### Summary

Silia Hartwood has lived many crucial years in her life: in M.E. 732 her father was killed by the Niffs; in M.E. 739 she moved to the Crown City; in M.E. 741 she decided to join the new Kingsglaive army. But when she returns to Insomnia without her right leg at the end of M.E. 755 she doesn't know that the most crucial year of all is yet to come.

From Chapter 44:

*The first thing she noticed was that Cor wasn't alone. A stocky man, not too tall, whose appearance she couldn't recognize, was sitting in front of the Marshal's desk, his back to her. The second was that Cor had a terrible expression. A lethal mix of gravity, anger and perplexity that she had rarely seen in his face. When Cor looked at her, the man turned back, and Silia's mouth went dry as if she had never drunk in her life.*

"Oh, by the Six. Libertus," she whispered. *He was thinner, and had cut his hair, but it was him. "What the fuck...?"

Libertus startled, not less surprised than she was. "Silia?"

Before she could pounce on him, Cor stood up and slammed both his hands on the desk. *"Hartwood, stop."*
Disclaimers/Warnings: This is my first fanfiction in English - as you'll all probably notice, I am not a native speaker. Suggestions and advices are of course more than welcome. I tried to follow the original events as far as I could, slightly diverging from Parting Ways; the story, however, is going to take quite a different path right after the end of Chapter 13, and will change the outline depicted in Comrades. I hope you'll enjoy it.

Update: previous and future chapters will now beta-read by brightspot149. Thank you very much!

PROLOGUS

M.E. 755

I

Silia opened her eyes. A ceiling stained with mold and moisture welcomed her back to the living world. She tried to remember how she had come there, waiting for her numbness to retreat like waves on the foreshore, but it did not happen. Her mouth was dry, and she had a faint but persistent ringing in her ears.

Morphine, she understood, and that first shiny thought uncovered a well of fragmented images. A Jormungand. The imperial army had summoned a fucking Jormungand. I can't stay here. I've got to go back to fight. She tried to lay on her side, but she could hardly move her head and fingers. I failed the warp. The blood. Thomas. I must...

II

"Silia."

Again the ceiling stained with mold and moisture. Pain. Her right leg was in a hell of a lot of pain. She tried to scream, but only a prolonged braying came out from her mouth. It didn't even sound like her voice.

"More morphine, hurry!"

No. "No!" She managed to sat up. She threw up, almost choking. Someone turned her on her side and held her head down while she coughed, struggling to breathe.

"Where's that fucking morphine?"

"No, No." She stretched her arms toward the white coat in front of her. She managed to grab the edge and pulled it. "No more morphine."

"Silia, stay down!" It was Sarah's voice. She was holding her head.
"No!" she shouted, and her voice came out clearer. "What the fuck hap...?" She didn't want other morphine. She wanted to know what the fuck was happening.

Thomas. The Jormungand. Niflheim. She felt the pressure of a needle into her thigh, but only the pressure, because the pain in her leg, that atrocious pain, was all she could think of. Silia clung to that pain to avoid fainting again.

"What the fuck happened...?" she whispered. The pain slowly went down. She felt her senses fading away again. The hem of the white coat slipped away from her hand. She could still hear Sarah's voice, or maybe it was her mother's, but she couldn't understand what she was saying.

III

An iron cart with bloodied instruments stuffed on the top shelf. A folding screen that once must have been white. Silia blinked and moved her lips. Thirst. She was thirsty. She had to remember. The Jormungand. Thomas. The failed warp. Niflheim.

The white coat again. Beige trousers. She waved a hand in his direction, and the beige trousers approached. This time she recognized him.

"Dr. Emblyn," she whispered. The beige pants lowered and became a familiar face. Horn-rimmed glasses, dark eyes with dark circles, hard mouth. The doctor laid his hand on her face - she barely felt his touch -, lowered her right eyelid and pulled out a flashlight that pointed at her pupil. He did the same with her left eye. Then he lay his wrist on her forehead.

"The temperature's still high" he said, to her or to someone else in the room, holding his face at her level. "How are you feeling, Hartwood?"

"I don't know," she said in a breath. "You tell me."

Dr. Emblyn got up. "You have to rest, Hartwood. You went into a hemorrhagic shock and remained senseless for two days."

"The jormungand...?"

"Don't think about it now. Are you feeling any pain?"

"No. I can't feel anything."

"Good thing. Get some more rest." He moved to leave.

"No!" she tried to call him back. "Doc. Please." She found out that she was able to move a little. She grabbed the iron headboard, kicked to push herself – she almost couldn't feel her legs – and struggled to sit up. The room started whirling around her and yellow lights flashed in the corner of her eyes, but she held on and managed not to faint.

"Hartwood, stay down!" the doctor replied with a loud voice. He returned to her bedside. "You must not force yourself."

"Tell me what happened."

"Not now."

Despite her weakness and dizziness, Silia got pissed off. "Doctor Frank Emblyn, do not forget who I am. You might be a military doctor, but I outrank you. I demand to know what happened and what
my current conditions are."

The long speech tired her. She was wheezing. Dr. Emblyn looked at her with an expression that she didn't like at all - was he pitying her? - and she liked even less his lacking of a retort.

She left the board with a hand and removed the blanket to get up.

"Hartwood..."

Her left leg, bruised and torn, was there. Of her right one remained just a bandaged stump above her knee. She found herself at a loss, and she had to cling to the headboard with both her hands again. She felt her beating accelerating, a scream crawling up her throat. "What the fuck did you do to my leg?"

"Hartwood, your leg was lost when your comrades brought you here. I saved what I could."

"What the fuck did you do to my leg?"

"Hartwood, settle down or I'll be forced to sedate you."

"Where's Thomas? What happened to the jormungand?"

"Silia!" Sarah came in into the infirmary. With her ears buzzing, Silia turned to her.

"Sarah. Look at what... what they did to my leg. How can it be? I can't fight anymore, Sarah. Where is Thomas? What happened to the jormungand?"

"Relax, Silia." Sarah's voice was calm. She sat on the edge of the bed and caressed her hair. She hasn't done that for years. "Calm down."

"Hartwood." Captain Drautos himself entered the infirmary. Sarah stiffened and stood up to make the salute. His presence convinced Silia that she had to be senseless,

thankfully, she said to herself, it's a nightmare, I'll wake up and my leg will be still there.

"Captain," she heard Dr. Emblyn protest, "I mean no disrespect, but Hartwood is extremely weak. This is not the time for..."

"Dr. Emblyn, Hartwood is a Kingsglaive. She has been trained to fight a war since she was thirteen."

It was not a nightmare. She wasn't dreaming, and she had lost a leg. She looked at Captain Drautos, but she couldn't loose the grip to the headboard to salute.

The Captain stopped in front of the bed, crossed his arms and allowed himself a brief sigh.

"Hartwood, we lost Fort Dornar. Five jormungands. We had to retreat."

Silia nodded. Five. She bowed her head. "I apologize, Captain."

"Don't, Hartwood, if there is a responsibility here, that's your Captain's. I underestimated their forces. There have been many losses. Leah Marcellus. Lamiel Melias. Brian Gauter. Cardok Kay. Melion Coster. And more: David Dorcas, Edith Ellie, Foxe Galfris... and Thomas Kurtz."

For Astrals' sake. Silia leaned her forehead against the iron board. Her leg was gone, and Thomas was dead.

"Hartwood, you wanted to know, now hear me out. That jormungand tore apart your right leg. There
was nothing to do except saving what could be saved. I can understand your dismay, but you've been luckier than many of your comrades."

"No, that's not true," she let out. "I can't fight anymore, Captain. What can I do with one leg? It would have been better off dead devoured by that daemon."

The Captain stared at her for a long moment, then he turned to Sarah and said with stern voice, "Helias, go back to your comrades. Reassure them that Hartwood has regained consciousness and she's polemic as ever. Doctor, you can get out now. I want to talk for a few minutes alone with Hartwood."

Sarah touched her hand while getting up. She went out with the doctor. Silia was not sure she would hold on any more.

"Hartwood," the Captain sighed. "Not all the Kingsglaives face such a circumstance twice. Seven years ago I encouraged you to hold on and keep your position, but this time, I understand, you suffered a serious mutilation. But it's not over. As I told you once, we don't throw away the members of our military elite as if they were broken tin soldiers. There are technicians in Insomnia who develop state-of-the-art implants and specialized recovery centers. It will take months, but you will be operational again."

"I will, but in what conditions?" she asked. She was about to cry or faint, and she hoped it was the latter case.

"This will depend on you, Hartwood. Start with following Dr. Emblyn's suggestions and get your strength back. As soon as you're able to travel, I'll have you back to Insomnia and transfer to a specialized clinic. Don't doubt, you won't be inactive. You will be on active duty supporting the city guard. When the military doctors will judge you adequate again, you will come back to the frontline. But it won't be easy, Hartwood, I warn you. The rehabilitation will be slow and painful. You will be allowed to retire at any time."

Silia laid her eyes in her forearm, pretending to wipe the sweat from her forehead, but actually she wanted to hide tears of relief. It was not over. How slow and painful could the recovery be? She had to endure five years of training and almost ten on the frontline. "And being a war invalid?" she murmured. "No way. I want to get back to fight."

Captain Drautos made half a smile, satisfied. It did not happen often. "I didn't expect anything less from you, Coeurl. Now stop grabbing that headboard as if your life depended on it and rest."

Silia nodded, and slipped down. Captain Drautos' footsteps had not yet been waned when she lost the senses entirely.

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SILIA HARTWOOD
SH014S6

Place and date of birth: Ambrosia, M.E. 728
Eyes: green
Hair: dark brown
Distinguishing marks: none

M.E. 741
Age: 13
4,9" x 92 lbs
The subject is selected by Captain Titus Drautos as adequate to undertake the training. Strong motivation. Her father died during the seizure of Ambrosia. Living mother. Run to Insomnia in M.E. 739 because of frictions with the occupation garrison. Strong predisposition to the use of magic.

**M.E. 746**
Age: 18  
5,1" x 110 lbs  
Training completed with the highest marks.

The subject is declared adequate for combat at the end of the five-year training and assigned to Squad 6 of the Kingsglaive Army. The subject is penalized by slim build and lack of physical prowess. She compensates with exceptional agility and flexibility. Gifted with great intuition, the subject demonstrates readiness to evaluate the situations of danger and to act accordingly. Unstable discipline. 9 reprimands for disorders and insubordination (see attachments). The subject is reliable and fit to work in team, but proud, impertinent and easy to being prodded. Technical skills in the use of white weapons: excellent. Favorite weapons: twin swords, daggers, one-handed swords.  
Technical skills in the use of blunt weapons: standard.  
Technical skills in the use of throwing weapons and firearms: standard.  
Magical skills: excellent. The subject masters perfectly any kind of offensive and defensive magic. Tactical skills: standard.  
Suggested position: median (magic cover, ready to advance on the front line if needed).

**M.E. 755**
Age: 27  
5,1" x 105 lbs  
The subject confirms herself as a prominent member in the Kingsglaive Army. See notes below.

Notes M.E. 748 – February, 7  
A serious injury affects the continuation of the subject's active duty (see medical report in attachment). Prognosis: three months. The subject refuses to withdraw from the frontline to undergo therapy and rehabilitation.

M.E. 748 – April, 14  
The subject, despite the opposite medical opinion, demands to return to active duty. Permission granted.

M.E. 749 – March, 13  
The subject contests Captain's decision to retire from the Larre Plain (being the city of Bors, occupied for sixteen days, declared lost). The subject volunteers to infiltrate the sewer to perform a sabotage operation. Permission granted. Thanks to the subject's intervention, the city of Bors is regained. An honorable mention and a reprimand for insubordination are assigned to the subject (see attachment).

M.E. 751 – August, 8  
An honorable mention is assigned to the subject for her key role in rescuing Squad 3, which was cut off during the retreat following the Battle of Langhore.

M.E. 752 – January, 2
An honorable mention is assigned to the subject for preventing an ambush performed by Division 17 of the Tenebrae Army.

M.E. 753 – October, 6
An honorable mention is assigned to the subject for saving n. 12 civilians in Farah. At the same time, the subject is reprimanded for disobeying the retreat order.

M.E. 755 – October, 11
The subject is seriously injured (see medical report in attachment). The subject is offered to leave the active duty definitively without dishonor. The subject refuses. Three days later, her return to Insomnia is arranged to implant a prosthesis at the Military Prosthetic Center, in order to replace her right leg. The subject commits to undergo the subsequent rehabilitation at the same Military Prosthetic Center and to provide active support to the City Guard as soon as her physical conditions will allow it.
The subject commits, as soon as the designated military doctor considers it appropriate, to return to her duty on the frontline.

Dossier updated on October, 19 - M.E. 755
Chapter Summary

At the end of what was supposed to be an ordinary beer night with his old friend Munro, Gladio has a surprise meeting.

1

In birra veritas

She was a small girl, perhaps a little younger than him. She was not beautiful, he turned his head back to look at her just because she was holding a book. She was reading, heedless of the excitement and the coming and going around her. An uncomfortable place to read, such a bar, Gladio considered. Taking a closer look, he had to correct his first impression: her oval face, framed by unkempt and ear-length dark brown hair, was pleasant, though hard. He couldn't be sure in the dim light of the room, but it seemed to him when their gazes met for a moment before she lowered hers back to the book, that her eyes were clear.

He was just back from a long training session with Noctis. On returning home in the Citadel hall, he had met Munro. They hadn't seen each other in forever and he had willingly taken a walk with him to have a beer, which had become three. Their tour had ended in a tavern where he had never been, a spartan place with bustling and mainly male customers, where they had ordered a fourth beer. The sign said: In birra veritas. Munro, who'd been married for a year to a beautiful but ill-tempered girl, had run off as soon as he'd became aware of the time, before Gladio could finish his beer. Gladio had remained for fifteen minutes or so sipping his now lukewarm drink, looking around himself. The place was noisy and euphemistically not really clean, but lively.

He was about to leave when the girl, whose table was in his visual field, closed the book, pulled back her chair and lowered. When she raised her back, he saw that she was holding a crutch. Leaning on it, she stood up. On her way out she absentely greeted the bartender, a stocky man with graying hair.

Less than a minute later, the occupants of the table next to his – five men in civilian clothes – got up noisily and headed for the exit, leaving some coins on the counter at their passage. They were laughing and they sounded drunk. Gladio had seen them previously approaching the girl, who had dismissed them with a few dry words he couldn't hear. He winked, hesitantly. Something about them seemed off. Perhaps it was nothing, perhaps they had decided to follow her to renew their approach. He'd take no risk in having a look, moreover he had to leave anyway.

He got up, and when he looked at the counter he saw that the bartender was staring at the exit. Then he lowered to take a rifle, so Gladio realized that he wasn't the only one who had that idea. He reached him. No words were necessary: Gladio pointed at the door, and the bartender nodded, going around the counter. They left quickly.

They did not see anyone. The road stretched straight and bright ahead of them, and theoretically the girl should have been still in sight, unless she had committed the imprudence of taking one of the side
alleys. Gladio preceded the bartender towards the first one: nothing. He hurried towards the second. Noises. Noises of scuffling – shoes hitting solid bodies, blunt bumps, curses in a low voice and groans, but none of them, it sounded to him, of a female voice.

What he saw in the filthy darkness of the alley left him speechless: five men on the ground, and a small shadow standing against the wall.

"Hartwood!" The bartender, pointing his rifle at an unspecified point, passed him by. "Are you all right?"

"Samuel?" the girl asked, genuinely surprised. "What are you doing here?"

The bartender – Samuel, it seemed – stepped over the men's bodies without worrying about their condition. For personal and professional deformation, however, Gladio lowered to the nearest, still amazed, confused and bewildered, and looked for the pulse on his neck. He was alive, although unconscious, lying on his stomach. A trickle of blood had already formed a small puddle near his head. The girl's crutch was there on the ground near to him.

"They followed you, Hartwood."

"I figured that as soon as I left. I brought them here on purpose."

"What did they want?"

The girl's tone seemed now amused. "What's your take?"

"How the hell did you do this, Hartwood?"

Gladio managed to get a sound out of his throat. "Hey," he said.

Samuel and the girl turned in his direction.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I am," she answered. "Would you hand me my crutch? The guy next to you was running away and I threw it."

Gladio picked it up. "I think we'll need an ambulance here."

"Oh, I didn't throw it so hard."

"Tell him."

He approached her, bypassing the other bodies, and held out the crutch. He still could not reconcile the five bodies on the ground with the girl's tiny figure.

"Thanks, boy."

Gladio was still too amazed to get mad for that boy. Now that she was close, he noticed that she still had her book under her arm, and he could read the title: History of Accordo. From the origins to the Alliance. "You know what, Samuel, I'm thirsty again. I'll have another beer."

The bartender sighed noisily. "Hartwood, I don't know how the hell you did it, but you've to call the City Guard."

"This sucks", she said, not very delicately. "What a nice business card."
"I've got it," Gladio offered, without grasping the meaning of her second sentence. Hartwood half smiled.

"Yeah, you're in the Crownguard, aren't you? Amicitia, am I right?"

"How do you...?"

"You're renowned, Amicitia, even if I only came back recently. And in addition, as tall as you are, you're a little hard to miss. I'd already noticed you in the bar."

She limped out of the alley; her right leg, he noticed, was rigid and uncoordinated. In the light of the main street, Gladio saw that she didn't seem to have resented the battle at all. "I'll have to give them your personal details," he warned her.

She stopped. "Is this really necessary? Can't you keep me out of it?"

Gladio shrugged. "There are five unconscious men, at least one with a head injury. If I don't provide your name and you don't explain what happened, it's you who risk a charge for assault."

Hartwood snorted. She dropped her crutch, balancing on her left leg, and with her free hand pulled up a chain falling on her breasts and took it off. She handed him a military plate engraved with a small stylized Bahamut and a serial number: \texttt{SH014S6}. A Kingsglave. That limping girl who didn't hit a height of five feet and a weight of a hundred and twenty pounds was a Kingsglave. It had to have been a joke, to her, knocking five adult men out.

"A Kingsglave" Gladio let slip.

The bartender whirled around. "What did you say?"

Gladio bit his lower lip. Kingsglaves weren't popular in Insomnia, and probably Hartwood hadn't waved around the army she belonged to.

The girl bent down to retrieve her crutch, quiet. "A Kingsglave" she confirmed. "Is it a problem, Samuel?" she asked, raising up.

The bartender did not answer. "A Kingsglave" he repeated. "I thought you were a weird one, Hartwood, but I would never have imagined such a thing." His gaze fell on the girl's leg. "Are you on a leave?"

"Temporarily", she answered. She walked towards the tavern, followed by its owner, and Gladio himself, feeling clumsy and confused, followed them. His presence was not necessary, but he felt somehow involved, and not just because he was a Crownguard.

"Will you be in trouble?" the bartender asked her.

"I don't think so" she said casually. "I didn't use any weapon, I didn't hit to kill, I didn't provoke them. What should I have done, let them assault me?"

"They're the ones who'll be in trouble" Gladio said. He kept staring at the plate, incredulous. He had never met a Kingsglave. "They assaulted a Kingsglave. They couldn't have been dumber."

They entered the tavern. The bartender pointed them to the telephone around the counter.

"I had no uniform and I never said I was a Kingsglave," Hartwood seemed to justify them. "What should I have done? I have no idea how these things work."
Gladio grabbed the receiver – an old-fashioned device – and dialed the number of the City Guard's answering service. After just one ring, he changed his mind and hung up. "Look," he told her, "You're right. If I call the City Guard and say that a Kingsglaive is involved, they hold the stick to us, the Crownsguards. The guys will go through the court martial and the entire business will go on for weeks. They are fucking bastards and if it were for me I would send them to rot in jail, but if you are satisfied we can leave them there on the ground. I don't think they'll say to someone they were beaten by a woman... no offense."

"And if they come back?" the bartender asked.

"If they come back, just tell me and I'll take care of it, but it would be better for them if they don't." Hartwood had a stool at the counter, put down her book and took off her jacket. "Samuel, please, pour two beers, and put the boy's one on my account. Stout or light, Amicitia?"

Gladio arched an irritated eyebrow as he slid onto the stool next to hers. "Look," he pointed out, "I'm not a boy."

"Two stout beers," she decided for both of them. Samuel made an amused grin and gave them his back while he tapped the beer into two mugs. Gladio scratched his hairline, embarrassed. He had met many tough women, but apart from Monica Elshett who had known him almost since he was born, it was the first time that one of them offered him a drink. She had got it right, anyway. He preferred the stout beer. He sighed. He noticed that he still had her plate in his hand, and held it out to her. "Hartwood, right?" he asked. "How long have you been out of town?"

Hartwood let the chain slip around her neck. She pushed towards him one of the two mugs the bartender had placed on the counter. "More than nine years, almost fifteen, since the training center was in the suburbs."

Gladio winked, impressed. "Almost fifteen? Damn, they threw you on the frontline when you were almost a child, didn't they?"

Hartwood's eyes widened slightly – they were clear, just as he had thought, green with brown streaks around the iris – then she bent her lips in a derisive smile. "Not exactly. I am twenty-seven, Amicitia. I am part of the first group of Kingsglaives who came into activity."

At the bartender's explosion of laughter, Gladio felt himself blazing and, without being able to prevent himself, he sought traces of her age on her face. Her eyes were hard, deep, but nothing – not a wrinkle, not a white hair – suggested that she was five years older than him and that she had spent the last nine at war.

"Hartwood is a weird one," the bartender repeated. He had turned to rinse glasses. "I've heard that sometimes the Astrals incarnate in human beings and walk among us. Are you Ifrit, Hartwood?"

"Ifrit is a male deity," Hartwood corrected him.

"The Astrals can do this and more."

"I'm not an Astral," she chuckled.

"You knocked down five men twice as much as you, Hartwood."

"If I were not able to do it, I'd have been killed on my first day on the frontline."

"This is the first time I've heard you talk so much. Usually you only say 'good evening', 'goodnight' and 'more beer'."
"If you like, starting tomorrow I can spare my 'good evenings' and 'goodnights'."

Gladio smiled, bringing the beer to his lips. Hartwood was almost nice, he decided. He knew very little about Kingsglaives and the magical prowess they were said to possess made them dangerous and incomprehensible creatures in the common imagination, far removed from the mocking cat that Hartwood seemed to him. From time to time he found himself peering her over his glass, intrigued. The Crownsguards seldom talked about Kingsglaives, and usually not in flattering terms. In fact their special army had not been able to raise the fate of the war, despite – Gladio remembered having heard a lot about it when he was a child – the hopes everybody placed in it. The King, however, kept on trusting in them, and his father himself had to admit several times, an opinion that Gladio shared fully, that if the Imperial troops had not yet showed in force before the walls of Insomnia, it was due to the strenuous resistance by which the Kingsglaives protected the boundaries.

He wanted to ask her a thousand questions. How was the world outside Cavaugh, if indeed the daemons, whose dissemination it was said, was more and more widespread, were so dangerous, what was her specialty in combat. "Do you often come here, Hartwood?" he asked her instead, to get the ball rolling.

She didn't look up from her mug. "Almost every evening."

"Will you stay for very long in Insomnia?"

"I hope as little as possible."

The laconic tone with which she answered his questions turned off Gladio' enthusiasm. She sounded more friendly with the bartender, who probably didn't share the opinion of most of his fellow citizens about the Kingsglaives. He couldn't delve into it further because the door opened behind him with a crash. Gladio turned to the entrance and returned almost immediately to his beer, not too interested, because such a place had to be animated by the exuberance of the drunks often. But then he noticed that the expression of the bartender, who was facing him and had turned his gaze to the door too, had passed from an initial frown to an anxious grimace. He saw him lower to where he had placed his rifle a little earlier and connected the dots.

On his feet, in the entire space of the door, there was a tall man with broad shoulders, an unmade beard, an expression not at all friendly. But above all, he noticed, a trickle of new blood that dripped on his face from his forehead. "Are you shitting me?" the big man growled, turning to a well-defined point beside Gladio. He approached with big strides, and although Gladio was not worried at all he found kind getting up to stand between him and Hartwood.

"What's your business?" the man asked. He hadn't recognized him. Good thing. "Get out of the way, whopper."

"Look who's talking. Wasn't the lesson enough for you?" Gladio asked him quietly.

"I've nothing to say to you," he barked, pointing at him. "Hey, you," then he said in Hartwood's direction. "Since you had the guts to come back here, as if nothing had happened, come out, let's end this."

Samuel had put the rifle barrel on the counter. "Get away from my fucking bar or I swear I'll shoot. I'm not joking."

Hartwood, in all that excitement, had kept on sipping her beer without even blinking. Slowly, taking all the time in the world, she emptied her mug, placed it on the counter and turned on her swivel stool. She smiled, but she did not seem amused.
"Listen to me," she addressed him, conciliatory.

"No, you'll listen to me!" the man interrupted her rudely. "Come outside and let's end this. A while ago you were just fuckin' lucky, we did not expect such a thing from a... from a little bitch." He wanted to emphasize that last word. "But no one, no one treats Rodolphus Kane like that. Am I clear? Now, will you come out or do I have to come and get you?"

Gladio gave himself another two seconds before intervening. Hartwood was perfectly able to defend herself, she had shown, but insults like that made him angry. He didn't need to intervene, anyway, because the woman got up from her stool, passed him by, and went to stand in front of the big man. She looked even more like a little girl in his presence.

"Listen to me," Hartwood repeated, "I'll come out and end this, if you want. But..."

"I'll kill you," he threatened her "I won't be easy on you just because you're a..."

"...but it would be troublesome for me because then I would have to fill in who knows how many fucking modules, and then answer to who knows how many fucking questions, so..."

The man half-opened his mouth, purple. It seemed that he had decided that Hartwood was crazy, but it also seemed that he didn't care, because he raised his arm to hit her. As always at crucial moments, Gladio felt the time slowing down. He heard the click generated by the disarming of the safety of the bartender's rifle, saw his own body coming forward and his arm stretching to block the man's hand, but above all he saw Hartwood's little hand clawing her assailant's wrist, her slim body floating behind his shoulders, and the big man kneeling with a grimace of pain with his arm bent behind his back.

"I was saying," Gladio heard when the time returned to flow normally, "that now I'm fucking sick of being interrupted. If you want, let's get back outside and it will end exactly as it did a few minutes ago, but if this time the City Guard arrives, you'll get locked up. I don't give a shit, but apparently the Kingdom does, if a citizen attacks a Kingsglaive."

The man's countenance became paralyzed in a feeling much stronger than pain and humiliation. "A Kingsglaive?" he enunciated as if he had learned to speak only recently.

"A Kingsglaive" Gladio confirmed. "Now, will you seize your last chance to leave without broken bones and a court trial, and tell your nice friends, if they have already regained their senses, to do the same, or will you prefer to go out and end this?"

He preferred the first option. The man stood up again – Hartwood mercifully let go of his arm – and rushed out of the bar.

No customer breathed as she limped back to the counter.

