis any other day, after all hearing that man joke was an experience one simply didn’t miss…when they could understand it, but Luke was sore and tired and wanted to at least rest before he spent the rest of the day tending to his own business. They’d likely be off tomorrow and then back at it again on the river the day after, so Luke wanted to take advantage of his free time while he could.

Walking through the village, Luke smiled fondly at the quiet busy work everyone had put themselves to. There were a few of the farmers that lived a bit further up from the village, growing the few foods that could survive in mountain soil, moseying about in the village as they tried to sell their crops. One of them, old Ray, was tugging on the reins of his equally old chocobo, Granny Apple as she was known, as he tried to cart her down the road, with little success. A few children surrounded her, giggling and petting her feathers while she continued to be stubborn with her owner. None of them seemed to mind when Ray tried to shoo them off. Just past their little scene, Luke spotted Rosa’s tailor shop and made a mental note to visit at some point before the end of the
week. He hadn’t bought many clothes in the time he’d lived in the village, needing only a few to last him on his off days. Considering how infrequent those were, everyday wear was almost unnecessary to him. Almost. But the same problem that plagued his work clothes plagued his casual ones: they weren’t fitting well. Not after he’d gained some muscle tone and no longer looked like a skin-wrapped skeleton. Gods knew why he looked so bad off, but then gods also knew why he’d been in a forest, so as far as Luke was concerned, he didn’t want to know.

When he finally reached the inn, he nodded to the innkeeper, a woman around his age who went by Ru, as she hated whatever her actual name was, who waved back at him from behind her newspaper. Nothing interesting going on on the front page, as far as Luke could tell. But then, the village was printing its own papers as receiving any from the city would have been impractical, so it was all incredibly local, only spanning the length of Syldra and Fynn villages. There hadn’t really been anything news worthy going on anywhere, as far as Luke knew. What worldwide information did reach the village was inconsequential: news of Accordo building a new temple in honor of Leviathan in order to appease her, though how one appeased a goddess that was well known for not being fond of humans, Luke had no clue, news of Niflheim dismantling what was left of the magitek program beyond transportation and finding alternative and reliable sources of energy, and Lucis rebuilding its crown city under the command of the former royal advisor. Nothing that interested Luke in the slightest. He was glad to stay in his uneventful little village where the hardest thing he had to do was wake up before noon.

And as he entered his cozy little room, finally able to shed his layers and relax, he realized how glad he was to call this place home.
Chapter Notes

I wrote this chapter and started chapter 10 and then realized I didn’t like either of them, so I rewrote them. Sorry for the delay. I do want to try to get out as much as I can before the semester starts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Let me get this straight.”

Gladio groaned as Primus showed the telling signs of starting on a rampage. Prompto stood a little ways behind him, looking ready to smack his face into the wall.

They’d been there for hours. And Primus would. Not. Shut. Up.

“You’re all going on some little stint to Fenestala to meet with delegates who barely know what they’re doing with the future of Tenebrae beyond building Princess Lunafreya statues on every corner, while leaving Aurelia in charge? Of all people? She can barely handle taking care of a baby, what makes you think she’ll do any better with a kingdom?!”

Gladio resisted the urge to snap at the man, already feeling a migraine coming on just from standing in his presence. As far as he, and everyone else knew, having a colicky baby didn’t amount to not being able to take care of a child. And Aurelia was just about the best choice out of the entire council, the only one with her head on straight and the authority to back up the position.

Though it was a miracle she accepted in the first place, considering she did have an infant to care for. She mentioned that it being temporary, along with the fact that she didn’t trust Primus with anyone in his care be it a child or a kingdom full of Lucians, was a good enough incentive to say yes. Now she was with Ignis in his study, learning the ins and outs of taking care of Lucis, starting with the crown city and extending into the reconstruction of the northern territories. All the while, Gladio and Prompto handled the inevitable blow out from the other council members, Primus primarily. Not that the others didn’t also take issue with the choice.

“Aurelia barely started learning her duties before the fall; I don’t think she’s ready for this sort of responsibility,” came one response.

“Lady Bellum is a smart woman but not, in my opinion, suited for position of regent in the absence of someone more capable,” came another.

“I don’t think you all should be going anywhere, especially if you’re desperate enough to place the Bellum woman in charge.” And another.

Gladio wanted to smack his head into a wall at this point.

“Look you guys, we get that you don’t want us leaving so soon, but Aurelia’s got this in the bag. It’s an important trip we’re going on and we won’t be gone long,” Prompto said, holding up his hands in a placating manner. Primus narrowed his eyes at the blond.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Mr. Argentum,” Primus started. Gladio narrowed his own eyes at the
thinly veiled contempt woven into Prompto’s name. “But is Tenebrae not in the midst of an
election for Prime Minister?”

He had a point there. Granted the election had gone on for months, what with Tenebrae too caught
up in rebuilding and repopulating to worry about who they wanted in the big chair now that the
royal family was gone, but it was still a relevant issue for the country’s people if they didn’t want
to slowly but surely descend into anarchy. However, the election didn’t exactly mean no one was
in charge, and Gladio had a feeling he knew where this argument was going.

“I can’t imagine,” Primus continued. “How you’re all planning on meeting with delegates when
there’s no one there qualified enough to meet with in the first place.”

“Haven’t you been paying attention? Tenebrae has always had a delegation just under the royal
family. Sure they were useless with the empire controlling everything, but they existed then and
they still do now,” Gladio pitched in.

Primus rolled his eyes. “Well good for them, but my point still stands. If these delegates you’re
meeting with are too busy crying over their princess to—”


As far as he was concerned, she was more than a figure head. She was the world’s glimmer of
hope, the healer of the people and…and a close friend of the king’s. He may have had some
regrettable things to say about her death in the immediate aftermath, but in the long run she’d long
since earned Gladio’s respect and he wouldn’t hear Primus bitching about her country paying those
same respects to her, regardless of what it did to their political climate.

“It’s no concern of yours what Tenebrae’s new government is doing with their country or their
people. It’s ours, which is why we’re going to Fenestala to meet with them. Your business is here
in Lucis, helping Aurelia watch over it,” Gladio concluded, putting emphasis on the last part. He
wasn’t going to leave Primus’, or anyone else’s, role ambiguous in the wake of his small group
leaving. No one but Aurelia Bellum was to lead Lucis in Ignis’ stead during his absence. That was
all that needed to be said.

“Unbelievable what Lucis has come to. Letting low end nobles run the kingdom while the common
folk prance around playing at politics,” Primus griped. Prompto frowned at the latter sentence, his
hands clenching into fists at his side.

“Cool it, man.”

Primus only sighed, loudly and obnoxiously, throwing up his hands and shaking his head as he
stalked off. The rest of the small group stared after him, varying expressions on all of their faces.
One of them, the new lord of House Corpus, rubbed a hand over his face. Late twenties and
missing a few fingers on his left hand from a sparring incident, one Gladio remembered hearing
about before the fall, and decorated with scars earned from fighting for ten years. He too was
inexperienced in the more political side of being Lucian nobility, but he also had a good head on
his shoulders. He was practical, Unfortunately, this meant he looked at all sides of an argument.
Including Primus’.

“Loath as I am to admit it, Primus does have a bit of a point,” he said. Another council member, a
familiar looking woman in her mid-twenties who clearly wanted nothing to do with any of this
from the very beginning, grabbed his shoulder lightly.

“Del…” she started, though Lord Corpus pulled away.


“I don’t mean to agree with him. I think we can all agree none of us want him in a position of higher power and Lord Scientia is doing a fine job watching over Lucis. But that’s just it. We need him, and you Lord Amicitia, and even you Sir Argentum, here helping with the reconstruction efforts. I doubt we’d have gotten the kingdom anywhere near this far back in order without the three of you. Why, then, are you all so keen on travelling to Tenebrae in the midst of their own messy political situation to meet with people you could easily send a letter to?” he asked.

It was an uncomfortable question. The trio could toss out lies left and right about how they needed to meet with the delegates themselves, observe the political situation for themselves and involve themselves in any efforts Tenebrae might request their help for, but in the end everything they needed to do could easily, and more suitably, wait until after Tenebrae had gotten itself in order. Nothing they had to say would truly blow over without raising questions. And they certainly couldn’t give their real reason for leaving. Reasonable people most of the new council may be… when they weren’t screaming at each other, they likely wouldn’t take kindly to the idea of the impromptu leaders of the kingdom running off to Tenebrae to find their dead king. Formerly dead king.

Gods, this was giving Gladio a headache.

“‘Well I mean,’” Prompto started. “Aranea is leaving for Tenebrae by the beginning of next week. Sure we could send letters to Tenebrae, but while waste an opportunity to go right there and start getting things done?”

“A sensible decision in a normal situation, but Primus isn’t wrong about Tenebrae being in the midst of an election. Particularly one that isn’t going anywhere. It seems a bit odd that you would leave now when there’s nothing concrete to look forward to once you arrive,” Lord Corpus continued. Prompto grimaced a bit, sending a helpless look at Gladio as if to say ‘sorry, I tried’.

“I think they should go anyway.”

Everyone blinked in surprise, their heads turning to look at Plessia as she leaned against a wall, separated a bit from the group. She refused to meet anyone’s eyes, even as she kept talking.

“My gran told me that Lord Scientia was studying to become King Noctis’ advisor, right? So he’s practically been working all his life for this job. He could use a break,” she shrugged. The rest of the small crowd waited silently for her to continue, but it seemed that was all she had to say. She turned her face away from them, black hair falling from over her shoulder to shield her from prying eyes.

“That’s…a touching thought, Lady Giounanus, but impractical. Kings and Regents don’t just get breaks, after all…” Lord Corpus said hesitatingly, clearly unsure how to react to a teenage girl that was effectively his peer, position wise.

“Del,” the other council member started again, Lady Risus if Gladio remembered correctly. “I say let them go as well. Ignis is tired and overworked as is. I can understand why he might want to leave the duties behind for a while and take a trip elsewhere. Besides, this will be a good exercise for us. We can see if we can handle an entire kingdom without the most level headed man in Eos watching our backs.”

She grinned then, a familiar gesture on an increasingly familiar face. She was…Lady Satis Risus. Ah. She had…_history_ with Ignis, which would explain her familiar use of his name and her willingness to speak in his favor. Gladio considered this fortunate. The more people that were on their side, the better, and Lady Risus had considerable sway in the new council, her father having been a higher up in the old one.
Though from the looks of indignation on a few of the other members’ faces, it was still bound to be a long battle. That was fine. They had all week, and honestly they were leaving with or without the council’s approval. They only wanted to make sure that when they left, Lucis would be in good hands.

“And do you honestly believe any of us are ready to take on that burden, Satis?” Lord Corpus tried once again. Lady Risus…Satis, now that Gladio remembered her properly, rolled her eyes and placed a hand on her hip.

“And do you think Ignis was?”

The rest of the new council traded sheepish looks amongst each other as the thought settled in that they hadn’t put much consideration into the strain ruling a kingdom had put on Ignis’ shoulders. Especially when that kingdom had once belonged to a dear friend. They hadn’t really had the luxury to allow Ignis that sort of leeway, no one had. But they seemed more inclined to consider not arguing the idea of Ignis going anywhere for even a short amount of time.

“Lord Rodel,” another one of them started, and Gladio mentally snapped his fingers at the reminder of Corpus’ first name. Rodel Corpus, the successor to House Corpus and the infamous finger crusher. His own fingers, specifically. That had been an interesting day. Gladio particularly remembered his father laying each and every single member of the crownsguard out, trying to figure out who was sparing with Rodel in the first place. “Are we simply giving in to these whims? For the sake of some vacation?”

“I’m not going to argue with the man who’s held this country together, literally blindly might I add, in the aftermath of the damned apocalypse. I still have my reservations about this trip, after all it still raises so many questions, but I suppose Lord Scientia has earned a break,” Rodel cut in, waving his good hand dismissively. It didn’t seem to quell the indecision in the other members, but at least they weren’t fussing anymore.

Instead, the new council slowly filed out of the empty room they’d holed themselves up in as they were waiting for Ignis to finish his business, all with varying degrees of discontent on their faces. No one was really pleased with the outcome of their little meeting, least of all Primus, Gladio would bet, but in the end no one was willing to further object. Gladio relaxed then, leaning back against the wall as Prompto slid to the floor to sit.

“Well that went well,” he said.

“You’re right, Prompto, that went swimmingly.”

Prompto chuckled at that, and Gladio cracked a small grin.

“You don’t have to be a smartass about it,” he laughed. “But still. All that arguing over us going to Tenebrae?”

“Like we didn’t expect it? I’m just glad it was over as quickly as it began.” Gladio shrugged. The new council had exploded in protest, debated amongst themselves, and then they were gone. It was the sort of situation an outsider might find amusing, but if anything it was exhausting.

“True that…” Prompto trailed off, turning his head to face forward, his gaze far off. Lost in thought, maybe? Probably. Most likely over what Primus said, when Gladio thought about it. Which was pointless to get upset about, because no one really cared what Primus had to say.

“Hey,” Gladio spoke up.
“Yeah?”

“You aren’t letting what Primus said get to you, yeah?”

“I—no…”

Which meant yes.

“He’s full of shit. Don’t let him tell you your background can’t make you a part of this.”

Prompto’s far off look remained for a few seconds before he shook his head and smiled.

“No, you’re right.”

Well of course Gladio was right. He didn’t see Primus setting up volunteer reconstruction work at the Stella Center. He didn’t see any of the new council going out and getting their hands dirty (though he could begrudgingly admit some of them had gone out and hunted daemons during the ten years), so he didn’t want to hear any doubts towards Prompto’s importance to the efforts in Insomnia. Not even from Prompto.

And speaking of…

“You gonna be alright leaving the Stella Center to go on this trip?” Gladio asked. Prompto blinked at him, surprised.

“Uh, yeah. Absolutely. I mean, this is Noct we’re talking about. Maybe talking about. But I wouldn’t miss this trip for anything!”

Prompto had amended his words at Gladio’s severe look, but neither could deny that they hoped they found that pot of gold at the end. As nice as the journey might be, it was what lie at the destination that would make or break the trip. And maybe even the guys.

“Besides, I think Patti can handle everything for however long we’re gone. It shouldn’t take too long, right?” Prompto continued.

“Depends. The trip to and from Tenebrae shouldn’t take long at all, especially not in a magitek engine. But once we get there…”

Who knew if they’d find their king. Or where they’d find him. Just because Aranea claimed to have run into him in Fenestala didn’t guarantee that he was actually living in the city. And that was if she’d actually found him in the first place. They could spend weeks chasing some guy named Luke around only to find that he was only ever that: Luke. And on top of that, he might have lost his memory, which would explain why he never sought a way back to Lucis, so who knew how he’d even react to seeing them. Gladio honestly found himself feeling less and less optimistic about this trip, and he wasn’t exactly keen on it in the first place. He didn’t want to go to Tenebrae to find some fisherman named Luke. He wanted his king back. He wanted…

He wanted Noctis back.

Prompto watched him silently for a moment, observing the emotions playing across his face, before nodding in understanding.

“Yeah. You’re right. Who knows, once we get there…”

They both looked up then as the door opened once more, Ignis standing just in the doorframe as
Aurelia peeked in behind him. She looked tired, bags under her eyes and her skin pale. Gladio felt a little guilty that this was only the beginning for her. It would get worse once they left. Despite that, she smiled at both of them before patting Ignis’ arm and mumbling something to him. He nodded at her in acknowledgment before joining Gladio and Prompto. Sighing, he leaned against the wall just opposite Gladio, a small room’s worth of space between them.

“We’ll need to take a car out to Lestallum to meet with Aranea. We’ll leave early Saturday and hopefully arrive in Cleigne by mid-Sunday.”

“Do we know what time she’s leaving?” Prompto asked.

“By late evening. She’d stopped leaving in the morning when she realized people were missing their rides back home due to oversleeping.”

Prompto snorted in amusement at that. Gladio rolled his eyes, easily reminded of someone he knew would have done the same.

“Guess that gives us a little time to hang out in Lestallum if we make it there early enough,” Prompto said.

Gladio would be grateful for that. It’d give him time to see his sister. Let her know what was going on…

“I suppose it does. We could stock up on supplies there, as I doubt Aranea is lending us any of her resources, assess the expansion efforts in the city, perhaps even speak with the mayor…”

Ignis continued to detail his plans as Gladio tuned him out. Not out of spite, simply his own thoughts distracting him. It felt surreal, the idea of going on this trip. It was also, admittedly, a pain, after all even he had work he’d be leaving behind to go to Tenebrae and he was sure it would pile up fast. But there was catharsis in the prospect of going off on some grand trip to find their lost king. The idea that Gladio might actually see him again…the thought itself took a weight off of his shoulders, his work and worries forgotten. He could only hope the trip itself would be so rewarding.

-o-o-o-o-

Within the realm of the crystal, there was no time. There was no soil, nor sky, nor sea. There were no kings and queens and mortals. No oracles or accursed usurpers. There was only solitude. Sanctuary.

Within the realm of the crystal, Bahamut had the gift of peace and quiet. He was free of distractions, only ever called upon by the occasional king, who was usually quickly sated of their curiosity before they disappeared back into the mortal realm again. Bahamut could spend all the time in the world meditating. Letting his power ruminate, ready to bring it forth when the time came to do so.

That time came and passed.

Now free of his crystal sanctuary, Bahamut found himself displaced and disgruntled. Surrounded by a snowy realm, he wasn’t exactly in the public eye, not in the way that Titan chose to be after having returned to his perch in the Disc of Cauthess, but he was still uncomfortably bared to the scrutiny of the mortal realm. Out here there was no quiet. The wind blew harshly, filling his ears with the blustery sounds and biting at his skin with the cold. An annoying chill for him, though the climate would have been considered a mortal danger to any mortal creature, but it picked at his
nerves. A constant reminder that he no longer had a place to rest. At least, not permanently.