"Hartwood." The bartender broke the silence in a dry voice. He seemed unable to leave his rifle. "If you want I can pour you another beer, but this seems to me like a bad night."

Gladio looked down at her while taking her crutch. "You're right, Samuel," she replied. "I'm going to bed. 'twas a good thing, anyway, that he came back while I was still here; now I think they won't bother you anymore."

"I'll drive you home, Hartwood," Gladio offered.

Hartwood, who was straightening up, stopped and gave him an ironic look and a crooked smile. "Amicitia, as you've seen, I don't need any protection, but if you're hitting on me and hoping to get in
my house, I'm sorry, I'm not interested. You're too young for me."

Her sarcastic tone and insinuation pissed him off. Above all he was pissed off by the bartender's and other customers' laughing, who were observing them as if a tv-show was going on in front of their eyes. "No offense, Miss Hartwood," he said in a more formal tone, "but you are not my type, either. I was only trying to be kind."

"I was just kidding," Hartwood replied, still with a sarcastic smile on her lips. She took her uniform jacket on the counter and put it on, passing her crutch from one hand to the other. This time he did not offer to help her. Finally she retrieved her book and put it under her arm. "I would never insinuate a Crownguard could hit on a Kingsglaive." She bid him and the bartender farewell with a gesture and went out.

Gladio had a sudden and irresistible craving for another beer – or something stronger – but he decided he would have it somewhere else. He didn't believe he would ever come back to this place.
Chapter Summary

Silia meets an old acquaintance of hers and learns that her recovery will take longer than expected. Gladio recalls of when he wanted to be a Wizard.

2

Quae volumus, credimus libenter

I

The man who opened the door had little if nothing in common with Silia's former comrade. Six years had passed, in fact, since she had last seen him. In any case, even the last time she had seen him, loaded on a military truck under a thick blanket, Balthier had little if nothing in common with the man he had been the day before.

"Hi, Balth," she smiled, feeling a lost sense of strangeness in seeing him there framed by the door of a bourgeois apartment, dressed in jeans and shirt. "You look good," she added frankly.

The man's eyes widened in disbelief. "I can't believe it. Silia Hartwood?"

"In person, almost whole" she answered, patting her right leg.

"I can't believe it" he repeated, moving over to open the door wide. Silia was stunned by the pleasant smell of cooking and clean — of home — that reached her. "What happened to you? What are you doing here, Silia? Damn it, I didn't think... come in, for fuck's sake, come in!"

Silia went in. It was a nice entrance, not huge, which hinted at a nice house. A toy car was laying on a carpet. "Wow. You've settled down, haven't you, Balth?"

Balthier gave an embarrassed smile. "Actually I got married," he said, bowing to collect the toy with his only hand. He put it on a dresser. "I've two children. They are three and five years old."

He was kind, but with a nervous, elusive cordiality, and Silia started regretting having bothered him. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine" he replied, hurriedly. "Come on, let's have a drink or something. But you haven't answered yet, Silia: what are you doing in Insomnia? Have you managed to leave?".

Silia followed him into the corridor, looking around. Balthier's house was quite different from her two-room apartment which, it had to be admitted, she had chosen willingly because of its proximity to the Citadel. "Why should I leave? The salary is good, the ration is tolerable, I can visit many beautiful places and meet exotic creatures and interesting people."

Balthier stopped at the kitchen door. His features waved for a moment, then he gave a dry laugh, rubbing his eyebrow. "You're still the same, Silia... How are the others doing? Is Samuel still going
on with his usual fucking jokes?"

"Worse and worse. Sometimes I find myself thinking that it'd be better for the whole army if a pyros melted his tongue."

He motioned for her to precede him into the kitchen. "I see you haven't lost your character these past six years."

"I've lost something else". Silia limped to the table and, after moving a chair, sat down. She pulled up her right pant leg and showed him the prosthesis.

Balthier blinked in horror. "A prosthesis? Don't tell me you're thinking about going back? Are you crazy, Silia? You had the chance to leave and..."

"...and what? To live on welfare benefits?" She noticed her blunder when he frowned. "I didn't mean to offend you, Balth, but this is not for me."

"What's this? A house? The certainty of being in a bed at the end of the day and not in shreds in a box?"

Silia smashed her tongue. "Balth, let's not argue. I haven't come here to parade my choice, which is mine and mine only. I just wanted to see how you were. I struggled a lot to find your address."

He sighed, pushing back a chair, but he put the table between them. "I cannot understand. I really cannot understand what's going on in your head. I cannot understand what was going on in my head."

"I'll tell you what was going on in your head," she said patiently, moving her hair out of her eyes. It had started to become too long. "You were a poor boy escaped from a city taken by the Empire, without education, without prospects. You knew perfectly that within a few years, if it'd gone well, you would've become a laborer, a farmer outside the walls, or something like that. And then one day someone tells you that you're gifted and that you can train to enter the new military elite of Insomnia, the last armed wing that still can oppose those motherfucker imperialists and defend the borders of the kingdom. You think it's cool and here you are spewing blood for five years while you learn how to handle swords, rifles and spells, and then you say 'this is hell!', but hell has yet to come because you don't have the faintest idea of what a war is..."

"Silia..." he begged.

"...and then you find out that the training was hard, but at least you weren't risking your head... not really... On the front you start seeing your comrades dropping like flies, hoping that your turn will never come, and..."

"Silia!"

She rose her hands in an apologetic gesture. "Okay, I'm sorry. I'm not even here to talk about the front. I meant, what was going on in our heads was that, when we were kids, breaking imperial asses seemed like a better alternative than staying in Insomnia begging and following on TV the undisputed progress of Niflheim. And whether you believe it or not, it still seems to me like a better alternative. That's why, when a jormungand ate my leg last month, I accepted to have a prosthesis implanted and to undergo the hell of the rehabilitation waiting to go back to fight."

Balthier didn't answer, and Silia let that dim silence weigh on her while looking around her in the kitchen. She wouldn't been surprised if her former comrade had kindly invited her to get the hell out.
"Whiskey?" he asked instead with a sigh, standing up.

"Whiskey" she nodded. It was afternoon, a little early to start drinking, but still she was tempted by his offer.

Balthier opened a cabinet and took a bottle, but all of sudden his right arm had such a violent convulsion that it fell from his hand. Silia snapped and grabbed it, but her artificial leg had a spasm and didn't hold her weight, and she fell.

That scene was so ridiculous and pathetic that she stood on her knees laughing hysterically.

"What the fuck, look at what has become of us" she finally managed to croak. Stalling, she stood up on her good leg. "At least the bottle is safe."

Balthier didn't look as amused as she was. He sat up, distressed, and it took a while for him to calm down and soothe his tremors. "I'm sorry" he said, "there are good days and some bad ones."

And I believe that the one when your old teammate rings at your door, reminding you of how you were doing a few years ago and how you lost an arm and suffered permanent brain damage is a bad day. But now she was there, and she would drink her whiskey trying to mitigate the mood. She didn't want to go home leaving Balthier upset.

"Where do you keep your glasses?"

"That other locker." He tried to point it out to her, but his hand was still trembling.

Limping, Silia retrieved two glasses and put them on the table. She shifted her chair next to Balthier's, sat down and filled them up.

"Come on, tell me about yourself. What's your wife's name?"

"Anthea."

"Is she pretty?"

"She's beautiful."

"And your children?"

"Xavier and Matteus."

"To them" she suggested, raising her glass.

With a smile, perhaps the first genuine one since she'd entered his house, Balthier joined the toast. "To them," he approved.

They drank.

"What's your business now?"

"Boring stuff. Insurance."

Silia grinned. "A Kingsglaive dealing with insurances. If someone had told me yesterday, I would have never believed it."

"Ex Kingsglaive" Balthier underlined.
"Ex," she conceded, wondering if you could really stop being a Kingsglaive or if the war ends up qualifying you forever. Mutilated or not, brain-damaged or not, Balthier would have kept on having the strength and reflexes of a war machine, even dressed in suit and tie. "What about your wife?"

"She's a doctor. We met while I was in rehab."

"Lucky you. All I've got is an old grouchy man called Cornell. Sometimes we have a beer together, but I don't think he'll ever propose to me."

Calmer, Balthier poured himself a second whiskey. "Tell me about the others, Silia."

Before answering him, Silia emptied her glass and took the bottle to serve herself again, carefully choosing her words. Then she realized that no word could soften the hard facts. "There are only a few of us. So few have remained that Squad 6 has been redistributed."

Balthier ran a hand over his face. "For fuck's sake, Silia, I'm sorry... how's Thomas?"

The two of them had been good friends. Perhaps more than good friends, Silia had sometimes believed, but love, sex, solidarity and comradeship on the front were such arbitrary and inextricable concepts that now, in Insomnia, she was no longer certain of anything. Balthier, in any case, had never sent a word after his permanent leave, but Thomas had not resented him. Better for him to get away from this war even with his mind, he'd once said.

"Thomas died the same day I lost my leg," she had to tell him. She couldn't mourn him with her comrades, because in the few days after her misfortune she had been hanging between a limbo of morphine and healing spells and the hell of an hallucinatory fever. "I can't remember what happened, but they told me that he probably saved my life."

Balthier didn't answer. Slowly, without a comment, he nodded. "Cedric? Ivan?"

Silia shook her head. "Cedric died two years ago... sorry, three years. Ivan died last year. It's faster if I tell you who's left: me, Sarah, Samuel, Caesar and Legato."

"You're kidding me." It was not a question.

Silia filled both glasses again. "No. All the teams are decimated, but we are... we were... those worst off. Don't you watch the news on tv?"

"They don't announce the body count."

"Yeah, nobody gives a shit," she let herself slip, taking another sip from her glass. "Every day that passes, Niflheim invents a new devilry, and we are less and less."

Balthier reached out to place his hand on hers. "And you want to go back to that hell, Silia. Why?"

"I've already told you: because I have nothing else." Her voice broke. "I know it's a desperate situation and we're little more than kamikazes, but I cannot think of any other solution than to keep on fighting. If we don't, Balthier, we'll find them here in front of our walls."

"And let them come. What can they do against the Wall?"

"And those outside the Wall? What about them?"

"They're already lost, Silia."

"I see that now you think as one from Insomnia," she spat, resentful, taking her hand from his. "Not
all of them, not yet, and as long as we can guarantee one more day of freedom, we will fight for it. We are scraps, Balthier, don't forget it, expendables recycled scraps."

"Have you been fucking brainwashed?" he exclaimed, standing up. Silia stood up too, craving to throw all her indignation in his face, but at that moment she heard the door of the apartment opening and closing. Children's voices, snatch of little feet. A woman warned them not to run in the corridor. Silia intercepted Balthier's dismayed – almost begging – gaze, and bit her lip.

The woman – pretty, but not beautiful – entered the kitchen a few seconds later, alone. She looked at her, at the half-empty bottle of whiskey, then at her husband. "Balthier," she whispered, forcing an uncertain smile. "I didn't know we had guests."

"Anthea." Balthier's eyes were red. Perhaps he could no longer hold his liquor as before; perhaps in Insomnia he'd managed to return to feel with human intensity. He ran a hand through his short curly hair. "This is Silia Hartwood. She's... she was...".

"Silia Hartwood," she helped him, moving towards her to introduce herself. "An old friend. I came back to Insomnia a month ago and I jumped up to see how Balth is doing. I'm sorry to intrude. I was about to leave."

"...come back to Insomnia?" the woman repeated.

"From the front," Balthier explained. "Silia is a Glaive. Squad 6. The same squad I was part of."

The woman returned to examine her with surprise. This was nothing strange, because she didn't have the physique of a soldier and at first glance she still could pass for a girl of twenty or so. "A- oh... I beg your pardon... I couldn't imagine... thank you for what you're doing for our Kingdom every day," she said, bowing her head.

"Don't thank me", Silia said, instilling a polemic shade she hadn't intended in her voice. "We don't do anything useful."

"Silia, for fuck's sake, you know I didn't mean it like that!" Balthier snapped. The woman raised her head jerkily: perhaps she had never heard him swear. "I just cannot understand why you have to do it... You've already done enough. Leave the rest to those who still have two legs."

"I do have two legs," Silia contradicted him, recovering the crutch. "Once I'm used to it, the new one will be better than the other."

"Why don't you stay for dinner, Ms Hartwood? It would be an honor for me."

Silia shook her head. "I would like to, Mrs. Carson, but I cannot stay."

"But..."

"Silia...". Balthier was clearly torn. "Stay for dinner. I'll introduce you to my children."

"No, Balth, I have plans, seriously," she lied. She had no other plan than going to Samuel's to finish the business the three whiskeys had begun, but she didn't believe she could hold a dinner with the shaken and drunk Balthier, his intimidated wife, and two children.

"Then I'll drive you home."

"Balth, cut it out."
"You cut it out, Kitty."

Being called again that after all that time had a strange effect on her: Silia blushed. Balthier smiled, approached his wife, and kissed her forehead, then he took Silia's arm.

"Let's go."

Although he had so insisted on accompanying her, on the way they remained mostly silent. It was a wet, year-end day, but Silia rolled down the window to look at the city flashing beside her.

"I'm sorry for coming" she said, without looking at him. "I've been blunt, but you're... the only person I know in Insomnia, Balth," she admitted. "Rehab's hard. I needed to see a friendly face."

"You needed to see someone who's in deeper than you are" he replied, but he was smiling. "At what stage of the rehab are you? I see you can move your leg."

"A little," she confirmed. "But it still cannot walk or hold my weight."

"The worst is over, then. Hold on" he encouraged her. "That prosthesis works fine, doesn't it? When I got injured, my arm was not a priority. I'm lucky enough to be able to reason, to move, and to talk without drooling. I don't think I could face a rehabilitation like yours. My neural system is too messy to learn how to use a new arm."

"It's not easy," she had to admit. She touched her pockets to find her lighter and cigarettes. "Can I smoke?"

"Please, don't. Anthea doesn't like it."

Silia sighed, disappointed. "Anyway, Balth, I've never been muscular, as you know. I depend on my agility. If my leg doesn't operate properly..." She left her sentence hanging.

"It'll operate properly, because you're goddamned stubborn. Even between Glaives, I've seen few people as fuckin' diehard as you are. When the cadets had been officially presented at the training center... it was 741, wasn't it? I saw you and I thought: that one, I give her a week and she'll collapse. Too young, too tiny. Instead, almost fifteen years later, you're here, with your sharp claws."

The man Balthier was now, with his grave and laconic countenance, for a moment gave away to the arrogant boy who'd had her back for four years. "It's so good to see you, Silia."

This time Silia could believe him. She'd have liked to answer that it was the same for her, but it wouldn't been true. Who knows what physical and psychological therapies he was still undergoing after six years, how many times he found himself trying to grasp an object with his left hand. Who knows how often he still awakened in the throes of nightmares, or a sudden noise behind his shoulders produced a panic attack. Who knows with what desperation he was trying to double-lock up the memories from the four years on the front, and how much effort she had frustrated by showing up at his door like that. She just smiled at him.

"Silia, we've been comrades for four years, not counting our training. I know what you're thinking about, and stop pitying me. I am driving you home because I'd like to tell you something about it, and I didn't want my wife to hear me. Being mutilated was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because if it hadn't happened, Silia, I'd have kept on fighting blindly until the day they'd have killed me. Returning to Insomnia made me realize that...". He lowered his voice, as if he wanted to disclose a painful state secret to her. "Nobody believes in it anymore, Silia."

"Believe in what?"
"That we have a chance to win this war. Everybody only wishes the King to keep the Wall erected for a few more years, then his son will do it, and then his son's son, when that kid will have one. What you do, what I too used to do, it's useless for them, indeed, harmful, because the magic energy that the Kingsglaives consume brings near the moment when the King will run dry."

The sat nav interrupted their grave conversation with its metallic voice, instructing them to turn right. They were almost there; Silia could see her building at the end of the street. "You aren't telling me anything new, nothing I haven't heard before by listening to strangers talking about the war, the Kingsglaives, the Empire and the King. Vermins, people say about us. We should reenter, according to them, stop using that fucking spell and think about the defense of our city together with the City Guard. When I hear them, Balth, I'd like to stand up and scream right in their face that they don't have the right to open their fucking mouths. They were born in a safe place as a matter of luck, they've never seen a magitek or a daemon, they've never had the heel of an imperial duty boot on the back of their head. How many Glaives were born in Insomnia, Balth? How many of them had more than two meals a day?"

"Julius from Squad 1" Balthier simply answered, double-parking his car in front of the gate of her house. His casual tone amused her. "He was bound to the Crownsguard, do you remember him? And then at fifteen he runs away from home and joins Kingsglaive. He wanted to see the world."

"And he saw it," Silia remembered with a sad smile. "I wonder if he liked it, or if he eventually regretted his choice, when his hour came. What was that, an imperial sniper?"

"You're thinking of Clayton. Julius was killed by a behemoth." Balthier looked at the clock. "I'm sorry, Silia, but it's getting late. Dinner must be ready by now. Will you at least accept a single suggestion from me? Since sooner or later you'll go back to the frontline, enjoy these months. There are so many things to do in the city. Go to the cinema, get drunk and faint on the street, find a handsome man who'll fuck you until you cry, listen to music, eat everything you find. Insomnia, Silia, is a happy island, if you pretend not to hear the roar of the cannons and the terrible verses of the daemons. I still dream of them at night, and I've to stretch and touch my wife to be sure that this is not a dream, I mean the reality, and that I'm not on a cot waiting for dawn to bring us new horrors."

He rubbed his eyes, and suddenly he looked like an old man. Perhaps, despite her youthful appearance, sometimes she looked like an old woman too. Then Balthier ran his fingers through her hair, on her nape and drew her near with ease. "I'll wait for you one day or another to go and drink something out, Silia. Don't let another six years go by."

"Count on it" she replied, returning his hug.

She would never look for him again. Balthier deserved to bury his nightmares alone.

II

Gladio Amicitia had learned what his role in life would be at the tender age of five.

From his previous childhood all he had left was a vague scent of happy years, almost devoid of his father – whose absence was compensated by his lonely mother's presence, who poured on him all her attention – and spent in the firmly conviction that marriage was an obligation imposed by the King to ensure that two people, chosen on the basis of criteria that were inscrutable to him, produced a third and possibly a fourth one.

From the age of five onwards, his memories started becoming clear, and particularly an uncommon threesome dinner when he had timidly given voice to his childish ambitions: he wanted to leave with
a camping tent and a rifle – to defend himself from the wild beasts and from the imperialists – and see the world outside Insomnia. In short, he wanted to be a hunter.

Of course Gladio was too young to record and remember the look that his parents must have exchanged – there must have been a look, there's always a look when a child confides to his parents an impossible dream – but the grown-up Gladio could perfectly imagine it. Whichever his father's exact words had been, in any case, on that day he had learned that, if he behaved well, his role would have been similar to the Giant's in *King's Knight*. Sooner or later, perhaps, he would leave Insomnia together with the Prince – who was then two years old – just as his father had traveled with the King, Cor Leonis and Weskham Armaugh. He remembered telling his father very seriously that he feared not growing enough to be the Giant and that he preferred to be the Wizard, but his father told him not to worry, that he would grow up enough, and to leave spells to those who knew how to use them.

Three years later, in M.E. 741, when a group of children and kids was chosen to employ the magic of the Ring of the Lucii to protect the kingdom under the banners of the Kingsglaives, he didn't have time to regret it, because on that year his mother passed away giving birth to Iris. Gladio easily understood that his father wouldn't be bothered looking after him even then and that he would have shown interest in him only when he'd be able to fight, so he convinced himself of the need to become stronger and stronger to join the Crownsguard as soon as possible. As a matter of fact, at the age of eight, Gladiolus Amicitia began to split up between school, his newborn sister, and his first training sessions, well aware that, sooner or later, he would leave Insomnia alongside that whining prince who responded to the high-sounding name of Noctis Lucis Caelum. He knew he'd made the right choice when his father began to train him personally in his free time, praising him for his sense of responsibility, his willpower and his predisposition to combat.

His official training, however, began only five years later, in M.E. 746. The very same year in which the first seventy Kingsglaives were sworn in front of King Regis in the Citadel Hall, acclaimed by half of the population who greeted them hoping to finally see the fate of the war overturned, and whistled by another half who feared a further weakening of the Wall due to the magical force the King would lend to them. Gladiolus remembered that day: he had attended the ceremony from one of the galleries reserved to the Crownsguards' and Council member's families. Jared was seated on his right and Iris, on his left, kept on wriggling on her chair, bored, as if she had a lizard under her dress. One of the young Glaives was Julius Clipeus, son of Livius Clipeus, another member of the King's Council. He was quite older than him, but Gladiolus knew him well. Five years earlier he had run away from home to join Kingsglaives, and his father, instead of fetching him, had been so outraged by his act that had washed his hands of him and told the King to do as he pleased with his son.

The Kingsglaives had not lived up to their expectations, but it was not their fault. After two years in which the fighting frontline had held and indeed it seemed to be advancing in favor of the kingdom of Lucis – the Kingsglaives had taken over some cities that for years had been under the imperial control –, Niflheim had put in ever-more advanced magiteks in combat. Half the population who had not whistled, gradually, had stopped believing in them, and wondering if, after all, the King would better preserve his strength.

"Gladio, watch out, they took the bait!"

Gladio's head jerked up, and he pulled the fishing pole so abruptly that the fishing line broke with a snap. "Damn it!" he cursed, turning the reel to rewind what was left of it. He laid the rod on the dock, stretching over his backpack to get another bait and a new hook.

"What's wrong with you today?" Ignis asked, peering him over his glasses. "You've barely talked since this morning. Have you argued with Noct?"
"I haven't" Gladio answered. "I'm just bored. Always the same spot, always the same view, always the same fish."

"We've been coming here for the last ten years, and you've never complained" Ignis pointed out.

Gladio sighed. "Perhaps I'm not in the right mood today, after all."

"Then a woman is involved. Has Juliana showed up again?"

"Nay. Juliana definitely shot me down last time we met, as you know." Gladio pretended to being concentrated on tying the hook. "She took it hard. But she knew how things were from the very beginning. Still I'm sorry, she's a good girl."

"I don't think women like being defined as 'a good girl' with that paternal tone."

Gladio got annoyed. "And what do you know about it? As far as I know, you've never dated a girl. And it's not because girls don't like you. If only you wanted to..."

"I do not want to," he cut short. "Do we have to keep talking about it? I have no interest in dating a girl I can't marry."

"You're way too serious, Ig. You've been looking like an old tutor. Since you were four, precisely."

Ignis didn't answer, staring at the artificial lake. They've been used going to fish there, in the close outskirts of the city, for a long time. When they were kids, sometimes they'd camped out pretending to be in the wilderness, as if they were not just a few miles from the center of Insomnia.

"Anyway," Gladio went on, "if you really want to know, I was thinking about the Kingsglaives."

Ignis frowned, amazed, then bent his lips in an ironic smile. "The Kingsglaives? Are you planning to join?"

Gladio scratched his hairline, embarrassed. "No. I've met one of them. It reminded me of when I was five and I wanted to be a Wizard."

III

"See you tomorrow, Hartwood."

"See you tomorrow."

Cornell went out, leaving her dressing in the locker room. Silia took off her sweatshirt. She didn't believe that walking, or rather, limping, could be so tiring. Sitting on the wooden bench, she took off her shorts too and looked at her artificial leg once again. She looked at it every day, for a long time, as by doing so she could somehow be convinced that it belonged to her own body, but yet she couldn't get her mind around it. It looked like a real leg, but of different color, translucent, between silver and ivory. It was rigid, of course, actually they had assured her that its material was more resistant than an armor, but the joints of the knee, of the ankle, even the toes, would have worked like those of a human leg, once her body got used to the artificial limb.

Once I get used to it, she repeated to herself standing up from the bench. She had to lean against it to propel herself. The artificial leg was linked to her neural system, but, as Cornell had explained to her, it was not such a simple matter as she thought. Moving an implanted limb is not like retrieving the normal functions of a leg after a period of convalescence, but rather how to learn to use one that
never existed.

She took a few unstable steps, shakily. She still had trouble walking, mostly due to the coordination between the two legs, but compared with the day she had reached Insomnia, unloaded from an airship on a stretcher, she had to consider herself lucky. Captain Drautos had removed her from the war zone three days after the accident, but she was not surprised; the Glaives were too busy to deal with a dead weight as she was. Once she reached the city – she still had a high fever – she had been transferred via ambulance to a military hospital, where she had remained for more than a week. She had moved from healing spells to morphine. Captain Drautos, however, had been of his word, and the Military Prosthetic Center's technicians came to take the measurements of her healthy leg, retrieve the results of her analysis and to ask her a few questions.

The prosthesis was ready in two weeks, but the implantation was not a simple operation. It took another week to leave the hospital. The first time she was allowed to lean her foot on the ground, it was odd: she could feel the floor but did not perceive its consistency, or its temperature. She had told it to the specialist of the Center who followed her up, and he had replied that it was obvious: they had not reached yet a level of technology such as to perfectly reproduce human nerves. *If you want a better leg than the real one, Hartwood,* he had told her with a sarcastic smile, *You could try Gralea. We do the best we can.* She had been about to flip him off.

Now, after three weeks of rehabilitation at the Center, she could stand and walk. Cornell, a former war veteran, had asked her if she was using some Glaive trick to recover so quickly. Yet it didn't sound like much to her being barely able to walk after so many weeks from the accident.

She limped to the sink and wet her face and neck, then returned to the cabinet to retrieve her spare t-shirt. She had to do something. Not only the recovery was slower than she had expected, but at this rate she would remain out of practice with the sword and everything else. In her narrow apartment she had at least begun doing crunches, but she felt weak, left behind, discouraged, and the news that came from the front did not improve her mood.

Then the day came she found out that she no longer needed the crutch, and – a life after, it seemed to her – the one she could even run.

"The worst is over, Hartwood," Cornell told her one night, as Balthier had done. Yet the worst seemed to be far from being over. She had invited him to have a beer at Samuel's, where she used to go every night for an hour or two. Living alone, after more than fourteen years she hadn't had a bit of privacy, first in the training center and then on the front, was alienating and she'd found out that spending a couple of hours in a noisy public place made her feel better.

Silia was so excited about his words that she snapped up. "Can I go back to the front then?"

He frowned. "Are you such in a hurry to kill yourself? No, Hartwood, you cannot go back to the front." Without any notice, with decent speed, Cornell took a knife from the table and struck a blow to her artificial leg, just above the knee. Silia seized his wrist, trying to move over at the same time, but something jammed and her leg had a shiver that seemed involuntary, like that of a dead frog shocked by an electric discharge. Her empty mug fell down and broke.

"Hartwood!" Samuel shouted from the counter, pulling out his rifle and pointing it at Cornell. The weapon was unloaded, as far as she knew, but he'd like to pull it out to calm spirits down, like he did some time ago when the nasty piece of shit had tried to threaten her. "Are you OK?"