And, most frustratingly, he wasn’t alone.

“You have words with me, Glacian.”

He didn’t bother to ask. He knew why he had been called to the Glacian’s realm.

As if on cue, Shiva materialized in a whirlwind of snow, free of the binding form of the messenger Gentiana. She watched him quietly, almost curiously. He only returned her gaze, waiting patiently for what she had to say. She summoned him here. He would not be the one to start this.

“You granted my wish,” she finally said. Her voice was like a whisper, carrying across the cold wind to sift into Bahamut’s ears, deceptively gentle. Yet there was ice in her tone, sharp and destructive. Mistrustful.

“That I did,” he conceded.

And he had. The Glacian had asked that Bahamut let the true king live, though she never stated for what purpose his life would serve. It frustrated Bahamut to no end. Every king, across generations, had given something of his or herself to the people of Lucis in exchange for the power of the crystal. Why then should the Dawn King, the man destined to use all the power the crystal had to offer, escape his fate? Bahamut couldn’t accept it, not that easily. Something had to be taken from him. A price had to be paid.

It seemed that price was the source of Shiva’s ire.

“You granted my wish and then you ruined him. What do you gain from this?”

“The price to be paid. You asked that I spare the Chosen, thereby betraying the prophecy and jeopardizing the order of the world. I cannot turn my back on my role so freely.”

Shiva only glared at Bahamut, calmly and stonily.

“I would not turn my back on my role either. But it was cruel to take him from this world so prematurely. Was it so wrong to ask that at least one king not suffer for our mistakes?”

Bahamut turned away from her then. He did not wish suffering on the mortals, after all he did not share Ifrit’s hatred for them. But he could not ignore the natural order to do as he pleased. Everything had to have a purpose. Everything. If the Dawn King would not die, then his place in the world would be repurposed. If he would not pay the price for his absorption of the crystal and its power with his life, then he would pay it with his mind. He would pay it with his body. And eventually he would return to the realm beyond with the full payment of his life as expected. Bahamut would not make a fuss. Mortals lived short lives, and so the Draconian would receive his payment in full soon enough. Until then, one with such power could not be allowed to wander around utilizing it so freely. Bahamut took from him what he had for the safety of not only the King of Kings, but the entirety of Eos. And in return, he would give the Chosen a new task.

Everything had to have a purpose.

Chapter End Notes
I originally wrote that ending part for foreshadowing, but I’m still unsure about it since it’s not really relevant until much later, so if anyone feels it’s unnecessary or out of place please let me know and I’ll cut it out.
They had left Insomnia at dawn.

Outside of the city limits there was a car ready to take them across the bridge and into the mainland. A rental, actually. They themselves were driving most of the way to Lestallum, Prompto at the wheel while Ignis and Gladio stayed in the back. Ignis had his hands clenched at his sides as they drove, his lips pressed tight together as he tried his absolute hardest not to comment on Prompto’s driving. Apparently he picked up on the smallest movements of the car, which of course meant he knew when it listed side to side minutely, or when it sped up too quickly or stopped too suddenly. Thought, with Prompto anyone could feel that last one. It drove Ignis crazy, judging by the barely concealed distaste in his expression. He kept his opinions to himself, however. He couldn’t drive the group anymore, not if they didn’t want to go flying off a cliff or something, and Gladio hated driving small cars. No leg room. He’d do it if Prompto looked close to totaling the damn thing, thank the gods they still had the number to Hammerhead, but he wouldn’t be happy about. He’d risk Prompto driving if it meant he didn’t catch a blood clot trying to squeeze into a small space.

It certainly brought back memories though, he’d have to admit. Taking that first trip outside of Insomnia after Cor had parted with them, Prompto behind the wheel as Ignis sat in the passenger’s seat trying his hardest to get the blond to pay attention to the road, everyone joking and laughing (usually at Noct, the easy target). Until the Regalia broke down. It was easy to blame it on Prompto’s bare minimum focus on the road, but in reality they all knew the car was just old and likely needed a tune up anyway, a fact ignored by the King who rarely took rides in his car anymore at that point. And considering Noctis had his own car—who even knew what happened to the thing—no one really had a reason to drive it. So its first trip outside of the city in a long time quickly turned into a long push down the road in the middle of the Ifrit damned desert. And then a series of hunts and favors at the behest of the only people who could fix it. It was beyond irritating at the time, after all they’d had a boat to catch and a wedding to attend, but it was easy to look back at that time fondly.

It was easy to remember the camp outs with a smile. How they slept under the stars, traveled around during the day running into wildlife they’d never seen and communities they’d never given thought to before. Meeting new people, becoming members of the Hunters overnight and gaining a reputation within their ranks. Exploring the underground channels and caves and testing their skills against the daemons. Reaching Galdin Quay for the first time and spending time on the beach, just having fun and messing around. Watching their prince have the time of his life with a fishing pole in his hand and a lure at the end of it. Curling up with said prince in the hotel, unafraid for the first time to reveal to the others what the nature of their relationship was when they knew that it would be the last time they could do so before Prince Charmless was off marrying his princess in their fairy tale wedding in Altissia. The guilty relief Gladio felt when the wedding was called off in the wake of the attack. The conflict Gladio felt when he had to squash down personal feelings in place of duty. The grief that hit him all at once when it finally sunk in that his father was dead and his life was gone, the last remnants of it holed up in Lestallum after narrowly escaping the destruction.

Well…those weren’t the fondest memories, but the group had gotten themselves together by the time Cor got to them. It was about focus by that point. Collecting the ancient weapons and taking down the empire. The feelings of dread slowly let up by the time they’d reached Duscae, replaced instead by determination and eventually that old wonder they’d felt exploring Liede. It was once again about discovery. Camping out in Alstor and fighting Behemoths just so they could ride chocobos across the marshes. The whimsical feeling of freedom was more subdued with the
imperials constantly on their trail and the itch at the backs of their minds reminding them that this was no longer a leisurely road trip, but they still found a way to make the most of it. They still discovered new and exciting things on their trip. They still honed their skills and tried new things and had fun. When they reached Lestallum for the first time, they were in awe of how different it was from Insomnia. Smaller than the crown city for certain, and grimy and cramped as well, but the people were so friendly and the culture so diverse. It was a wonder to a group of people who grew up in high society (and a boy who wasn’t quite so well off, but still grew up in a nice neighborhood, in a nice house, and with parents who could send him off to the sort of school fit for a prince) and had never experienced something so homely. Just the anticipation alone of entering the city, going through the tunnel only for it to open up and reveal something so lively, was a marvel.

Even now after the long drive, as they slowly but surely approached Cleigne with the outline of the expanded city on the horizon, Gladio found himself tensing in anticipation. He hadn’t been to Lestallum in half a year now, and the feeling of going back was nostalgic. The city itself was thriving, the added sections making it approach Insomnia in size, though with the refugees leaving, all of that space was becoming unnecessary. It still siphoned power from the Disc, the fear of power running out dissipated once Titan had returned, no longer connected to the Chosen King. It, like the rest of the world, was now piecing itself back together. While it hadn’t suffered damage from daemon or imperial attacks, it did suffer overpopulation and the various problems lack of sunlight created. Despite that, it had survived well enough, protecting a large chunk of humanity as they tried to find sanctuary in the one place where light shone the strongest.

As Prompto pulled into the city itself, Gladio could see that it still suffered a bit of overpopulation. There were rows of magitek engines at the side of the road, ready to take most of those people back to their homes. Behind them, crowds upon crowds of people milled about in their daily lives. Prompto had to pull to the side of the road just past the gas station to even have a place to park thanks to the large number of cars, broken down or still running, that were strewn about. Gladio had to let Ignis out on his side just to avoid the man accidentally hitting someone else’s car that had been parked haphazardly over the curb.

“We’re finally here? I don’t remember that trip taking so long…” Ignis mentioned, smoothing out his clothes as best he could. He reached up and adjusted his sunglasses, almost knocking them further out of place before Gladio righted them for him.

“That’s because we’ve never driven straight from Insomnia to Lestallum before. And anyway, the car was never so quiet when we did take long drives. And someone kept asking for us to pull over and take a picture of some random rock, so we always had to camp out wherever we walked before night came and we could try again the next morning,” Gladio said. Prompto blushed sheepishly as he closed his door and locked the car up.

“Ah, true.”

“So, uh,” Prompto started. “We did get here by around three, like you figured Iggy. What should we do in the meantime?”

“I’ll go find Aranea and speak with her about arrangements. After all, once we get to Tenebrae, we’ll need a way to get back. If neither of you are accompanying me, feel free to walk around or find somewhere to rest. You especially, Prompto, that was a very long drive.”

And it was. Gladio may have spent most of it reminiscing but it still took about two days to reach Lestallum, the group having rested at caravans before continuing on. It had gone by in a blink for Gladio, nothing interesting happening and, as Ignis said, the car being mostly silent the entire time.
Prompto seemed ready to protest, despite the truth in Ignis’ statement, holding out his hands as if he was going to offer help to Ignis instead. He wisely dropped it before he started, however. Ignis knew Lestallum like the back of his hand at this point, having lived there for ten years. Instead, as Ignis walked away, crossing the street when he knew he heard no cars, Prompto shrugged awkwardly.

“Got any plans?”

Gladio shook his head. Though he did actually have a plan, after all he owed his sister a visit, he wanted to keep that to himself. He was sure Prompto would find something to entertain himself with.

“Nah. Guess we’d better do as Iggy says. Actually, he’s right that you need to take a break. Go to the hotel and find a cheap room to crash in. We’ll find you when it’s time to go.”

Now Prompto was the one shaking his head.

“I’m too giddy to sleep,” he admitted. “I’ll just find somewhere to sit down for a while.”

Gladio raised an eyebrow at that. Prompto had been sitting down the entire time in the driver’s seat. He needed to take a nap. But Gladio wouldn’t push. It wasn’t exactly his responsibility to do so, and he knew it’d irk the blond to try and parent him.

“Suit yourself,” Gladio shrugged, following Ignis’ path into the city before slipping through one of the alleyways. It would take him on a route towards the power plant, which was where Gladio was sure he’d find Iris. She had mentioned working with Holly on repairing old parts in the plant and helping with the upkeep of the place. Her fighting skills were unnecessary nowadays, Iris having only been interested in fighting daemons and no intentions to become a hunter, so she redirected her efforts towards making sure Lestallum was still well powered. Unlikely as it was, a lot of people still feared that the darkness would return, and it left them dead set on making sure the plant still lit the city. And though Iris knew better, having been clued in ages ago on Noct’s role in eliminating the scourge, she easily used the constant maintenance as a way to keep herself busy.

She’d been pretty gung-ho about it just after the scourge ended, but after these few months she’d calmed down a bit as the work lessened. As a result, Gladio was confident he’d find her ready to head home around this time. He figured he’d meet up with her at the plant and walk her there. She might not have needed it, but he was her brother. He was going to do it anyway.

He wended through the alleyways, passing by familiar and foreign faces alike. Some people he knew simply from fighting alongside them outside of the city limits, on the rare occasion he actually felt like fighting with others. He knew his self-seclusion was unhealthy, had always known and had often tried to force himself out of it, but it was what it was. His particularly reckless behavior was a danger to others anyway, and he found himself thankful he wasn’t putting other hunters in harm’s way by avoiding them. He told himself that the unfamiliar faces he passed by were the ones he was protecting with such behavior. He was shielding them, he’d think to himself. Shielding them in place of his king. He could at least admit to himself now that his behavior then was irrational and idiotic. He protected no one throwing himself at whatever hostile crossed his path. He’d had that beaten into his head by his family and friends multiple times. Even Noctis had reprimanded him for it once he found out.

He was lucky, despite it all, to have lived long enough to see his king once more. To have lived long enough to see the sun return, and his sister grow up and his brothers see and feel the light again. He was lucky to be here now, fixing the world up and restoring his home to its former glory. To maybe even see Noctis again. It was humbling, realizing that protecting and helping went
beyond swinging a sword around and tossing himself into danger. He couldn’t be a brother or a friend or even a protector if he was six feet under.

Gladio looked around then, having realized he was staring at the ground while lost in thought. He didn’t seem lost, after all he’d long since memorized the way to the power plant and didn’t really need to think about it when he walked there, but he was particularly lucky he hadn’t mowed someone down while not paying attention. That would’ve been messy. Luckily in this section of the alley, there wasn’t really anyone else around. Just one person up ahead. Short and slim; a girl or young woman it looked like. In fact, a young woman who looked particularly familiar. Gladio’s eyes widened as he realized who it was he was looking at.

“Iris!” he shouted, running to catch up with her. She turned at the sound of her name and smiled once she caught sight of him.

“Gladdy!” she shouted, waving, before running to meet him. They immediately pulled one another into a hug. Gladio grunted a bit at the constricting arms around his middle. His little sister…or not so little anymore, rather, had certainly gotten strong. He pulled back slightly to look her over. She seemed healthy, her skin glowing and her form straight, her head held high. Her eyes were bright and full of mirth, no longer hidden slightly by her hair since she’d cut it so short. A surprise to Gladio who knew she was growing it out since last he saw her. She seemed to be checking over him as well, making sure everything was in its proper place. He tried not to look as tired as he felt.

“This is a surprise,” she said, pulling back completely. “What’re you doing in Lestallum? Thought you still had work back home to get done.”

“What, am I not allowed to visit my baby sister?” he grinned. She rolled her eyes at the moniker.

“What, am I not allowed to visit my baby sister?” he grinned. She rolled her eyes at the moniker.

“Whatever. Let me guess, you’re running from the council? What’d they do now, ban cup noodles?”

“Ha ha. Very funny, Iris.”

Iris only chuckled, her entire face brightening. Despite the jab, Gladio was glad to see it. And unsure of whether or not what he was about to tell her would wipe it away. He didn’t want that to happen but… She deserved to be in the loop.

“Actually, I’m out here on business. We’re taking a trip to Tenebrae,” he told her as they started walking in the direction of her apartment, rubbing at the back of his head in a nervous habit he’d had since he was little. She raised an eyebrow at the action.

“This sounds more like a vacation to me. Can’t imagine what’s going on in Tenebrae that you guys need to be involved in…?” The end of her sentence rose with inflection, though it hadn’t come across as a question. More like an opening. Gladio’s chance to explain himself.

“It’s not a vacation, at least not really. The council thinks we’re going there to meet with delegates in Fenestala.”

“The council thinks. So what are you really there to do?”

Gladio sighed. He opened his mouth…and then closed it again, unsure of exactly how to get this information across without just blurting it out. Then again, blurting stuff out was usually his forte when it came to telling someone something. No point in trying to soften a blow, he always said, not when the words would hurt either way. Or in this case… Gladio wasn’t even sure if they would hurt. Or if they’d just make Iris angry.
“Look, we got some information from Aranea, reliable information,” or so Gladio said, but he’d believe it when he saw it, “that our king might be in Tenebrae.”

Iris stopped in her tracks and stared at him, the news not seeming to have sunk in quite yet. She was entirely silent, however, so he continued.

“She says she saw him in Fenestala last time she took some refugees back to their homeland. It’s not a lot to go off of and I know it sounds crazy—”

“Crazy?!” Iris shouted. “You’re damn right it sounds crazy! It sounds asinine! Noctis? In Tenebrae?!”

At this Gladio tried to shush her, not wanting her words to even start rumors. That wouldn’t go over well if it turned out…that Noct really was dead. She only shook him off, though.

“No don’t shush me! Do you realize what that sounds like?!”

“Like…Noctis is alive?!”

“Like you all lost your godsdamned minds!”

Gladio huffed, a bit exasperated, as he tried to wave down his sister’s outburst again.

“I get it! I know! I thought it was crazy too. You think I was just gonna up and believe Aranea randomly found Noctis in Fenestala without any proof?”

“And? Did she give you proof?”

“Well no, but—”

“So no proof and yet you’re still dropping everything to skedaddle off to Tenebr—”

“Iris, would you listen to me?!”

Iris stopped in her small tirade, sighing and holding out a hand for Gladio to continue. He waited for a moment to see if she was really done before finally continuing, the tension slowly easing out of his shoulders.

“I know how it sounds, alright? It felt wrong, Aranea just showing up to tell us out of nowhere that Noct’s alive. I didn’t want to believe it either.”

Iris crossed her arms, looking unsure.

“So what made you?” she asked.

“She knew what he looked like. After he came back from the crystal. You know we never had the time to meet up with anyone before we went back to Insomnia. The only people who saw him were the guys, Talcott and a few hunters. And none of the hunters paid him enough attention to have spread around what the King of Lucis looked like at thirty. If you described Noct right now, what would you say?”

Iris blinked at that, her brow crinkling. She seemed ready to say something before closing her mouth again, silent again for a few moments.

“…I doubt what I would describe him as would be what he looked like—looks like now, judging by the sound of things,” she said. Gladio grinned a bit.
“Pretty face? Too much hair gel? Scrawny and lazy?” he suggested.

“Clearly you have plenty of compliments for him,” Iris snorted.

“You wouldn’t think he’d look like a king. That he’d stand so tall. Or look so much like…”

“Like…”?

“Like King Regis. But that’s exactly what Aranea described. Exactly how he looked when he came back,” Gladio finished.

“But how do you know whoever she found wasn’t just some lookalike?”

Gladio sighed, leaning against a wall, not minding the dirt that immediately clung to his sleeve.

“We don’t. This is all just going out on a limb.”

Iris nodded in understanding, relaxing her own stance.

“But you want to check. Just in case. You want to hope.”

Gladio nodded at that. He wasn’t surprised she’d pick up on it quickly, once she got over the shock. It was a lot to take in, he was sure. After all, Noctis was a huge part of her life as well, and to hear that he might be somewhere in Tenebrae was overwhelming. That, coupled with the uncertainty of whether or not it was actually Noctis… Well, needless to say Iris’ outburst was justified.

“Gladio. That’s not a lot to go on, to outright leave Insomnia and go to Tenebrae for. You don’t know if she really saw Noct, or if you’ll be able to find him if you did and…honestly if he was still alive, why would he be in Tenebrae and not here? They have boats, I’m sure he’d have been able to find his way back by now.”

Gladio cringed a bit at her reasoning, knowing how much further he was digging himself into a hole the more he talked.

“He uh…judging from what Aranea said, sounds like he lost his memory…”

As expected, Iris covered her face with a hand and sighed.

“So not only do you not know for sure if it’s him and might not be able to find him, but he also probably has no idea who any of us are anymore. You realize how ridiculous this all sounds.”

“I know. But like you said…”

“Yeah,” Iris chuckled humorlessly, “hope. Well look, Gladdy, you better know what you’re getting into going on this trip. You better remember that you might never actually find him there. And if you do…I hope you’re prepared to deal with that too…”

“Trust me, I know. I realize we might be going there for nothing. But if there’s a chance…”

“There is a chance, I guess. At least if Aranea’s saying she saw him. She wouldn’t lie about something like that. But don’t get your hopes up Gladdy. For your own sake. It’d hurt even more to expect him to be there only to be disappointed.”

Gladio knew this. He knew this more than anyone. He didn’t want to believe that Noctis might still be alive only to realize he really had been chasing a dead man the entire time. He didn’t want to go
to Tenebrae expecting Noctis to show up out of nowhere and run into his arms and suddenly everything was alright again. He’d reclaim his throne just as he’d planned to do all those months ago; all those years ago. He’d fix all of Lucis’ problems and the world would go back to the way it should. Gladio knew better, he wasn’t naïve. He knew even if they found Noctis again, which there was a high chance they wouldn’t, he wouldn’t remember Gladio at all. He wouldn’t remember Ignis, he wouldn’t remember Prompto, he wouldn’t even remember that he was royalty. But fuck if the thought of that didn’t hurt. Gladio wished, regardless, that Noctis would be there in Tenebrae, waiting for his friends to take him back to his life and his rightful place on the throne, even if he knew that this wouldn’t be the case.

“I know, Iris. I’ll be careful about this. I won’t expect anything out of this trip.”

“Yeah you will. You think you won’t but you want him to be there. Honestly? So do I. And so does Iggy. And so does Prompto. And I hope you guys do find him, if he’s out there. And if he’s not? It’ll be okay, Gladdy. I’ll be here for you, at least,” Iris smiled, though it was a subdued expression. Gladio smiled at her as well, soft and grateful. He reached out a hand and ruffled her short hair, laughing quietly when she pushed his hand away and pouted playfully.

“Thanks Iris.”

Iris’ smile widened. “Hey, someone has to keep you in line.”

“Heh, I guess so…”

“I know so. So when are you guys leaving?” she asked.

“Tonight. We’re heading out with Aranea’s next batch of refugees. She offered to give us a lift to Fenestala, but beyond that we’re on our own.”

“Oh? How’re you guys getting back?”

“If we’re lucky,” Gladio paused for a moment, putting silent faith in his next words. “We’ll find Noct quick enough to hitch a ride back when she comes to pick up the Piztala residents. If not…”

“Then you really are on your own. That’ll suck. You know how much your work is gonna pile up if that happens?”

“Trust me, it already is,” Gladio cringed. Iris laughed, patting his shoulder.

“Good luck with that. Well, I wish you guys the best. Go find Noct. And when you bring him back, let me know so I can see him myself this time!”

“Cross my heart,” Gladio promised. Iris smiled again, surging forward to wrap Gladio up into another one of her patented Amicitia bear hugs. He made sure to match it when he hugged her back.

“I’ll see you when I get back, alright?”

“You better.” Her words were punctuated with a small sniffle and Gladio patted her head again, softly this time. “You guys be safe out there.”

“Are we ever otherwise?”

“I’m not even going to answer that. Now get going!”
They parted and Gladio turned with a wave, ready to head out to the magitek engines just on the edge of town. He’d bet Ignis and Prompto were already there, Ignis still speaking with Aranea most likely while Prompto probably found his way there out of his excitement to leave. It would soon be the beginnings of dusk, so more than likely Aranea and her men weren’t quite ready to leave yet, but Gladio didn’t want to be in the center of town when they were. He wasn’t going to miss this for anything.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Short chapter, so I figured I’d go ahead and do a same day update.

Aranea watched three of the four saviors of the world mope in the corner of her engine and tried her absolute hardest not to roll her eyes. She could feel it coming on, though. It was difficult to resist.

“You’d think you three would be more upbeat, y’know since you’re about to see your king again.”

“Possibly about to see our king again,” Ignis corrected. Aranea didn’t even grace that with a response.

“You guys got plans when you get to the city?” she asked instead, crossing her arms and leaning against one of the walls. They were all sort of smushed into a small area near the front, what with all of the refugees taking up the space, so there wasn’t much room. Or privacy for that matter. But no one paid their small group any mind, and that was fine with Aranea honestly. She wanted to keep this subject between herself and the other three…and she supposed whoever else they might’ve told, though she doubted they would’ve spread that sort of information around.

“Plans?” Prompto asked, raising his head from its position in his arms as he lay on a small plastic table that had been dragged in there ages ago by a few of her men when they decided playing cards was a better alternative to fighting daemons. Idiots.

“You know. How’re you gonna find his Royal Pain in the Ass once you get to Tenebrae?”

“I’d thought about that,” Ignis admitted. “And I realize we don’t have much to work with. You said he called himself Luke and was working as a fisherman, correct?”

“You got it, Specs,” Aranea nodded.

“So he’ll likely not be a resident of the city. Though we don’t know if he’s still in Fenestala, it helps not to expect him to solely be there.”

Aranea raised an eyebrow at that, not quite getting the logic.

“What, fishermen don’t work in the city?”

“As far as we’ve heard, no. It would ruin the economy of the smaller villages surrounding Fenestala if the city ran its own fishing businesses. Instead, it trades with the villages to continue supplying them while receiving fish and meat caught in the river or hunted in the forests by the villagers.”

Aranea placed a hand at her chin, tapping at the corner of her mouth in thought. It made sense, she supposed. Though now they’d have to figure out which of those villages Noctis—or Luke was hiding in.

“Alright so you’ve got a start. How many villages?” she asked.
“Five,” Ignis answered. “Syldra, Fynn, Maria, Ormi and Quina. Syldra is the closest to the city and Quina is the farthest as well as the most isolationist, especially after the scourge. Needless to say, Noctis likely won’t be there.”

“Oh, so you’re working with four villages and a potential last resort. I’m guessing you guys are starting with Sydra if your king’s not in the city anymore then?”

Ignis nodded and Gladio sat straighter in his seat, raising an eyebrow at Aranea.

“So you’re so interested. Planning on helping us look?” he snarked. Aranea let out a short, amused laugh.

“Ha! Hell no. I’m just curious honestly. I didn’t even think you guys would actually believe me, so I kinda wanna know where you go from here.”

Ignis furrowed his brow.

“You are the one who gave us that information.”

“I did,” Aranea nodded. “Because I know what I saw. But beyond me passing the news off and getting you guys there, the rest isn’t my business. We’ll be in Fenestala for a while resupplying and readying for the trip to Lucis and then back to Piztala. If you guys are hitching a ride back, you better have dragged your king’s royal ass back to my ships before I set off. I’m not waiting around for you, I’m not your damn chauffer.”

“We understand,” Ignis said.

“Glad that you get it. Can’t blame me for wondering, though. He is supposed to be dead after all.”

Aranea took note of how all three flinched at the word ‘death’, turning their faces away almost as if in shame. Weird. They had no part in his death after all. At least as far as she knew.

“Though I guess that’s not really an issue anymore,” she continued, her words quiet and calculating as she examined each of the men at her table.

“We’ll see for ourselves once we get there. We’ll have to ask around the city to see if anyone has heard of or seen a fisherman named Luke. If we find nothing, we move on to the surrounding villages. Hopefully, we’ll at least get some information in the city before we have to resort to that,” Ignis informed the group, having already formed a plan.

“And…” Prompto hesitated. “Once we find him?”

Ignis sighed, a bit at a loss. Their king’s loss of memory posed a problem. Ignis had no idea how much Noctis would have forgotten and how badly it would have affected him. A part of him wanted to hope he’d only forgotten the events of the road trip and afterward, but knowing their luck they’d be lucky if Noctis remembered anything at all. He seemed to not even know his own name considering his use of the moniker ‘Luke’. If that ended up being the case, they were going to have a difficult time convincing Noctis that he was, well, Noctis.

“Hey, if you guys need to tie him up, I have some rope,” Aranea offered, smirking. Gladio groaned into his palm.

“No helping, Aranea.”

She only shrugged. “Just thought I’d let you know.”
“Once we find him, we’ll have to try and coax some sort of memory out of him. See if we can bring out at least a small inkling of the old Noct.” Ignis cut in.

“I doubt it. He really had no idea who I was. Or who he was, for that matter. Didn’t want to believe me when I told him he was king,” Aranea said, crossing her arms and cocking out a hip.

“That…complicates things,” Ignis admitted. “But no matter. We need only speak with him to gauge for ourselves how serious this may be.”

“If he’s willing to listen,” Aranea added. Ignis nodded at that.

“Well, look. Like I said, I’m offering a ride back. We’ll probably be in the city for about a week, maybe a week and a half. I’ll give you guys that much time to reach my ships before I leave. If you don’t make it, better hope you score a big enough boat to handle those waters. It’ll be a long trip down river and then across the ocean, on top of hoofing it back to Lestallum. Or Insomnia if your car gets stolen. Which it might,” Aranea told them, sighing slightly.

“Right. That’s another thing we’ll have to deal with, once we get back,” Ignis mumbled.

“Well, it’ll be worth it once we get Noct back, right?” Prompto chimed in, ever the optimist.

“If Noct’s even there to get back,” Gladio rumbled.

“Trust me, big guy,” Aranea said. “He’s there.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Suit yourself.” Aranea stretched her arms out, relieving them of the soreness that built up from taught muscles held in one position for too long. She lamented silently to herself how she might possibly be getting old, before eliminating the thought completely. Last she checked, she was forty years young. ‘Old’ could go fuck itself.

“Well I’m not hanging around you three while you sulk in the corner. If anyone needs me, I’ll be on the bridge.”

They all acknowledged her in their own little ways, Ignis nodding, Prompto waving and Gladio inclining his head slightly, before she turned and walked off, letting them brood. She got it. She understood. This was a big deal to them. But jeez, they didn’t have to bring the depression party on her ship. She hoped, for their sake, that Noctis would not be a royal brat for a least long enough to hear them out, for their sakes. It sucked, seeing such a formally lively group brought so low. And over one person. Aranea had never had anyone like that, so she couldn’t exactly empathize. She’d been on her own since she was little, fighting to survive until it eventually became her full time job. Eventually joining the empire because they paid better than mercenary work and still let her poke her enemies with pointy things for cash. They’d given her squadrons, not friends. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t sympathize. Losing someone important? She didn’t want to experience what they were going through.

Sighing, she plopped herself into the copilot’s seat, leaning back in the leather and examining their surroundings. There was nothing but ocean and no land masses on the horizon, so they were still a ways away from Niflheim territory and by proxy, Tenebrae. But magitek engines were fast, faster than any train or boat or car for certain, so she was positive they’d reach the continent soon enough. She’d drop the refugees and be on her way, handling her own business while the trio handled theirs. And though she had no intentions of helping them search, after all Noctis Lucis Caelum was not her responsibility, never was and never will be, she’d wish them the best of luck
in finding their friend.

They were going to need it.
Fenestala had improved a lot since the last Gladio had heard of it. He’d never been there personally, and only knew of what it looked like due to newspaper appearances and his father’s own accounts, but he knew how vibrant the city had once been. How it was draped in white and gold, banners with the royal crest decorating the city and sylleblossoms around every corner celebrating the oracles, with streets that gleamed with marble and buildings that curved organically, constructed centuries before Niflheim made its influence known. When the scourge hit, the entire city dimmed. The loss of life, coupled with the death of Lady Lunafreya, had sent the place into a downward spiral from which it had only just now started to recover. Buildings destroyed in daemon attacks, streets dotted with rubble and blood, banners torn down (likely by Niffs), and the lifeless feeling of an empty, evacuated city were all that was left. At least from what Gladio had heard from former residents. Former former residents now.

It was far better off than what the tales had implied by now. The streets were cleaned, the buildings in the midst of restoration, and the people thriving as they moved about the city. The sylleblossoms were back, reflecting the fields full of them up above in the floating islands where Fenestala Manor lie untouched. It wasn’t quite back to the quality of life it had been, after all the population had dropped drastically and large portions of the city were still ruined, but it was showing a lot of vibrancy and the people seemed happy.

Which was good for them, but Gladio was pissed right now.

He’d been asking around for an hour now and so far no one knew of any fisherman named Luke. It was maddening. What, had Noctis disappeared into thin air?! …Okay, well he had, but that was beside the point. Gladio doubted he’d left no trace whatsoever of his time in Fenestala, if he’d left in the first place but Gladio doubted it’d be that easy to find him, so it was getting frustrating that he wasn’t picking up any scent trails. It was simple: had a man named Luke, a fisherman, been to this part of the city. He’d given his description, at least the description he remembered…the vibrant blue eyes and the midnight hair (maybe not that poetically), and had so far found no one who recognized it. No one who recognized the name. No one who had even known there were fishermen in the city, much to Gladio’s mounting annoyance.

Sighing, he slowed his gait to a sluggish shuffle across the pavement. He felt his shoulders droop and his posture slump as the disappointment started to get to him. He’d promised himself he wouldn’t get his hopes up to the point where there’d be any disappointment at all, but it was just as his sister said. He’d raised subconscious expectations towards finding any lead on Noctis at all and it, expectedly, led to the hurt. It was an agitating feeling, burrowing under his skin and settling into his muscles, into his bones. He was tired. Tired from the travelling, tired from the anticipation, and tired from the constant warring within his mind. The little voice that whispered to him that all of this was pointless. That he was wasting his time. He’d tried his hardest to ignore it, but it had gradually gotten more intrusive the longer Gladio stayed in Fenestala. They’d been there barely
half a day and there was no progress. At least as far as he knew. With no cell service in Tenebrae as
of yet, he’d have to wait until he and the others all met up again to hear any news. Which, with
Gladio’s darkening mindset, he doubted would be anything of note.

Barely paying attention to his surroundings, Gladio ducked past a tall man, nearly the same height
as Gladio himself, hauling a multitude of duffel bags around, having nearly run into him from not
paying attention. The other man wasn’t quite so graceful in dodging and managed to clip Gladio’s
arm a bit, rebounding from the force of collision. The man, pale and a sheen and blonder than the
former Tenebraean royal family combined, grunted out an apology as he attempted to heft up the
bags that had started to slip from his shoulders. Raising an eyebrow, Gladio reached out a hand to
the man hesitantly.

“Uh…need some help?”

“No, I’ve got this,” the other man huffed. His accent was plainer than most, but distinctly northern.
Gladio was pretty sure he recognized it, actually. It was common in Gralean citizens. That raised
his eyebrow further. Niffs didn’t live in Tenebrae what with the Empire having banned emigration
centuries ago, so either this guy slipped through the cracks or chose not to go back home during the
refugee trips.

Well, whatever it was, it wasn’t Gladio’s business…

“If you’re sure…” he trailed off, not moving in case the guy ended up collapsing under the weight
of all his stuff.

“I’m positive. Can’t do my job right if I’m asking people to carry my work around for me,” he
said.

“Huh.” What in the hell kind of work required being a walking luggage carrier, Gladio wondered.
The other man only rolled his eyes at the look he received.

“Look, you don’t have to stare. I’ll get my own office one of these days, and then I can finally put
this stuff somewhere safe. Can’t keep the trust of my clients if I lose all of our correspondence.”

Must’ve been some serious correspondence.

“Clients? What, are you a contractor?”

Those weren’t rare to find nowadays. A lot of people were still out of regular work and had to rely
on themselves to get things done. People with skills would be contracted under former
businessmen and women who knew how to keep a budget going, and then they would go out and
perform whatever job was asked of them for whatever salary the contractor was willing to pay.
Which usually relied on whatever the people under their self-proclaimed jurisdictions were willing
to pay when they asked for certain things. It was a shaky business model at best and many were
more than ready to get back to their former levels of productivity before the world entered ten
years of night, but until everything was cleaned up, the people were all back in their homes and the
population rose a bit, they’d have to make do and hope the local governments kept the contractors
under control while the federal governments attempted to create some semblance of normalcy in
the world.

“You got it, bud. I mostly deal with fishermen and huntsmen.” He looked Gladio up and down
then, taking in his crownsguard uniform and groomed appearance. “You look like neither, so I
have no business with you. Have a nice day.”
Gladio, whose eyes had widened at the mention of fishermen, stopped the man in his tracks.

“Wait, wait, wait! You said fishermen? You happen to know one named Luke?”

The Gralean man turned back to Gladio and stroked his chin thoughtfully, thinking back to the people he’d met as he tried to place the name.

“Hmm… I don’t know any Luke, but I did contract a small fishing business from Syldra a small while ago. Old Man Caius and his boys, specifically. Maybe your Luke works for him?” the man shrugged. Gladio’s eyes widened at the information. It wasn’t much, but it was a lead. He’d take it.

“Do you know where this Caius guy is?”

The other man nodded. “Lives in Syldra. ‘s why I contracted with him. I was a little desperate at the time and that happens to be the closest village. That should help you find your guy though, right?”

“Possibly…” Hopefully.

“Well then, good luck to you, man. I’ll be on my way,” he said with a bit of flourish, before turning on his heel and walking off. He’d given Gladio what he needed though. Now to bring it to Ignis and Prompto.