Everyone was staring at them. Puzzled, embarrassed, Silia raised her hands. "It's all right. Everybody calm down. We were just kidding." She ran her fingers through her hair, taking a cigarette from the pack. "Shit, Cornell," she said in a lower voice, putting the cigarette between her lips. "Did you want
to get yourself killed? Three-fourths of the people here are armed."

Cornell smiled, stretching out to take a cigarette from her package without permission. "I'm a war veteran, Hartwood, I assure you I'm not so easy to kill. I wanted to give you a practical demonstration of what's happening with your leg: voluntary movements are different from reflexes. Let me give you an example: if I told you I was about to hit you, you would have thought to move your leg and your leg would have moved. But in your current state, Hartwood, a sudden action is unable to trigger a sudden reaction. I won't put my signature for your return to service. I have a professional deontology that doesn't allow me to let you get killed on the front."

Silia punched the table, frustrated. "For fuck's sake. How much will it take?"

"Who knows, Hartwood?" He pulled out a lighter from his pocket and lighted his cigarette, then leaned to light hers. "I don't know if you noticed, but I have one, too."

She was too demoralized and distracted to grasp the meaning of his words. "What?"

"A prosthesis," Cornell simply said, but he didn't show it to her. "My left leg, from my knee down. A war wound like yours, with the difference that I wasn't young as you are and back then prosthesis weren't like that baby you've attached to your thigh. Two good reasons why, in spite of those months of work, I couldn't go back to fight." He blew smoke. "It took you a month and a half to pass the first phase, the most difficult one: getting used to the artificial limb, which your body didn't reject – and believe me, this isn't a foregone conclusion. Do you know how many people we have to start with all over again? And resuming basic functionality, that is, the minimum movements. You've gone further: you can stand up, walk, and even run. I have already seen such things, but not often. The average time of recovery, in order to do what you did, usually takes from three to five months. My task with you is almost over, Hartwood, what you need now is to get back to training from the bases because your leg could not only move again like a normal person's leg, but like a Kingsglaive's one. If you resume training consistently, in a few months you should be able to return to the front."

"Months?" she groaned.

"Months. Don't be such a kid, Hartwood, and thank the Astrals. Perhaps you've never thought about it, but that prosthesis," he pointed out, "costs as much as three years of a Glaive's salary. Not to mention the specialised physiotherapy. Do you think I'm working with you every day for the glory?". He looked at her as if she was a naïve and foolish child. "The Kingdom paid for this, just like the Kingdom paid for your five-years training, because the Kingsglaives protect our borders. So, Hartwood, try not to flush all this by hastening your return to the front. Actually," he said, "I can put my signature on a paper. You can't go back to the front, but you are perfectly able to perform the city duties. Make yourself useful."

Silia smiled gloomily. "From the military elite of the kingdom to the neighborhood fuzz? What a pretty breakthrough." At least, she said to herself, I'll have something to do. And I should find a way to go back to practice.

Cornell finished his mug and stood up. "Come tomorrow to the Center, Hartwood, to sign in and retrieve the documentation. I will also send a copy to your Captain, although I suspect he has more concerning things to think about in these days. But don't worry, someone will decide what to do with you. Thank you for the beer."

Cornell left the tavern. As he walked through the tables, some of the regulars stared again at him, then stared at her, but without too much curiosity: brawls were on the agenda. Moreover, she had been unanimously identified as a troublemaker.
She retrieved her jacket from the back of the chair and stood up, putting another cigarette between her lips. She had deluded herself that her stay at Insomnia would be short, so she hadn't wasted time looking around. In almost two months she had seen nothing more of the city than the Prosthetics Center, Samuel's bar, her apartment and Balthier's. The small civil cars, agile and swarming like insects, made her feel nervous; the deafening music she heard everywhere and the gigantic luminous screens she saw in the street bothered her, and the first time she saw a girl walking with her bare stomach she had to remember to herself that in Insomnia people didn't risk a second navel by a stray bullet.

*Enjoy these months. There are so many things to do in Insomnia.*

"Samuel," Silia asked, tapping her fingers on the counter to call his attention. "Do you know where I can find a cinema?"
Gladio meets Hartwood again in a pretty hot circumstance. Silia is starting to believe that perhaps her new experience as a City Guard won't be so straightforward.

3

Gratia gratiam parit

I

Gladio saw Hartwood again almost two months after their first meeting, just at the beginning of the new year; they were in the main road of the East District. She had said she was on a temporary leave, but now she was obviously on duty, as she was almost fully dressed in the Kingsglaives’ uniform – without helmet and gloves. The purple cloak of her attire fluttered behind her as she walked sternly – almost martially – next to a City Guard who, on the contrary, appeared much more at ease and relaxed. Her right leg was still stiff, but she was not limping anymore.

Once again, Gladio noticed her because of her small figure, and struggled to recognize her in those formal robes. He stopped to watch her down the street, and he wasn't the only one: he could not help noticing the watchful glances that passersby and shopkeepers had for her. At some point she was due to pass in front of him, and he wondered if he should stop and say hello, but then he remembered how they had parted the last time and the feeling passed.

Suddenly in a nearby street, less than a hundred yards from where he had stopped, an explosion blew the air, leaving him deaf for a moment.

Konstantin's restaurant, he immediately imagined, darting in the direction of the building and dodging the people who were running in the opposite direction. Old Kost had been an Imperial soldier, originally from Gralea, who had deserted at least thirty-five years ago, and he was more Lucian in his heart than many of those he knew. It was not the first time that someone played a dirty trick to his restaurant, but never anything so serious. Or perhaps it was a gas leak. Without thinking about the consequences, Gladio ran to the burning edifice.

"Old Kost!" he cried. It was too early for customers to be there, but the man lived on the first floor of the building and he'd never go anywhere.

"Get out of the way!" a female voice ordered. A blistering jet of water threatened to hit him fully. Gladio turned around, already certain of who it was: Hartwood had casted a hydro and was aiming it at the fire. He had never seen a real spell from so close a distance. "Crux! Call for reinforcements and a fire truck while I keep the flames at bay!"

There's no time, Gladio thought, and rushed to the door of the restaurant, but Hartwood interposed between him and the entrance. She kept on aiming the magic jet to the fire.

"What are you doing?" she shouted in his face. "It could all come crashing down at any moment!"
"I don't care!" He snapped to get around her. "I think the owner's inside!"

"Damn it!" she cursed, and without giving him a chance to react, stopped the spell and rushed into the building.

Gladio followed her inside. It was a real hell – the wall covering of the restaurant, it seemed, was not fireproof – and he just had time to glimpse the woman when a section of the ceiling, engulfed in flames collapsed, threatening to overwhelm them both. Gladio jumped on Hartwood, pushing her to the ground and shielding her with his body, but no weight crushed his back. He raised his head cautiously: they were surrounded by a magic wall. He kept forgetting who he was dealing with.

"For Odin's cock" Hartwood cursed beneath him, as thanks, nudging him in the ribs. "Care to tell me why you followed me?"

"Told you." Coughing for the smoke, he stood up. "Old Kost must be inside."

"Get back out there" she lashed at him, standing up in turn. "And let me do my job."

"I'm not going anywhere."

She opened her mouth to say something else – probably to insult him – but another section of the ceiling, falling down interrupted her. "I don't have time enough to fight or to force you out" she said sourly, "If you really want to come, stay inside the magic wall. If you get yourself killed I'll be in trouble."

As nice as a snake in one's pants. He followed her.

They found old Kost upstairs. He was semi-conscious and his legs were blocked by a load-bearing wall that had collapsed on him. They lowered to examine his condition: he was bruised and burned, but not gravely.

"Don't worry" Hartwood reassured Konstantin, in a very different tone from the one she had used with him. "You'll make it. Just listen to me." She patted twice on his cheeks to make him recover. "Please. Just listen to me for a moment. I need to know if there's anyone else in the building."

"I'm alone" he heard him whisper.

"You'll be fine" Hartwood reiterated.

Gladio had already bent over to lift the debris. "Wait until you touch anything, Amicitia, or we risk being buried alive." Hartwood expanded her magic wall, and that was a good idea, because as soon as he had freed the old Niflheimian's legs, the rest of the ceiling crashed down. An avalanche of concrete, plaster and burning wood slid around them, repelled by the energy of the protect, without even scratching them.

"Let's go out" she ordered, lifting Kost by his arm and shifting his inert body onto her back.

He wanted to help, but she was already going away, risking to leaving him uncovered.

When they were out of the building, Gladio found that a patrol of City Guards and a crowd of onlookers had gathered. A fire engine was already in operation, and the Guards were taming the fire with powerful jets of water, raising an infernal smoke. Two of them rushed in their direction as soon as they saw them emerge from the cloud.

"Hartwood, are you okay?" her partner asked, taking Kost's body from her shoulders. The other
Guard, reached by a paramedic, carried him to the ambulance.

"I'm fine, Crux" she coughed. "The old man too. He fainted, he has burns, and probably his legs are fractured, but we acted quickly and he shouldn't have inhaled too much smoke. There's nobody else inside."

The Guard – Crux – clicked his tongue in with annoyance. "Hartwood, never do it again. That's not the protocol for fires."

"There was no time."

The man looked at her with irritation, but did not reply again. He turned to him. "What about you?" he asked. "Are you injured?"

Gladio opened his mouth to answer, but Hartwood did it for him. "He's fine, and I almost want to denounce him for hindrance. He tried to enter the building on fire, then he followed me inside, and he refused to leave when I told him to get away."

Gladio rubbed his throat. It was burning from the smoke, and his patience completely exhausted. "I wanted to help, and I have every right. I'm a Crownguard, I'm allowed to intervene if and when I want to. If you have any problem with that, Hartwood, come on, you can write it in your fucking report" he challenged her.

"My partner and I have been assigned to this area" she retorted, approaching him in a way that would have been menacing if Hartwood had not been shorter than him about a feet and thirty. "The City Guard has the priority to intervene."

He was fucking through with her arrogance. "The protection of the city also concerns the Crownguard. Plus, old Kost is an acquaintance of mine. Hartwood, I've already told you, if this doesn't suit you, go to the Citadel reception and fill out a fucking complaint form."

"Hartwood" Crux said conciliatory. "Take a pass on this one. His father is General Clarus Amicitia, a member of the King's Council. Moreover, no one got hurt."

"I don't give a shit about who his father is."

At another time, Gladio would have replied that he didn't care about who his father was too, but he didn't want to agree with her. They kept on staring each other, surly.

Finally, after a long time, Hartwood surrendered. "To hell with it" she said, rubbing her forehead with her arm, and in doing so she left a gray mustache of sweat and ashes on her skin. "Crux, please, could you deal with going to the hospital and see if the old man has recovered and can answer some questions? Amicitia, did you say that you know the victim?"

Gladio sighed, trying to push back his irritation, and nodded. "Konstantin Erdem is from Niflheim. Everyone knows it in the city. He's a good man, but they targeted him. So it would not be so strange if it wasn't a gas leak."

Hartwood blinked. "Let's go to the headquarters, Amicitia. I need further information from you to report. It won't take long."

II

Gladio had silenced three calls from Noct as he talked to Hartwood sitting at a desk in the central
station of the City Guard, hoping to end that story as soon as possible.

Hartwood had been warmest to him – if an interrogation, whose only deviation from the theme had been her offer of a bottle of water, since they both kept on coughing, could be defined as ‘warm’.

She had no experience as a City Guard, it was obvious, so she had tried to pull herself together with a barrage of questions as dry and peremptory as useless. Instead of recording, as everyone used to do, she had written everything down by hand Gladio had noted with amusement – the only one he could get on that day.

"Listen" he said, when she finally dismissed him "it's none of my business, but if I can help..."

"That's right" she answered him back. "It's none of your business. Good afternoon, Amicitia" she discharged him.

Still swearing in a low voice, Gladio left the station. He needed a shower, he decided. Since he was at the Citadel, instead of returning home, he resolved to go to the Crownsguard's headquarters to have it at the Training Hall. Only once he had passed his magnetic card to enter, he remembered Noctis' calls. He hurried to pick up his phone, but at that moment he saw Noct himself sitting in the waiting room.

"Noct?" he asked, surprised, closing the call. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see my father. I tried to call you three times to know if you were hanging around the Citadel. Since you didn't answer me, I thought I'd drop by. What the hell happened to you?" He twisted his nose slightly. "Have you been to a barbecue?"

"Very funny" he lashed to him. Actually he smelled like smoke and his clothes were screwed. At least, he consoled himself, he wasn't wearing the uniform of the Crownsguard; since it was tailor-made, it would have taken a lifetime for him to get another one. "Have you heard about the explosion?"

Noctis opened his eyes wide. "What explosion? I don't know anything."

Gladio sighed. Noct was a little too often out of touch for someone who would have reigned. "Look at the news, every now and then. There was an explosion in a restaurant. You know that old man from Niflheim? I guess I even brought you there a couple of times. I was in the area by chance, and I lent a hand. Then I also had to respond to some sort of interrogation of the City Guard, since I knew the victim."

"Are you okay?"

Gladio ran a hand through his hair. "I'm fine. I'm just pissed off. Miss Nice of the City Guard made me lose a bunch of time."

"Miss Nice?"

"Forget about it. What did you want to tell me, Noct?"

Noctis shrugged. "Nothing important. Prompto wants to go and see that adventure movie on hunters tonight at the Odeon. Are you up for it?"

"And you called me three times in an hour for this bullshit?" Gladio got irritated. He was already irritated. He took a deep breath: it was Hartwood who had pissed him off, and Noctis had nothing to do with it. Perhaps a movie night would do him good. "I'm sorry" he said, but Noctis
had already frowned. "Let's go with the cinema. What time?"

"Seven o' clock" he replied irritably. "If Your Majesty is in the right mood."

"Listen, I'm sorry if I stole your drama queen role for a moment. Just an hour ago I came out of a burning house. Let me be nervous. Seven will be okay. Till then we can train a couple of hours at the Training Hall."

Noctis snorted. "If I really have to..."

"You have to. You have not worked out for three days."

"All right, all right, just calm down. What about having something together before?"

"Ramen."

"Ramen. How boring. Just because you're so bitchy today."

Gladio smiled, more relaxed. "Let me have a shower, first. I should have a change of clothes here at the HQ."

III

Hartwood was occupying the same table as the previous time, and as the previous time she was reading. The book was no longer History of Accordo, but The Astral War: History and Myth.

Throughout the afternoon, even during his training session with Noct, Gladio had been distracted and unfocused. The thought of the fire bothered him like a woodworm. It was absurd, with a war that had been going on for decades, that someone was going to wage war even inside Insomnia, so he kept on clinging to the faint hope that it was an accidental explosion. If this had not been the case, however, he wanted to see the responsible party in jail for a while. After his second shower that had washed away smoke, sweat and a bit of weariness, he had decided that even if he didn't want to see her again, especially so soon, he would drop by the tavern where he had met Hartwood the first time to get news on the preliminary investigations before reaching the others at the cinema. And there he found her, in effect. This time she was wearing civilian clothes.

As he approached the table, Hartwood looked up from her book. The progressive contraction of her eyebrows testified surprise, then annoyance, and finally resignation. She pulled back a chair as if she were doing him a favor.

"I didn't think I'd see you here" she greeted him.

"And, indeed, here I am." He sat down, just to spite her. "I was curious to hear about what happened to old Kost's place, and who better than you?"

"Anyone else, it seems" Hartwood sighed tiredly. A plate with leftovers of chicken and potato was in front of her. She pushed it aside with her elbow. He didn't think she would deign to answer him, but instead she did. "The restaurant is gone. Fortunately, the old man is insured. The inspection confirmed that it was a malicious explosion. A craft bomb."

"Bastards" he let slip, but he was prepared for the news. "Any word about it?"

"Nothing." She shook her head. "We started questioning the alleged witnesses, but..."
Gladio's gaze fell on Hartwood's beer mug, still full, and she noticed it. With unexpected and rough kindness, she pushed it forward. "Take it, it's the third for me. After all the smoke I breathed today, I'm terribly thirsty."

He gladly accepted it. Hartwood looked down at her book, then, after a few seconds, closed it with a dry gesture. "Look, Amicitia, I wanted to apologize for this morning. I've been an asshole. But I'm not used to..." She made a vague and repeated gesture with her hand. "...such things." The ballet of her hand stopped on the pack of cigarettes she kept on the table. She took one out and put it between her lips.

Gladio shrugged, without understanding whether she was referring to the city, the fires or whatever. He decided to let it go and changed the subject. "I saw you no longer limp, Hartwood. Is your leg better?"

She nodded, lighting her cigarette. Gladio wondered where she found the desire to inhale other smoke. "More or less. I don't need a crutch now."

"You're a daring one, Hartwood. Or a crazy. That building could have collapsed at any moment."

"You too have gone inside without thinking twice, am I wrong?"

"I'm a little crazy too. The important thing, however, is that old Kost is fine."

"I thought you had only Prince Noctis and the royal family at heart."

Gladio had relaxed a bit, after that brief moment of complicity, but he got defensive again at that gratuitous zinger. "Mostly. But this is not a reason for leaving a man burning alive, if I can do something. I would have done it even if I hadn't been a Crownsguard."

Hartwood smiled, her head reclining on the palm of her hand. "That's honorable, Amicitia. And thank you for what you did for me. Trying to shield me from the beam, I mean. It wasn't necessary for you to get involved, like the previous time, but thank you."

"You're welcome" he replied, unable to decide whether he should be pleased by that semblance of thanks, or even more irritated. Hartwood didn't like him too much, it was clear, and he couldn't understand why. The front, he thought sourly, must have gone to her head. "However, if you can, keep me informed about the status of the investigations. I'll stop by some other time."

"Would you like another beer, Amicitia?" she offered, pointing to her empty mug.

"Never mind" Gladio said. "I don't have much time tonight. I only came to ask for news." He stood up, putting his hands in his pockets, and decided to pester her one more time before leaving. "Anyway, I wanted to tell you that the Kinsglaves' uniform really suits you, Hartwood. Take care. See you around."

IV

"Hartwood, listen to me. I really have to tell you something."

Silia took a last puff of smoke and then dropped the butt from the window of the squad car. "What?"

Still keeping an eye on the road, Crux turned to look at her. "Don't take it badly. I'm aware that even if you're half my age you've seen things I can't even imagine, and that, if I'm lucky, I'll never have to see, but I've been doing this job for almost forty years. I was born in Insomnia, I've always lived
here, and I'll probably die here."

Silia drummed her fingers on the window, waiting for him to cut to the chase. Crux was not exactly the smartest person she'd ever known, but he seemed a good fellow, and he had managed to find a good middle ground solution between addressing her as if she was a frightful jabberwock and flaunting an ill-concealed contempt.

"Many citizens don't like Kingsglaives."

"Oh, really?" she sneered, mockingly. "I've already figured it out."

"I had no doubts" Crux answered, ignoring her little zinger. "I've nothing against you, that's why Commander Lars has assigned you to me as my partner. But you're not a City Guard. You don't know anything about Insomnia, you don't know the crown citizens, you don't know the protocols and the procedures. Look at few days ago, that fire. You cannot launch spells in the midst of the city, heck, I don't even know if there's a law that regulates the use of magic. Magic flasks are strictly forbidden, for example, if not upon regular request for permission that usually is released in..."

"Yeah, yeah, I've understood" she interrupted him. It was useless to explain to him that on the front she wasn't used to procedures and protocols, because when facing an unexpected emergency they had a few seconds to evaluate and react, and those few seconds made the difference between life and death. "It's just a temporary solution, Crux. As Commander Lars explained to you, the Kingdom wants me to earn my salary as I get back on track before returning to war."

"It seems to me that you're more than on track" he said, and Silia got irritated.

"I can assure you" she said cautiously "that I want to go back to the front more than you don't want me in your way. My right leg doesn't move properly. If it were for me I'd leave tomorrow, but the military doctors don't agree."

"I'm not calling you a coward, Hartwood." Crux returned to look at the street. "If you really want to know, I meant that, in your conditions, you're stronger and faster than any City Guard I've ever known."

Silia bit her tongue. She forced herself to calm down, because if – as it seemed – she had to spend the following months in Insomnia, she couldn't wage war against everything and everyone. It was her who had to adapt to the city, not the contrary. "Listen, Crux" she interjected, clicking her tongue in. "I didn't want to be unpleasant. This situation wears me out. That's not what I grew up with. That's not what I'm used to."

Crux gestured vaguely. "Don't mention it, Hartwood. Everyone does what he's able to. As far as I'm concerned, you've performed miracles in these past years. Those bastards from Niflheim ate Eos, piece by piece, and even if you couldn't stop them, you slowed their advance. It's not a big deal for many citizens, but it seems a lot to me, and even the King and the Council are of the same opinion."

It was the first time, since she had returned to Insomnia, that someone expressed themselves about Kingsglaives in these terms. Silia was almost moved. She smiled. "Thank you, Crux" she said frankly.

The man smiled in return. "Since we're here, Hartwood, let me be honest with you. I'm afraid they assigned you this investigation for spite. The crown citizens will never open up to you, and I'll be damned if this suits me, the Guard doesn't care a jot about that man and his restaurant. I'm going to help you as much as I can, Hartwood, because it's my job, and I try to do it at my best, but they're using you as a fender. If we catch the culprits, it's fine. If we don't catch them, no harm done, and in
any case they will attribute the failure to you."

Silia took a deep breath. She had just promised herself to calm down, and she would do it. Moreover, she couldn't say that this revelation came to her unexpectedly. Nevertheless, the idea of being shitted on by the City Guards after having spent ten years in the war was outrageous.

Be zen, she told herself. A few months. In a few months you'll think back to this shit after a day on the battlefield, you'll tell it to the others as you're passing a flask of whiskey to each other sitting in the firecamp, and you'll laugh together about it. "Thanks for being honest, Crux. I can't do much about it, I'm still a Glaive, but since I signed the documents from the Royal Chancery, I am under the jurisdiction of the City Guard. Not that I care a lot about having an extra reprimand on my record, but..." She shrugged. "I might as well grin and bear it. But if Hector Lars dares and pushes his luck with me, I'll make him pay for it. I am still a Kingsglaive."

Crux touched the back of his head. "I hope I never have you as an enemy, Hartwood. You're like a magic flask: you'd better not shake it."

V

Be zen, she had said to herself in the squad car with Crux, and she had tried hard, she could swear it on Shiva, but it had been damn hard in the previous days. She had been zen when, the day after the fire, she had opened the Insomnia newspaper and saw that the news had been relegated to a short article that commented on the increasing tax crime in the city, perhaps in response to the hopeless protracting of the war. She had been zen when all the witnesses they had questioned, no one excluded, had looked at her and Crux in their face, declaring that they knew nothing and had not seen anything. She had been zen when Commander Lars had summoned her and she had to tell him there was no news. She had been zen when a City Guard named Margaret, perhaps in a clumsy and absolutely not required attempt to cheer her up, had told her not to worry, because the case would have quickly deflated and no one would talk about it anymore. She had been zen when, on her weekly visit at the Military Prosthetics Center, Cornell had told her that there were no further improvements and that the electromyography had confirmed that the nerves of her artificial leg still didn't respond perfectly.

Silia got up from the desk she had occupied for the last hour copying the report on the computer – she knew how to fly a military aircraft, and yet a damned word processing system put her in trouble – and took her jacket from the coat rack. She had surrendered on everything, but not about the uniform: she would not wear the attire of the City Guard. She had grown up in the uniform of the Kingsglaives, she knew the pockets and the reinforcements inside out, and without it she'd felt like a snail without its shell. She distractedly waved at Crux and started down the corridor to get out of the station. She needed to vent her frustration by running and doing some physical activity in an open and secluded place.

She put her pass on the reader and went through the automatic doors. She almost banged her nose against Gladio Amicitia's chest.

"Oh, thank Six!" he exclaimed. "I was looking for you, Hartwood."

"And I was going home" she lied, going around him. She had seen him only once since the night of the fire, and she didn't want to tell him again that there was no news. In truth, she didn't want to tell him anything, and she didn't like at all that he had come looking for her at the headquarters.

Amicitia was about to put his hand on her shoulder. Silia had an involuntary reflex, one of those she had learned in training without anyone having explained them and that saved her life lots of times –
one of those that her artificial leg wasn't yet able to do – and violently grabbed his forearm.

Amicitia frowned irritably, but did not pull his arm to free it. "Hartwood, a little nervous, are we?"

"I don't like being touched by strangers" she wanted to point out, letting his arm go. "If you want to excuse me, Amicitia..."

"Five minutes" he said again, raising his hand with his fingers stretched out to emphasize the concept. His hands were huge. "But not here. Let's go for a walk."

"Why should I go for...?"

"Five" Amicitia repeated. "If you prefer so, we can make our way together while you're heading home, so I'll not waste your precious time."


She pressed the button for one of the elevators, waiting for him to start talking, but he did not. When they entered, Amicitia folded his lips into what seemed to be a rather mocking smile.

"Five minutes" she reminded him, irritated.

"Don't be technical" he retorted, but slipped his hand into his pocket and handed her a note.

The elevator was now on the tenth floor. Silia blinked, perplexed, taking the piece of paper. There were three names with their respective surnames, and she could recognize just one of them. "What does it mean? Who are they?"

"Those who played that nasty trick at old Kost's restaurant."

Silia froze, the note in her hand. She watched him. "How?"

"I didn't mean to offend you or go over your head, Hartwood, please believe me" he quickly said, scratching his hairline. "It's not your fault, and I'm sorry you found yourself in the midst of this, but people in Insomnia don't like Glaives and they will never talk to you."

Almost Crux's same words. "Amicitia" she said, feeling her lips hot. She felt humiliated and relieved together. She folded the note and tried to return it to him, calling upon her nerves. "You shouldn't do that."

"I just asked a few questions around. On my own behalf. I told you, I know old Kost. I certainly didn't do it for you. It's just that I thought we could help each other. You're in charge of the investigation, but you're in a dead end. I know who the culprits are, but I cannot involve the Crownsguard because it's a business of the City Guard."

"How did you find out? I cannot accuse and charge them just like this, Amicitia."

He made an ironic expression and produced a second note. "Of course not. Here are the names and addresses of four witnesses."

Silia opened her mouth, then closed it. She read the names on the paper. "Fucking bastards" she let slip. "We have already questioned them all and they said they didn't see anything."

"Summon them again. Now that I have spoken to them, they will suddenly remember." He checked his watch. The elevator had arrived on the ground floor, and the automatic doors opened. They were instantly swallowed up by the din of the hall. "I exceeded your five minutes, Hartwood. Will you
forgive me?” He smiled again, a broad, sunny and boyish smile.

Silia had to remind herself that Gladio Amicitia was a Crownguard who had interfered in her activities and that she must at least look irritated. But she was starting to like that young man. He could have run to the City Guard's headquarters with his names taking the merit. And she had been incapable, so she had little to do with it, especially over old Kostantin's head.

At once, Hector Lars' upset face, that she perfectly figured out, prevailed above any scruple. She had to bite her inner lip in order not to smile as she preceded Amicitia out of the elevator, raising a hand with her well-stretched fingers.

"I know, Hartwood, I'd said five minutes, but let me tell you that you really are a pain in..."

Silia shook her head, ignoring his last statement. "Five beers. It's what I owe you for this favor."

Amicitia came out of the elevator, looking away from her with an embarrassed air. "Only five? All together?"

"Not necessarily."

"Do you still want to go home or can I have the first one now?"

"Let's go for the first one."
Dulce bellum inexpertis

Chapter Summary

Silia returns to the refugee district where she lived with her mother for a phantom tour.

4

Dulce bellum inexpertis

I

The air was cold, though not damp. It was late January and though she had suffered much stiffer temperatures elsewhere in the past, Silia shuddered as she went down the rickety staircase. Twice her right foot slipped, and at the second time she decided to concentrate on the broken steps instead of looking at the abandoned suburb that extended beneath her gaze.

The Citadel Square, as it had been re-christened, was the neuralgic point around which the refugee district organized itself. But in the center, instead of a cutting-edge skyscraper, there rose a cast iron fountain with three taps dispensing water. It seemed to have been torn from Insomnia and moved somewhere beyond the Wall. The pavement had more holes than basalt pieces, and a stubborn grass had managed to creep between the interstices. The walls of the houses that piled up against the square like a herd of mesmerizes above its prey were peeling and crumbling, the fountain looked like it had been dry for centuries, and the shutters of the shops were rusty. Only the biohazard sign, probably placed by the City Guard to discourage anyone who had been so incautious as to descend the staircase in the period immediately following the epidemic, disclosed that the district had been abandoned in 744.

Silia ignored the sign and crossed the square. Just like the district, even the MRSA4 epidemic brought by some refugees, which had depopulated the ward, had been somewhat out of place in a futuristic city like Insomnia. Only one-tenth of the two thousand inhabitants had survived and had been accommodated elsewhere in the city, Marius had told her. It was him who, at the time, had given her the news he had just received from his father. Since then, she imagined, everything had remained as when the district had been evacuated: a window to the past, which actually wasn't a very unlikely present for those who weren't lucky enough to live protected by the Wall.

She wedged in the symmetrical alleyways, remembering the road better and better every step and recognizing houses and shops. The butcher, the greengrocer, and the shoemaker. Mrs. Myra, on the second floor of the house with yellow bricks, who'd bake the bread at six in the morning. Sigmund and his sisters' brood – he also had joined Kingsglaives, only to die shortly after their arrival on the front. Gerrit, the mechanic to whom Marius sometimes gave a hand. She wondered who had survived. She had no way of finding out.

She almost got over her alley, but when she entered she felt as if Marius would open the door at any moment to welcome her.
“Here you are.”

Silia jumps, almost letting the cigarette slip from her lips, then she recognizes her friend's voice and his profile in the dim light. "Damn it, Marius, you scared me."

"Did you sneak out to smoke? Hand it to me, come on." Marius comes up beside her – when the hell did he grow so tall? she wonders often and often – and, without waiting for any confirmation, takes the cigarette and puts it between his lips. "That's good. It's not a cigarette like the usual ones. Who did you steal it from?"

Silia knows pretty well why Marius is there, in that alley, at ten o'clock in the evening, instead of lying in his bed to rest from an exhausting working day in view of the next one, but she encourages his long preamble. "No one. A guy gave it to me." It's true. The stranger guy to whom she sold a fire flask gave her three cigarettes, along with the money he promised to her.

Marius doesn't investigate further. Without returning her cigarette, he sits on the crate next to her. He smells good. He must have had a shower after dinner. "So, will you tell me?"

"How do you know it?"

"My father. He saw the Captain coming in. He heard your mother's screams. Tell me everything."

Silia sighs, tilting her head back to look at the night sky. It's a beautiful evening, but Insomnia is so bright – not their district – that, unlike in Ambrosia, you can't see the stars. "When the Captain came in to ask for me, I thought I was in trouble, you know..." she shrugs. "For that magic flasks business. I hid, and my mother told him that I wasn't there, but before dismissing him, she wanted to know why he was looking for me. The Captain replied that the King, through him, was selecting kids who were particularly sensitive to magic power in order to form a group of elite fighters." She frowns, turning to study Marius' reaction. As she imagined, he's not surprised.

"It was you, right?"

Marius doesn't return her gaze. He throws the cigarette butt, smoked to the filter, which goes off on the already dirty sidewalk. "Did I do wrong?" he asks, with that new deep voice. Height, voice, his first facial hair: Marius is turning into a man she doesn't know. "I thought that if you didn't want to listen to him, you could just say no."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because, in case you wanted to listen to him, I didn't want to give you false hopes."

Marius looks up. They stare at each other for a long time, and no words are needed because they both understand that the other is ready to follow that imposing stranger, a Captain at the service of His Majesty, and to die, if necessary. Whatever it takes to run away from the refugee district and get back to those fucking Niffs.

Silia thinks of Captain Drautos again. A tall, muscular man, between his thirties and forties, with deep blue eyes. He was almost completely dressed in black. His stern appearance intimidated her, but not so much that she couldn't raise her head to claim that she was Silia Hartwood. He had squared her from head to toe, arching for a moment the right corner of his mouth in an expression that she had learned to know well: disappointment. She was well aware of being too thin, too short, too weak for anything he had in mind for her.
"And how did it go?"

Silia shrugs again. "My mother tried again to send him away. She told him I was just a skinny little girl. He was about to leave. I felt so humiliated and angry that I hit the wall and I told him: 'you are looking for kids who are particularly sensitive to magic power. I am. Aren't you interested in knowing anything else?"

Marius blinks. He looks cherished, and she always likes it. "Did you speak to Captain Drautos this way?"

She nods. Actually, when he had looked at her severely, raising his eyebrow, and told her that no one was allowed to address to him by tapping the walls, she'd been about to crap her pants. "I begged him to test me. I was completely lost. When I confessed to him I'm able to draw from elemental sources and prepare fire, blizzard and thunder flasks, my mother slapped me. She had not beaten me for years."

Marius doesn't answer, and Silia is grateful to him for that. She touches her cheek: surprise, anger and shame had been stronger than pain. "Then I thought that the Captain would leave. I'd been slapped by my mother as a little child in front of such an important man. I was about to cry. But the Captain didn't leave. He drew his cloak aside to put a hand in his pocket, grabbed a purple crystal, and immediately dropped it to the floor as it was hot."

"An energy crystal." Marius half smiled, amused. "It activated with me as well. That was your test, Silia."

Silia curls up above the crate, grabbing her knees. "The Captain explained it to me as well. He said it reacted to my anger. And then he told me to pick it up. The crystal no longer burned, it was just lukewarm, and the Captain asked me, can you feel it, Hartwood? I felt it, Marius. It was a pulsating energy, so physical that my hand was tingling. Just like when I'm near to an elemental source."

"Kids who are sensitive to magical power can't control it, the Captain said." Marius slightly leans on her. "They lose this affinity when they grow up, and often cause some harm."

Silia hides her mouth behind her knee to not showing him she's smiling. "Do you know what he told me? That I look like I'm agile. That perhaps he can make something of me. I've never felt like that before. But then my mother interfered. She told him she wouldn't allow him to take me away. The Captain answered that the King isn't used to kidnap kids and that I am old enough to give my assent, if I want. He will let me know in a few days. I'll go and look for him at the Citadel, if necessary. I won't accept a 'no' as an answer."

Again, Marius is staring at her admiringly, and she returns his gaze. "And what about your mother?"

"She went crazy." She had never seen her like that before. Never. Not even when her father died. "When the Captain left she started screaming. She tried to slap me again. I didn't allow her this time; she cannot keep on deciding about my life. I told her that if she gets in my way in this thing I will kill myself."

Marius puts a hand on her arm. She hasn't felt him so close since they still were in Ambrosia. They meet almost every day in Insomnia, but for a short time: they are too busy making a living. "Don't talk nonsense. You'd never do that."

She shakes her head slowly. She feels like she's about to cry. "No. Dad would never forgive me. But my mother got so pissed that she told me she doesn't want to see me anymore. She said that I'm
crazy, that I cannot lead a life full of resentment and that I must learn to accept the things I cannot change. She can't understand that it's not like that this time. If the Captain teaches me how to fight, I can change something." She rubs her eyes in the hollow of her elbow. "Can I stay at your place for a while, Marius?"

"You know you can but, Silia, she'll get over it."

"I couldn't care less about my mother." She's sincere. At that moment, all that she can think about is the Captain's black leather jacket, his sword on his belt. And the hatred she feels for Niflheim burns again, scorching, like water found by digging deep into the sand. "I want to fight, Marius. Should the Captain discard me, I swear that-

She leaves her sentence unresolved, because she doesn't know what she will do. Even Marius has no certainty of being accepted; who knows how many other kids have come forward? Perhaps even more rancorous towards the imperials than they are.

Marius jumps out of the crate. "Let's go home. Are you hungry?"

Silia shakes her head without following him. She hasn't eaten – she went out immediately after the fight with her mother and she spent the rest of the afternoon wandering – but she's not hungry. She feels like her stomach is gripped with anxiety. "Do you remember the name of the military group that Captain Drautos is putting together?"

He nods, putting his hands in his pockets. "Kingsglaives, aren't they? Who knows what it means."

Captain Drautos did not explain it to her, but Silia knows it pretty well. "A glaive is a kind of spear, a sickle with a long pole. It means that whoever will be chosen will become the extension of the King's arm."

III

Silia went up the stairs to the second floor, up to the two rooms she had shared with her mother from 739 to 741. The door hung ajar from its hinges like an arm from a dislocated shoulder. She entered the foul-smelling dimness, making her way up to the shutters with her cell phone, and opened them wide. The afternoon winter light revealed the round table, the two overturned chairs, the kitchenette and the three cabinets without doors.

The room had been invaded by all kinds of flying and creeping animals over the years – she could see traces of them all around: feathers, guano and dry stools, old nests and empty burrows – that had managed to break into the apartment. Probably, for some time, even two-legged animals had inhabited it, but now it had been empty for who knows how long. Silia had never felt any particular affection for that house, and seeing it now, in those conditions, left her almost indifferent, but she remained in the middle of the room staring at the dusty table, feeling her face stiff. She considered the misery of that abandoned apartment, not much more sleazy than when it had been inhabited. One more time she wondered how her mother, a person who'd never shown a little bit of pride, could insist on not accepting a single gil of her apprenticeship pay.

If we hadn't parted that way, she told herself for the first time in so many years, perhaps she would have accepted the money, and she wouldn't have been here, like Gregor, when the epidemic broke out.

She pushed aside the plastic striped curtain that divided the kitchenette from the room where they'd slept. The light there was enough for her to open the shutters and let some air in. Her bed was still in
its place, next to her mother's, both naked and exposing impudently the soaked and dampened mattresses. Her mother had died in one of those beds, she had to remind herself. Something stuck in her throat this time, and she had to rub her eyes and swallow to push it back. She had not cried when she got the news from Marius because even though she had not yet officially sworn, she had become a Kingsglaive, and a member of the military elite doesn't cry, either in public or in private.

She sat heavily on what was left of her bed. As a young girl she found it uncomfortable, compared to the one she had owned in Ambrosia, but she hadn't had the chance to appreciate the comforts of an army camp bed yet.

IV

Karl Hartwood's portrait was taken when Silia was too young to remember, just a few months before the hand of Niflheim extended over Ambrosia. The photo shows a man about twenty-five, dark hair and eyes, average height and build – Silia inherited hers from her mother. The man smiles, looking embarrassed towards the lens; cameras, in Ambrosia, were a rarity, and Silia can't remember owning or having ever owned any other photograph. In the picture, Karl is in the clinic he had set up on the back of their house, revealed by a few details: a metal cart in the background, a bottle of something (saline?) that appears on the right on drawers. Of that clinic, she only remembers the smell of disinfectant.

Her father Karl had a sharp and kind face and always used to keep a wild short beard, more because of his absolute shabbiness she believed, than for fashion. That's how she recalls him: his stinging chin that irritates her cheeks when he rubs it on her face, his agile and long fingered hands that caress her hair. She's got the feeling that he was very affectionate, because she always links him to hugs and kisses, but she cannot be sure.

Silia has remained at home, sitting on her bed, longer than she had planned to do. She realizes it when she lifts her head and sees her mother leaning against the door frame, looking at her silently. Soon, she presumes, it won't happen again to her to be surprised by someone.

She gets up from her bed without trying to hide the photograph, and approaches her mother. She knows that Marius, when saying that she'll get over it, is wrong; not this time.

"I was accepted," she announces, in a cold voice, but she thinks her mother already knows. "I'm moving to the barracks tonight. All my needs will be provided by the Kingdom as long as the training lasts. Marius has been accepted too."

She looks at her, waiting for her comment. You'll regret it, she expects to hear, but her mother only shakes her head. "You're just like your father."

Silia has a heartache, because even though she has only vague memories of him, she knows perfectly that of the two parents, it's her father whom she looks like and it's her father whom, if she could have chosen, she would have liked to look like. But her mother is not trying to please her at all. "Leave dad out of this," she answers, without raising her voice. They will neither cry or fight again; the fracture that divides them is deep, and filled with icy water. "Dad has nothing to do with it."

Her mother is not really looking at her, she realizes, but at an invisible spot beyond her shoulders, as if her father's ghost had appeared. "I've always known. He died when you were too young to remember his words, his idealistic speeches, and yet I heard you doing the same speeches at eight, nine, ten, eleven years old. Speeches about pride. Speeches about freedom. Speeches about an honorable death."
For years her mother has not spoken about her father, and she has always struggled to respect her choice. She cannot think of a single moment, from when she has memory, in which they have remembered him together. What she knows of him – what she thinks she knows – comes from the other inhabitants of Ambrosia who knew him, who were treated, and in some cases saved by him and by Gregor, who was his friend. Always in whispers, because Karl Hartwood had died fighting against the Empire. "These are concepts that even a child can understand, if she believes in them."

"If he was still alive, maybe..." her mother continues, as if she had not heard, "If he was still alive, after what we've been going through for the past nine years, hunger, misery, you would see him for what he was: a self-centered man." Silia opens her mouth, indignant, hurt, but her mother doesn't let her talk. "A self-centered man who took up arms and got himself killed without any concern for his family. But instead you think of him a hero, a brave and selfless patriot who died to defend his own ideas, and that's how you'll remember him forever."

Silia can't feel anger now, just a dull and disgusted indignation. "Think what you want," she merely spits. Trying to change her mind is useless; they're of a different clay. "Dad has nothing to do with this," she repeats, "I'm proud of what he did, unlike you, but I'm doing this for myself. I'm tired to live like that, mom, and now I can do something good."

"Oh," her mother smiles, and returns to look her in the eye. "I'm sure of it, they've chosen wisely. I've seen it, the moment when that Captain Drautos understood what he had on his hands: an idealistic girl. They won't need to brainwash you, they'll own a perfect guerrilla to use to mend a war they already lost. You can say what you want, Silia, but we have already lost, even before you were born."

Silia smiles in turn. Again her mother is confident she's insulting her, but it's not like that. "If you think this way about this war," she asks, "Why did we leave Ambrosia?"

"For your safety," her mother simply replies. "I didn't want to see you killed by the imperial soldiers as happened to your father, after that last, useless stunt with your friend Marius. I thought here in Insomnia we'd have found some peace before the war reached us again."

"Well, it happened." Silia walks past her to get out, the photograph in her fist. She's sorry she couldn't find her father's Cosmogony, but now she only wants to leave as soon as possible. They'll give her new clothes, in the barracks, and she won't need anything else for who knows how many years to come. "By the way, I talked to Gregor, he'll give you a hand in case of need. I won't be paid so much now, but in a few years they'll pay me a real salary. I will let you know how to take that money."

"Don't bother." Her mother's tone is low, slightly jarring, almost sarcastic. "I won't take the money the King paid to buy my daughter's idiocy."

For a moment, Silia is sure that this is the last time she will see her mother, and in spite of the harsh words they exchanged, she feels an affection that she hasn't felt for so long. She would like to hug her – when did she last hug her mother? – to apologize not for her own words, because she believes in every single letter out of her lips, but for giving her a bunch of concerns. For a moment, she believes that the fracture filled with icy water can be healed, because they're mother and daughter, they've no one else left, and even though they could never understand each other she loves her. If her mother made a gesture, she thinks, any gesture of affection, not even a gesture, even a glance would be enough, Silia would throw her arms around her. Although she'd always believed herself not to be scared of death, she's only thirteen, she spent the last three sleepless nights in Marius' bed – both without speaking, back to back, occasionally shaken by tremors not attributable to the cold – obsessively reviewing everything she knows about magiteks and daemons.
But her mother just looks at her quietly, her face a mask of rancor. To her, Silia understands, she's already dead.

"Goodbye, mother," she says, and she goes out without looking back.

Outside the door, in the alley, she finds Marius. He has a bag on his shoulder — a deflated bag, because he doesn't own much either — and a melancholic look, and it's enough for him to look at her face to understand, and for her to look at him to understand that he understood.

"Where's the meeting place?" he asks, distractedly.

"At the Citadel's Square."

"Got any smokes?"

Silia pulls her last cigarette out of her back pocket, a little battered one. It lost some tobacco from its tip. "Let's share it" she offers. "Even if I had others, I believe we won't be allowed to smoke anymore." She lights it and, for a while, they walk silently, passing the cigarette to each other after a few puffs.

"Silia?"

"Nh?"

"Do you think we are going to die soon?"

Silia turns to look for the last time the dirty and gray houses of the refugee neighborhood. "I believe," she says cautiously, "that we have been dead all along."

V

The ringtone of the cell phone startled her like a bomb alarm. She looked around, amazed at being in a room now almost in the shade, and pulling it out of her pocket, she realized two things: the first, that Gladio Amicitia was calling. The second, that it was six o'clock in the evening and that she had been in that ghostly place for two hours now.

She ran a hand through her hair, leaning the phone against her ear. "…Hi." Her voice, though soft, resounded like a shot in the empty house.

"Sorry, Hartwood, do I bother you?"

Silia was about to answer that he was bothering her indeed, but when she opened her mouth she realized that, after that phantom tour, she needed to hear a living person's voice, even Amicitia speaking baubles. "Don't worry" she replied. "Tell me, Amicitia."

"I just wanted to hear about the fire. I exchanged two words with old Kost, yesterday, and he told me that the culprits are out again."

"Ah, don't blame me," she replied, forcing a casual tone. She rubbed her eyes. "Blame this fucking bureaucracy you have here in the city. What does it mean, released on bail awaiting trial?"

Amicitia produced a snort of annoyance, or perhaps fun. "It means that they pay a sum, usually commensurate with the seriousness of the crime they are accused of, so as not to have to wait in jail until the trial. Where have you lived so far, Hartwood?"
"Here and there, but always in places where, if you put a building on fire and it's not to obstruct the advance of a troop of magiteks while you're fleeing the population, you end up rotting in jail, or worse. What if they run away? Insomnia's huge."

"Insomnia's huge, but they cannot get out of it. If they vanish, sooner or later the Guard will nail them."

"Isn't it safer to leave them in jail?"

"Hartwood," Amicitia chuckled. "You're always reading books. Why don't you get one about civil and criminal law?"

"Oh, perhaps I will. In this city I feel like an anak in a luxury restaurant." Silia got up from the bed. The heel of her boot bumped into a solid body protruding from under the bed, and she looked down.

"Are you going to Samuel's tonight, Hartwood?"

Her father's Cosmogony. Silia put it on her knees, without knowing how it had ended up there, and she dusted off the hardcover. Had it been thrown there by a squatter who was uninterested in myths and literature? Or was it her mother, after her departure, who knows for what reason, hoping that sooner or later she would return to occupying that bed? She doubted it; she had written to her seven times during the first months of training, but her letters had remained unanswered. She had then asked Marius to include the eighth in the next envelope he would address to his father, but Gregor Gaunt's tactful reply had been that her mother didn't feel like reading her letters. Silia shouldn't have resented it too much, he had said, because sooner or later her mother would have get over it. Gregor lied shamelessly, because he knew her mother from before she was born.

She opened the book.

_Always fight for your hearth and your home_, her father's minute handwriting said.

"Hello? Hartwood, did the line go dead?"

"... no," she whispered, leafing through the book. Her father had taught her to read on it, making her spell out the Astrals' names by following the letters with her finger. When she had acquired enough mastery to read the volume completely, perhaps understanding a twentieth of it, her father had been in the ground for a year. "No, Amicitia. Can you repeat? I didn't hear you."

"Are you going to Samuel's tonight?"

_In the Light of the Gods, Sword-Sworn at his Side 'Gainst the Dark the King's Battle is fought. From the Heavens high, to the Blessed below, Shines the Beam of a Peace long besought._ "No," she answered mechanically, but at that moment she didn't know what she was saying. "I've got to work tonight. My shift starts at half past seven, and I still have to go home to put on my uniform."

"We can meet tomorrow, then. Remember, you promised to tell me about the Battle of Langhore, if I get you drunk enough to remember it."

The Battle of Langhore. Her mother. 13-year-old Marius. The Cosmogony. Her father. Silia closed the volume with a sharp snap. Too much past all at once. It was 756, not 732, or 741, or even 751. It was 756, and a night in the car with Crux patrolling the East District awaited her. Her body, at that moment, was like a good sword used to cut fish, and at that rate it would rust.

_Be zen_, she told herself once again.
"Hartwood, care to tell me what's wrong with you?"

Putting the book under her arm, Silia got up and walked through the half-lighted house toward the exit. "I'm sorry. I got lost."

"Lost where? Where are you? It's quiet as a tomb, where you are."

Silia chuckled. "In a space-time hole. See you tomorrow night. You'd do well to pay me a lot of drinks if you want to hear about the Battle of Langhore."
Nemo solus satis sapit

Chapter Summary

Silia tries to find a routine in her new situation; Gladio finds out that she likes tattoos.

5

Nemo solus satis sapit

I

There were mornings when Gladio opened his eyes, watched the light penetrate the semi-open shutters illuminating his desk, his Coleman camping equipment that he had patiently put together over the years, and his impeccable uniform of the Crownsguard hanging on the rack, and had to work hard to get on his feet and start a new day.

A part of him knew perfectly that he should enjoy those moments of relative lightheartedness, because King Regis would not live much longer and sooner or later the unbearable weight of the Kingdom of Lucis would fell on Noctis' back, and Gladio would have to help him on taking his responsibility. But every day slipped away always the same; in the morning, the only time of the day that he could really consider his own, he'd sit at the kitchen table, exchange a few words with Jared, and read the newspaper sipping his small coffee – Ignis had infected him with his mania for Ebony, which he drank strictly bitter. He'd invariably spend the next hours at home, or accompanying Ignis to the city or to the Citadel for one of his thousand errands. The afternoon was entirely dedicated to his training: alone, with Noctis, or with Ignis and Prompto as adversaries, he would never miss his four or five hours at the Training Hall. He shared equally his evenings between his friends and his family.

Since he had graduated, his routine had never changed that much; sometimes he would play handball, or fish with Ignis and Noctis, others he would hang around with some girl, usually not for more than a couple of weeks. Insomnia didn't lack anything – gyms and courts for every kind of sport, cinemas, arcades, clubs – but what he really wanted, what he'd always secretly desired, was getting out of it and finally trying his Coleman equipment on the field.

For this reason, since Hartwood had – more or less – stopped greeting him as if speaking to her was a favor, he tried to catch every opportunity to meet her at Samuel's. He didn't always find her in good spirits; a problem during her shift, an indisposition to her leg – or so he imagined, because sometimes it had spasms that she would clumsily try to hide, and those evenings she was more impossible than ever – or even a wrong question, or a right question at the wrong time and Hartwood would dig in an obnoxious and rude mutism from which, he had learned, trying to wean her of was useless and even harmful. When it happened, Gladio would put a good face on, finish his beer in a hurry and return home or reach the others; he and Hartwood were not really friends, she had never explicitly invited him to sit at her table, and he didn't want to impose his presence on her.

But there were evenings when Hartwood had such a loquacity that he found odd in a soldier. It didn't depend on the alcohol. It was as if she had noticed for the first time that after all there was someone
who wanted to know how the Glaives held up, what they had to face every day and what they had
gained and lost in those ten years. She'd tell a lot, and good, without sparing the bloodiest details, as
if she had not lived them on her skin, and Gladio had begun to interrupt her more and more often to
ask her all kind of questions.

It was the end of February by then, and it was flooding as if Ramuh was running wild over the
Crown City. Watching the rain violently picking against the windows of the kitchen, Gladio sipped
his coffee wondering how he would spend the morning. Not a chance he'd go out; it was not a day
for walks. He thought about retrieving some old videos of MMA fights, wondering if Hartwood was
on duty under such weather.

*Are you patrolling in a canoe? See you tonight at Samuel's?*, he texted her.

His phone rang almost immediately afterwards, but his message remained the last of his conversation
with Hartwood. He swiped the screen and went back to the inbox.

*I have to talk to you. See you tonight at Liberty?*

Gladio choked with his last sip of Ebony. He hadn't seen Juliana for months; she had been the one
who had dumped him – if you could call it 'dumping', since there had never been anything serious
between them. He had been very clear about it from the start and that was her problem – and it was
the second time. He had no intention of getting involved again in that vicious cycle.

*We'd better not*, he wrote. Then, feeling guilty, he added, *It doesn't work, you've seen it.*

He didn't have to wait too long for Juliana's answer: *It's just a dinner. I'm sorry if the last time I got
angry. It won't happen again.*

Gladio knew very well that it wouldn't be just a dinner, because Juliana was damn provocative, and
for two or three weeks it would probably have worked. They wouldn't fight and they'd spent some
pleasant nights together, but then she would start pouting again because they met too little, they
would quarrel again, and for the third time Juliana would slam into his face like an insult what he did
know perfectly, that she was nothing more than a lover to fill the hours when he wasn't with Prince
Noctis.

Juliana was the offspring of one of the noble families of Insomnia and, if his life hadn't been destined
to serve the Royal Family, his father Clarus would certainly have supported – and perhaps even
advocated – a stable relationship between them. After all, he himself, Shield of King Regis or not,
had ended up getting married, and Gladio and Iris were the living proof of it. But Gladio was well
aware of his mother's perpetual sorrowful expression, and though his father had done everything he
could to make her happy, his 'everything' had not been enough.

The phone rang again. *If you like, Amicitia*, Hartwood laconically replied, ignoring his joke. *You'll
find me there. My checkup at the medical center ends at 7.*

They had known each other for two months and she kept on calling him by his last name. He had
then decided to do the same, after all 'Hartwood' had a nice sound to it, a bit harsh, which suited her
much more than her first name.

*7:30 then*, he replied. Gladio wondered if it was a good day for her. Even when she was in a good
mood, her texts were not much livelier.

The phone rang again. Juliana had sent a new message. *So am I forgiven?*

Another buzz. This time it was a picture of a pair of red lace panties. Gladio scratched his hairline,
his face feeling hot. That picture, instead of teasing him, made him angry. Just because they had sex, Juliana could not flatter him like he was a teenager in heat.