Striding off toward the heart of the city, Gladio kept as fast a pace as he could without outright sprinting. And here he’d been just about moping to himself about it all being hopeless. Not that he could immediately count on that small bit of information being completely reliable, and a small part of him still wanted to brush off the possibility of finding Noct, but he’d take what he could get for now. They would deal with the aftermath when they got to it, with or without their king. Gladio knew he was far from the only one looking forward to seeing him again, and he wasn’t going to drag Ignis and Prompto down just because he couldn’t handle the possibility of confirming Noct’s death. Again.

They’d cross that bridge when they came to it, if that was truly the case.

The building the trio had found themselves staying in was actually not a hotel, but accommodations provided to them by the Tenebraen government. A small, rectangular white building that sat innocuously in the middle of the city amidst a large bed of colorful flowers, constructed with aging and stained marble that held up only through continued maintenance and care. What may have been a proud and beautiful structure hundreds of years ago was now an old and decrepit piece of history, largely ignored by the inhabitants who were now too busy trying to rebuild their lives to care much for a symbol an old government they never knew. Only kept up by the remaining vestiges of the Tenebraen government, trying its hardest to cling to the kingdom’s identity. It worked out perfectly for the trio. News of their arrival hadn’t gone unspoken, what with the council having believed their cover story a bit too well. They were announced the moment they had arrived. It wasn’t a big affair, and the delegation of Tenebrae truly was wrapped up a bit too much in their own problems to give Lucis much thought, but it was still a bit of an obstacle to overcome. Ignis had to speak with a number of representatives just to convince them not to look too much into why the trio were there in the first place. Said representatives found their pleas odd, but were ultimately fine with leaving them be until they were ready to speak on whatever matter they came for. Once they left, Ignis promised to come up with whatever issue he could think of to discuss with them. Prompto and Gladio both agreed that this was the best course of action.

In the meantime, they’d been set up in a place to stay, one that had once been a city hall before Niflheim tore down the localized government, while they took care of their own business. It was to
keep them out of the way of the general populace so that they wouldn’t be bothered. They were technically there on business after all, and it wasn’t as if people didn’t know who they were. Word spread with even only a few people having initially known that they were the King of Light’s entourage. They’d been recognized and greeted multiple times in the streets as a result, and Gladio was sure plenty found him rude when he brushed off their awe and gratitude in favor of asking around for that elusive Luke figure. Not that he minded much in the long run. Eventually, he found his answer. And on the first day in the city on top of that. He’d consider it good luck.

Jogging up the stone steps preceding the building, he crossed the threshold to find Ignis already there, though Prompto must have still been out as he was nowhere to be seen. Surprisingly, Aranea was there as well, speaking with Ignis in a low voice. Both she and the regent turned towards Gladio, Aranea raising an eyebrow at Gladio’s flushed state.

“You look like you’ve been running a marathon,” she noted.

“Find anything, Gladio?” Ignis asked, stopping the diversion in conversation before it started.

“A contractor. Said he had a job with a small fishing company from Syldra. Didn’t know the name Luke, but the guy reckoned he might’ve been a part of the company. Would explain why he was in the city.”

“You’re right about that. There was a small company of fishermen hanging around town from what I had seen that day. I doubt they would’ve stayed long though. Probably back in Syldra Village by now,” Aranea added. Ignis nodded at her words.

“That makes things easier for us,” Gladio concluded.

“That depends on the number of fishing companies in the village. It’s a small village, but of the five surrounding ones it’s still the biggest. Odds are we’ll have to pick through them until we find which one Noctis works under.”

“Oh not. Guy said it was owned by a man named Caius.”

Ignis rubbed his chin at the news, his eyebrows raising in a small show of pleased surprise. Under his sunglasses, his eyes were open, staring unseeingly ahead of him as he processed the information. And undoubtedly tried to work through every possible outcome that could result from them acting upon this news, knowing him.

“It seems our luck is looking up,” he finally said. Gladio grimaced a bit as he realized Ignis was echoing his earlier sentiment, neither having pointed out the one flaw in the logic.

“He’s actually gotta be there for it to matter.”

There was every reason to believe he couldn’t be. Maybe he didn’t actually work under Caius, or maybe he wasn’t really in Syldra, or maybe he’d found his way to Fenestala by accident. Maybe, the small voice whispered again, traitorously, he wasn’t really even there at all.

The thought became more and more depressing the deeper they dug into their cause.

“If it makes you feel better, there was only one fishing company in town at the time. This contractor you found probably couldn’t get in contact with any of the farther out villages. It’s not a guarantee, but this Caius guy is probably your best bet,” Aranea offered, running her fingers
through her hair, left loose for once – a rare sight, absentmindedly. She was dressed in comfortable clothing, her armor nowhere to be seen, as she rested back against a heavy and ornate wooden reception desk. Relaxed as she seemed, Gladio guessed she’d be there for a while. Which meant they’d have at least a bit of time to go searching before she and her men were ready to head back to Lucis if they wanted to hitch another ride.

If she’d let them.

“No, we’ve got a little more time before we need to—”

“It certainly helps, but we’ll ultimately have to see for ourselves,” Ignis said. Aranea turned a sarcastic look on him.

“Yeah? Let me know what you see, Specs, I’m curious what the world looks like through your eyes,” she snorted, patting at his back roughly. Said eyes rolled beneath his sunglasses.

“Close yours and I’m sure you’ll figure it out quickly enough.”

Gladio caught himself cracking a grin. At least Ignis seemed to be in better spirits if he was verbally sparring. He hadn’t bothered to let his sense of humor loose in quite some time.

“So, we’re just waiting on Prompto, and then…?” he asked, though he was sure he already knew the answer. Ignis only nodded at the unspoken words.

“We go to Syldra and find this Caius. And from there…we find Noct.”

“And hey, look. I’m here for about a week. I know I’m being a hardass about it, but I’m serious. I’ll give you guys a ride back if you get back soon enough. But I’m not waiting for any of you,” Aranea told them, shifting in her spot slightly.

“And if we miss our window of opportunity?” Ignis asked.

“Better hope the Tenebraen government likes you guys enough to give you a good boat,” she shrugged. Ignis tilted his head down in understanding.

“We’ll try to be expeditious about it then.” He turned back to Gladio, his eyes closed once again as he addressed him. “Last I’d heard of Prompto, he’d been asking around the outskirts of the city. We’ll only scatter ourselves unnecessarily if we attempt to look for him. We’ll wait for him to meet up with us and then deliver the news. And then we can set off for Syldra village in the morning.”

“And we’ll need a boat to get there.”

Ignis sighed.

“That we will. And a fast one, at that.”


“Ava, you really shouldn’t push yourself…”

“Nonsense! Sit down, Lucky, I’m not that old that I suddenly need your help with everything!”

Luke continued to stand in the middle of the small dining room, despite the old woman’s words, and hold his hands out hesitantly. Ava batted them away, brushing past him with all of the energy of a teenage girl, flitting back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room as she set down dinner plates and other glassware. Luke had been invited over for the fourth time that week and had finally lost the resolve to turn the woman down, losing the battle quickly when Ava picked her
way through all of his bad habits. It may have been well-meaning, but Luke found it mortifying and had only agreed in hopes that it would get her to stop. His presence seemed to please her well enough. She’d ceased her verbal assault rather abruptly, grinning smugly at his compliance. And then set to dragging him (physically, by the Six—how was she so strong?) halfway across the village to her and Caius’ house. Caius himself knew to stay out of his wife’s way, and so was nowhere to be found from what Luke had seen. Not that he’d seen much, the guilty feeling washing over him as he stood useless while Ava did all the work of cooking, cleaning, and setting the table. She’d damn near lost her head when he offered to help her cook.

Apparently his ability to burn water was personally offensive to Ava.

“There’s really nothing you need me to—”

“What I need you to do is sit your skinny ass in that chair so I can feed you, boy!”

Cringing slightly at the tone in Ava’s voice, Luke did as told and plopped himself down into a chair at the table. Smiling, Ava placed a steaming mug in front of him, patting his shoulder lightly with her free hand.

“Here, have some tea. It’ll help you calm down,” she said. Luke honestly couldn’t believe that she of all people had actually just said that to him. He wasn’t even sure Ava knew the meaning of the word ‘calm’. She had more energy than he did and he was just about half her age.

Ava was an interesting woman. Brusque and sharp-tongued, and a bit rude as well. Though she certainly had her caring and motherly side, after all she lavished attention like this on most of the younger generation in the village, it was mixed in rather crudely with her harsher personality. One wouldn’t think much of her from her appearance alone, after all she was short and unassuming, her white streaked strawberry blonde hair pulled up in a bun and her glasses propped neatly on the bridge of her nose. Her hands soft, though a bit shaky from stress put on them, and arms welcoming, her dresses bright and colorful and warm. Her accent almost as posh as her husband’s, having picked it up from knowing him for most of her life. She looked and sounded particularly harmless. In actuality she was about as harmless as a mountain viper, but thankfully she only ever pulled out all the stops through words in her old age nowadays. Luke was a bit glad he hadn’t known her when she was younger and a lot more agile. Caius had told him stories of the fist fights she used to get into. Apparently she was a sight to behold.

Thankfully, Ava was more concerned with caring for her family, or what was left of it, than she was picking fights, so Luke only felt mildly harassed being sat down at her table to eat dinner with them. And if he was truthful with himself, he was glad that both she and Caius cared enough to have him over anyway. He felt like a bit of a burden, the old couple having made it their mission to help him back on his feet, memory or no, but he was grateful nonetheless that there were people who did care enough to do so. He couldn’t imagine how lonely he’d be if he didn’t have the two looking out for him, Ava inviting him over constantly and Caius giving him work and a team of friends. He honestly wasn’t even sure he’d still be alive if they hadn’t taken him in.

Grateful as he was to them though, he could do without Ava’s flitting back and forth. It made him feel antsy watching an old woman move around so much while he sat in a chair drinking tea.

“I really don’t think I should be—”

“Lucky, you’re more crippled than I am. Don’t even try to convince me that you need to be standing up doing anything.”

At this point, Luke figured it’d just be best for him to shut his mouth.
Ava shuffled out of the dining room, having finished setting the table and placing the food, calling out Caius’ name through the house. Luke placed his chin in his hand, leaning on the table with Ava out of sight (she’d have chewed him out rather harshly for the bad table manners otherwise), he let her voice fade into the background as the kitchen and dining room fell quiet. He liked the calm atmosphere. It felt close and comfortable, as if he really belonged in the leftover pieces of this small family. His eyes drifted over to the large picture hanging on the wall, just over the divide between the dining room and the kitchen. A twenty-some year old stood smiling brightly at the camera, holding a fishing rod in one hand as the other laid atop the shoulder of a sandy blonde haired Caius. His own reddish hair was bundled under a sun hat, his skin tanned under the sun light. He was all that was left of a young man who left the world far too soon. Luke often found himself thinking that that boy should be the one sitting in this chair, instead of him. Happy as Luke was to be considered part of Caius and Ava’s little family by now, he couldn’t help the small pang of regret that it was him when it should have been their actual son.

He didn’t remember the ten years without light, if he’d even experienced it at all. Honestly, he doubted he’d ever know. This long after having not gotten even a smidgeon of memory back, he figured he probably never would and left it at that. But it left him at a loss when others spoke of the ten years of hell. Ten years in which they’d lost so many close to them. Where their population had dropped when so many were torn apart by daemons, or infected with starscourge, or even killed in their attempts to escape to the city so that they could evacuate. What was left had huddled under flood lights provided by the joint efforts of Lucis and Accordo and powered by the miracle of the river’s power channeled into electricity. It was a sad existence, with an even sadder outcome as many emerged from the darkness to find that their loved ones were gone and their lives were all but ruined, and Luke couldn’t find complete happiness in knowing that his comfort came from the empty space left behind in the household of a couple that lost their only child. He indulged Caius and Ava’s doting not only for himself, but because he knew they needed someone to keep them occupied. Not a replacement, you could never replace a human being, but someone who required the attention they had to give, the caregiving they had been robbed the opportunity to perform with the absence of a son still young enough to have lived at home in a community that didn’t push its children out of the nest in their teens. Luke wouldn’t be surprised if Ava doted on him so much because she used to treat her own son in such a way; if Caius didn’t invite him so readily onto the team because of the vacant spot his son would have otherwise filled. He was pretty sure the fishing rod Caius had given him for leisure had been held in someone else’s hands before his.

“Spaced out there, Lucky?” Luke jolted out of his thoughts at the sound of Caius’ voice. He shook his head lightly, despite the old man being right on the money, and removed his elbow from the table top…swiftly, once he noticed the evil eye Ava was giving his arm.

“You’re letting your tea get cold. And how many times must I tell you not to wait on our account! Dig in! It’s not as if we sit around the table and give grace to the Six. No one does that anymore. Eat!” Ava cut in, not even letting Luke get a word out. Eyes wide, he only nodded before starting to fill his plate. Ava smiled again, pleased and sat down in her own chair just beside Caius. Caius picked here and there at what he wanted, unable to eat too much at a time with his missing teeth, as he started up a conversation about the activities of the village. Luke and Ava listened in, adding their two gil when appropriate as everyone enjoyed their meal. Luke silently thanked his blessings that he had the opportunity to be there enjoying dinner with the old couple, the only people to have taken him in at his worse. He’d dreaded the idea of losing that. He dreaded the uneasy feeling that settled in his gut from the meeting with the Dragoon. He dreaded that she wouldn’t be the only one trying to tell him who he was; to take this away from him.
They were given a small motor boat courtesy of the Fenestalan delegation.

It had taken a bit of convincing to even get the stuffy old dignitaries to hand it over, after all their presence was short notice and, frankly, unwelcome, but they’d managed to convince them that the boat would keep the trio out of the delegation’s hair for a while. They’d been pleased with that. No one liked having Lucians shoving their faces into others’ businesses, especially when they had no place in Tenebrae beyond having housed their refugees. Prompto figured that was why their little group hadn’t been outright ignored. The Tenebraen government was a little too busy cleaning up its own messes to deal with anyone else’s for the moment, and their hastiness to get the trio out of their faces had been sprinkled with the barest showing of gratitude.

Not that any of them minded all that much. They were on their way to Syldra now, not having bothered to dilly dally around too long in the city once they realized that Noct wasn’t there. All they’d had was a bit of luggage they’d packed and the small amount of money they took, so there was nothing to hold them any longer. And they were all too eager to see Noct again to let anything in the city hold them back. Not that the others would admit it, too steeped in their own pessimism. Prompto understood, he really did. He knew that getting his hopes up by expecting Noctis to be in that village was a set up for disappointment. But he’d be damned if he let himself get depressed beforehand. Someone had to hope, for all three of them.

While Ignis and Gladio grew more subdued the farther they travelled down river, Prompto found himself thrumming with excitement. He’d never seen the villages surrounding Tenebrae, his only trip to the country culminating in a lot of sadness, a lot of daemons, and a subsequent trek through the snowy fields of Niflheim after he got thrown off a damn train (Noct still owed him for that). The villages were tucked into the mountains, dotting the valleys and lining the river as the city shown brightly above them, a beacon to the residents. That was…well, used to be where the Oracle lived. That was where safety was. Or, supposed to be. Niflheim’s attack on Fenestala Manor and murder of the queen twenty two years prior ended that.

The villages themselves had known Niff occupation long before then, but had survived regardless. Prompto was sure they were sturdy people to not only have survived the empire but to have survived the ten years of darkness. As far as he knew, they’d had the benefit of hydroelectric power lighting their flood lights; a benefit many in the world didn’t have. And they were certainly blessed for it. Especially if the villages were still going as strong as he heard they were.

Nonetheless, Prompto was looking forward to reaching Syldra. Beyond the obvious, he’d be glad
to simply be on dry land. Interested as he was in how the villages functioned, he’d been hit with a slight case of jelly legs and a large case of boredom. The river itself was the most interesting thing around, the surrounding environment composed only of mountain and forest…and more forest. Tenebrae’s most interesting features were its floating islands and the boat was too deep into the mountains by this point for them to be able to see those islands.

And Prompto could honestly admit that he wanted the other guys to get up and stretch their legs as well. They needed something to occupy their minds. They’d grown so quiet that a few times Prompto wondered if they were even still awake, or if they’d fallen asleep at the helm. They barely even moved, too wound up with nervousness and anticipation, as well as the lingering pessimism that kept them from getting their hopes too high.

When the boat finally docked at Syldra, the trio found themselves grateful for the chance to move around on a steady surface, glad to leave the sway of the boat behind. How people spent most of their lives on the water, Prompto would never understand. All he needed was a vehicle and a good set of legs to move him to the next interesting place he might have found. Stepping off of the boat just behind Gladio and Ignis, Prompto looked around the small village with moderate curiosity. Around them there was plenty of activity going on, what with the residents going about their daily lives. No one paid the trio much mind, surprisingly in Prompto’s opinion as he was sure they all drew attention. Dressed in their crownsguard garb and clearly holding an air of the high class. Or, at least, Gladio and Ignis were. Prompto was sure he still oozed plebishness even after all these years.

“So where do we start?” he asked. Ignis stood silently, listening to the hustle and bustle and acclimating himself to the new environment. He still needed help getting around areas he’d never been to before, though for some odd reason he wouldn’t admit it out loud, and liked to take the time to simply feel the air and hear the sounds. Prompto stayed close behind him, ready to help guide him in a moment’s notice. Until then, Ignis would listen out for anyone he might almost walk into.

“Well a fisherman’s company would have a separate building to operate from, right?” Gladio chimed in. “We just ask around for that and try to find this Caius guy from there.”

“Moreover, we’ll need to ensure we have a way to find Noctis on our own should this Caius be uncooperative. We have a description from Aranea as to what he currently looks like, and I’m sure you both can remember his appearance from a few months ago, correct?” Ignis asked. Prompto started to nod before catching himself.