*I'm sorry,* he typed. *I'm rather into black lace.*

II

Five minutes early, Amicitia entered the tavern, and Silia raised her hand in a thrifty greeting gesture, which he returned with more enthusiasm. He stopped at the counter to exchange a few words with Samuel, who took two empty mugs and began to fill them. Silia took the opportunity to read a few more lines of *The Ascent of Gralea.*

Amicitia would show up a couple of times a week, usually between 7 and 9, and they’d sit together having dinner, drinking something, and talking. When she had overcome her prejudices – his family name ill-disposed her to his regards from the very beginning – she developed a kind of a comradely sympathy towards that young man. Amicitia was serious and responsible – sometimes even too strict – and lacked any sense of humor, a flaw he compensated with an easy tendency to embarrassment that betrayed his young age and which Silia took advantage of to mock him. After an initial reticence, they had begun to exchange opinions and above all information, some of which should have remained confidential, about the front and the King’s Council. He’d always listen with great interest to her stories about the war; Silia had thus discovered – or rather realized – that the young man, like most of the citizens of Insomnia, had never set foot outside the Crown City. She, on the other hand, had not returned there for ten years, and she couldn’t hide all her gaps about Insomnia, ranging from reading road signs to using an espresso maker.

"What are you doing? Are you reading up on the enemy?" he greeted her, pushing a mug of beer in front of her. He placed a chair next to her, sitting down. They had two very different concepts of 'personal space'. "I thought you already knew everything."

"Oh, this is a doozy," she replied, taking the beer and passing him the volume in exchange. "Got it from a Captain's corpse. They can read, did you know it?"

"You mean, a book written and published in Gralea?" He began to leaf through it. "Who knows how many lies."

"Pure propaganda," she confirmed. "They think of themselves as the true heirs of Solheim, whereas we're a bunch of uncultured goats who don't deserve the power of the Crystal." She took a sip of beer. "Well, they have a point: if we had relied a little more on technology, perhaps we wouldn't have reached this point."

Amicitia frowned, returning the book to her. "You mean that we should have started fabricating abominations like magiteks as well?"

"Not magiteks," she contradicted him, "More armored military aircrafts. A faster and better armed fleet. More powerful cannons." She recalled the words of the technician at the Prosthetics Center. "Most advanced medical equipment."

He pursed his lips like a child caught in a foul. "We do what we can," he said, still on the defensive. *That's exactly what the technician at the Prosthetics Center said.* "I know it," she tried to reassure him. "And we've more solid ethical principles."

Amicitia studied her from above his mug, perhaps wondering if she was ironic. He seemed to decide
that she wasn't. "Luckily. How was your day, Hartwood?" he changed the subject.

"The most exciting event was a fight on the Fifteenth after a traffic accident under that shitty downpour."

"You're killing yourself with work, in short."

Silia slid onto the table in an emphatic gesture. "Please, Amicitia. If it was up to me..."

"...if it was up to you, you'd go back to the front tomorrow. I know your chanting by heart, Hartwood."

She didn't answer him.

"How's your leg, by the way?"

Silia had never revealed to him the severity of her wound, nor had he asked for details. "Give it up. I can run for a while. That bastard Cornell keeps on saying that if he had to send me back on duty everywhere but the front he would have already done it, but that running for a while isn't enough to resume my duties as a Glaive. If I wasn't sure that Captain Drautos, obsessed as he is with discipline, would break my ass, I would screw it up and leave Insomnia without authorization." She swallowed. She was getting nervous. The results of her clinical exams had improved, but too slowly.

Amicitia didn't comment. He finished his beer in one gulp, and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. If there was one thing of him she had learned to appreciate, it was his receptivity: he immediately noticed when she didn't want to talk, and he got the hell out.

This time he didn't. "Listen, Hartwood, how much did you drink tonight?"

"Who cares?" she lashed at him, on the defensive. "This is my second beer."

"Good. Drink it and let's go."

She didn't get carried away by him. "Let's go where?"

"The Training Hall, at the Citadel. You need to train in a well-equipped place. The Hall is reserved for the Crownsguard, but I'll let you in."

Silia drowned the smile that had risen spontaneously on her lips in another sip of beer. "Won't it cause you troubles?"

"Who cares?" he mocked her. "Let's go."

Silia finished her mug and stood up. "Fine. Let's see how you do."

They left. She felt electrified by the idea of returning to fighting. The air outside the tavern smelled good and clean. It had something to do with the rain, which had swept away some smog.

"Hartwood, tell me." Without agreeing on it, they proceeded to the Citadel on foot. It was not far away, and it was a mild evening. "You don't know many people in Insomnia, do you? Don't you have any relatives?"

"You want to be sure no one will look for me if you tear me apart? If you succeed, I'm the most suitable person." She slowed down to light a cigarette. It was somewhat windy so she couldn't keep the flame of the lighter alive. At the fifth attempt, she did it. "The only one who could claim me is Captain Drautos. Hector Lars, the commander of the City Guard, would instead uncork a bottle of
champagne. My mother was here, but she died three years after I started training with the Glaives, and I've no other relatives. I was born in Ambrosia."

"I don't want to tear you apart, Hartwood." Amicitia snorted a laugh. "Where's Ambrosia? I heard someone mention it."

This time she did snort a laugh. She kept forgetting that the crown citizens lived in a limbo, even a crownsguard as close to the King's family as Gladio Amicitia was. "It's in the Niflheim Empire, for twenty-four years now. Not well versed in geography, are you, Amicitia? Remind me to lend you some books."

A car almost splashed them while passing over a puddle next to the sidewalk – the remains of that morning's cloudburst. Amicitia had looked away, irritated and probably embarrassed, and she felt a little guilty. "Anyway," she continued, more conciliatory, "This doesn't surprise me. It's a small settlement, and it was invaded many years ago. If it has not disappeared from the maps, it's not far off."

They continued to walk silently. "It will seem odd to you," Amicitia resumed talking after a minute or two, "but I don't have many friends either. There's Noctis, of course. You know he's not just work for me. I love him very much, even if he's still a kid in so many ways. Oh, there's Ignis, my best friend. He's almost my age and he's very mature. Perhaps too much. There's someone else I can call a friend. Prompto Argentum, a school friend of Noct, he's one of us, I've come to care for him. A couple of Crownsguards. But they're a few. Being the prince's bodyguard doesn't help much with social relationships. Not to mention that my father is General Clarus Amicitia."

Silia smiled a little, dropping ashes from her cigarette. "Don't you have a woman, Amicitia?"

He scratched his hairline. She had noticed that he did it when he was embarrassed. "Well, sometimes I see some girls, of course. But it would be complicated for me to be with someone. Because of Noctis, you know. I could not give priority to her. And what about you, Hartwood? Are you with someone? A Glaive?"

She shook her head. "Get out. There's no better way to get screwed over."

Amicitia didn't comment in any way, but she reluctantly went back to think about Hans, whose memory hadn't touched her for long. It had been almost eight years since his death, and she had elaborated and moved it in the archives 'painful but inevitable things' of her memory a long time ago. Hans aside, that discussion had reminded her of her comrades, the only family she'd had in the last fifteen years. She used to call Sarah, and she talked to her and to the others, at least once a week, but those phone calls depressed her. She could hear the sounds of the military camp at night in the background – male voices, coarse laughter, the clash of swords and the clatter of mess-tins – and she'd lost heart for no longer being part of it. Sarah, Legato, Samuel and Caesar overwhelmed her with questions about her health and the Crown City, but her answers were laconic, tight, because she was terribly ashamed at the thought of being stuck inactive at Insomnia, while they repeatedly risked their lives.

"I didn't mean to sadden you, Hartwood," Amicitia said, breaking the silence. "I'm sorry if I reminded you of something unpleasant."

"You didn't make me sad." Silia deviated to reach a trash can where to put out and throw the cigarette, but actually she felt melancholic. "I was just wondering if I'm still able to handle a sword on the right side."

They resumed the walk. "I've never seen you fight. What's your combat specialty, Hartwood?"
"Twin swords. I don't have much physical strength, as you can imagine, but I've learned to handle heavy weapons as well. However, my position is median. Magic attack and support to the front line with physical attack in case of need."

They walked quickly. Amicitia turned from time to time to look at her. "So, you must be pretty good with magic."

Silia shrugged. "We've been recruited according to this requirement."

"How does it feel, having such a power? I've never had the slightest predisposition."

They reached the Citadel Square. "Not as nice as you might think. It's not your power. You become a link."

Amicitia returned to stare at her. "Why are you talking like that? When you use a sword, a rifle, is it your power?"

She shook her head. She looked for words to explain. "The sword is yours. The rifle is yours. That's the strength of your arms. When you use the magic of the Ring it's as if you were using someone else's gun, which does not consume ammos, items, but someone else's life energy. King's life energy. If King Regis, at fifty, looks like he's almost seventy, it's also our fault."

"It's not a fault," Amicitia pointed out. "You are his arms. You protect his kingdom. Every power has its cost."

"Is it really worth it?" Only when he stopped again she realized she had said it aloud. Perhaps, after all, Balthier's words and the crown citizens' opinions had taken root in her more than she thought. "I'm sorry. War is going badly. I sometimes wonder if there's no other way."

Amicitia shook his head. His eyes shone in the electric streetlight. "Some of us were born to sacrifice ourselves."

Are you talking about you? she asked herself, but this time she didn't say it aloud. "Come on," she urged, "Let's get tired."

III

The Training Hall, adjacent to the Crownguard's headquarters, reminded her of the building she had lived in and trained herself for five years. There were no locks, but sensors on which to place magnetic cards and automatic doors that opened as a result, but otherwise the smell of gym – wood, disinfectant, a light but persistent hint of sweat impossible to erase, grease and oil – was well familiar to her.

Amicitia spread his arms as to encircle the whole room. "Here we are," he announced. His voice rumbled in the large empty gym. "No one will disturb us here. What do you want to do, Hartwood? At your own discretion."

"Swords," she replied promptly. Her hands tingled with emotion. "I handle twins blades, but we can use a two-handed one to meet us halfway."

"Let's go with two-handed swords. Do you feel up to it, Hartwood? I know I proposed it, but I wouldn't want you to hurt your leg."

Silia began to take off her shoes. Her socks were thick and Amicitia wouldn't notice the prosthesis, unless, of course, he had hit her leg with his own body. "Don't worry. But, if you can, avoid
impacting against my right leg."

"Who did you take me for?" he replied in an offended voice.

Silia smiled with her head down. She had said it for his safety, because the technicians of the Center had not exaggerated when they had told her that the prosthesis was harder than steel: she had broken iron poles as if they were rotten planks. When – finally – it would been perfectly synchronized, it would have been a deadly weapon, not a weak point.

Amicitia retrieved two training swords from an iron locker. He was about to pass one of them to her, when he changed his mind and threw it. Silia felt her body snap, her fingers closing securely around the hilt. She passed her sword from one hand to the other, tried some simple scheme: step back, step aside, lunge. Diagonal cut, step back, mezzano, lunge, guard. The training sword was unbalanced, but it didn't matter.

Her heart rate, initially convulsive at the idea of fighting, slowed down. Silia prepared a guard stance. "Come on, Amicitia."

"Shouldn't we warm-up?"

Silia knew she would regret it bitterly that night, but she didn't want to waste a moment more. "When an enemy attacks you, do you ask for five minutes to warm up?"

Amicitia came forward. They studied each other with some little preliminary skirmishes, which were enough for Silia to realize that she couldn't count, as she feared, on the correct response of her prosthesis. At the beginning of the rehabilitation she had struggled to move the joints of the knee, the ankle and even the toes, which now responded to her impulses, but not always and not as she wanted. And besides, apart from her prosthesis, she hadn't held a sword in her hands for four months, and she suffered the consequences.

At first Amicitia merely parried her slow and uncertain attacks, then gradually began to press her. At least – not a great consolation – her reflexes were still excellent, and her body began to react mechanically to those friendly assaults.

After five minutes of exploratory quarrels, Amicitia's expression changed. Her last lunge had touched his ear, for distraction Silia believed, because it had not been a particularly calibrated blow. "All right," he murmured, moistening his lips. He was no longer smiling. He was no longer a boy of twenty-three now, but a man wounded in his pride. "Let's start to get serious."

It was not like that, or at least not for both of them. Silia took it seriously, as far as the leg and the forced immobility of months allowed her, but Amicitia evidently had to restrain himself. The man was quick, fucking quick. Not as quick as she had been before her accident, but far more than she would have imagined by his size. And he had a frightening physical power; she could not counter it, and she couldn't have done it even in her brightest conditions.

She studied every movement, every reaction, every hesitation. The Glaives were so used to facing mechanical warriors with almost identical abilities and equally programmed reactions, or daemons that were pure instinct and lacked typically human tricks, that clashing with an adversary like Gladio Amicitia was an exciting challenge. He wasn't perfect, she noted; he wasn't controlled in his movements, and when you fight with heavy weapons you cannot afford wasting energy, even if he must have a huge stamina. She imagined a death fight using only swords. With his abilities and his physical constitution, she would have to keep a constant distance from him to have a chance to knock him down. Every now and then his guard limped slightly on his left side; perhaps, by focusing on speed, she would succeed...
And then his elbow found its way between her neck and her ear. She hadn't seen his hit coming because she was concentrated on disengaging, and the impact was unexpected even if not strong. Enough, in any case, to send her back to the ground, the opponent's massive knee on her chest and the tip of his training sword at her throat.

Her ears were buzzing, the shame for not having succeeded in parrying it and even to predict it hurt more than her offended neck tendons, but she found herself smiling.

"What's so funny, Hartwood?" he asked surprised, his lips parted in a mild panting.

"How long have you been training, Amicitia?" Her neck throbbed.

He moved his knee and held out his hand to help her get up. "Ten years – seriously. But I started when I was a child. Did you get hurt? I'm sorry. I thought you would..."

"I should have," she admitted, accepting his hand. She straightened her back, but remained seated, because her artificial leg was tingling. "I'm out of practice, as I told you. It's fine, Gladio."

She realized she'd called him by his first name only when he smiled and scratched his hairline. He dropped down sitting next to her. "Even if you're not at your best, Silia, you're not half bad."

Silia shook her head. Listening to her name pronounced by his voice made her unexpectedly pleased. "Be honest, how many times would you have killed me in a serious fight with real swords?"

Gladio didn't answer.

"You see," she smiled. "You can die by being 'not half bad', Gladio."

"You didn't use magic," he reminded to her. Silia wondered if he was so lenient with Prince Noctis as well, or if it was an empty courtesy. "I can overcome you physically, but if you'd use magic I would be in serious trouble."

"Perhaps," she admitted, "but not in close combat. It takes some time to cast an attack spell, that's why magic attackers stand in a median or rearguard position. In a close combat, magic isn't much use." Running her hand in her sweaty hair, she turned to look at him. Gladio's body, under his sleeveless shirt, was the most solid she'd ever seen and must have been the result of constant and exhausting training. And what she could see of his extended tattoo was impressive.

"May I?" she asked, sliding down on her knees behind his shoulders.

Gladio stiffened, uneasy. "Ah? Hm... sure."

When she lifted his sweaty shirt on his back, he gave a start. Perhaps he didn't understand that she intended to see his whole tattoo. She smiled at his embarrassment.

The tattoo was a true piece of art. The raven's feathers, which didn't leave uncovered a single inch of his skin, were so realistic they seemed true. "It's majestic," she blurted out.

"My father has one just like that."

Silia blinked. "Seriously? Does General Amicitia have a crow tattooed on his back?"

Gladio nodded. "It's a family tradition. The Amicitias have been the closest family to the royalties for generations, and the firstborn is destined to become the King's Shield. When appointed as such, he receives this tattoo. Do you like tattoos, Silia?"
She didn't answer immediately. That revelation confirmed to her that Gladio had never chosen his role, it had been assigned to him at his birth without anyone ever asking for his opinion. Once again, she regretted having misjudged him. She, at least, had been free to decide voluntarily what to do with her life. "I do," she admitted, following the lines of the drawing with her forefinger. She felt him shiver under her touch. "I'd like to have one."

"Silia, that tickles. And I'm soaking wet." He was not at ease, it was obvious, so Silia stopped touching him. "I'll take you to the tattoo artist who made it, if you want. He owes me a favor. Tell me, what tattoo would you like?"

She sat down next to him. She'd always liked the idea of getting a tattoo. Some Glaives, like Nyx Ulric, had one or more, but she considered it a waste of work, with all the injuries that their skin suffered continuously. "A coeurl," she confessed.

"Why a coeurl?"

Silia stretched out her artificial leg and twisted her ankle, bent her knee, moved her toes, testing all her joints. "That's how my comrades call me."

"For Six's sake," he exclaimed, amused. "It's perfect. The first time I saw you, actually, I thought of a cat. Your eyes, you know, but not only."

She squeezed her lips, then told him. "When I was a girl, on training, they used to call me Kitty. Not to praise me."

"Let me guess: you scarred someone's face and they stopped."

"Not really." She had fought tooth and nail to carve out her place among the glaives, sweating blood, but the day they finally stopped calling her that was when Bors had been regained. "It took time."

"Where would you like to get the tattoo?"

She thought about it a little. "On my back, diagonal, the crest on my waist and the mustache on my scapulas."

"I'll talk to the guy and I'll let you know. It shouldn't be a problem. You're so small that it won't be a demanding job."

"I'm sorry if I'm not a beast like you."

"It's just that when I was a child my father told me that I should have been King's Knight Giant."

"King's what?".

"King's Knight. It's a videogame."

Silia blinked. "I've never played a videogame."

"I'll take you to an arcade, then, sooner or later."

They fell silent for a while, relaxing. Silia shuddered as the sweat began to cool on her skin.

"Silia," he said.

"What?"
"Let's do it again, from time to time. Can you do it with your wound?"

Silia nodded. "The first phase of motor recovery, the hardest, is over. Now I've to resume training. It won't be so easy for you to knock me down next time, Gladio," she mocked him with a sneer.

He grinned in turn. "Oh, I don't think so."

"We'll see. Now I think I'll have a shower. There are showers here, right?"

"Sure." Gladio started scratching his hairline. "But, hm, go first."

"What's the problem? Are they communal showers?"

He turned away. "Exactly. There are very few women among the Crownguards, and-"

"Oh, it's not a problem for me," she provoked him.

Gladio frowned, suddenly serious. "It's a problem for me."

Silia raised her arms in a conciliatory gesture. "Gladio, don't take yourself so seriously, I was joking," she reassured him. She was not joking at all. The front had anesthetized her sense of decency, but Gladio's reaction had made the situation ambiguous, and suddenly she was embarrassed at the idea of his naked body under the shower. "Then I'll go first," she announced, getting up.

"Wait, Silia." He tossed a plastic card with a magnetic card, then he winked at her. He still looked embarrassed. "Take this, so you can come here to the Training Hall even when I'm not with you. It's rare for someone to come late at night. Try not to get caught, if you can, but if they catch you, tell them that I've authorized you."

Silia fiddled with the card. She smiled. "I'll come, thank you. But it's funnier if you're here as well."

IV

Tebaldus Verman's studio was downtown, embedded between a laundromat and a shop of meat of dubious origin. When his father had brought him there at eighteen for the first session of his tattoo, Gladio had asked him why Verman, if he was so good – and 'good' was a euphemism: his father's tattoo, which would later also be his own, was still perfect after almost forty years and extraordinarily realistic – insisted on staying in a neighborhood like that, in a street where you risked catching three different diseases by just breathing. Clarus had replied that Verman was a weird man who carefully selected his customer. He demanded to be paid in favors: a hand in getting barrels of unspecified beasts' blood which he used to make his inks, and closing an eye when the barrels were passing the gates of Insomnia. Gladio had concluded that Verman worked for the sake of working, or rather for the sake of art.

When he entered he did not immediately see Verman. He thought he was working on a client on the back, but he couldn't hear voices or the hum of the tattoo machine. Gladio rang the anachronistic little bell on Verman's desk, and the old man grunted something. "Come in," he repeated, more understandable.

Gladio found him in the back. Verman was leaning over a table, and he was sketching something on a piece of paper. His bushy gray hair fell over his eyes, and Gladio didn't understand how he could see and draw. He approached, peering at the drawing. It was a woman with snakes – or perhaps electric cables – instead of her hair, lying on what looked like a cloud, and with her body twisted into two huge amphipteres.
"It's beautiful," he murmured, admiringly.

"On paper, sure she is," the old man replied. "If you meet her, good-bye."

"She's a melusine, isn't she?"

"What brings you here, Gladio?" Verman cut to the chase, resting the brush next to the paper. His hands and forearms were dirty with ink. "Has your sister finally decided?"

"Not yet." Without invitation, Gladio occupied the chair on which customers usually sat. "Last month she wanted a Lich. But the other day I heard her say that maybe Carbuncle is better. It will take some more, Verman. I'm not here for my sister."

The old man raised his eyebrows, giving an even more gruff expression, if possible, to his gray eyes. "You know I don't work with everyone."

"I know. But we can find an agreement."

"Who is he?"

"A friend. She's twenty-eight. Small in stature and physical constitution, she would like..."

"No," Verman interrupted him, crossing his arms.

"Why not? You didn't even let me finish."

"First thing, because I'm not going to tattoo your lovers. Second, because I'll make an exception for your sister, but I don't like working on shrunken bodies. I'm not a miniaturist. Third, because I don't want my tattoos to become ornaments for ladies like jewels or make-up."

Gladio laid back on his chair and laughed. "She's not my lover. And she's a Kingsglaive. She won't show off your tattoo at parties."

Verman leaned toward him, pulling his hair back from his face. Gladio had captured his interest. "A Kingsglaive?"

"Precisely." Enjoying his astonished expression, Gladio still allowed himself a few seconds before explaining. "She's on a medical leave. She saw my raven, and she loved it. She will come back to the front, and think, Verman, your tattoo could be the last thing an imperial soldier will see."

He knew how much Verman hated the Niffs. The man nibbled at his lower lip, then clicked his tongue. "I didn't agree," he said. "But what would this Glaive like to be tattooed with?"

"A coeurl" Gladio promptly replied. "On her back. No miniatures. I cannot say she has a huge back, but it would be a pretty extended tattoo."

"Why just a coeurl?"

"You'll understand when you'll see her."

Verman drummed for a while with his long gnarled fingers on the table. "Bring her to me tomorrow afternoon. I didn't agree yet," he repeated, "I want to see her and talk to her first."
Chapter Summary

Gladio meets again his old friend Munro after a training session with Silia. But war isn't exactly an appropriate topic for a beer night when a Kingsglaive is sitting at your table.

6

Frangar, non flectar

I

They came back frequently to the Training Hall. Silia had also used it in his absence; she had told him it was because she didn't sleep so much at night and had to recover from months of inactivity. He could imagine her very easily kneeling in the empty gym, her eyes closed, concentrating like an old samurai, before starting to try out complicated fighting schemes against an invisible enemy. He would have had some trouble if someone had discovered her using his pass, but nothing serious, and in any case the evident improvement of her mood as well as her physical condition was worth any complaint.

The first time they had trained together he had landed her without any problem, but she was understandably out of practice. Even an amateur, however, would have noticed from the first moment that she was handling the sword with exceptional mastery and dexterity. Silia was ambidextrous and terribly agile, though uncertain on her wounded leg. And she was able to warp. He hadn't expected it – he had seen Noctis doing it, but he believed it was a technique exclusive of the royal family – and the first few times Silia had surprised him and hit behind, to his great dismay.

The hours he'd spend practicing with Silia had to be added to those of his ordinary training. He'd return home more and more exhausted, but satisfied. He had learned by heart the extent and ability of the people he had been measuring against for fifteen years – his father, Cor Leonis, Noctis, Ignis, Prompto and his peers of the Crownsguard – and studying that new adversary, every night more dangerous than the previous one, was stimulating. Silia had a fighting style that didn't allow any distraction. She moved around him like a predator waiting for a wrong move; every time he took the initiative, she avoided his attacks looking for a blind spot in his guard.

I'm improving too, he realized, rubbing his breastbone under the right armpit; he kept on brandishing the training sword as if it was his greatsword, extending his arms too far, and she continued to take advantage of it to insinuate herself into that hole in his defense.

"You should do something for that hole in your guard," Silia said in that regard, moving the cigarette from one side of her mouth to the other. She was itching to light it, it was obvious, but he had begged her not to smoke in his car.

Gladio grimaced. "I'm trying. Two-handed swords are too light for me."

"Then next time get hold of a wooden greatsword."

"Don't be so smug, Coeurl," he provoked her. "You took a pretty smash in your face today. You
used a healing spell in the bathroom, didn't you?"

"My nose kept bleeding," she claimed. "And I didn't want to embarrass you in that fancy-ass place of yours by showing up with a blood-stained shirt."

"Sotherby's is not a fancy-ass place. Unless you use Samuel's dive as a comparison."

"Anyway, I was serious. Next time find something that looks like the weapon you usually handle. But only if you are able to get hold of two blunt twin swords or something like that for me. I would like to handle weapons that look like mine, as well."

"We have a deal," he accepted.

They exited from the underground car parks at the back of the Citadel. On the left sidewalk Gladio distinguished a familiar silhouette from behind, and tried to get his attention by flashing the headlights.

"Yo, man," he said to Munro, pulling over. He had on his office attire – jacket, shirt and trousers, but no tie – and a folder under his arm. Gladio hadn't seen him since the night he had come across Silia. "What a surprise. How are you doing?" He held out his hand through the window.

"Well, look who's here!" Munro squeezed his hand vigorously, leaning against the door of the Subaru. "Full of work up to my ears, Gladio. I ended up at this indecent hour. But what are you still doing around here?" Only then he seemed to become aware of Silia. He arched an eyebrow conspiratorially. "For a moment I thought it was your sister. Munro Oswine. Nice to meet you."

Seldom in those months had he seen Silia interact with someone else who was not him, or Samuel at the tavern, or her partner Crux. "Silia Hartwood," she introduced herself, a little stiff, without naming the Kingsglaives or the City Guard. "Nice to meet you."

"We're going to Sotherby's for a beer." He carefully avoided telling him that they were working out secretly at the Training Hall. "If Rebecca doesn't pester you, why don't you come?"

"Even if it was not for this, I'm sure Rebecca would find another reason for pestering me." Munro opened the rear door, on his side, and got in the car. "If I'm not in the way, I'll have a beer with you."

Instinctively, Gladio turned to look at Silia. He had not thought of consulting her about the matter. She glanced sidelong at him, but didn't protest. However, in a spiteful gesture, she lowered the window and lit her cigarette. The day after Ignis and Noctis would likely complain about the smell. Gladio wrinkled his lips, but didn't say anything.

"So?" Munro asked. "Hartwood, right? What's your job?"

"Security," she answered, and Gladio bit the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing.

He was starting to believe that it would be an embarrassing night.

II

Silia remained mostly silent, so much so that he regretted asking his friend to join. Munro had had three beers, and he'd never held his liquor well. He wasn't exactly drunk, but he ran his mouth, telling anecdotes, laughing by himself, asking Silia questions that she answered with few words or didn't answer at all. He often turned to her, insistently, and Gladio could easily understand why; Silia was hard to figure, which intrigued him, and subtly mocking, which irritated him.
It would have been an embarrassing but harmless night, after all, if Munro had not started talking about work.

"You know," he was saying to Silia, "I work at the Royal Chanchery. Bureaucracy, primarily, but it's an interesting job, you always handle a lot of information."

"Is that so?" she answered politely. Gladio choked a giggle.

"You don't know how much," he boasted. "The war, for example. Newscasts minimize. On the other hand, it has been going on for so many years that some people do not even remember why it started. The Niffs advance all right, but since King Mors isolated Insomnia thirty years ago, citizens no longer feel the consequences, except when a new wave of immigrants arrive."

Next to him, Silia had straightened her head, more interested. She didn't comment.

Munro seemed to realize that he had finally earned her attention. He took a sip of beer and wiped his lips. "The Glaives," he said, and Gladio grimaced, because he knew from the beginning that they would end up hitting that nerve, "Fifteen years ago they seemed the decisive weapon. Unfortunately they didn't live up to the expectations. I knew one, you know? Before he joined up, of course. Julius Clipesus."

_Julius._ Gladio turned to look at Silia, who gave no sign of recognizing that name. Cool as a sphinx.

"He left home and stood against his whole family. He wanted to see the world. And for what? I know he's dead now." He took another sip of beer. "No wonder. Pledging with Glaives is equivalent to signing a death sentence."

Almost expecting she'd jump to his throat, Gladio kept on staring at Silia. She was tense, still, her chin resting on the back of her hand, and she looked at Munro almost without blinking. She reminded him of the crouching coeurl, ready to tear his prey apart, which Verman had tattooed on her back. For the first time, although it wasn't really the right time, he found Silia _gorgeous_, and felt a flutter in his stomach.

"Truth is, we should fall back," Munro continued. "Glaives are a waste of time and money, if used in this way. They would be more useful here in the city than defending purely nominal borders which, however, are shrinking more and more. Don't get me wrong, we were right to invest in their training," he specified, "I constantly read the reports coming from the front. Kingsglaives are deadly. With them and the Wall, Insomnia would really be ironclad. But we should concentrate the defenses on the Crown City instead of sending them to swarm all over Lucis and to kill themselves against daemons and magiteks."

Gladio was tempted to place a hand on her knee, under the table, to calm her. If Silia had hurled herself at Munro, it would have ended badly for all three of them. But she only light a cigarette with quiet gestures. "So," she said patiently, as if explaining something difficult to a child, "Glaives should fight only for Insomnia. Do you know that very few of them are from the Crown City, Oswine? They're all from the borderlands."

"Of course I know. So what?" he replied. "They've sworn loyalty to the Kingdom. _For hearth and home_, that's their motto, but their _home_ is Insomnia, not their already lost cities."

"Munro, don't talk like that. Silia is..." Gladio interjected, before the discussion degenerated, but then it was Silia who laid a hand on his knee and held it firmly. She didn't want him to tell Munro. Gladio snapped his mouth shut.
"…she's a Glaives sympathizer, I've understood that by myself." With ease, Munro leaned back and hung his chair on the two hind legs. He smiled sympathetically. "Hartwood, no offense, it's just my opinion, even if it's shared by most people. Do you know how many Glaives are left? I work with reports coming from the front. They used to be one hundred and twenty, and I'm talking only about the first group, now they're..."

"Fifty two," Silia completed for him. She stood up. "The last fallen one's name was Faruq Jameel, Squad 2. Declared dead last Tuesday at five and zero six postmeridian. A daemon. Given the multiple wounds on his corpse it is unclear whether the mortal blow has been inflicted by a Ronin or a Wraith."

Munro looked at her with half-closed lips, apparently oblivious of the cigarette that was being consumed in his fingers. "How do you...?"

She didn't let him finish. She laid her finger on her lips in a calm and irritating gesture. "I suppose your reports, Oswine, are flawless. But there's something you won't find in those reports." She stood beside him – even though she was standing and he was sitting down, Silia surpassed him only slightly – and laid her hand on the table next to his glass. She hadn't assumed any threatening attitude, but by that simple gesture, Gladio realized, she intended to impose herself on Munro. "Faruq Jameel was twenty-five years old. He had a sister in Carador. Now she should be twelve. His parents died during the imperial occupation of his town. The week before Faruq, Nicolas Caleigh, Squad 4, died. Twenty-seven years old. He covered the retreat of the other members of his unit. Nicolas, unlike Faruq, had no one else. He arrived in Insomnia, with a wave of immigrants, in 750. He was already a man when he joined the Glaives."

Munro had understood by then. It couldn't be otherwise. He opened and closed his mouth twice, but Silia didn't let him speak. "Was this in your reports, Oswine?" she smiled.

Munro had lost all his boldness, but didn't give up. "Listen, Hartwood, I understand very well what you mean. I'm sorry for your losses. But I call no take-backs, things don't change. Since you're undergoing this war on your head, you should agree with me first. What's the point of continuing to die fighting against the Empire? Gladio, you tell her."

Silia looked at him silently. Now it was he who felt as if a dangerous feline was cornering him, waiting for a misstep. "Silia knows what I think about the matter," he gave away. "Without the Glaives, the Niffs would be hanging on our heads by now. And neither you or me, Munro, have the right to speak. We've never been out there fighting."

"You didn't think so until recently," he whipped him, annoyed, then seemed to calm down. "But you know our women are always right."

"Enough, Munro." He hadn't cut in between them, because he knew Silia and she would be even more pissed off if he had somehow taken her defense, but now that Munro had brought him into that, he wouldn't shut up. "Silia is not my woman, and perhaps it's true that once I had the same opinion about Glaives, but not anymore. Listening to a direct testimony instead of reading a simple report changes a bit your perception of things."

Silia was putting her jacket on. "Forget it, Gladio. I'm going home. Continue your rendezvous."

"Silia, wait." He stood up, but she firmly set a bill on the table – she tossed it, actually – and walked away quickly. Gladio snorted, scratching his hairline. Following her out would only make her mood worse.

"Gladio, what the fuck," Munro snapped. "You could have told me you were hooking up with a
Glaive. I certainly would not have started talking about the war. What the fuck is she doing in the Crown City, anyway?"

"I'm not hooking up with Hartwood, I told you" he repeated. That evening, suddenly, he realized that Munro was not as funny as he had previously considered him to be.

"Sure. Sing it to someone else. Anyway, she really has a temper."

"D'you know what?" he said, putting his jacket on too. "That's what I thought as well. But tonight I changed my mind. If she really had a temper, she would have clocked you. And frankly I wouldn't have stopped her. You've really been an ass." He glanced at the bill Silia had left on the table. He smiled. "And she also paid for everyone."

III

Since that disastrous beer with Munro, Silia had disappeared. She didn't answer his calls, she didn't come to Samuel's, and it seemed excessive to him to ambush her at the City Guard's headquarters. But he was starting to fear that if he didn't do something, their relationship would end there, so he decided to proceed otherwise.

Silia Hartwood's house corresponded to one of the geometrical and indistinguishable apartments of a building not too far from the Citadel. He checked the number of the apartment and climbed the stairs up to the seventh floor. He didn't feel like waiting for the lift.

Silia's door was identical to all the others on its right and left. Not a plate or a name. He put a hand in his pocket and rang her bell with the other, feeling a bit uncomfortable. He didn't believe she would be pleased by the surprise visit – provided she was home.

When Silia opened the door, he recognized the annoyed look that had constantly furrowed her eyebrows during all their first meetings. "Gladio? What are you doing here? How did you find out where I live?"

"You're forgetting who I am," he bragged to cover his embarrassment.

Silia was dressed in a bulky buttoned black shirt – as if she'd put it on in a hurry when he rang her bell – and a pair of trousers of the same color. She leaned against the door frame without letting him in. "All right, you spied my domicile on the archives. But why did you come?"

"Checked, not spied" he corrected her. "I have a top-level access pass for almost all Lucis databases." It was a lie. To access the information about military army, he had to use his father's pass. "Come on, Silia, let me in. You can't disappear for ten days like this."

Wrong move. "Can't I?" she asked incredulously. "Gladio, I'm gonna do whatever the fuck I want while I'm not on duty. Goodbye." She started to close the door.

"Okay, I'm sorry," he clumsily attempted to remedy. "It's just... come on, Silia, we're no longer two strangers. I'm sorry for what happened with Munro. He's not a bad guy, it's just..." ...that he's an idiot, he wanted to tell her.

"Nothing happened with Oswine," she denied.

"Should we continue to talk about it at the door?"

"No. Come in," she said grudgingly, and moved away, letting him in the tiny entrance.
"I didn't know you couldn't receive men at home. Or did I interrupt something?"

"Gladio" she spat with annoyance. "What the hell do you want from me?"

Gladio scratched his hairline. "I don't know. Understanding what's gotten into you, I think. Okay, Munro talked shit about the Glaives and the war. He was an asshole. But I have nothing to do with it." He realized only then that they were still in the entrance. "Can we go to your room or do you want to talk here?"

"We can go to my room," she agreed, and led the way. "But it's very different from your villa, Amicitia. And it's dirty and messy; my butler has the day off."

Gladio clicked his tongue, following her. That little bit of her apartment he saw, in any case, was not messy or dirty, and he would be amazed of the contrary, given the military discipline that she had received. Silia walked him into a small, bare room: an iron bed with a thin mattress, a small wooden bedside table with a lamp, a tiny wardrobe, a desk. The house of those who don't have a home. The only detail that caught his attention was the large amount of books neatly lined up and stacked on the desk, some still untouched.

She sat on her bed. "Gladio, listen. You should not have come. I'm not pissed off for your friend Oswine. He's certainly not the only one to be of that opinion. Since I've been in Insomnia I heard those speeches dozens of times, even expressed in less sweet terms. It's just that…" She reached for the lighter and cigarettes on the bed table and lit one. "People have started talking," she said simply.

"Talking about what?"

"About us. About how we're often seen together. Everybody at Samuel's makes jokes about it, but that doesn't bother me. Bar talk, that's what it is. But your friend Oswine seemed to be convinced of that as well. It's no good."

Gladio frowned. "Well, isn't that nice? I thought of you as the type who doesn't care about people's jokes."

Silia licked her lips, turning her gaze away. "That's right, usually. Truth is, I don't want people saying that you're hanging around with a Kingsglaive."

Gladio felt as if someone had injected anesthetic into his face. It was so natural for him to be with Silia that he had never thought that anyone could misrepresent the camaraderie nature of their relationship, if not some distorted mind. Munro had made a few jokes, that was true, but he hadn't paid him any attention. Male jokes. "Silia" he said dryly. "There's nothing improper between us. We are just two adult people who sometimes spend a couple of hours together drinking beer and talking about war. We train together. I can't see why someone would misunderstand."

"Because, whether you like it or not, you're Gladiolus Amicitia" she said. "And I'm a Kingsglaive."

Gladio managed to smile. "Silia, I'm really grateful for your consideration, but I don't care if someone makes jokes. I care if you disappear for ten days without a word."

Silia didn't answer. That kind attention, so unexpectedly from her, pleased him. "Forget Munro. He likes mocking me. That's something the both of you have in common," he winked. "Yet I'm sorry he was such an asshole. But you were amazing. You answered him in such a pungent and controlled way that I got chills. I was afraid you'd kick him in his face."

She gave half a smile, standing up from her bed. "I wanted to. Since we are here now, Gladio, I'll take two beers." She disappeared into the next room, probably a kitchenette, judging from the noise,
and came back a few seconds later with two cans. She passed one to him.

Gladio sat down, taking one, and drank. "So," he ventured to ask, "Is everything okay between us?"

Silia nodded slowly. She touched his can with her own. "If it is for you. Is it?"

"Of course it is. It's not to point out, Silia, but I rarely miss my duties. I want to spend my free time as I like, with whom I like, especially if I don't do anything wrong, as in this case. I told you that I have few friends, Silia. We have not known each other for long, but you are one of them." He was ashamed to have said it, and took another sip of beer to mask his embarrassment. He also felt relieved. He looked around again, trying to find a less thorny topic of conversation. Silia's Glaive uniform, clean and tidy, was hanging near the wardrobe. There were two twin swords, leaning against the wall, polished and well-kept, but studded with scratches and abrasions that testified how much they had been used in battle. His gaze fell on a thick Cosmogony tome on the table by the bed.

"You sure read a lot, don't you, Silia?"

She denied, stretching out to put out the cigarette in the ashtray. "Only when I can. I couldn't study." Her voice was now dry. "The situation in Ambrosia wasn't..." She shrugged. "Neither in Insomnia. Then I joined the Kingsglaives and I received another type of education."

Gladio was fully aware of his privileged existence. He had sacrificed much – he himself hadn't had a real adolescence, unlike Iris, since he was busy training Noctis and acting like his bodyguard – but at least he'd never had the issue of putting something edible on the table. And he had received an education, which he always took for granted.

"But I learned how to read." Silia gestured to the stacks of books. "And if you can read, you can virtually learn everything, if you have enough time to do it. History, for example, is very important."

"That's surprising." Gladio smiled.

She smiled too, but with sarcasm. If there was one thing that he had learned, it was how easily Silia became defensive. She could move from embarrassment to annoyance, and from annoyance to a sort of rough gentleness, in no time. "Did you think we were all ignorant boors? My father taught me how to read. He was teaching me, but he was killed when I was four. Then, I kept on learning on my own."

He'd heard similar stories, and even worse, many times, but now that Silia was involved they seemed closer and more real. Since he had known her, since she'd been sitting so near to him that he could count her scars, the front was no longer a distant reality but a loophole narrowing around Insomnia that sooner or later would strangle the city. He looked at Silia; she was sitting on the bed with her legs slightly spread, the can of beer at her lips, her short brown hair falling down on her eyes, and he wondered again how he could believe her a young girl when they met for the first time. "When did you leave Ambrosia?" he asked her for the first time. Silia tended to avoid carefully talking about the years before her joining the Glaives.

She frowned. "Ambrosia, like Galahd and many other cities on the borders of Lucis, was invaded by the Imperial army, and Lucis could not retake it. The soldiers of the garrison, humans, not magiteks, liked to harass the population, especially women and children. And we little kids liked to contrive some jokes. We were savage and rash, young guerrillas who grew up hating the occupying forces and shaming our parents who did nothing to react against them. One day one of us, Marius, my best friend, thought it would be fun to infiltrate their hangar and tear all the tires of their duty cars. We were eleven years old, and we were blown, but Marius turned himself in to let me run away."
Gladio didn't struggle to imagine her as a little girl, even wilder than now, a street creature full of resentment. "Did they kill him?"

Silia shook her head. "No. But not for sympathy. It's not exactly a strategic idea to execute a boy of eleven after they publicly admitted that he had been able to infiltrate the hangar of the Imperial garrison. But they beat him wildly and they hit his face with a whip. He still has a scar like yours. He almost lost his eye."

"And you? Did you manage to get away?"

She didn't answer, nor did she nod. "I'm not proud of it."

Gladio found himself with his right hand halfway toward her knee. He stopped right in time, embarrassed. "You were just a girl."

If Silia noticed his gesture, she didn't reproach him. "That episode pushed our families to take refuge in Insomnia."

"What happened to that kid?"

"Marius? He also joined the Kingsglaives. It was him who talked about me to Captain Drautos."

Gladio smiled. "Seriously? This sounds like the beginning of a romantic love story."

"Not exactly. This is the beginning of a romantic hate story. We joined the Kingsglaives together, but shortly after the beginning of the five-years training we started drifting apart. For years he's been publicly harassing me with obscene jokes and sexist comments about female Kingsglaives. Once, while drunk, he tried to lay his hands on me. I broke his nose."

He felt angry at the idea that such an element was in the army that protected the King and the Crown City. "Why didn't you report him to Captain Drautos? Did he ever do anything to prevent these disorders?"

Silia pulled a lock of hair out of her face, putting it behind her ear. "I didn't denounce him because of what he had done for me when we were kids, I think. But that's not the main reason. Women in the army have a bad time. If we don't show our claws it's over. And running in tears to the Captain to report that someone has laid his hands on you, when it's common opinion that women in the army only distract men from fighting, is the worst thing you can do."

"Captain Drautos doesn't share this opinion about female Kingsglaives, though," he observed. "Otherwise he wouldn't have recruited women from the beginning."

Silia shook her head. "No, not Captain Drautos. But Kingsglaives aren't like you noble, swanky Crownguards. We aren't a homogeneous army. Most of us have humble backgrounds, and we come from different provinces. And although Captain Drautos cares about discipline, Glaives are more a bunch of idealist mercenaries than a tidy military unit. We solve our small problems by ourselves."

"So would I be a swanky noble?" Gladio replied, half ironically and half offended. "Is that your opinion about the Crownguard?"

Silia shrugged. "I didn't mean to offend you. But how many of you are of humble origin, Gladio?"

"Cor Leonis, the Marshal, is of humble origin and has made his way only through his strength. Didn't you know?"
"No," Silia admitted. "Anybody else?"

Gladio opened his mouth to answer, but no one else came to his mind. "The Crownguard was born to protect the Royal Family. Crownguards are chosen by the King himself, so it's normal that many of them have been born in families close to the king, and therefore noble."

Silia nodded, stretching out. "On the contrary, almost all Kingsglaives were born in border towns, including the Captain. Hungry and fierce orphans and refugees, youngsters seeking redemption or revenge towards Niflheim."

"You had your redemption. You have managed to join the military elite of the kingdom."

"Yeah, and to die on the front, many of us," Silia completed for him. "But better this way than MRSA4. Better than prostituting in the refugee district. Yet better than lie down in a city occupied by a garrison of Imperial soldiers who rape your mother or sister, beat your father and impose amazing taxes." She wasn't looking at him anymore, but toward the window. Once more, Silia was making him feel privileged. "And moreover," she continued, turning to him again, "The crown citizens, safe in their homes, protected by the Wall, call us leeches, distrust or even despise us." He saw that she was caressing her right leg.

"Crown citizens rarely realize how lucky they are," Gladio commented, a bit disheartened. "Kingsglaives did a lot for the kingdom."

"Toothpicks to stem a dam," Silia whispered, then shook her head. She kept on rubbing her leg. "Oswine named Julius Clipeus. Did you know him too?"

Gladio nodded. "I really wanted to ask you. His father, Livius Clipeus, is in the King's Council. He's a friend of my ol' man."

Silia gave half a smile. "Clipeus from Squad 1. A handsome boy, a couple of years older than me. He never integrated that much during our training. It was predictable; he was the scion of a noble family in a group of beggars. We weren't so close, but I liked him. Out of Insomnia everything was new and exciting for him. I cannot say I've ever fully understood why he did it; we had nothing to lose, he had everything. I was very sorry that he could see so little."

"I liked him too," Gladio confessed, but didn't add that their mutual sympathy was born from the fact that Insomnia was too constricting for the both of them. "When he left home, all hell broke loose. His father doesn't even mention him anymore. Can I ask how he died?"

"A Behemoth. It takes a while to get them down, and Julius failed a warp. It happens very often to novices, and not only to them." She returned to touch her leg. It was most likely giving her some troubles.

"You're always evasive when talking about your leg. I'm not looking forward to you risking your life on the front again, but I'm sure that every Glaive is precious at this moment. What have you been doing in Insomnia for months?"

Silia blushed, opening her lips in an incredulous grimace. "Are you perhaps insinuating that I am hiding...?"

"No, no, Silia," he hurried to deny, "For Astrals' sake. I'm sick to death of hearing you saying that you want to go back to the front. On the contrary, I am saying that if you're here there must be a damn good reason."

Silia sighed with her lips close, and seemed to calm down. Without notice, she rolled her right pant
"What the hell...?"

"I lost my leg in mid-October," Silia said quietly. "That's why I'm here. This is an alloy of steel and Bandersnatchs' claws. Don't ask me how the hell they did it, I just know it's better than a real leg, but I have to get used to it."

"May I?" he asked, approaching her, fascinated. Silia nodded, and he sat on the bed alongside her, laying his hand on her knee just like he was about to do shortly before. The prosthesis was lukewarm, though rigid, and so well made from the joint of her thigh to the ankle, that he had never noticed it. "Can you feel my hand?"

"Sure," Silia nodded. "It's not a piece of metal; it's connected to my nerve endings." She stretched her leg, moving her ankle and knee. "It's not the same, of course. It was odd, the first time I laid my foot on the floor. I can feel your touch, but not your heat, or the softness of your skin."

"Wow," he said simply, and then a thought struck him. "Silia, are you already at that level in such a short time?"

She smiled. "Don't flatter me, Gladio. I'm not the same as before, and in fact the specialist who follows up with me keeps on refusing to send me back to the front." She unrolled her trouser leg again. "Let's not talk about it anymore. What about going to eat something out? I'm afraid I'm not ready for a dinner for two."

"Oh," Gladio rubbed his forearms. He was about to forget his promise to Iris. "I'd like to, Silia, really, but I have to run. Got a very important dinner tonight."

Silia grinned, lighting another cigarette. "A hot date?"

Gladio smiled in turn, getting up. "Kind of. She's a very pretty brunette, but she also has a temper."

"Don't keep her waiting, then."

"I won't. Since we spend so little time together lately, my sister gets angry if I'm late."

Silia pulled up, perhaps to walk him to the door. "I don't want you to neglect your family for me, Gladio. Hurry up."

He followed her to the entrance. "Since everything is clear, see you tomorrow at Samuel's?"

Silia shook her head. "Tomorrow I've the night shift," she answered, and Gladio wondered for a moment if it was an excuse. "The day after tomorrow. But, even if everything is clear, try not to let people see you as you leave my house."
Chapter Summary

Just when things are getting out of hand, Silia is finally declared able again, but before she can leave Insomnia the Kingsglaives are ordered to retreat.

7

Dubitando ad veritatem pervenimus

When she moved into her new apartment in Insomnia after being dismissed from the Medical Center, during the hours she'd spend stunned by painkillers looking at the city lights from the window – something very similar to a hallucinogenic trip, even if she had never taken drugs for recreational purposes –, Silia had believed that she would have never become accustomed to the city life, nor did she want to, convinced as she was that she would be back to the front shortly.

Since she had joined the Kingsglaives, she had never stayed in the same place for so long, there had never been a place she could call home, and she had never been able to talk to the same people for more than a month or two, with the exception, of course, of her companions and her Captain.

She was therefore amazed to find herself adapted, or almost, to that new and temporary phase of her life. Her activities as a City Guard were few and boring. The Crown City certainly had its hassles – robberies, thefts, vandalism – but she was astonished to find out how quiet it was in proportion to its population density: that was a litmus test of King Regis’ influence. It never occurred to her to use her duty gun, because, although among the glaives she didn't excel in physical strength, there, in the civil world, it was far too much to block a suspect or disarm a threatening target without any damage to people or goods. With few exceptions, however, this didn't make her City Guard colleagues love her much more: only with Crux she had some kind of confidence, and few others showed her sympathy. Her partner joked about it: they were just envious, he said, because since they worked together, he was immune to any risk.

She had been training more and more often with Gladiolus Amicitia, and although she continued to be firmly convinced that there was no better way to hone her skills than to put her ass on the line every day, she had learned a lot from an opponent like him. Their relationship had evolved from casual knowledge to unexpected complicity. In the morning, when he had nothing better to do and she wasn't on duty, Gladio would drive her for a ride into the city. He'd show her parks, shops and buildings; he'd put in her hands everyday objects that she had never seen, such as games machines, latest-generation cell phones, laptops; he'd talked about himself, his friends and the Crown City. For better or worse, he once told her, you should know what you protect at the risk of your life. In the evening, a couple of times a week, they would meet at Samuel's, and waited until ten or eleven to sneak into the Training Hall, where they'd sweat for hours, clashing fiercely, trying coordinated combat techniques that they would hardly experiment against an opponent.

In those months, Silia never met Gladio's sister, neither Ignis Scientia, Prompto Argentum or Prince
Noctis. They were extremely frank about everything between them, but she began to hear a sort of white noise, an indefinable feeling that she had often felt on the battlefield before an ambush, but prolonged, chronic, and increasingly perceptible. They had nothing to reproach themselves with, she and Gladio, yet somehow their meetings had the taste of clandestinity. A situation that Silia herself wanted to preserve, a last stake to separate them from a too close relationship born in a moment of disorientation.

II

The unexpected collision against a solid body and the energy that generated caught Gladio so off-guard that he couldn't react properly. The repercussion on his greatsword reverberated down his arms to his chest, taking his breath away for a moment, and he was thrown back brutally against the wall. He violently clashed his head and shoulders.

When he could focus again, he was lying on the floor. Shame and indignation overcame the pain. "By Six, are you insane?" he gasped, straightening painfully. He hadn't taken such a blow in a long time. "No magic, we told!"

Silia, wheezing, seemed as taken aback as he was, as if she had not realized what she had done. "You are insane! You could have smashed my head with that lunge if I had not cast that protect!"

They looked at each other furiously for a few seconds, then Silia blinked and seemed to dominate herself. She took a deep breath, brushing her sweaty hair away from her eyes. "Sorry, my fault. I reacted reflexively. Did you hurt yourself?" She approached him.

He had hurt himself. He believed that nothing had broken, but his head and back, especially the backbone, hurt like hell. His training sword, when impacting, had been thrown away so hard that it had cracked the wall. Only then he realized how impetuously he had pounced on her. In recent times their clashes had become so fierce that they were struggling to contain themselves. "No, it was my fault." He rubbed his aching back, grimaced in pain, then gently sat down on the floor. "I really could have killed you."

Silia joined him and knelt behind his back. "Hold still for a moment."

"What...?"

...are you doing? he would have liked to ask, but suddenly he felt the warmth of Silia's hand on the back of his neck, and then in the middle of his shoulder. The warmth became a pleasant, invigorating heat, like a healthy wave that dragged away the pain.

Silia withdrew her hand too soon, and sat next to him. "That's better, right?"

Gladio felt more than better. He felt light, rested and strong as before training. He tried to stretch his back, arch his neck. The pain was gone. He had used healing items previously, thanks to Noct's power, but that was the first time he had experienced the effects of a heal. "You shouldn't have used a spell for me, Silia," he told her. "An ice pack would have been enough."

She waved a hand in a gesture of sufficiency. "I wish there was one to repair the gym. Look at this mess."

"We must control ourselves." Gladio ran a hand through his sweaty hair. The next day he would have to give many explanations, but now he didn't want to think about it. He felt good. "Since your leg is fine, we've step up the pace. At this rate we'll end up hurting ourselves seriously."
At this rate, he corrected himself, feeling a little less good, they would send her back to the front within a month.

Silia's reentry was a matter of fact, omnipresent in their everyday life since they had met, thanks to her constant complaints about it, and yet, as he was used to live for today, he'd never considered that sooner or later that moment would have actualized. Now that it had become more and more tangible, the idea unnerved him. He couldn't find as exhilarating as she did the prospect that she would return to war to risk her life.