“Uh, yeah.” He didn’t think he could ever forget. It was surreal seeing his best friend again for the first time in ten years. Before that point, the last Prompto had seen of him, he was running towards the crystal, a frantic prince with only one goal on his mind and no assuredness that he would accomplish it. When Noctis returned, he’d stepped out of Talcott’s truck a king with determination in his eyes and his head held high. His presence was commanding; it demanded respect and reverence. And though Noct hadn’t changed much personality wise, he simply felt different to be around. He left a lasting impression, one that Prompto doubted he would ever forget. It’d take a drastic change for Prompto not to recognize him on sight.

“No way we’d ever forget,” Gladio confirmed, likely following the same thought process that Prompto had. He had a wistful look in his eye, his gaze distant as he reminisced in the memory of Noctis at his finest. The definition of a Chosen King.

“Good. Then we ought to start looking now. There’s no point in waiting around,” Ignis said.

“We splitting up again?” Gladio asked. Ignis shook his head.
“Not yet. If we have to search for Noctis ourselves then perhaps, but as of right now it’s best we stick together.”

“Gotcha.”

Stepping around both older men, Prompto started off in a random direction, glad that the village was relatively small, especially compared to the city, and therefore wasn’t too much of a hassle to navigate. It seemed to be on a grid system, each street crossing in neat, straight lines with important shops on every corner. Though nothing that looked like a fishing company. Then again, Prompto wasn’t entirely sure what that would look like. Would it have a large sign with Caius’ name? A giant fake fish perched above the door? A group of jolly fishermen gathered in front of the building greeting all of the passerby? Prompto doubted it. It’d likely be one of the many unidentifiable brick buildings scattered throughout the village.

“Guess we oughta start asking around?” he asked behind him, not turning to face the other two. Ignis hummed quietly.

“The question is who is relevant enough to ask.”

“Pick a person and go from there. We gotta start somewhere,” Gladio grunted, sounding impatient. Understandably so. They were so close already. It felt like an injustice to be held back by themselves of all things now.

“How about that guy?” Prompto asked, pointing at a man across the street. The man had a head full of curly, bright red hair, almost serving as a beacon that signaled his presence. He was dressed in a beige jumpsuit, the fabric smeared with all sorts of different dirt stains. And was that…a tackle box? Prompto wouldn’t know for sure beyond what he’d seen of Noct’s tackle boxes, but it certainly looked like one. Score.

“Hey!” he shouted. Waving at the man, he quickly ran across the street, the sounds of Gladio and Ignis following him not far behind. The red haired man looked up, wide eyed and perplexed, pointing to himself in question. “Yeah, you!”

Prompto lowered his voice when he reached the man, holding out a hand for him to shake.

“Hey, man. Name’s Prompto. And this is Ignis and Gladio,” he quickly introduced himself. The red haired man’s eyes flicked over the group curiously before he reciprocated.

“Teran. An’thin’ I can ‘elp you boys with?”

“Yeah, you happen to know a man named Caius?” Prompto asked, suddenly and irrationally hoping that he had the man’s name right. It’d be embarrassing to have gotten it wrong now, though he doubted that he actually did. Again, irrational.

Teran only laughed though. “That I do. ‘E’s my boss.”

Whoa. Okay. They lucked out. Tentatively, Prompto offered his next question.

“You, uh…you happen to know someone named Luke?”

This time Teran was quiet. He seemed to contemplate the group then, looking over them carefully and taking in their style of dress. Rubbing his stubbled chin, he shifted from foot to foot and sighed through his nose.

“You all may wan’ ‘o talk ta ol’ Caius about Lukey,” he said carefully. It was an…_interesting_
reaction, to say the least. Why he seemed so guarded about Noctis…or who he hoped was Noctis, Prompto couldn’t understand. But he was thankful nonetheless that they were getting warmer, strange reactions or otherwise.

“Any idea where we can find Caius?” Gladio asked. Teran pointed them in the right direction, the small building being a bit farther in town (Teran himself was out doing chores), before waving them off. They sent him quick thanks before heading off in the direction he indicated.

“So, what do you think that was all about?” Prompto asked.

“The pause? Likely it’s because of Noctis’ amnesia,” Ignis offered.

“What makes you figure?” Gladio questioned.

“No doubt if he’s integrated himself well enough into this village that he has a job and friends, they know that he has a past elsewhere. They may have been expecting someone to come looking for him eventually,” Ignis reasoned. It made sense. No way could Noct show up in a village in Tenebrae and not leave people wondering where he came from. On top of looking blatantly Lucian, his lack of memory and kingly raiment would all raise questions. And people would start to think that someone had the answers to those questions somewhere. For said answers to show up out of nowhere in Lucian crownsguard uniforms after half a year must’ve been uncanny.

“Think Caius might be expecting us then?” Prompto asked. Though the real question behind his words was whether or not Caius would take them to Noctis.

“We’ll have to see once we find him.”

Which didn’t take too long. The small shack was right where Teran pointed too, near the heart of the village so that it was in easy reach of anyone who needed to go to it. Small and wooden and painted a pale blue color, it stood out from the reddish brick and mahogany wood of the buildings surrounding it. Atop it was a sign stating in red, painted letters ‘Nenia’s Fishing Company’. They had no clue who Nenia was supposed to be, but they figured they’d found the right place all the same. The door was wide open, letting the summer breeze in. As the three entered the shack, they found it rather empty and quiet, only a low buzzing from a fan filling the room. It seemed to be more of a storage area than a company workspace, fishing equipment strewn about the floor and piling upon itself. There was only one other door within the building, closed of course, and it was off to the side in a section that protruded from the rest of the wall in an odd example of architecture. An office, most likely.

Prompto grabbed Ignis’ arm lightly to lead him over the debris without letting him trip. It was like a tornado came through the place. Then again, when the real work was out on the river, Prompto could understand why the shack would be such a mess. Who hung around it long enough to clean it?

They approached the door as quickly as possible without getting tangled up in the mess on the floor, Gladio knocking on the door as he was the first to reach it. It was silent for a long moment. Long enough for Gladio to knock again before they heard the telltale signs of life from within the separate room.

“Alright, alright. I’m coming, hold your chocobos…” the voice grumbled. It was muffled, but it came across clearly as a city accent. Surprising to Prompto, who expected everyone to sound like Teran had.

When the door opened, it revealed an old man of average height with white hair and grey eyes,
blinking through a pair of shoddy glasses as he looked over the trio. His bushy eyebrow raised during his assessment, clearly wondering who they were and why they were in his shack of all places.

“Can I help you lads?” he asked at last.

“I believe you can,” Ignis said. “Did you happen to hire a man named Luke?”

Caius went silent again, the same contemplative look on his face that was on Teran’s. He looked over the three again, Ignis in particular (paying close attention to Ignis’ eyes, Prompto noted) before sighing.

“I figured that boy’s family’d come looking for him eventually,” he finally said. Prompto’s eyes widened in excitement. They were definitely getting warmer now. Their suspicions had mostly been confirmed through Teran’s reaction, but now it was absolute with Caius’ confirmation. Not only were they on Luke’s trail, but they knew something was off with him due to the reactions regarding him. That something was likely his memory, so…

Aranea was right. Probably. Hopefully.

“You knew we were coming,” Ignis stated more than questioned.

“Few weeks ago he got recognized by the former Niflheim Dragoon. Figured she’d tell somebody.”

Caius seemed to sag against the door frame, rubbing at the bridge of his nose to ward off a headache.

“I almost wish you boys didn’t come,” he said. “Lucky’s pretty happy here.”

All three flinched at that. Of course they were glad for the chance to see Noctis again, but there was still an upsetting possibility that he wouldn’t feel the same.

“But,” Caius continued. “He deserves to know who he is. Truly. I believe he’s been running from that truth for a bit too long.”

“So, you’ll take us to him?”

Caius stared at Ignis quietly yet again, though this time it seemed he was simply thinking about his response.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Prompto asked, brow furrowing.

Caius sighed in exasperation. “Is it true he’s the king of Lucis?”

All three paused at this, silent. Gladio in particular hadn’t said a peep since the conversation started, conspicuously enough. He looked antsy.

“It is,” Ignis answered.

Caius nodded then.

“Well then I suppose it’d be wrong of me not to take you to him.”
Stepping out of his office, Caius beckoned them to follow. Prompto felt the excitement start to hum through his veins. It was happening. It was finally happening. This Caius man would finally let their worries rest. Either they would find Noctis or they would leave in disappointment. But Prompto wanted to believe that he was in for a more than pleasant surprise. The trio followed Caius out into the street, leaving the shack with the door only swung shut as an afterthought as they started further into the heart of town. The grid system that the village was built on was really beneficial for this sort of situation. Prompto could easily remember where they came from and could easily figure out where they were going. When it came time to leave, they would be able to find their own way back out of the village. And if they needed to stay longer than necessary, they’d be able to quickly find their way around. A helpful thought when Prompto considered the possibility of Noctis being there. And the not so exciting possibility that he wouldn’t want to leave.

Turning a corner onto a new block, Caius led them to a small inn a bit further down the street. It was an old building, clearly having experienced several renovations and updates judging by the stone structure at the bottom and the newer wooden sections in the higher rooms. Not that it was particularly tall. Maybe four stories if it didn’t have a basement. Not the sort of place that expected too many visitors too often. Maybe the occasional tourist and more than likely the families of residents coming back to visit after having left for the big city. Possibly also a place that housed imperial soldiers before the switch to magitek troopers. And the inside wasn’t much better looking, though it did at the very least have a homely atmosphere and smelled pleasantly of burning fire wood. Not the sour, overbearing smell of a camp fire after it had been put out, but the welcoming scent of a fire place. As they entered the lobby, Caise waved at the young woman at the reception desk, nodding them all forward and turning his head slightly to the side as he addressed them.

“Now, I want you boys to understand something.”

He paused for a moment then, turning to face them all fully.

“He remembers nary a thing about his old life. Doesn’t know who he was or what he did. Hell, in the beginning he barely knew his knickers from his britches. I don’t want you all overwhelming him. And don’t be surprised that he doesn’t know who any of you are either.”

He gave each of them a severe look then, his eyes meeting each of theirs separately.

“And don’t let me hear of any trouble. You can take it up with me if you’ve all a problem, understood?”

“Mr. Caius—”

“Just Caius.”

“…Caius then,” Ignis hesitated for a bit. “You not only have our gratitude, but you have our word. Noct—Luke is a dear friend of ours and we would not dream of starting trouble. We only wish to see him again.”

Caius eyed the group skeptically. “I have the feeling you wish for more than that.”

Without another word, he led the trio up the stairs and to the rooms on the second floor, their doors lining the walls in a dimly lit hallway decorated sparsely with a tacky looking carpet and a flowery wallpaper that looked like it might have been in fashion about a hundred years ago. Caius didn’t bother checking the door numbers, going straight for the one he knew he needed. Rapping on the door lightly, he called out what Prompto had assumed was his funny little nickname for Noct—er, Luke.
“Oi! Lucky! You’ve some visitors!” he shouted. There was silence for a moment before they all heard shuffling behind the door, and the sound of a lock turning. The door cracked open a bit, the room inside dark as the occupant remained out of sight.

“What? What visitors?”

Prompto felt his breath catch, his eyes widening involuntarily as he immediately recognized the tone and timbre. He’d heard it so many times when he went to Noct’s apartment to drag him out of his slumber so that they could go enjoy the nightlife of Insomnia. ‘What?’ he’d always ask. ‘Go out? Can’t we stay here and game or something?’ Yawning and blinking sleep out of his eyes the entire time.

“Well stop lurking in the doorway and you’d see, wouldn’t you now?” Caius grinned. The door opened wider then and familiar blue eyes framed with dark strands of hair peeked out, expectedly blinking tiredly in the light of the overhead lamps. They slid over the group silently, confusion clouding them and furrowing his brow.

“Who’re they supposed to be?”

Prompto heard someone suck in a breath, though he didn’t know who. For all he knew, it could have been him. His fists clenched involuntarily, his head turned away in dejection. He knew. He knew that Noct wouldn’t recognize them. It still hurt. Off to his side, he noticed that Gladio’s hands were shaking. He could hear the cracking in Ignis’ voice as he stepped forward and spoke, Caius moving aside to let him. Out of the corner of his eye, Prompto saw Noctis straighten, pushing his longer ebony hair out of his eyes as he focused on Ignis. He raised an eyebrow then as Ignis placed a hand over his chest and bowed.

“I apologize for the abrupt and unexpected meeting. My name is Ignis Scientia, and my companions are Prompto Argentum and Gladiolus Amicitia.”

Ignis raised his head to Noctis then, his eyes open and unseeing though it was clear he’d immediately recognized Noct’s voice as well. His smile was small, watery and tentative. But it was there as he spoke next.

“And you, Your Majesty, are King Noctis Lucis Caelum.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

*sweatdrop* I tried to make this whole chapter in Ignis POV, but the sucky thing about being visually descriptive and writing a blind character is that Iggy clashes with my writing style and it'd have taken me forever to try to get through this whole thing with him.

“When I said not to overwhelm him…”

There was a ringing silence left in the wake of Noctis’ door slamming shut and Caius’ pause. “That was what I meant.”

Ignis sighed.

“Apologies, We knew that Aranea had already told him of who he was, so we’d hoped he’d be a bit more willing to listen,” he told the old man. Caius only shook his head.

“I don’t know if your Dragoon told you, but he also rejected the idea of being your king. He won’t be easy to convince, not with his mind set to denying any sort of relation to Lucis.”

“Heh. Leave it to Noct. Stubborn as a mesmenir,” Prompto chuckled humorlessly. Ignis pushed his sunglasses up, a familiar habit for when he was thinking.

“Indeed he is. We need only show him proof to convince him. But how would we go about doing that?”

“Well I would suggest talking to him first, personally. I’ll see if I can get him to open up the cave,” Caius said, his tone light and a bit jovial despite the serious atmosphere surrounding the three visitors. The sound of knocking met Ignis’ ears then, before the old man attempted to coax Noctis back out of his room. Ignis had half a mind to do so himself, but he knew it wouldn’t have nearly the same effect it would have months ago. Years ago, even.

“Lucky! Now you ought to do right by these young men and at least hear what they have to say. Sulking about never helped anyone,” Caius called through the door. Ignis strained his ears for any sign of response from Noctis.

Nothing.

“Lucky!” Caius called out again, knocking at the door once more. Finally, after a few beats of silence, he sighed.

“Well now, I apologize. He’s usually not quite this stubborn…”

“It’s quite alright,” Ignis answered. He tried not to let the sound of his disappointment leak into his voice. “We shouldn’t have expected it to be easy. It’s as Prompto said…”

“Yes, well…” Caius trailed off. He sighed then, instead of finishing his thoughts. Instead he walked over to the group, patting Ignis on the shoulder in what he assumed was reassurance.
“He’ll come around. Eventually. But then I’m sure you boys already know that. Find yourselves a room while you stay; after all I doubt Lucky’ll let you stay with him.”

With that, the man left them to their own devices. Everyone simply stood around silently, letting the shock set in. It was really Noctis. Really, truly Noctis. And he had no idea who any of them were. It was one thing to expect this outcome through hearsay, but another thing entirely to have someone you’ve known and cared for since you were six years old ask who you were. Ignis found himself rather ‘put out’, in the simplest of terms.

“I’ll uh…I’ll go get us that room…” Prompto said, though his voice sounded quiet. Far away, almost. Like he was talking through water. It was maddening for someone who relied mostly on sound. Ignis forced himself to break through that shock, to focus. He said that he was going to prove to Noctis that he was indeed the king, and he meant it. But the first barrier was getting through that door. Preferably by being let in.

Ignis turned towards where he figured Gladio was standing, hoping that the expression on his face was reassuring. Judging by the tightness in the muscles around his mouth, he doubted it. He couldn’t imagine how Gladio felt about this. Being told by someone you’ve been friends with for the majority of your life was painful enough, so to be told that the love of your life didn’t remember you? Ignis wouldn’t have wished that on anyone. He wished he knew the words to comfort the other man. But what could he say? Ignis was…Gods, Ignis was at a loss.

He turned back towards the door. Reaching a hand out, he felt the air until his fingertips hit wood. They clenched into a fist, knocking at the door lightly. Still no movement from inside, but where else would Noctis go? He ran from his problems by shutting himself in, not leaving out.

“Noc—Luke,” Ignis corrected, knowing his old friend wouldn’t answer to his own name anymore. “Please, if you would. We only wish to speak with you. We’ve no intentions of forcing you into anything. You must understand, before you were our king you’ve always been our friend. We thought you were dead for nearly eight months now. This…the chance to see you again…it means a lot to us.”

Still silence. Ignis thought he may have heard shifting on the other side, but for all he knew it could have just been the product of an overactive imagination. Sighing, Ignis leaned against the door slightly, praying silently that Noctis would open that door and let him in.

Nothing. No answer. No door opening. Not even a peep. He didn’t even tell them to go away.

In what Ignis was sure was only a few minutes, Prompto returned with the sounds of jingling—room keys it would seem. This village was in an odd sort of limbo between old timey and modern age, what with its creaking wooden buildings lining what felt like stone roads under his thin shoes clashing with the ozone smell of artificial light and the faint sounds of radios and televisions being played behind thin walls in the houses they’d passed that still maintained such technology. It would make sense that the inn used traditional keys instead of key cards for the rooms, and likely saved the higher tech for more serious security measures.

“So, we’re in luck. The lady at the desk said there was a room available on this floor, just a little farther down the hall. Room 213, she said.” Despite the uplifting tone of the words, Prompto’s voice held a lilt of sadness within it. The jingle of keys was heard again as one of them was placed within Ignis’ hand. His fingers curled lightly around it.

“You’ll have to guide me to which room it is.” He’d be sure to pace his steps so that he could remember the amount of distance between their room and Noct’s. Old habits die hard, and he knew he couldn’t be far from his king now that he knew he was alive.
“Sure thing,” Prompto said. Ignis felt a hand at his shoulder, a feather like touch pushing him away from the door he’d still been leaning against.

“You coming, big guy?” he heard Prompto ask. Ignis waited silently for Gladio’s answer. There was none verbally, but the soft footfalls of his crownguard boots soon joined their own.

The three walked, defeated, to their room. They weren’t giving up, far from it, but they took quite the blow to their enthusiasm. Ignis wasn’t going to give into such feelings, however. He’d take the time later that night to try and figure out how to coax Noctis out of his room, and then convince him of who he really was in the morning. Or afternoon, knowing him.

Until then, they’d wait until the next day and hope Noctis would be more reasonable then. And in the meantime, they’d settle themselves in and then explore the village for a bit. No use in remaining idle, not in an unfamiliar place with only light luggage and no food. Thank Shiva they’d remembered to bring gil.

-o-o-o-o-

Prompto woke to the faint sound of knocking. Groaning, he turned over in the bed and squeezed his eyes tighter shut, hoping the noise would go away. It only persisted.

Huffing, he sat up and looked around blearily. Ignis was up, as expected, standing by the small gas stove as he debated on what was for breakfast, having gone out the day before to pick up supplies when he (and the rest of them) realized they wouldn’t be getting through to Noct so easily. With Prompto’s help of course. After all, none of them knew a thing about the village, and letting Ignis wander around by himself would have been an infinitely bad idea.

To Prompto’s left, Gladio sat by the window, still as silent as ever as he seemed to be contemplating. Or maybe he wasn’t thinking about anything? Maybe he was just processing the shock of the previous day. Prompto couldn’t know for sure. The older man hadn’t said a thing since they found Noctis, and it was a little worrying if Prompto was honest with himself. He wished he could help draw Gladio back out of that shell, but he didn’t know what to do or say…

Another knock sounded at the door, harder this time.

“Can you get that, Prompto? I don’t trust myself to maneuver around this room easily enough not to trip,” Ignis finally asked quietly, not moving his eyes from the stove. Prompto rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, nodding without realizing as he stood. Gladio didn’t move an inch from his spot, still gazing out the window.

Now on his feet, Prompto pulled on the slacks and undershirt of his crownguard uniform, not wanting to put on new clothes without having taken a shower, and shuffled towards the door. He didn’t know what they’d done to earn themselves such an early visitor, but nonetheless an apology was prepared on his lips. He’d hoped they hadn’t broken something without noticing at least.

When the door swung open however, the words died on his tongue.

Noctis stood just outside their doorway, dressed in a t-shirt and jeans and still looking unkempt. His eyes were a little red, as if he hadn’t gotten any sleep. And as he stood there, he shifted from foot to foot and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly, only occasionally meeting Prompto’s eyes.

“Noct?” he asked, again not thinking. Noctis flinched slightly at the name, ducking his head further when Ignis and Gladio turned their heads towards him. Prompto had peeked back at them for a split second, unsure of exactly what to do, before turning back to his best friend and deciding to
wing it. This was Noct, after all. Prompto could talk to him. It’d be fine.

“Sorry! Sorry, Luke I meant! How’s uh…how’s it hanging?” Prompto asked, leaning against the doorframe in an attempt to appear relaxed. Judging by the skeptical look on Noctis’ face, it clearly wasn’t working.

“I uh…” he started. His attempt quickly died off though, and he once again ducked his head towards the hallway carpet. Prompto heard a huff of breath through his nose as he seemed to struggle with himself for a bit. He was tempted to reach out to Noct, maybe help him a little. That likely wouldn’t have gone over well, so instead Prompto kept quiet and simply waited.

Noctis started again, his resolve hardening as he finally dropped his hand and steadied his gaze. “Look, I—I know that was rude just slamming the door on you guys.”

His mouth was open, ready to continue, before he clamped it shut again. He looked over the group once more, meeting each of their eyes separately. His gaze lingered for a bit on Ignis’, likely due to him realizing the injury to them, before he looked back into the hallway. Back in the direction of his own room.

“You, uh… You guys wanna come to my room for a bit? I know this is out of nowhere, but I think I at least owe you that. If you came here all this way for me, at least.”

“We did.” Ignis quickly said. He felt his way around the small kitchenette, turning off the appliances he’d turned on in preparation and inching his way around the counters. Prompto went back to help him, Gladio rising to his feet to do so as well. Noctis watched for a moment, taking their group dynamic in, before heading back in the direction of his own room.

When they’d stepped out into the hallway (the other two thankfully having been dressed soon after they woke up), they found the door to Noct’s room left open, inviting them all in. Prompto glanced at his friends again, still a bit unsure. Walking into that room meant finally confronting the very thing they came here for: an amnesiac king who was clearly in denial over his own origins. Honestly, Prompto was surprised he decided to even let them in in the first place, let alone invite them over.

There was no more reason to avoid this however. Not when it was their very purpose for even being there. Tightening his grip lightly on Ignis’ shoulder, Prompto walked forward. The other two were quick to fall into step. When they reached the room, only a short ways down the hall, they were greeted with the most alien of sights.

The damn thing was clean.

Not spotless, none of them thought they’d ever witness such a miracle, but clearly Noct put a lot of care into his living space. Prompto only wished Ignis could see it for himself. He’d probably start crying.

Noctis himself stood in the middle of the room, leaning against an ancient looking couch and wringing his hands, clearly unsure of how to go about this. He watched them silently, waiting for them to let themselves inside so that…whatever this was could begin.

Naturally, Ignis got the ball rolling.

“Were you expecting us?” he asked.

Noctis didn’t say anything for a moment, turning the words over in his head.
“I didn’t know who to expect,” he finally answered. Finally he seemed to get fed up with them standing in the doorway, waving them inside and pointing them over to the couch. “Sit down. You’re making me nervous.”

Well. It seemed he was still bossy. At least that hadn’t changed.

It took a bit of effort for Prompto to hide his small grin at the familiar mannerism, but somehow he managed. He guided Ignis over to the couch, sitting between him and Gladio as Noctis took a seat adjacent to them on an equally ancient looking recliner. He placed an elbow onto the right armrest and leaned into his hand, examining the group once again.

“Look…I can take one look into the mirror and tell that I’m not from Tenebrae. Figured somebody knew me somewhere, so it wasn’t so hard to guess that I’d get visitors one of these days. But after so many months, I’d started hope I never would.”

That got rid of the grin real fast. All three of them cringed a bit at the admission, leading Noct to raise a hand in placation.

“I’m not trying to spite you guys, but I—who are you again?”

That question wasn’t as biting as it was the first time. Now they were a little more prepared for it.

Ignis quickly introduced them. Reintroduced them. Again. Gods, this was gonna result in a headache, Prompto was sure.

“Apologies. I realize our previous introduction was rather abrupt. I am Ignis Scientia,” he said, before gesturing to Prompto and Gladio. “And these are—”

“No, no. I remember your names from yesterday. I mean, who are you to me?”

Ignis leaned back at that, looking a bit uncomfortable. Likely in anticipation of another negative reaction from Noct. Honestly, they were all wary of that. They didn’t want to be kicked out just for saying the wrong thing. And answering that question was probably the wrong thing.

“We’re…we were your personal crownguard. And you were—are our king. My job was to be your advisor, Gladio your shield, and Prompto…your best friend.” The unspoken ‘all of us were your friends’ hung in the air listlessly, though the look in Noctis’ eyes suggested that he might have picked up on it anyway. If from nothing else, the fact that they were so desperate to get in contact with him that they dropped everything and came to see him themselves should have tipped him off. He leaned back in his seat, soaking the information in.

He seemed troubled.

“Your Dragoon tried to sell me the same story. I’m not buying it though. What the hell would the King of Lucis be doing in some backwater village in Tenebrae? It doesn’t make any sense that I would be here if I’m supposed to be your king.”

“That’s what we’d wondered. Last we’d seen of you, you were walking up the citadel steps towards your throne. The throne you were prepared to die on. And yet you’re here. Curious…”

“That’s an understatement,” Noctis scoffed.

“Regardless, you are our king. That’s for certain…for us at least. You require proof, yes?” Ignis asked. Noctis raised an eyebrow.
“You think you can provide it?”

“I’m positive.”

Ignis was quiet for a moment before he began. Prompto looked between him and Noctis, wondering how this would start. A quick glance was thrown Gladio’s way. He was staring at Noct, an unreadable expression on his face. Prompto figured it’d be best not to comment on it.

“I suppose I could go into the broader aspects of your personality: your picky eating habits, your hatred of carrots, your inability to go to sleep at a decent time and subsequent refusal to wake up past noon…”

Ignis paused for a moment as Noct raised an eyebrow, seemingly amused from what Prompto could tell. Then again, he would probably be too if someone remorselessly laid out all his bad habits like that. No point in getting angry when it was true.

“But I would wager you want the finer details,” Ignis continued. “For example, there’s a scar running slightly diagonally across your back, thin and clean. The result of a daemon attack when you were eight.”

“A daemon attack?”

Ignis nodded.

“Wouldn’t I have contracted the scourge then?”

A fair question, but…

“No one was entirely sure if you had, what with the magic in your blood having natural healing properties. But it wasn’t nearly enough to get you to walk again, so you were taken to the Oracle Sylva to be healed completely. If there was any threat of the scourge, it was gone the moment she had gotten to you,” Ignis easily answered. Noctis accepted it well enough, leaving the three on his couch relaxing slightly.

Until he spoke again.

“What about this one?” he asked, placing a hand over the middle of his chest.

“There’s…a scar on your chest?” Prompto asked tentatively, clarifying for Ignis. Who frowned slightly.

“I’m afraid I would not know about that one. Perhaps a result of a skirmish during the time you were separated from us.”

The skeptical look was back on Noctis’ face as he looked over the three yet again. This time, his gaze settled on Gladio, who he’d finally realized had been staring him down this entire time. Not maliciously, of course, so Noctis brushed it off, shrugging a shoulder lightly.

“Alright then. So you guys definitely knew me personally. But you still haven’t proven that I’m supposed to be your king.”

Jeez. Noct wanted to be a tough nut to crack today. Thank the gods Ignis seemed to be prepared for it well enough.

“Assuming you showed up here in what you were wearing when we last saw you, do you happen to
have a black suit lying around?” Ignis asked, leaning forward now. Prompto could almost see the
gears turning in his head as he attempted to pull the situation back in his favor.

“Lying around? Hell no, that kind of thing has no place here. I sold it to the tailor so I could have
money for a place to stay, at least until I started making steady income. I doubt Rosa’s done
anything to it if you guys need to see it.”

Ignis looked a little worried about that. Understandable if there was something on that suit that
would’ve proven his point.

“We may have to, if it comes to that. There was a handkerchief in the pocket—”

“Oh that? I still have that. Thought it might’ve been something sentimental, so I figured it could
stick around.”

And back on the trail. Ignis’ expression eased back into neutrality.

“You’re right on the money, actually. Right around your twentieth birthday, we’d had our
kingsglaive uniforms commissioned and your kingly raiment in the works. King Regis had taken
the handkerchief from the suit jacket and written a phrase on it: Fiat Justitia Ruat Caelum. At the
time, you’d made a bit of a fuss about it. Something about him ‘making bad dad jokes in the
fanciest way possible’. But you’d kept that handkerchief in the pocket of your suit nonetheless,
holding onto it as a keepsake. The phrase would also be found in the king’s study, sculpted into the
golden frame of the painting depicting the prophecy. This was the only place that phrase could be
found. Few even knew of its existence, so how then would anyone other than the crown prince
have it written on a handkerchief?

“And if you need further proof,” Ignis continued. “There are still letters of correspondence from
King Regis that survived the fall of Insomnia. We could match the handwriting if you wish.”

Prompto blinked in surprise at the information. He’d have never even considered… Even Noctis
looked impressed, both eyebrows raised in surprise at Ignis’ easy deduction.

“You say no one knows of its existence, yet you know of it?” he asked, not quite ready to take
Ignis’ words at face value.

Ignis smirked minutely. “Who do you think it was you complained about the dad joke to?”

Noctis was…decidedly less enthusiastic about the whole ordeal as he absorbed the revelation.
Impressive as Ignis’ illation was, and Prompto had to admit it was pretty damn impressive, it
seemed to only upset Noctis more. Prompto could admit, it was a bit overwhelming to hear such
news. If he put himself in Noct’s shoes, he’d have probably fainted from the overload. The idea of
being a king? The king? The one that banished the darkness and saved the world? And then being
expected to drop everything and go back to Lucis to rule? To hold a continent’s worth of struggling
people’s fates in his hands? It’d be a little too much, to say the least. But…

“I didn’t finish what I was saying before,” Noctis finally said. The trio waited patiently for him to
continue.

“I’m not trying to spite you guys, I’m really not. But I’m happy here. I can’t imagine what sort of
person I’d have to be to lead a kingdom, especially in these times, but I’m not him anymore. If you
came here hoping to have your king back… Sorry. I just… I can’t. I don’t want that. I don’t want to
be a king.”

Yeah. Yeah, it’d be a little too much, that was for certain.
The good thing about getting a new job with better hours is the paycheck. The bad thing about getting a new job with better hours is the amount of free time that I suddenly don't have. I'm sure once things calm down and I'm used to my new schedule, I'll be able to work my writing around it. Until then, hopefully this is the longest amount of time I'll take between chapters.

“Hey, Gladio?”

Gladio plopped down on the mattress next to Noctis, having just finished taking a shower. He raised an eyebrow at Noctis, not expecting the quiet demeanor and halting words. In the prince’s hands, a newspaper was crumpled and ragged, as if it had been balled up and then straightened back out. A familiar one with a familiar headline, dated May 17th, a familiar and meaningful date. Gladio was surprised Noct kept that paper. Personally, he would have rather tossed it and every one like it in a bonfire. He didn’t need more reminders that his home was invaded and his life was gone. He had enough nagging at him every time he looked at Noct and knew how vigilant he would have to remain to keep his prince…his king safe. Every time they barely made it out of a battle and had to count their lucky stars that they were all in one piece. That the empire hadn’t killed any of them. That they had another day to fight and to live.

Noctis placed the paper back in his arsenal in a flash of blue light. He sighed and leaned back on his arms, not bothering to look at Gladio. It bugged the shield a bit how guarded Noct seemed, his shoulders hiked up and his head turned away, but he supposed Noct had earned his space. He’d been through much these past few months.

“…What’s up, Noct?” Gladio asked, unsure of exactly what sort of answer he’d receive.

Noctis sighed, peering around the small hotel room in the Leville. It was as barebones as ever, a sign of the frugality with which the group had chosen it. They only had to stay for the night before they went back to Caem, not interested in exhausting themselves before their trip to Altissia.

“You think I got what it takes? To rule, I mean?”

Gladio raised an eyebrow at that. It was an insecurity he’d long since known Noctis had, but he never voiced it. He never laid his feelings bare like that, too concerned with looking as put together and regal as his father. He had a long way to go before he reached the point where his persona was authentic, but...

“Maybe if you stopped staying up all night playing video games, you might scrape by,” Gladio grinned. Noctis rolled his eyes, turning his head to the side to hide his own smile before aiming a weak punch at Gladio’s arm.

“Nobody asked you anyway.”

Snorting in amusement, Gladio reached over and pulled Noctis into a headlock. The prince didn’t even bother to try and struggle out of it, instead looking up at Gladio through his fringe.
the side slightly when Gladio huffed a laugh.

“You literally just asked me, you little troll.”

Noctis’ nose wrinkled in mock distaste. “I’m not even that little.”

“That’s what you’re protesting to?”

Noctis finally pulled out of his grip, turning to face Gladio though he kept his head down, his bottom lip pulled worriedly between his teeth.

“I’m serious though.”

Sighing, Gladio studied Noctis solemnly. He’d been through a lot already, and still had a lot more to wade through before he could reclaim his throne. And yet he hadn’t let his father’s death drag him down. Sure he’d had his bitchy moments, and the occasional mood swing, and Gladio had even heard him crying softly a few times at night, not even counting the breakdown after he’d taken down the marilith, but that didn’t change the fact that he kept moving forward. He went towards each goal with determination, helped out anyone in need along the way, and easily accepted each royal arm, knowing they brought him closer to defeating the empire and taking back the crystal. His lackadaisical attitude at the beginning of the trip slowly transformed into the patience, kindness and effort that Gladio saw in him now. And yeah, he could still be a little shit, but Gladio figured that came with being twenty and spoiled, so he couldn’t really kick up a fuss about that. Nonetheless, Noctis had become someone Gladio was proud to stand beside and glad to offer his loyalty and his life to. He’d make a fine king, Gladio was sure.

“You got what it takes, Noct. Trust me,” Gladio finally told him, lifting the prince’s chin with his fingers to ensure eye contact. Noctis held it for a moment before looking away again, doubt still lingering. Gladio fought the urge to sigh. It seemed it wouldn’t take just words to convince Noctis of what he was capable of, despite how sure Gladio was. If Gladio had learned anything in the Tempering Grounds, it was that his own resolve would prove his worth as the shield of the king, not his strength, not his birth and not his sword. So how could he show Noctis the same? That his king lived up to his title everyday as he pushed on without complaint…well okay, with a lot of complaint but mostly it was harmless whining. Noctis never took his role for granted, so why he took himself for granted, Gladio simply couldn’t understand.

Leaning back on his arms, Gladio shrugged instead. It was his job to protect Noct and his choice to love him. Nowhere in his duties and obligations was he supposed to coddle him. Noctis would figure out through his own efforts and his own time that he could be the King Lucis needed. Until then, Gladio would keep protecting him.

From everything except himself.