"Have you ever thought about joining the Crownsguard?" he dropped, without thinking, and he immediately regretted it.

"What's wrong with you so suddenly?" Silia was rubbing her head with a towel.

Gladio bit his lower lip. What had occurred to him? He had never heard of a former glaive in the Crownsguard. He wasn't even certain that it was possible: Silia Hartwood had sworn an oath as a kingsglaive, and she took it so seriously that she had not retired even when she had lost her leg and was offered that chance. "I could talk to my father about it," he kept on, "Silia, you're a top-level fighter. We started training so you could recover, but now I'm improving thanks to our workout. We need people like you in the Crownsguard."

Silia smiled. It was a languid, sad smile that made his mouth dry and his face warm even though it would easily find a place on the face of an indulgent mother. "Gladio" she whispered. "I am a Kingsglaive. I owe my skills to the glaive training, and to the Captain who has accepted to admit me. I won't abandon my place. Never talk about this again."

"But why?" he got furious, scratching his hairline. "You would be more useful in defending the King and the Prince than..."

He couldn't stop in time, and Silia understood perfectly what he meant. She stood up and, without looking at him, without even a word, she walked away to the corner of the gym where she had left her sweatshirt and her shoes before warming up. Gladio couldn't help himself, and stood up to reach out to her.

"Silia." His voice reverberated in the gloomy silence of the empty room. "Silia, I'm sorry," he called after her. "But can't you understand that I...?"

He stopped in the middle of the gym, his lips parted. Silia, still in the act of wearing her sweatshirt, was staring at him. There was hostility in her gaze, but also a dejected prayer. Don't do it, she was saying, please.

Gladio didn't do it. He looked down at the ruined parquet. He had to take a step back, because the situation was getting out of his hand, more and more, and he was the Shield of Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum, a man with responsibilities, not a teenager in heat. He stood silent, because if he'd added a single word it would have ended badly. It had already ended badly.

So he was more relieved than amazed when the door of the gym was knocked down by two armed men. They aimed they duty berettas now to him, now to Silia.

"Nothing happened!" he cried, raising his hands. "It's me! Gladiolus Amicitia, Crownsguard! Nothing happened!"

Even Silia, he saw, had raised her hands, but silently. "Nothing happened!" he repeated. He knew the elder man, a city guard. He looked for his name among the waves of his memory. "Curtis, it's
"Gladiolus Amicitia?" Curtis blinked and lowered his weapon, motioning for his colleague to do the same. "The janitor called the City Guard. He said he heard tremendous scuffling noises inside one of the Training Hall gyms."

"And didn't he think, that genius Bernard, that could be someone who was training? I guess he was too coward to come and check by himself. Such a good guardian we have!"

"The Hall is closed, Amicitia. It's one o'clock in the morning, in case you haven't noticed."

He hadn't noticed. They always lost the sense of time when they fought.

"What the hell happened here?" Curtis' colleague asked, looking around and then staring suspiciously at Silia. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"My name is Silia Hartwood, a Kingsglaive" she replied quietly, pulling the chain out of her shirt with slow gestures. She swung the plate, approaching Curtis' partner, a young man in his thirties. "ID SH014S6. I've been working with you. Both my badges, the Kingsglaive and the City Guard one, are inside my wallet, in my jacket."

"May I ask what the hell is going on?" Curtis asked.

"Our training session got out of hand," Gladio explained. He pointed to the cracked wall and forced a smile. "We went a bit too far. I'm sorry, I'll pay for the whole thing and I'll send a formal apology."

"The janitor said he heard like an explosion. Moreover, what are you doing here, Hartwood? The Training Hall is reserved for the crownsguards." He turned to Silia.

"That's my fault. Hartwood is in town due to an injury and I asked her to train with me."

"No. It's my fault," Silia said in a resentful tone, approaching them. Gladio had almost forgotten that the two guards had interrupted the beginning of a serious argument. "It was my idea. I knew I didn't have the authorization and I'll answer for that, even for the material damage. Take note of my ID. I'll talk to Commander Lars, to Marshal Leonis, to anyone who's involved."

Gladio interjected. "There's no need. Listen, Curtis, I apologize for the damage, but there's no other place where we can train seriously without posing a danger to people or goods. Think about what could have happened if we had been outdoors, maybe with civilians around."

Curtis kept his stern look, but seemed to calm down. "Can't you train like normal people, Amicitia? Running, barbells, punching bags?"

"Come on" he answered friendly. "If we had stick to those trivialities for beginners, we couldn't defend our borders from those bastard niffs and I would be a very poor bodyguard for the Prince."

Curtis sighed. "I'm going to write a report for the City Guard. Hartwood," he said sternly, peering at her. "With all due respect, remember that you aren't allowed to act as you wish just because you're a kingsglaive. You work for the City Guard right now, and rules apply to you as well."

Silia opened her mouth to reply, and by looking at her face Gladio understood that they wouldn't have been pleasantries. Kingsglaives, though they were outside the military hierarchy as a special army, outranked the city guards. Although he believed Silia wasn't the type to give these things weight, Curtis wasn't allowed to talk to her like that. Once again, Gladio got in the way: he reached her and slid his arm behind her back with a comradely gesture. A show for the benefit of the City
Guard. "Come on, Curtis, don't get me in trouble, Hartwood is the best sparring partner I've ever had. If some mess happens with the City Guard, I'll find myself without a worthy opponent. Could we just pretend that my hand slipped while I was training alone? Next time we'll be more careful. We promise."

Curtis pondered for a while, then gave up. "All right. I will write on the report that it was a false alarm and that you caused the damage, Gladiolus Amicitia. But if you get noticed again here in the dead of night, you are in trouble."

"Wait," Silia was starting to say.

"We'll be more careful," Gladio repeated, squeezing her shoulder to invite her to shut the hell up, then he friendly held out his hand to Curtis and then to his partner. "Thanks again, and good work. We'll go to bed."

When the two City Guards were gone, Gladio let Silia go. It had been like hugging a pine trunk. Without looking at her anymore, he went to get his jacket. He would have gladly avoided going out sopping wet, but he didn't want to stay longer, not even the time for a shower.

"Gladio" Silia called him.

Gladio turned with a grimace, expecting the resumption of hostilities. Since he knew her, the fact that he had stand between her and the city guards wasn't in his favor, indeed. "I did it just in order to get them out of our hair without saying anything to anyone," it justified himself prematurely. "The damage is not much and at most I'll get a dirty look from Cor Leonis and a mumble from my father. Did you hear what Curtis said at the end? If you get noticed. We can keep on training here. If you still want."

Silia just pulled up the zip of her sweatshirt, without looking at him. "Let me know how much the damages amount to. See you."

III

Ten days after, handing to her the results of her last EMG, Cornell finally gave his permission to return to fight. She couldn't say that it had come completely unexpected: she was really hoping for that, and she hadn't talked about it to anyone for good luck. She accepted the communication unperturbed, but couldn't hide a smile.

Cornell was as acid as ever: "I've never seen anyone so glad to get killed, Hartwood. Danger ends up becoming a drug, isn't it?" He was grim, in a bad mood. Perhaps he had grown to sympathize with her – and a part of Silia wondered how much influence this had to the time he had declared necessary for her recovery –, or perhaps he simply feared that all his work would be wasted.

"Come on, Cornell, tell your wife you're not coming for dinner. We'll have two beers at Samuel's to celebrate."

"There's nothing to celebrate, Hartwood."

They had seen very seldom since the first phase of her motor recovery had ended, but Silia joked about it anyway. "Let's celebrate you won't have to see my ugly face anymore."

Cornell didn't let be coax. He closed the folder with a blunt gesture and stood up. "I'm busy, Hartwood. Goodbye."
Three grievous days passed by without any news; Silia kept on doing her assignments as a city guard. She saw Gladio again one night, but she didn't feel like sharing the news with him, not after what had happened between them in the gym, not after a certain date for her departure, which however couldn't be far away. Frustrated, worried and irritated, she called the Center and asked for Cornell to demand explanations. He reluctantly picked up the phone, and informed her sternly that he had forwarded all the medical documentation to Captain Drautos without receiving an answer. "Be patient, Hartwood," he said to her, calming down. "I suggest you enjoy these last quiet days. If I hear anything, I'll call you, but no more stalking me."

Another week passed. She had tried to behave as usual with Gladio, but the awareness of her imminent return to the front and the thought of the painful discussion, that the mere mention of it had generated, stiffened her against him. Gladio, too, didn't seem too comfortable in her company, and although he had exposed to ensure they could keep on working out at the Training Hall, it didn't happen again. She should have been relieved by those distances between them, but it was not like that.

Finally, on the morning of the tenth day after she had been declared able again, Hector Lars summoned her in his office. Silia had to control herself not to run in the corridors. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Commander Lars, you wanted to see me?"

The man tighten his lips. The singularity of her presence in Insomnia and the cooperation of a glaive with the City Guard had caused some short-circuits in the system of powers and hierarchies. As a matter of fact, Lars was almost twenty years older than her and was the Commander of the City Guard, but she was a Kingsglaive. Both knew perfectly that if it came to it, Silia's authority would prevail over Lars', but they tacitly agreed to behave so that from the outside Silia appeared to take orders from him. She didn't care.

"Hartwood, a notice has just come for you. Probably there will be a copy in your apartment as well."

Silia shuddered as Lars handed her a large yellow envelope sealed with the Royal Chancellor's logo – not the Kingsglaive one, she noted with concern. She tore the edge of the envelope. A single protocol sheet on letterhead was inside.

"To the attention of Silia Hartwood

The imminent return to Insomnia of the Kingsglaive army is being announced.

Report in full uniform on May 7 at 3 pm to the new provisional headquarters to receive instructions. The possible lack of attendance to the convocation hereunder will be judged in accordance with martial law."

Silia turned the sheet – nothing else – and moistened her lips. How could the glaives come back to Insomnia? She had talked to Sarah just two days before, and there had been no warning of a retreat. She looked up at Lars, who was staring at her waiting for a reaction. He probably knew the contents of the envelope, but nothing else; he certainly was not aware of the situation on the front. I've to call the others. She crumpled the sheet and put it in her pocket.

Something about her upset expression had to leak, because Lars lifted the corners of his mouth into a restrained, but undoubtedly amused sneer, and asked: "Are you not glad to go back and resume your duties in the Kingsglaive Army, Hartwood?"
Of course Lars had understood shit: along with his relief for not having her running around anymore, that question suggested a mild accusation of cowardice. Silia frowned slightly, and since that was her last day of cooperation with the City Guard, she allowed herself to reply properly. She smiled.

"Of course I am. Someone with balls and able to handle a sword has to take care of this war."

Lars' mocking expression crumpled like the sheet of the convocation she kept in her pocket. Ten years earlier people in Insomnia had entirely entrusted the war to Captain Drautos and to a handful of youngsters under the age of twenty. And although for a long time the war had become for them a second-order news on the newscast, they didn't like too much remembering it.

IV

She hadn't yet left the City Guard's headquarters, that Silia was already on her phone. Sarah took a while to answer.

"Oh, finally!" Silia snapped. "I was starting to shit in my pants, Sarah. Are you all right?"

"Hi, Silia," she greeted her, in a gloomy voice partially covered by the roar of a military truck. "Sorry, we were busy with the arrangements for our departure. The four of us are almost unharmed. So you heard the news, I guess."

"I fucking heard them, alright" she replied. "What the hell happened?"

Sarah sighed. "We've lost our last stronghold. The niffs employed a new devilry. They call it Diamond Weapon. Never seen such a fucking thing, Silia. We had many losses."

Silia took a deep breath to calm down. It was fucking humiliating, that she was there, perfectly able to fight, while her companions were routed by the last discovery of the imperials. "Diamond Weapon" she repeated. "A new kind of daemon?"

"Yup. I don't know how to describe it."

"I do." Samuel apparently snatched the phone from Sarah. "The Walking Death. Think of a ten-times-size Iron Giant with an only eye and a huge beating heart, able to fire rays of energy so powerful as to blow up a building. Charlie and Tyler were on the frontline, only the shoes were left of them."

Samuel had been, as usual, brutally evocative. "Thanks, Sam," she tried to downplay, "Now we can have the same nightmares, even if I've never seen it."

"Oh, you'll see it even too soon, if we don't do something," she heard him say. "If they have more of those monsters, I don't know how much longer the Wall can hold."

A shiver lashed her spine. "What the hell…?"

"Listen, Silia." Sarah had picked up the phone. "The most odd thing is that the niffs, instead of get it over with, have retreated. They could have given us their final blow. We were on course, and with such a beast, they could have wiped us out."

"And instead they left, as if they remembered leaving the stove on," Samuel said, then she heard Legato telling him to close his fucking mouth.

"Why would they want to do that?"
"We haven't the bloodiest idea. Not even the Captain. He gave the order to return to Insomnia and no one has seen him since we dismantled the camp."

Silia sighed. "And to think that I would have called you shortly: I am fit for combat, again. I was waiting for the Captain's green light and a date for my departure. I was about to reach you."

"And instead, lo and behold, it's us who are reaching you. Good thing. You're spared of one of the most disastrous and bloodiest battles in our history."

_"Yeah, how fuckin' lucky I am,"_ she thought, but she didn't say it. _"When will you get here? My call is for three in the afternoon."

"In the morning. Put the transmitter on and stay reachable, Silia. As soon as we enter the gates of the Crown City and the Captain gives us the permission to scatter, we'll meet somewhere."

"Roger, Helias," she replied, and she couldn't help smiling. "See you soon, sis."

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V

She came down to the hall before deciding to look for Gladio. She'd thought about calling him on the phone, but at that time he certainly was at the Training Hall, and he probably wouldn't have seen her calls before a couple of hours. She could wait until that night to talk to him, of course, but Samuel's words about the Diamond Weapon and the Wall kept on tormenting her. She wanted to confront him about the return of the glaives.

She started to retrace her steps to the elevators, but she found herself in front of Crux.

"Hartwood," he told her, a little breathless, getting his thumbs in the pockets of his attire. "I was waiting for you to end your phone call, but then I lost you. Are you going to leave without saying goodbye?"

Silia pursed her lips. She had left the headquarters almost running, and she hadn't thought about her – now former - partner. "The documentation I've to sign hasn't arrived yet. I would have been looking for you tomorrow," she tried to clear herself.

"Good," he replied, embarrassed, then held out his hand, hesitantly. "But now I'm here, so I might as well say goodbye to you. I wish you a safe journey, Hartwood."

_He doesn't know it's the glaives who are coming back,_ she understood. It was obvious. _"Thank you,"_ she said, vague, shaking his hand. Crux had always been a man of few words, like her, but somehow their silences had entangled and they got along. Lars was arrogant, but not stupid: he had put beside her a kind man, quite elderly, appreciated by all his colleagues, who had nothing against the glaives and who had patiently endured her intemperance and mood swings.

"Kick some imperialists for me," he ventured to say. "Not magiteks. Those can't feel anything."

"We see less and less imperialists in the flesh. Now they release the infantry and leave with their airships."

"Damned cowards."

"Indeed."
They looked at each other uneasily as people passed them around in the hall. They seemed to both have the feeling of having something to say, but neither of them decided to do it. It was Crux who put a hand on the back of his head and spoke: "Well, Hartwood, then, goodbye. I'll follow your movements on the newscast. Just, try and stay alive. You're a good woman. If you came back to Insomnia and I've not retired yet, you know where to find me."

Silia smiled, and felt a surge of affection. "You're a good man too, Crux. Take care. See you soon."

*It is also possible that he retires before I leave Insomnia.*

She let him come first to the elevators. In those months, Crux's lips had never uttered a joke, a wit, or an inappropriate remark toward her, but she didn't want him to see her stop at the Crownsguard's headquarters floor. Only when Crux got into one of the service elevators, Silia came up to wait for another. She knew she wouldn't go unnoticed anyway but, as a precaution, took off her uniform jacket.

Nobody seemed to pay too much attention to her at the headquarters. Her intention was to have someone deliver Gladio a message and wait for him outside, but the man at the reception, when she handed him her pass, gazed it wide-eyed and returned it to her, inviting her to enter.

"You can find Gladiolus Amicitia in the Hall B2, madam," he told her, polite. "May I show you the way?"

Silia blinked, caught off-guard. "No, thanks. I think I can find him by myself."

The Hall B2 was not one of those closed, private gym, where she and Gladio trained, but a huge equipped area whose interiors were visible through large windows. Perhaps it was for demonstrations, she thought.

Gladio wasn't alone. Silia stopped to peek from behind the glass: it was the first time in so many months that she somehow invaded Gladio's spaces, she realized, and, consequently, the first time she saw him with Prince Noctis. The Prince's resemblance to his father was undeniable, but only for those who remembered King Regis' look before the Crystal wore out his vital strength. Now it didn't seem, but once King Regis had been as handsome as his son, if not more.

They didn't notice her – they were too focused on the training, and the room was enormous – so Silia kept on watching them silently, gazing at the Prince, fascinated: if the glaives' role wouldn't change, which, in those hours more than ever, seemed unlikely, that grim-faced boy would be the next king to whom she would pledge her loyalty. King Regis had inherited from his father, King Mors, a catastrophic situation, but he had managed to keep the right balance and ensure wellness to Crown citizens, even opening the gates to those who, like her and her mother, fled the war from the outskirts. She wondered what Prince Noctis would inherit in a few years – no illusions, regrettably, about King Regis' life expectation – and how he would reign. Gladio had no doubt: Noctis was immature but brave and good-hearted, and he would become a good king.

*As long as a dozen Diamond Weapons don't breach the Wall and level Insomnia.*

Staring at them together, Silia felt that her lips bended in an involuntary smile. Gladio was extremely serious, as they fought – the Prince's guard, she noticed, had something like a million holes, and he wasn't at all precise in his lunges – but when the boy fell badly he stopped instantly to help him get up – and to yell at him where he went wrong. Then they had to say something funny, because, after having dealt a friendly fist on Prince's shoulder, Gladio burst out laughing, and the boy echoed him. They were no longer Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum and his Sworn Shield, by now, but two young men in their twenties who were joking together, bound by a complicity that went beyond the blood
Suddenly, the prince turned in her direction, casually, and looked at her curiously. Before he could gesture to Gladio, Silia, seized by an inexplicable embarrassment, flapped her heels and walked off briskly along the corridor. After all, her doubts could wait a couple of hours more.

VI

Gladio entered Samuel's bar, one hour later, in advance of his usual time. He just nodded distractedly to Samuel, looking around, then walked directly to her table, frowning.

"Silia, what the hell has got into you?" he asked, out of breath, sitting next to her. He was slightly sweaty, his hair unkempt, his expression annoyed.

"I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed. "I shouldn't have come looking for you while you were with Prince Noctis."

Gladio blinked a couple of times, amazed, then frowned again. "And what are you apologizing for, by the Six? We're friends. You can look for me whenever you want. Ivan, the man at the reception, asked me whether it was all right with that Kingsglaive. Why didn't you call me, since he let you in? I was with Noctis, but there was nothing wrong with it. I would have introduced him to you. It's about time."

Silia snapped her tongue off. "It wasn't urgent. There was no need for you to rush here. Sorry if I made you worry."

"Silia..." he sighed. "I guess I know what you wanted to talk to me about."

He was already aware of the glaives' return, therefore. She had supposed it. Depressed, Silia light her third cigarette of the last ten minutes and kept on talking in a lower voice. "A debacle. I suppose the crown citizens will be happy, when the news will spread. No more glaives to consume the magical power of the Crystal and the energy of the King. Have they also told you about the Diamond Weapon?"

Gladio nodded. "I'm sorry. I know that Captain Drautos has transmitted all the data in their possession and that our scientists are examining them in order to formulate hypotheses. I wish I could tell you that they'll study a countermove and that the withdrawal of the kingsglaives is temporary, Silia, but I'm not used to lying. I'm afraid this war is down to the wire."

Silia crumpled her cigarette into the ashtray. She looked at the last remnants of smelly smoke that it emanated, her forehead resting on her hand. "One of my comrades, Samuel, said that if they deployed other creatures like that, perhaps even the Wall couldn't stop them. Do you think it's possible?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "My father hasn't said anything about it, but he's worried, it's obvious. We can only leave everything in the hands of the King and the Council, right now." He sighed. "Are your comrades fine?"

"They are," she confirmed, and then she couldn't help herself. "I was about to return, did you know?" she came clean.

Gladio raised his head suddenly. "What?"
"I was about to return to the front," she repeated. "Dr. Cornell had given his approval. But he never received an answer from the Captain. It wasn't meant to be like this, damn it."

"How long have you known it?"

She couldn't lie to him. "Ten days."

"And you didn't tell me."

"I didn't know when I would leave. I would have told you, Gladio."

"I would have learned it," he noted, raising his voice slightly, "overnight. 'I'll leave tomorrow, Gladio, thanks for everything', you would have told me."

Silia punched the table, exasperated. She didn't want to resume what the city guards at the Training Hall had interrupted. "And even if it was like that, what would have changed? I am a Kingsglaive, Gladio. That's my life. These months in Insomnia were an unfortunate setback." It was not entirely true.

Gladio greeted her words with wrinkled eyebrows. "I was an unfortunate setback as well?"

"I didn't mean that." She stretched her hand to grab her pack of cigarettes.

He intercepted it, gripping her wrist tightly. "You know what? I didn't want to tell you, but I'll do it anyway. When I heard today about the glaives' return, I felt relieved. My first thought was not 'What the fuck is going on? Is this the first sign of our definitive defeat?', as it should have been, but 'How lucky. Silia won't go back to the front'. That's idiotic, isn't it?, considering I was an unfortunate setback."

Silia opened her mouth to protest, indignant, but Gladio tightened his grip on her wrist, and parted his lips, reaching for her, and Silia clearly sensed the tension of the moments preceding a danger. She reacted by pulling her hand out of his grip.

"Gladio, enough. This is all in your mind. I had fun, training with you and everything, and I consider you to be a friend as well. But I've been fighting since I was thirteen," she said, finally reaching for the pack of cigarettes and lighting one. She tried to keep her voice steady and calm. "I'm unable to do anything else."

Whatever it was about to happen a few moments before, it passed. Gladio put his hand back upon the table. "Aren't you afraid to die, Silia?"

Silia was glad they had changed the subject, but answering that question was unexpectedly hard. She'd been afraid to die, at first, of course. The first months on the front had been horrifying. Almost every day someone missed the call, and they all went to sleep – they tried to sleep – wondering who would be next. And then, without realizing it, everything had changed. "Not anymore," she said, honestly. "It's... inevitable, isn't it? If you fight, I mean. You cannot be scared every minute, every hour, every day, for months, for years."

Gladio nodded slowly, absorbed. "I've been perfectly trained for every circumstance since I was a kid," he said, "And yet I have never put my life at risk. I cannot even imagine how it could be like, to risk it every day."

"I wish," she let out, "you'll never have to find out, Gladio." She put out the cigarette in the ashtray, then a question came up to her. "And what about that?" she asked, pointing to her left eye.
Gladio also lifted a hand to his scar, that was very similar to Marius'. "Oh, this one. Nothing particularly heroic. I didn't risk my life, only my left eye. Almost two years ago, one night, Noctis and I were walking around. We went out to celebrate the end of his tests. Noctis doesn't drink, but that night I insisted on taking him to a pub like this, a guys' night out, you know. We ended up in a fight. A man tried to stab Noctis, I think he was so drunk that he hadn't even realized who he was in front of. I stepped between them."

"And did he managed to hit you?" Silia repeated, with a hint of fun. "How drunk you were?"

"Not so much," he justified. "I could have stopped it without any trouble. But he would get hurt badly."

"He was about to stab the prince."

"And he was a simple drunkard," Gladio shrugged. "What kind of crownguard would I've been if I'd raged against a man who could hardly stand up? Anyway he was brought to justice."

Silia sighed. "Sometimes I wonder if you are upright at the limit of idiocy, or just idiotic."

Unexpectedly, Gladio laughed. "Noctis told me something very similar, on that occasion. You would get along, the both of you, you know." He looked again at her, smiling. "What a pity that you haven't given me the chance to introduce him to you today. I won't make again the same mistake taking him with me to such a tavern, but one of the next few nights we can go somewhere else. Maybe with Ignis and Prompto, too. What about it? Now that the Kingsglaives will come back to Insomnia, we'll have plenty of time."

*Right, Silia said to herself, with dismay. There will be plenty of time to start some shit, if we don't give a grip.*

"...Silia?"

Gladio was staring at her again, and again Silia felt the same sense of danger. "Do you think that maybe now...?"

Silia moved to get up and leave – a *retreat* – but there was no need: this time it was him who brutally broke that moment. "Nothing, forget it. I've to go, Silia. See you." He stood up, making his hands disappear into his pockets. "I'm sorry."

Without a wave of goodbye, Gladio started walking towards the exit. Silia found herself staring at the bottom of her glass: she knew pretty well what he had been about to say, and she was glad that he had not.
Quies ante tempestatem

Chapter Summary

Silia reunites with her comrades, but she feels uncomfortable about her Captain and the future of the Kingsglaives.

8

Quies ante tempestatem

I

The transceiver had rolled toward the corner of the drawer among a folder, a lighter and a purse full of coins for the laundromat. For a moment, as small as it was, she thought she'd lost it. She hooked it to her ear and turned it on, almost expecting to hear her comrades' voices. Predictably, the device returned a vague white noise; the Glaives wouldn't make their return to Insomnia for a few hours, and they were still out of reach.

When she was eighteen and had just arrived to the front, she was amazed by the order to keep the transmitters constantly active. She felt the receiver like a foreign body, almost a spider clasped to her ear, and she'd jump whenever she heard its beep. It took a lot for her to memorize her comrades' frequencies – and de-memorize the deceased's ones – but she soon understood the importance of being a full member of a network. The Captain, who often coordinated them from above, could update them in real time on the movements of the enemies; they could communicate with teams that operated at a distance, and give each other instructions. Those transmitters had saved many lives over the years.

Unable to remain inactive at home, Silia wore her uniform and spent that morning wandering the city, without a destination. It was May by now, so she kept her jacket hung from her shoulder. She bought the newspapers of the day, and all of them reported the Kingsglaives' retreat on the front page. Sitting on a bench in a park, she smoked one cigarette after the other and she read pages and pages with similar content: the most frequent word was *debacle*.

Her most alarming fear that had kept her awake for two nights – besides the situation with Gladio, which was getting out of hand, of course – was that the King could break their army apart. Turning and tossing sleeplessly in her bed, she had told herself that rather than definitively joining the City Guard, she would pack her bags and leave Insomnia. She would have moved to an occupied city and once there, a little more professionally than when she was eleven and used to harass the imperialists, she would have given the Niffs a hard time. But the daylight had illuminated with reason her childish nocturnal fantasies: she was twenty-eight years old, she was a war veteran, and above all, ten years before had pledged her loyalty to King Regis. She would have swallowed all her pride and indignation, if it came to that, and supported the Crown City as she would have been a required to.