“How’d the mythril hunt go?” he asked. Noctis seemed happy for the subject change, scooting closer to Gladio to lean against him, his legs folded on the bed as he shifted out of the dejected pose and into the more comfortable confidence he pulled off with ease now.

“Alright. You should have seen it. I wasn’t sure how you’d take the scenery, but Specs was convinced you’d like it. It was definitely out of this world.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. The lake for a ceiling, floors that repaired themselves…” Noctis grinned mischievously, wiggling his fingers playfully at Gladio. “The undead.”
“I think I had enough of those at the Tempering Grounds,” Gladio snorted. Noctis only rolled his eyes.

“Whatever. I guess you would’ve enjoyed yourself. Plenty of daemons to fight. And hey, Aranea was there too so I guess you could’ve had your customary dick measuring contest with her. Either that, or asked her out.”

“Ha ha, smartass. It sounds, and looks, like it went fine without me. No dick measuring necessary.”

“Or asking out, huh?”

Gladio huffed in mock exasperation, lifting Noctis’ face again to plant a kiss on his mouth. It came and passed quickly enough that Noctis barely had a chance to react to it, only blinking confusedly at Gladio as he processed the movement.

“You’re getting married, I don’t want to hear it.”

“…Wedding was called off,” Noctis pouted, lifting his face for a more proper kiss. Grinning at the behavior, Gladio indulged him.

“Don’t worry so much, Prince Pouty—”

“I’m not pouting.”

“—I’m not interested in anyone but you.”

“Uh huh,” Noctis snorted, pushing away from Gladio. Obviously not seriously, but Gladio wasn’t going to take the silly accusation lying down. Leaning against his prince…king, he pressed him down against the mattress.

“Want me to prove it?”

Worries pushed from his mind by that point, Noctis eagerly took what his shield had to give. Twice.

In their defense, they wouldn’t have the chance to enjoy that sort of alone time again for ten years.

Gladio thought that their one last time after ten years of hopeful waiting that slowly waned into desperate wishing would be exactly that. One last time. That he’d turn away from that staircase and lift his sword to the last daemons, the last remnants of the starscourge, and know that it would be the last he’d ever see of his king.

He found that the sentiment hadn’t changed much.

It wasn’t just about not being able to see Noctis, to touch him, to hold him, to protect him. It was about his very purpose. For as long as he could remember, he’d worn his name and his title proudly. He’d be the king’s shield. He’d be the next in a long line of generations of king’s shields. He’d grow up as proud and strong as his father, and serve a king as wise and respectable as King Regis.

And then he met the quiet ten year old with a bad case of resting bitch face and a tendency to brush off any and all forms of social interaction. If he could have locked himself in a room and pet cats all day, he probably would have. He was spoiled, he was undisciplined, he was whiny and he couldn’t even take a few hits in a training session without wanting to call it quits. Had he any idea how often Gladio wanted to quit after the number of failures he suffered? Gladio never let it deter
him, however. His mistakes were proof that he needed to improve for the sake of his future king. And when he finally met that king…

He was disappointed.

It’d taken months for him to find any modicum of respect for the spoiled brat, and even then he’d only been convinced when his little sister defended him. It’d taken years for that respect to come as naturally as breathing, and even then there were hitches along the way. But by the end of their journey, Gladio indeed found himself the proud and strong shield of a wise and respectable king. Beneath it all, it was still just Noctis. Noctis with his picky eating habits, and his dumb movie references, and his ridiculous ego. But there was really no separation. Being a king didn’t make him not Noctis. He walked as tall as he could, head held high and sword at the ready. He defended his people…what was left of them until the end. He was King Noctis Lucis Caelum not because he was born to be, but because he had worked hard to be, despite his previous insecurities.

Now he wasn’t either, and Gladio was lost.

It wasn’t just about losing a friend. It wasn’t just about losing a lover. Gladio couldn’t be the shield to a man who didn’t want to be king; who couldn’t be because he didn’t even remember his own birthright. Gladio sat on the dusty couch of the extended stay inn room of a man named Luke who believed his entire life was in a small fishing village in Tenebrae. There was no more “Noctis”, no more reminiscing on the fun days of their teenage years, riding around the city when they had finished their responsibilities, eating out when Ignis was too tired to cook (even if he wouldn’t admit it) and Noctis was more than ready to give him a break, sitting around the apartment playing video games when Prompto was busy with club activities, his schedule clashing with Noct’s volunteer work, and of course clashing wooden swords in the training grounds as Gladio watched the prince’s progress with proud eyes. There were no more dates, disguised as outings, in the midst of Insomnia’s night life, no more stolen moments on the road, no more not-so-secret looks and brushes of skin for the comfort of just knowing the other was there.

There was no more “Your Highness”. No more playful jabs at Noctis’ lazy prince act, no more bodily guarding him in the middle of a fight, no more collaborated moves that showcased their coordinated dynamic, no more standing behind Noctis during acts of diplomacy or standing beside him when he made a heavy decision or standing before him when he picked a fight he couldn’t win. There was no more “Your Majesty”. Though the regal, bearded man from over half a year before sat adjacent to them, watching them with sad but firm eyes, they no longer held familiarity. They no longer held knowledge of shared pasts or promised futures. They looked into Gladio’s own and only viewed him with the guarded caution of a stranger. It was unnerving.

Gladio had found himself becoming increasingly quiet on this trip. He simply didn’t know what to say, or how to voice his slowly increasing dread. How did one convey to their friends that they were terrified of being confronted with a Noctis that didn’t remember them? He could already figure both Ignis and Prompto already felt terrible losing familiarity with a friend they’d known for so long. For him, though…it was becoming overwhelming. The opportunity to see Noctis again and yet the unsureness that settled in the back of his mind when he realized that Noct wouldn’t feel the same, wouldn’t even recognize him. Gladio had known him for twenty years, and yes the ten years of darkness counted, and all of a sudden their entire past was taken from them. Taken from Noct.

How could he open his mouth and not have his first words to Noctis be “I love you?”. When he’d rarely gotten chances to say it. When now was when it was needed most, for both Noctis and Gladio’s sakes. He’d only get a blank stare now. Possibly that familiar, disgusted nose-wrinkle, that uncomfortable look darkening those blue eyes as he looked away, unsure of how to deal with
such affection. Probably get kicked out once Noctis decided how he was gonna deal with it.

Gladio couldn’t deal with that.

“I understand,” Ignis said, easily accommodating Noct’s feelings on the matter just as he always did. Despite the disappointment practically oozing from his words.

What else did they expect? Noctis was “Luke” now. And “Luke” just wanted to be a fisherman.

“Sorry,” Noctis simply responded. He watched the group again, quietly, as he judged their intent and their purpose in his living space. Despite his clear refusal to take up the mantle of king again, he didn’t seem particularly eager to shoo them away. Instead he was…curious? Possibly? Not that this was much better, after all no one wanted curiosity to follow the unfamiliarity. Gladio almost wanted to be kicked out. At least he wouldn’t have to listen to Noctis ask them questions he should, in a fair world, already know the answers to.

It didn’t seem this was on his mind, however, as he stood.

“I’ve been a gods awful host, by the way. You guys want anything? Something to drink? Eat? I’m not the best cook around, but I’m sure I won’t give any of you food poisoning.”

Though his offers came as questions, he’d already made it into the kitchen area, opening the refrigerator, as ancient looking as the rest of his furniture, to rummage inside of it. Ignis, ever polite, quickly declined.

“We’re quite fine. We don’t mean to burden you. Well, more than we already have at least.”

Noctis snorted, blunt as always. “I’m not gonna lie, you’re right about the burden part.”

All three of them flinched at the accusation, unsure of exactly how to take his words. He was quick to follow up though.

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t have a problem with you guys in particular. You traveled halfway across the world just to see me, even if it’s just because I’m supposed to be your king or such—”

“We assure you,” Ignis cut in. “You being our king is the least of our concerns. You were our friend before anything else.”

 “…or that. Either way, that’s not something people just get up and do. Not in this day and age, at least. I hear the reconstruction in Lucis is pretty bad, even worse in Insomnia. Almost as wrecked as Altissia, right?”

“Some of it was,” Prompto said, “But it’s gotten way better now.”

“Well it’s not so hard to guess that if you guys were so close to your king, you’re all pretty important aren’t you? Yet you leave the reconstruction efforts to see me? I can’t be angry at you guys for that kind of dedication.”

Despite their earlier protests, Noctis handed each of them a bottle of water, gripping his own as he sank back into his chair, sighing.

“But I also mean what I say. You guys came all this way for someone close to you, and I respect that. What I don’t respect is some foreign king who fucked off for ten years and only came back when the world was at the brink of its end, just so he could die and leave all his responsibilities behind. And I sure as hell don’t want to be him.”
Gladio fought down the urge to argue his points. That it was out of his hands being sucked into that crystal, that it was the gods at fault and not at all his choice to spend ten years absorbing the power of kings and gods so that he could fight the immortal chancellor and purge the star of its scourge. That it was out of his hands to ‘die’ on that throne. They would have been empty words anyway. Instead, he bit down the twinge of ire and drank from his water bottle, opting to remain silent. That was probably for the best, as of now. He’d already left off with Noct on a sour note from before the ten years, and had never gotten a chance to apologize after his return and now likely never would. No need in creating bad blood pointlessly at this stage.

No one else commented either, though the other two were clearly uncomfortable with Noct’s choice of words. They were torn between correcting him or starting an argument, and though he’d made it clear that he didn’t have a problem with them personally, they were still walking a fine enough line with him that it was just as possible, and just as probable, that they would get the boot for starting shit with him. A shame, really, that even without his memory, he didn’t seem to think too highly of himself.

Noctis seemed to be waiting for some sort of acknowledgement, his eyebrows raised in mild surprise when he received no rebuttal. His gaze flicking over them again, he settled it on Ignis again. More specifically, Ignis’ scars if Gladio was guessing his line of sight correctly.

“You guys sure you don’t need anything? You don’t need a cane, Ignis?”

Ignis grimaced slightly, though Gladio doubted it was at the offer. He’d long since learned to take the loss of his eyesight in stride, and likely would have never perceived insult or pity in Noctis’ words. He probably was, however, a bit put out by Noctis’ use of his name as opposed to Iggy or Specs. In a casual atmosphere like this, he’d have never referred to Ignis by his full first name.

“I’ll get by, thank you.”

Noctis stared at him skeptically, but seemed to take Ignis’ word for it.

“Well, I don’t know how long all of you plan on spending here, but I can tell you now it’s pretty boring. If you’re here to try and convince me to be your King Noctis, you can drop that line of thought right here and now. I don’t mind if you want to stick around the village though. Do what you want,” he shrugged.

“In the meantime, I do have to work most days so if you need me for anything else, it’s best to catch me during evenings. Also, talk to Caius or Ava if you guys need any help around the village. They’re good people, they’d be happy to do anything for you.”

The dismissal in his words were clear as day, and the trio stood as they prepared to leave.

“Well, Noct—ah, Luke. Sorry. It was good seeing you again. Thanks for…” Prompto trailed off awkwardly, obviously unsure of how to treat the best friend that no longer recognized him. Noctis nodded to him, a small, tight smile formed on his lips as he’d caught the slip up. He said nothing though, only waving to them as he stood again, heading into a separate room where, more than likely, his bed and bathroom were. Ignis and Prompto walked out ahead of Gladio, and he softly shut the door, holding onto the handle unconsciously as he tried to figure out exactly how to react to this entire ordeal.

“That went…better than expected,” Ignis said. Prompto raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’m almost scared to ask what you expected.”
“To be thrown out the moment I brought up his status as king again, honestly.”

It seemed Ignis had picked up on their tentative situation as well, unsurprisingly.

“Well, I mean, you did prove it,” Prompto said, trying to soothe the tense mood even just a little bit.

“With the most basic of reasoning and the most coincidental of circumstances. That he even kept that handkerchief at all is a blessing. And even then, we’ve no other means of providing evidence. Not here at least. No statements, no documents, no relatives, no recordings. Even your pictures are back home, placed in an album, correct Prompto?”

Prompto kicked at the ground in dejection, realizing how much of a mistake that was. He’d only meant to clear up his camera space and keep the photos of their road trip safe somewhere, not knowing that they might have been vital on this trip. Though it was unclear how much they would have helped. Even the proof Iggy provided had been enough to show to Noctis that he wasn’t just anybody, and he still seemed determined not to accept it as truth. Bullheaded as usual.

“No matter,” Ignis continued. “We’ve caught his attention at least. And if he’s welcoming enough to our presence, we might at the very least still be able to convince him that he’s Noctis. And perhaps, if we should be so lucky—”

Gladio couldn’t quite resist the urge to roll his eyes at that particular pun.

“—he might start to regain his memory at some point. Perhaps then it’d be a bit easier to convince him that he is indeed the king.”

It was a small, unrealistic moment of optimism for all of them, but they’d take it. The idea of Noctis getting his memory back…that was something worth fighting for. Hell, if Gladio had to pick a fight with each and every single one of the Six, he’d do it just to have the old Noctis back. Just for Noctis to have himself back. All of himself.

“What do we do in the meantime?” he asked, breaking his silence for the first time in hours. Ignis and Prompto looked to him in surprise, both having not known what reaction to expect from Gladio and having warily approached his uncharacteristic quietness. He hadn’t meant to worry them. It was more his own doubtful feelings on the matter that kept his lips sealed. He supposed, though, that a goal could more easily keep his mind occupied. With that though settled comfortably in his head, he could relax a bit easier. There was nothing concrete about Noctis’ amnesia. No one knew what caused it, though it wasn’t hard to guess, considering the amount of power it would have taken to pull Noctis from his throne and fling him over an entire ocean. Not that this was reassuring, as it meant there were even more unknowns regarding the permanence of Noct’s amnesia and just how deep it went. When he found himself in Tenebrae, just how much had he known about himself? Did he gradually forget as time passed? Was it all blasted from his mind in a single moment? Did he wake up not knowing who he was? Not knowing anything? Was it possible to give it all back to him?

Gods knew. And that was the damn problem. Gods knew and they probably caused it and they weren’t going to do a damn thing about it. And Noctis didn’t deserve that. No one did.

“In the meantime, we’ll stick around the village. We’ll attempt to befriend Noctis once again. Maybe if he’s more comfortable with us…”

Then maybe he’d be more open with going back to Lucis with them. With learning more about himself and maybe, hopefully becoming king again of his own free will. After all, they couldn’t
force him. He’d been forced to do things all his life. This would have to be his choice.

“Right. Become friends with Noct again,” Prompto sighed, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck as if he was readying for a fight. Hell, he probably was knowing how stubborn Noctis could be. “No probs. Did it before, I can do it again.”

“I’m sure we all can.” Ignis turned to Gladio again, a worried crease in his brow. “And it’d probably be best not to…”

Not to allude to his deeper relationship with Noctis. Gladio knew better. It’d just make things awkward and that was the last thing he wanted. He’d keep the ‘dating thing’ under wraps. It’d suck, but Noctis was there in front of him, and decidedly not dead, and Gladio wasn’t going to fuck it up.

“Gotcha,” he answered. Ignis nodded in understanding, facing the direction of the room…well, what he thought was the direction of the room they were checked into, but thankfully Prompto corrected him before he walked into a wall. They all three walked back to their room, their spirits a little higher than they had been the previous day. They’d commence with planning, trying to find ways to connect with Noctis without interfering too much in his daily life. They’d try to find ways to make it snappy so that they could all make it back to Fenestala before Aranea left. And if they didn’t? Noctis was more than worth the extra effort.

Gladio spent that night in bed for the first time sleeping peacefully, knowing Noctis was safe and well. He doubted he’d be able to ignore the empty space at his side quite yet though. He did say, after all, that he wouldn’t mention his relationship with Noctis. But that didn’t mean he’d forget about it. Feelings like those didn’t go away quite so easily.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

*looks at previous author’s note* *sweatdrops* In all seriousness, I needed a break from this fic. It had become my primary focus for a while and it was starting to tire me out a bit. I tried to type this chapter and got stuck. Yup. Despite having a full story chapter plan, I got stuck. I didn’t forget about this story, trust me, I would pull up the file and stare at it in frustration for who knows how long before closing it again. I just couldn’t get anywhere. Figured it was time to give the story a rest for a bit and let the creative juices build up again. I ended up scrapping the first half of this chapter and writing something completely different from what I had planned and it helped so much. Be patient with me, please! I might a little slow on updates for a while as I try to get back in the groove. Not to mention, we’re in a slow period of the story before the narrative picks back up again as well, so it’s going to feel like filler for a while. It won’t be too long, I’d drive myself crazy writing nothing but filler for too many chapters, but it’s there to hold the pacing so…

*shrugs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regis Lucis Caelum was a ballsy man, Aurelia had to admit. His father, King Mors, had already earned the people’s ire when he’d drawn the wall back until it covered only the Crown City, and when his son continued on the course he set, he hadn’t exactly endeared himself to the rest of Lucis. Aurelia wasn’t exactly the most involved in politics in her early twenties, but even she remembered the protests in the streets against Regis’ reign. The sign posts demanding Regis’ fall, the chants calling for retaliation against Niflheim, the marches in the streets for the sake of the homes that were being lost to the empire with the introduction of the treaty. She spent those days traveling outside of the wall with her friends, enjoying her youth and ignoring her duties. It was probably the reason she was even still alive when she thought about it. But still, she held respect for Regis. He did what best he could to uphold the most favorable outcome. He sacrificed his kingdom and married his son off for the sake of peace.

Of course, in the end it was pointless. The city fell, the prince and his bride went missing, and the world went into a ten year darkness that stole away half of the world’s population. It ended when the prince –the king, rather– suddenly reappeared out of nowhere and then died to bring the sun back. And considering how adamant King Regis had been about Prince Noctis leaving the city before the treaty (Aurelia specifically remembered it causing a huge fuss before she left herself), she wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d known what his son would eventually do. She couldn’t imagine how that could have felt. Just the thought of anything happening to her own child set her on edge. To have known his son was going to die for Eos?

Regis Lucis Caelum was a very ballsy man.

He was also admirable for being able to handle the insanity that came with running a kingdom. There were already so many responsibilities to handle in a fully functioning kingdom: the affairs of the city, the affairs of the main continent, the affairs of the territories, the international affairs, the traditions and the duties and so on and so forth. And all of it was tied to the ruling monarch, the council only served as a check to the king’s power. They advised. They didn’t rule. It was a
position Aurelia always knew she would one day fill. But ruling itself? She had to handle all of that on top of the rebuilding of essentially the entire world. The other council members spent too much time arguing with one another to be of much help, and the old provisional government had never been reinstated after it dissolved when the darkness came. Primus was no help either, constantly making snide and belittling remarks. He wasn’t in any way fit to rule the kingdom, and his verbal attacks weren’t getting him any closer to doing so, so she wasn’t entirely sure why he bothered. He wasn’t an outright villain in their situation or anything of the sort, but he was an immature asshole and he’d have reveled way too much on his own power to do anything good for anyone else. No wonder Ignis had left this to her…

And speaking of, Ignis Scientia was another person Aurelia had serious respect for. She had no clue what he was leaving to do, but she knew it had to have been incredibly important for him to drop everything and run off to Tenebrae. He wasn’t shirking his duties, even she knew he wouldn’t have. Couldn’t have. Ignis had been glued to the crown prince’s hip since they were children, Aurelia remembered, and his devotion to his duty and to his friend had been his driving force in piecing the kingdom back together. He wouldn’t fail Lucis the way he felt he’d failed their young king. And yet his abrupt announcement of taking leave, as well as those of Gladiolus and Prompto’s, were as mysterious as they were confounding. No reason was given beyond the flimsy excuse of diplomatic relations with the new government of Fenestala, and Aurelia wasn’t stupid. She knew the government there was a bit of a mess and neither country would benefit from forcing talks this early into reconstruction. There was something else the three were chasing after, and whatever it was, Aurelia only hoped it would come to their benefit. She would trust Ignis’ decisions for now, but she only hoped that they found whatever it was they were looking for and came back quickly.

Aurelia decidedly did not respect the job of ruling Lucis.

In fact, she kind of hated it.

She agreed because she knew she couldn’t leave it to anyone else, not when the council was also a mess and Primus was gunning so hard for her position. Obnoxious as he was, he knew quite thoroughly the governing processes of the kingdom. Being a member of the Fiducia family gave him perks, certainly, but if he’d been born with half the smarts, manner and grace that his cousin Queen Aulea had, it wouldn’t have been nearly as difficult a choice to have allowed him on the council. He’d been a pain for as long as Aurelia had known him, as a young child bullying the others, as a snotty teenager looking down his nose at everyone he came across, as a man in his late twenties muscling his way into meetings he simply could not handle with the care of a man who loved his kingdom. Gods but Aurelia was happy she didn’t stick around often enough to have put up with that. With any of it, really. If Primus wasn’t making a fuss, someone else was. Rodel was starting debates with anyone who would listen, Palla was sticking her head in the sand at the sound of any reasonable suggestion, Litus was far too immature to handle even small meetings, and Plessia wasn’t even old enough to have graduated high school. It was a mess, really.

All of it was a mess. She hoped she’d be able to hold it together long enough for Ignis to come back, or she feared she might lose her mind.

“Lady Bellum?”

Turning at the sound of her name, she found one of the Citadel cleaning girls standing in her doorway. It was a thankless job, Aurelia was sure, but in the current day and age, it was too hard for people to be picky and the Citadel had plenty of openings. It wasn’t the job she seemed upset about, however. There was something else on her mind.
“Yes?” she answered. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s one of my coworkers. He’d gotten sick all of a sudden, a few weeks ago that is, and I think it’s starting to spread. I came up to help clean this floor and it was completely empty,” she said, her shy gaze leveled with the floor. She seemed nervous about admitting this information, as if she’d get in trouble for it, but if anything this meant trouble for everyone. Another issue left behind in the wake of the ten year scourge: the sickness. The council spent so much time arguing over it that they hadn’t bothered to do anything about it, even when it started spreading from the animals to the people. And now it was in the Citadel, which was just great. She’d need to find some way to contact Ignis, to let him know. As of now, she couldn’t do anything about it. If she got near the infected, she feared spreading it to her husband and her baby and she couldn’t risk that.

“I see,” she said, slowly and thoughtfully. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll see what I can do.”

There was nothing she could do. But her words brought a sliver of hope to the girl’s eyes, and that was enough.

-L-O-O-O-

Luke found himself leaning against the port railing, scratching absently at his beard as he stared into the water. Nothing in particular was running through his mind, as he’d already gone through the processing phase in regards to his three new visitors. They were a strange bunch, that was for sure. They’d been there for about three days now and, if anything, seemed more concerned with acquainting themselves with the village than actually bothering Luke. Not that he minded much. They spoke to him, certainly. They sought him out frequently enough. Prompto in particular seemed to like talking to him despite his lackluster responses. Yet they never pushed him, never pestered him...hell they even seemed to know when he wanted to be left alone.

They definitely must’ve been telling the truth about knowing him personally.

It was strange, having complete strangers treat him with such familiarity. After all, with no memory it wasn’t exactly as if he could boast the same. He had no recollection of their faces, of their voices, of their habits or mannerisms... He didn’t even know how well he was supposed to know them. They’ve never brought up just how long they’ve known him or how long they were friends with him. He wasn’t even sure if a prince was allowed to have friends like that.

And that was a whole other can of worms. King of Lucis. Ha. It wasn’t as if he was attempting to be willfully ignorant of his own past. But he supposed it’d be easier to stomach if he was some Lucian nobody. But the King? It was ludicrous that he’d have been such a person. No matter how much the truth wanted to stare him in his face, he didn’t want to have that sort of life. He didn’t want that sort of baggage. How was one supposed to accept that they were meant to die? On top of that, how believable is it that he would end up halfway across the world from the place where he supposedly died?

Groaning, Luke rubbed at his temples in annoyance. He hadn’t want to let these sort of thoughts cloud his mind again, but slowly and insistently they creeped back into his consciousness. They’d started to interfere with his daily life, making it hard for him to pay much attention to those around him, let alone be anywhere near as responsive as he usually was. The amount of ‘are you okay’s he’d gotten was starting to climb to the point where he’d lost count. Even on the boat, the rest of his team had given him a wide berth, thinking he needed space to himself. He didn’t need space. He needed things to go back to normal.

No one else seemed to mind the other three, however. Most of the people who knew Luke didn’t actually know why they were there, and the few that did lost their cautionousness when they realized
the other three weren’t there to harm Luke. Those who didn’t know Luke treated the three guests as exactly that. Guests. They were given the typical Tenebraen hospitality, despite the fact that the Zoldara villages never got guests from anywhere other than Fenestala…Lucian guests were out of the realm of thought until now, and yet were still treated with warmth and welcome. Not that Luke found that to be something to complain about, not at all. It was just…odd. How mundane they were to others when, to Luke, they were the source of the world turning upside down. It was easy to brush of Aranea Highwind when she accused him of the crime of being the King of Kings. It was not so easy to brush off three men who seemed to know Luke better than he knew himself.

He’d attempted to chase away these thoughts by simply returning to normal life, but when it came down to it they kept coming back. Even out on Caius’ boat where he was usually able to put his worries behind him and focus on work, he found his normally clear mind quickly clouding up with unwelcome thoughts.

“Li’l Lukey!” One of the men shouted. Luke stiffened a bit, having not expected it when everyone had otherwise been so quiet, but he turned nonetheless. It was Grier who had addressed him, watching him expectantly. Wanting to get back in the groove of things, Luke forced a mock glare onto his face at the nickname. It hadn’t even registered at first but…well if he wanted everything back to normal, he needed to start acting normal first.

“You get over here and call me little again,” he responded, not able to stop the cheeky grin from forming. The others, expectedly, burst into laughter.

“Nah, how about you get over here?” Grier laughed. “I’ve got a story for ya!”

Well. This was gonna be good.

Attention captured, Noctis plopped down on a crate covered by one of the older nets and leaned forward, waiting patiently. Grier looked over the entire group, silent for the sake of dramatic effect. Then he began.

“Took a train to Cartanica once, just before the long night,” he started. To everyone’s surprise, his voice was quiet as he spoke. “Had some business with some family. It was a few weeks after the Tide Mother was woken, and I knew I had cousins visiting Altissia. Luckily they’d gotten out during the evacuation, but I had to make sure they were okay. Just at the train station though, I’d seen the most curious thing. A blind man writing a list. It was curious, I tell ya. The writing wasn’t even legible. But when I walked up and asked him about it, he said it was for his friends. Had to keep them in check, regardless of what had happened to him. Just at the train station though, I’d seen the most curious thing. A blind man writing a list. It was curious, I tell ya. The writing wasn’t even legible. But when I walked up and asked him about it, he said it was for his friends. Had to keep them in check, regardless of what had happened to him. I gathered from that that his blindness was recent. He went on about how his buddies all needed him and that he couldn’t let his routine change…”

Grier paused then with a thoughtful expression. “Said he couldn’t stand the thought of being treated differently. He felt like he’d been pulled out of his body and put into a new one, and the only thing he could do to ground himself was to continue being himself, even if he was at a bit of a disadvantage. He excused himself then, said he didn’t mean to ‘dump his emotional baggage on a stranger’ and then apologized, but his words stuck with me. Things change around us all the time. Hell even we change with them eventually. But we all have some sort of anchor, even if it feels like we lost a part of ourselves. Maybe that’ll help us find ourselves again.”

His eyes met Luke’s as he gave him a meaningful look then. “Just something to keep in mind.”

“Life lessons from an ol’ man,” one of the others joked.

“Y’ gonna tell m’ fortune next?” another laughed, followed by a round of chuckles from the rest of
Luke had straightened in his seat, however, letting the words sink in. They were clearly an attempt on Grier’s part to help cheer him up, remind him that just because he couldn’t remember his past didn’t mean he wasn’t still who he always was. And it was a nice attempt, but it wasn’t as if Luke hadn’t thought about this already. His problem wasn’t not knowing who he was. His problem was not wanting to be who he used to be. The story itself resonated with him though. It sounded like it might have been…

There was no way. That would’ve been too much of a coincidence. Yet still...

The story stuck with him until he returned to the village, floating around in his head even as he helped carry the hull to the cellar beneath the shack. Even as he started for his room, not bothering with any other chores for the day. Not thinking about them. The inn entered his view and he found himself…hesitating.

He couldn’t exactly help his curiosity.

…It couldn’t hurt.

Sighing, Luke pivoted on his heel and turned for the market where he figured Ignis might be. This would be the first time he’s ever sought one of them out, but he supposed shutting off from them wouldn’t do anyone any good. They weren’t there to drag him away, he knew that. It wouldn’t do anyone any harm to go talk to them.

It was weird how, despite that, Luke felt more and more apprehensive the closer he got to the market. Like he was opening a can of worms that was best left sealed up in storage. Funny, really, that he’d find the idea of speaking to a trio of guys that traveled across an entire ocean to see him a bad thing, after all most would be over the moon to have such dedicated friends, but the circumstances surrounding their arrival left what would have otherwise been a friendly visit soured. He couldn’t shake the feeling that they wanted more out of him than he was willing to give, even if they never said such. They’d look at him with reverence in their eyes, the name Noct would catch on their tongues before the corrected themselves (and it got even worse when one of them accidentally called him ‘Majesty’, especially so absentmindedly like it was natural for him to call Luke that), straighten their posture around him momentarily before relaxing…except Prompto who tended to always be relaxed around everyone. He wished all of them could be so relaxed. He wished they’d stop reminding him so constantly of who he was in their eyes, even though he knew it was an irrational thing to expect. They knew Noctis all their lives. Noctis was who they saw when they looked at Luke. He couldn’t expect them to suddenly accept him as himself when they’ve always called him by another name.

Still. It could be annoying when they started to call him Noct around others.

So when he found Ignis standing amongst the stalls, he unconsciously grit his teeth in preparation for the inevitable. Especially once the other man heard him coming and turned towards him.

“Ah…Luke. A pleasant surprise,” he greeted in that nobility branded accent. The sort one heard from the high society of Tenebrae and, Luke assumed, Lucis as well. The pause was noticeable, but at the very least Ignis had caught himself before he started to say it. He caught on far quicker than most, Luke had realized.

“Doing some shopping?” Luke asked. He inwardly cringed at his inability to make small talk sound natural, but at the very least if Ignis noticed, he didn’t mind.
“Hmm. I’d thought I’d grabbed enough for our stay here, but then I remembered that those two eat like behemoths,” he responded, pulling a smile out of Luke before he’d even realized his own facial expression had changed. Another thing he’d never expected: how easily he clicked with the man. They really must have known each other since they were children. He found, when he didn’t think about it too hard, that he didn’t mind that so much. Having friends like the three visitors was also in some ways…refreshing.

“I almost want to ask why you’re feeding them then. They can’t come out here themselves and shop?” Luke asked, grinning in amusement at their odd dynamic.

“Ah yes, so Prompto can bring back something questionable that he thought looked cool and Gladio can hunt down a basket full of cup noodles from who knows where. I would like to live through my meals, thank you.”

That had Luke laughing. Wow, were they quirky.

“To the first one, I can only say that regardless of what it looks like it probably won’t kill you. And that second one? I don’t even think cup noodles are sold here.”

“Don’t tell Gladio, he might cry.”

Both chuckled at the light teasing (at least, Luke hoped it was light and the other two weren’t actually that weird) as Ignis continued to shop.

“You know,” he said, running his fingers over the wares, occasionally pausing at whatever caught his interest. “I’m surprised the economy survived well enough here for there to be a market.”

“Trade with the other villages kept it up,” Luke answered, shrugging matter-of-factly. “It’s not the same in Lucis, I’m guessing?”

“There are children in Lucis who don’t even know what gil is. The currency had only been recently worked back into the economy once meteorshards were no longer necessary. Lestallum still uses them as a main form of currency though some shops will take gil. Most of the money flow is in Insomnia for now.”

“That’s gotta be fun to deal with. Can’t imagine having to fix an entire country’s economy.” Which wasn’t a problem in Tenebrae where no one even lived in the city until the light came back. All that was left to even *use* currency were the villages and they had gotten on just fine with gil.

“Oh yes, it’s the highlight of my life,” Ignis quipped sarcastically. “In all seriousness, it’s a pain but it’s necessary. Meteorshards should be left to Lestallum to help fuel the powerplant. Nowhere else needs them with the daemons gone and the sun returned.”

“I’m sure,” Luke nodded, mostly to himself as the other man couldn’t see it. He seemed to know however that this wasn’t what Luke was here for.

“Enough about that. I’ve a feeling it’s not what you came here to talk about?” Ignis asked. He kept it casual as he continued to shop, offering an out if Luke no longer wanted to talk about it. A nice notion, but Luke wouldn’t have come if he’d planned on backing out.

“Heard something…” he said, quiet and uncertain. Uncertain of how to start it and…uncertain of how Ignis would react.

“Oh? Might I ask what?”
“I think…it might have been about you.”

Ignis’ eyebrows furrowed at that, his eyes opening to stare quizzically in Luke’s direction. Though he couldn’t quite meet Luke’s eyes, the emotion in them was understood just the same. Curiosity. And confusion.

“…Should I be concerned?”

“Oh no, it’s nothing bad!” Luke was quick to correct that train of thought. He hadn’t even realized how his words could be construed. “It was a story one of my coworkers told me actually.”

Ignis turned to face Luke fully then, waiting silently and patiently for him to continue.

“You see, he’s from Cartanica. And he mentioned having gone back a few weeks after the Hydren leveled Altissia. Said he met a blind man writing a list at the train station.”

“And you wondered if he meant me.”

“Yeah.”

A long silence before Ignis spoke again.

“It’s possible. We had a reason to stop in Cartanica. To visit the royal tomb in Fodina Caestino.”

Luke had the distinct impression that that ‘we’ included him as well.

“I don’t remember having met anyone here in Cartanica but then…things were out of sorts then. I might recognize the voice if I heard it again, or I might have pushed it out of mind.”

“He’d mentioned that. That y—this person had admitted to feeling kind of out of it, and needing to write the list down to feel like himself.”

Interestingly enough, a small grin appeared on Ignis’ face then.

“Yes. A list of materials we might have needed to keep stocked, in case we ran into a sticky situation in the quarry. I do remember wanting to do something familiar to keep myself grounded but…” a pause then, as if he was going to say something else and then thought better of it.

“Regardless, it’s in the past. I’m assuming you just wanted to confirm if it was me or not?”

Luke nodded again before catching himself. “Yeah, I uh… It just stuck with me. Figured I’d ask.”

For a man who couldn’t see, Ignis saw right through Luke. Easily.

“If you need something to ground you back to reality, take a step back. Look at the situation as a whole. Does it matter if you’re Noctis Lucis Caelum or Luke the Fisherman from Syldra? Are you not the same person either way?”

Was he? Luke honestly wasn’t sure at this point. There was a hell of a lot more to being Noctis Lucis Caelum than just being himself, but…obviously Luke the Fisherman couldn’t escape that. Not after Aranea had found him. Certainly not after Ignis, Prompto, and Gladiolus had found him. How was he supposed to look at the whole picture when most of it was missing?

“If it helps,” Ignis continued. “I can tell you that you haven’t changed much. I’m always going to know you as Noct, and you’re going to know you as Luke. Does that mean you’re not still you?”

Oh god this felt preachy? Was this too preachy? I don't really like how this chapter ended...
Next one will be better. It'll be with Prompto. And then Gladio afterwards. Both chapters are already half written, let's hope this means I'll finish them without taking six months ha ha...ha.

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