When at last her transmitter activated and Sarah's voice told her excitedly that within half an hour they would arrive at the West Gate, it was one o'clock. Silia jumped up, went back to the street, and called a taxi. Along the way, the radio continued to broadcast the news of the Kingsglaives' retreat,
and one time the taxi driver ventured a comment by slightly turning his head in her direction, but her expression had to have dissuaded him from persevering, or perhaps he had recognized her uniform.

It was rush hour and it took almost forty minutes to get to the gate. She gave the taxi driver what in Ambrosia would be the equivalent of a week of meals for her and her mother, and began looking around, disoriented, in search of the military trucks.

"Your buddies haven't got here yet," an unknown male voice said.

Silia turned. She didn't recognize the two City Guards stationed at the gate, but perhaps she had crossed their path in the past months.

"Thanks for the information," she answered caustically, but didn't give them the satisfaction of starting a discussion. She sat on the edge of a planter and lit a cigarette.

"It was time for you to come back," the man continued. She had never been assigned to the guard of a gate in those months, but she guessed it must be a rather boring task. "What have you achieved in these ten years?"

Silia continued to ignore him quietly. She wondered if, now that the remaining glaives would walk the streets of Insomnia, the citizens would have lowered their voices; or if, since finally the King had given them reason, they would have flashed even more contempt.

"Hartwood, right?" the other man said with a mocking tone in his voice. "I know ol' Crux. Lars has given him this hassle because he's too good to complain, but it must have been a nuisance. What did you do on the front to be sent back to Insomnia, Hartwood? Did you set fire to Drautos' arse?"

They laughed. Silia forced herself to calm down. She was no longer in the City Guard, but she suspected that the Captain would not be pleased by a fight at the West Gate of the Crown City, especially at such a delicate moment.

"I don't know if she set fire to Drautos' arse," the first man resumed. He pretended to lower his voice, but he took care to make himself be heard clearly. "But I know who she gave hers to."

Silia straightened and got up from the planter. She put out the cigarette and hid her hands in her pockets to avoid using them. Zen, she told herself again, as she approached the man who had made the joke. "Don't rejoice too much about the Kingsglaives' return," she spat with a cheerful bravado. "If we take active duty here in Insomnia, probably there won't be need for so many City Guards."

The Guard opened his mouth indignantly, but Silia took out the Kingsglaive pass and slammed it almost to his face. "I'd also like to remind you that I am a public official as well as you, and technically a superior. The next arses that will burn may be yours, gents."

Silia glanced at the other man, also stiff in a military salute. She was tempted to ask for their names and IDs, but the siren of the gate started howling. She was pleased by noticing how the two men stood motionless, waiting for her directives; clenching her jaw to hold back a smile, she put the pass away and motioned them to open the gate.

I foresee hard days for everyone, she said to herself, withdrawing to let them work.

She watched three military trucks pass the level crossing, one after the other, and proceed along the
avenue. She recognized Elea, Miles and Taras behind the wheel – the latter greeted her with a lively honking, which she replied with a wave of her hand. The fourth truck pulled up: Legato was driving.

Silia approached to get into the cabin, but her comrade turned off the engine, opened the door and jumped down. He stopped, examining her with folded arms, his brows wrinkled in his everlasting expression of disappointment. Whether it was a half dressed girl fascinated by the uniforms or a miter's discharge from a magitek falling upon him, all Legato did was note the reality with discontent.

"Here you are," he said, compassionately. "I remember you being taller, Coeurl."

"I remember you being nicer."

He smiled tightly. Finally he came forward, raised a hand, and Silia gave him five. Legato crushed her hand in a strong grip. "I missed you. You don't know how strange it was not to be able to count on you and Tom in the second line."

Silia couldn't answer because a movement of air behind her back made the hair on her neck raise. She whirled around, grabbing Sarah's arm and tipping her to the ground.

"For Odin's cock," she laughed. "You haven't slacked off in these months, uh?"

"Still the same moron," she growled, helping her get up. "Who'd you think you're dealing with, Miss Helias?"

Sarah squeezed her into a fiery embrace. "It's really nice to see you again."

"Sarah, never do it again. We are not at the camp. In the city this is called disorderly conduct."

"Fuck you, Silia, you made me lose a hundred gil!" Samuel struck a friendly fist on Caesar's shoulder, with whom he had supposedly bet them. "I was sure she'd have tackled you."

"My ass. Sarah's as furtive as a garula." Caesar approached her, grabbing her shoulders. "Let me look at you, Silia. No sunken dark circles, no blood in your face, no dust in your hair, no rips and burns on your uniform. Yes, I'd say Insomnia did you good."

"She also put on some weight," Samuel observed, comradely patting her ass.

"Fuck you. They're muscles."

"And alcohol," Sarah pointed out. "I lost count of every night you called us while drunk."

Silia looked at them, almost moved. She didn't find them well at all; they were emaciated and full of fresh wounds, but they were alive, standing on their legs, and that was enough. "For the Six, guys," she murmured. "I cannot believe it."

"What? That we're alive, that we're all together again, or that we have retreated?"

"The three of them," she answered, looking for her cigarette package to blow off steam.

"Ok, but don't cry." Legato held out a hand to her. "Gimme a cigarette instead, now that we can smoke freely. And let's go eat something before the meeting. I also want to see your new leg."

II

Stiff with her arms behind her back, Silia was feeling so excited at the idea of being back in the ranks of the Kingsglaives that she had to struggle to stay still. She kept on staring at her comrades – now
little more than forty – unable to stop comparing their emaciated appearances, their new wounds and their tired and ferocious expressions with hers. Her body wasn't less ready to fight than it had been before her accident, thanks to her exhausting workouts with Gladio, but she couldn't shake off a feeling of defect, as if in recent months she had been granted a favor she didn't deserve.

Captain Drautos looked as indestructible as ever. He reviewed them, walking the wide and spartan room back and forth, pausing only briefly on her.

"Kingsglaives," he enunciated, with his stentorian voice that rarely rose beyond a certain limit. "I will be brief. I have called you, after consulting with the King and the Council, to give you some brief instruction. You are all aware of the situation: we have lost the stronghold of Lambert, and at the moment we are not able to counteract the last imperial offensive. The Council and the bioengineers of the Kingdom are working to analyze the data we hold about the creature called 'Diamond Weapon'. Until a decision has been made about it, the Kingsglaives are to be considered on tactical retreat."

Someone murmured, but the Captain silenced them with a sharp gesture of his arm. "I demand silence. Tactical retreat is not equivalent to a license. You are still the military elite of the Kingdom, do not forget it, and you must consider yourselves in service. Keep your transmitters always active and be on call. You may be asked to perform other functions in the city these days, like your comrade Nyx Ulric."

Silia didn't understand what the Captain was referring to. There would be time later for anecdotes.

"The rooms of the provisional command have been put at your disposal, but you are allowed to stay where you prefer, until the re-entry on the front or the final allocation of the army in the Crown City has been arranged. Keep a proper conduct, as adequate as your position demands. I do not want to hear about unrest or friction with civilians, or worse, with the Crownsguard or the City Guard. If it occurs, the consequences for the responsible will be very serious. I hope I have been clear on this point." This time the Captain looked exactly at her. He couldn't know what had happened at the West Gate, so she held his gaze impassive.

"You can go now," he finally dismissed them.

Silia relaxed. It was the right time to talk to the Captain for the first time in months, but he walked across the room at a brisk pace toward the exit. Disappointed, Silia followed him.

"Sir!" she called him.

"Hartwood," he said distractedly, without stopping or slowing down. "I don't have time, now."

Silia couldn't hide her surprise for his lukewarm reception. That infernal night of six months before, when she'd found out she had lost her right leg, it was only the Captain's presence that stopped her from despairing, and it had not been the first time since she had joined the Glaives. The disappointment made her more formal than she wanted. "Sir, I beg your pardon," she insisted, saluting, "I just wanted to ask for instructions."

Captain's glance slipped to her right leg, but he didn't comment about her accident in any way or inquire about her current state of health or the functionality of her prosthesis. "I have already provided you with all the necessary instructions. You can go," he dismissed her.

Silia blinked. "Captain, Squad 6 no longer exists. I don't know where I've been assigned to."

"Hartwood, we just returned to Insomnia and there will be changes. All teams are decimated now."
You don't need to be assigned to a new squad for the time being. You have your transceiver. Wait for directives like everyone else. You can go," he repeated.

Silia stopped following him, stiffening again in a military salute. The Captain seemed cold, absorbed, but with all that had happened in recent times, he had to be worried by a thousand more important concerns than with the health of a single member of his army. "Captain," she called him once again, without being able to prevent herself.

This time the Captain stopped. "What else, Hartwood?"

Silia cracked a smile. "I just wanted to thank you. The prosthesis is perfect and I'm operational at a hundred percent. I have not wasted my time in Insomnia."

The Captain seemed to hesitate for a moment, then opened the door and went out.

III

When they entered the tavern, predictably everyone stared at them. She was well accepted only because regulars tended to forget which military army she belonged to and because Samuel himself welcomed her. But a parade of five fully-uniformed and armed Kingsglaives had to be hard to swallow.

She preceded her comrades and thought it would be tactful to exchange two words with Samuel. The man looked at them uncomfortably and rubbed his tongue on his lips as if he wanted to tell her something troublesome.

"Hi, Samuel," she said, leaning against the counter. "I hope you don't mind if I've brought a few friends. They're loud, but they won't give any trouble, I guarantee that for them. They came back from the front this morning. If it's a problem for you, we'll go somewhere else."

"Hartwood," the man greeted her, shaking his head slightly. It was not the first time she showed herself in her uniform, but Samuel looked at her as if only then he fully realized that she was a Glaive. "I never mind about paying customers. Have a seat," he said, but he looked up and scrutinized other clients' mood. Silia pointed out a table to her comrades with a nod of her head.

In spite of the tense air and the glances of dissatisfaction by other customers, she and her mates hadn't seen each other for such a long time that they didn't let anything spoil their good mood; they isolated themselves in a jumble of small talks, laughter, gossip, and imprecations, ignoring everything else. Sarah's company was inevitably the one she had been missing the most because they were two of the few women among the Glaives and they had to struggle for so long with their claws and teeth against prejudices, harassment and pestering by some who they were forced to call 'comrades'. But she'd have given her ass for every one of them. They were the last remnants of Squad 6, and they had ripped each other from infinite deaths.

"Silia," Samuel confided, "Did I told you that I had the honor of being sorted to Squad 4 with your nice childhood friend?"

"Marius?" she blinked. "So lucky."

"He's as nice as a Kyactus stuck up in your ass. Silia, what the fuck did you do to him? I lost count of all the bad jokes he made about you in these months. Some of them were funny, I have to admit. When he said it would be better for you if the jormungand had eaten both your legs so you could have got longer prosthesis, I was the first to laugh."
"I didn't do anything to him," she sighed, drinking. Marius was always the same. "I've never understood what went wrong with him when we joined Kingsglaives. He wasn't so bad before that and his father would have him swallow his punch if he'd heard Marius speak of me like that." Or if he knew that he tried to lay his hands on me, she said to herself; she had never told it even to her teammates over the years, and after that episode they had never talked to each other unless it was clearly necessary.

"Well, compared to Sonitus and Tredd he's a princess," Samuel continued.

Sarah sighed. "I pity you, Sam, but better you than me, anyway. I would have myself expelled from the Kingsglaives."

"Silia" Legato noted, his chin resting on his hand. "Did you talk to the Captain?"

She pursed her lips. "Almost nothing; you saw it. I've to admit that I expected a different welcome. Since I got back to Insomnia, I've kept sending him weekly and then monthly reports. At the beginning there were answers. Tight, as you would expect from him, but still answers. Then nothing. He didn't even reply to my doctor when he sent him the documentation for my return. I hope he's not convinced that I am no longer able to fight."

She had hoped for a few words of reassurance, but there weren't any. Sarah wiped her lips with a handkerchief then put her fork down on the plate, still half-full as if she wasn't hungry anymore.

"The Captain has been rather evasive for some time now. It happened that he didn't respond to his transceiver for hours. Days, actually. We found ourselves isolated during a retreat two months ago near Cledwyn. Radio silence."

Caesar frowned. "It has already happened in the past, as you know, but now more and more often. We wondered if, after all, he didn't receive instructions on something we still don't know."

"Like what?"

Legato shrugged again. "I don't know. He must have his reasons. Don't make me choke on my beer."

They were so absorbed by their own conversation that she only noticed Gladio when she found him behind her back. He smiled, pleased. "Do I bother you, Silia? I see you're in good company."

Her comrades stared at Gladio, then they looked at her again. Mindful of the last time they had met, Silia felt embarrassed, but made a conciliatory gesture with her hand. "No bother, Gladio. Have a seat; I want you to meet the former members of Squad 6."

He raised his hands as if to shield himself. "I don't want to ruin your rendezvous."

"You don't ruin anything at all. Guys, this is Gladiolus Amicitia, a Crownguard. He's also the reason why I can still handle a sword decently. He was my sparring partner when my muscles were atrophying due to inactivity."

Gladio scratched his hairline, uncomfortable, and took an empty chair from a nearby table. "She's exaggerating, and moreover, once she recovered the functionality of her leg, Silia was a great workout for me."

In turn, her comrades introduced themselves and shook his hand.

"I heard the latest news from the front," Gladio said, conciliatorily. "I'm sorry for the loss of the
Lambert stronghold."

"We are more than sorry," Legato said, compassed. He was staring at the bottom of his beer. "But it was only a matter of time. Imperial forces are overwhelming; their resources seem to be endless."

"Yet they have retreated," Sarah said. "I cannot really understand what they're up to."

"Nothing good, of course." Gladio turned to look at Silia. "The Council meets constantly now; I don't know what my father looks like anymore."

"It's a desperate situation now." Caesar was playing with his empty plate. None of them crossed the others' eyes. "The combined armies of Tenebrae and Niflheim are far too advanced, and with their technology, it's like trying to fight laser rifles with swords and bows. Kingsglaives have reigned them in for ten years, but now we are just a handful. If something doesn't happen, we will soon find them on us."

They all fell silent. Silia was feeling more useless than ever: over the last six months she had contributed to the war effort in no way.

"I trust King Regis." Gladio stretched out to take her half-full mug and drank; a confidential gesture that certainly her friends didn't miss. "I told Silia a short while ago: if you were not there, we would have lost the war a long time ago."

"I'd like to be as optimistic as one who has spent the last eight years safe here in Insomnia." Legato was severe. "No offense, Amicitia, but after risking our necks for such a long time the idea that it may have been useless makes me crazy."

Gladio opened his mouth to answer, but Silia touched his arm. "Come on, don't perpetuate the eternal stereotype of Guards and Glaives behaving like cats and dogs. Legato, I left you realistic, not pessimistic - that was Sarah. What happened to you?"

"It happened," Legato answered with a loud voice, "There is no more water in the glass to be able to judge it half full or half empty."

"Come on, guys." Samuel lifted his glass. "We haven't been to Insomnia for a while, we haven't meet Silia for months, and I can't remember the last time I thought I'd for sure see the dawn of the next day. We have done our best, and perhaps it hasn't been enough to win this war, but I feel right with myself. Let's enjoy these days of deadlock."

Caesar was the first to lean his glass against Sam's. Sarah joined, hesitating, and also Legato, with a resigned sigh. Silia looked at Gladio, raised an eyebrow, and again took her glass to join the toast.

"To Silia, more immortal than Cor Leonis," Sarah pranked. "Torn by a jormungand's teeth just a few months ago and now look at her, how she's looking so fresh. She even got a tattoo."

"What?" Samuel asked. "Where?"

Sarah tackled her, laughing. "On her back, I can see a part of it. Take off your shirt, Silia, let us see."

"Will you stop?"

Samuel pulled her shirt up her back. "I cannot fucking believe it," he laughed, incredulous. "It's a coeurl."

Silia tried to escape. She'd never liked to be touched so confidently, and her teammates, who had
seen her in every humanly conceivable condition, were the only ones who were allowed, but in six months she had the time to get out of the habit of their familiarity.

Even Legato got up to look at the tattoo. "So they won't mistake you for a kitty anymore, huh?"

"I'm so jealous, I want one too."

Sarah glanced up at Gladio, who was watching them with an amused smile on his face, and scrutinized him nastily. She pointed to him. "Amicitia, I see a nice tattoo on your arms, too. You're behind this, aren't you?"

Gladio raised his arms. "I only took her to the person who tattooed me. Silia was jealous of my raven."

"Why don't you undress? I want to see it fully."

"Perhaps another time," he replied, embarrassed, throwing her a rescue request with his gaze. Gladio, who was much more a people person than she was, kept on getting uncomfortable with sexual innuendos and allusions. Silia laughed, and instead of helping him, she supported Sarah. "Why, Gladio, show Sarah your cock."

She had learned to hold such trivialities with him, over the months, but now that she was at a table with her comrades, full of beer, it had slipped spontaneously down her tongue. Gladio stood up, stiff, and gave her an annoyed gaze, but he recovered promptly. He smiled. "I'm sorry, Sarah, but I only show it on special occasions."

Sarah smiled mischievously. "You make people beg, Gladio."

Everyone at the table cracked a laugh, but Silia saw that Gladio was awkward and regretted her own words. He raised his hand in a goodbye. "I have to go now. It was nice to meet you. Silia..." He frowned in an expression that probably her comrades believed to be amused, "...see you around."

He left the room. Silia expected a barrage of allusions and tavern jokes, before the door closed behind Gladio's shoulders, but there were none. She was just starting to become paranoid.

IV

She had departed from her comrades late at night, glad to be able to tell them see you tomorrow. When a lamp decided to lean on her, she realized she was slightly staggering. I better get rid of this hangover before tomorrow, or the Captain will think I've spent the last six months getting drunk. Not too far from reality, in this case, since when she didn't practice at the Training Hall with Gladio or on her night shift she'd spend the evening at Samuel's.

She saw the shadow behind her far too late. She moved but, blurred by alcohol, too slowly. In her partial defense, the attacker was not a newbie; he grabbed her throat with one arm and bent hers back behind her with a speed and strength she would have never imagined. It was only because he laughed that she recognized Caesar and didn't deal him a head butt in his Adam's apple or a kick in his groin, or worse, a fire in his face.

"Caesar, you're an asshole!" she exclaimed, trying to wriggle away. "Did you want to get yourself killed?"

Holding his grip, Caesar kept laughing. "This time your guard is down. I'm not Sarah."
"Fuck you. You're drunk, Caesar."

"So are you. Are you going home or meeting Gladio Amicitia, Coeurl?"

"Home. Why should I...?"

Caesar's hands slid from her arms to her waist and Silia felt kissing on her neck. "I'll come to see your house, then."

"There's nothing to see," she sighed, not angry anymore. "It's a stark two-room apartment where I just sleep."

"You've a bed, then. I want to see that."

For a moment, Silia stiffened. There had been a period, long before, after Hans' death – whom he had never known – when Caesar had regularly slipped into her cot in the middle of the night. It had been nothing more than sex between comrades. He hadn't been the only one, neither had she been the only one for him, but among all of them, he had been the only one who, after having come, stopped to give her pleasure. Perhaps because she had been the first for him; he had been sixteen, Caesar, when he had been thrown to the front. His group hadn't had the luxury of being able to train for five years, as had happened with the first in activity. But now they weren't on the front, and the idea of lying down with Caesar, having sex on a bed and looking at him in the light of the lamps, gave her the same feeling of strangeness she had felt when she'd seen Balthier wearing jeans and shirt.

"Cee..." she murmured, with the intention of talking him out of it.

"What's up, Kitty? Is it just because I don't have a bird tattooed on my back and arms?"

The image of Gladio, of his hands, of the hard curve of his jaw mingled with the memories of the front, with the thought of blood and death, and then with the pain of rehabilitation, the solitude of her first months in Insomnia, the sense of impotence for that war they couldn't win. She wriggled, her breath short, and seized Caesar by his arm, clinging as if she were about to sink.

"Let's go home."

The smell of sex was, for Silia, the scent of the grease they used to keep their boots soft and to polish their weapons. It was the fragrance of soil and damp grass, when they'd make it in a hurry, furiously, for a few minutes hidden from stranger eyes. It was the metallic hint of the wounds they carried upon them carelessly, those too light to waste a heal on.

Now, in the Crown City, it was the freshly washed sheets which contrasted to their beer breaths. It was a one-and-a-half-square mattress that offered support for backs, knees, and elbows that struggled. They didn't have to fear interruptions, protected from prying eyes as they were within the four walls of an apartment whose door was locked. She reminded Caesar of it, between a bite and a kiss, who had then pushed her on the bed and sunk into her violently as if they had had a few seconds of respite. He listened to her after coming, slowly starting again.

Silia closed her eyes, breathing in Caesar's skin, but her mind kept slipping away to wider shoulders and a more pronounced jaw with a rough beard, to thicker wrists and more muscular abdominals flexing and pushing. And when he taped her mouth, pressing her head against the pillow to stifle her moans, again forgetting that they weren't on the front and that no one could hear them, it was not Caesar she was thinking of while sinking her nails in his buttocks.
Caesar bent over to tie his shoes, turning his bare scarred back to her. Some new reddened furrows, here and there with shreds of tiny drops of blood, had already appeared on his skin. She herself, on the other hand, had teeth marks on her neck and thighs and probably a pair of bruises.

"For Odin," Caesar wailed. "I got cramps. If I had known it would be such a toil, Silia, I would have warmed up a bit before."

The clock on the wall read 3 o'clock in the morning. Silia was sweaty, exhausted, and her heart still pounded in her chest after her last orgasm. "We should do it more often, now that we're in Insomnia, Cee," she smiled, stretching an arm to run her fingers on one of his old scars. He shuddered visibly.

"Only the both of us?" he asked, turning his head slightly to offer her a little grin. "Because at certain moments it seemed to me that we were three on this bed, Silia."

Silia stopped, cut to the quick. "What do you mean? Are you still drunk, Caesar?"

"Oh, you saw I'm not that drunk" he replied. He finished lacing his shoes, leaving her on pins and needles a little longer, then he stood with his elbows resting on his knees. "Don't screw around. I don't know about the others, but it took me half an hour sitting at a table with you and that Crownguard to understand that you've stuck in an unmanageable situation. How is it, exactly? You slept together and you are trying to pretend it never happened? Or you never slept together and you are trying to continue on this path, since he's the Prince's Shield and I suppose he cannot afford distractions?"

Silia opened her mouth in amazement, but realized that she couldn't speak. Forcing herself to do it was a titanic undertaking. "What do you know about Gladiolus Amicitia?"

"Silia..." Caesar's tone was halfway between the tender and the offended. He straightened his back to face her. "Gladiolus Amicitia, the Shield of Prince Noctis. I know a lot about the members of the Crownguard: his father is in the King's Council, and he's also a friend and protector of King Regis. As you see, I did my reading. What's the story?"

Silia took a deep breath to calm herself. When she spoke, her tone of voice was so dry as to be almost imperceptible. "There's no story. We are at war, Caesar; you were there on the front, with me, in past years. We are at war, and we are Kingsglaives, the military elite of the Kingdom that continues to thin. There's no story," she repeated, shaking her head.

Caesar stood up, his arms folded. "Silia, we all lived every day as if it was the last one for years, but now, for a few months now, you have been in the eye of the storm." He caressed his beard with a tired gesture. "You haven't to be ashamed of it, it's not your fault; you were about to die, you lost a leg. I know you'd rather risk your life every day than go back to Insomnia to undergo humiliating and exhausting recovery paths to get back. But here in the Crown City, in spite of yourself, the pitiful anesthesia in which we are all plunged on the front by instinct of self-preservation is over. You came out of the bubble and re-entered the real life, if such a real life exists: the life of the people who don't get up in the morning hoping not to die."

Silia joined him at the window. She looked with him at the futuristic architecture of the half-lit Citadel, imagining the Crystal pulsing in its Sanctuary, in the center of the building.

"It's not so strange what happened to you," Caesar said. "But, with the tens of thousands of crown citizens, really, a Crownguard? The Shield of the Prince?"
Silia sighed. She had always kept an eye on Caesar, in battle all of them of the Squad 6 had done it, because even if already at eighteen he had the face of an adult man, aged from an orphan childhood spent in the street, he was the youngest. But at that moment it was she who felt like a little girl in front of him. She wished him to leave so he wouldn't look at her face and force her to agree with him. When she caught his gaze, she saw that Caesar was half smiling.

"You know, Kitty, on the front, when I was terrified, I'd just turn around and look at you or Legato to find some quiet... You'd hang around in the middle of the cannon whistles as if it didn't concern you. If we'd walk into an enemy ambush, you'd look so phlegmatic and unperturbed that I'd feel safe."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but at the beginning it wasn't like that. I too was amazed when I found out that, if you're forced to worry about your life too long, then you get used to that," she interrupted him, grateful that he had offered her the occasion to change the subject.

He continued as if he hadn't heard her. "Now I don't see an impassive soldier looking at me anymore. I see a confused woman. If you want to know how I think about it, it's good that he's the irreproachable Shield of the Prince and not someone else. Sooner or later we will be back in the fight, Silia, and it's better to do it without leaving anything behind. You should do as you did with your leg: a clean cut, a rapid amputation without anesthesia. Seeing how he embarrassed he was when you sided Sarah in that dirty little joke, I believe you still have time."

"It's not like that," she finally denied, wearily. "Amicitia's just as strict as you said. His first thought in the morning is Prince Noctis, and it's also his last."

"So it's like that," Caesar cut short. "It's none of my business. It's your life, Silia, but let me remind you that, after having saved it just a couple of times, I care about it a little bit." He went to the bed and bowed to retrieve his shirt and jacket. He began to put them on.

Silia stood looking at him from the window, arms crossed on her naked breast, desperately wishing that those hands could return to make her forget her situation, which had become, as Caesar himself had pointed out a little earlier, unmanageable.

He had to feel her gaze because, two buttons down from his collar, he stopped and raised his head. "Don't look at me like that," he said and smiled. The scar on the right side of his mouth became a deep wrinkle. "It makes me want to start again."

"Who's stopping you?" she answered, shrugging it off. "Certainly not me."

Caesar's fingers trembled for a moment, as they had trembled the first time they'd touched her seven years before, but then they resumed buttoning his jacket. "Better not. I must be honest, Silia, it was odd. It made sense on the front, but here it is just a band-aid on your wound."
Chapter Summary

Gladio and his friends receive an unexpected summons from the Citadel. Things are about to change for them, for the Glaives and for the whole Kingdom of Lucis.

9

Tertium non datur
May 9

I

The call to the Citadel announced a damn serious affair. The Council had gathered in a hurry for almost a whole day, and whatever the topic of discussion had been, Gladio couldn't understand why the four of them had been summoned, since Prompto hadn't yet taken his oath. As far as he knew, however, the rest of the Crownsguard hadn't been involved.

"This call is kinda strange, isn't it?" Prompto remarked aloud. "Perhaps we have done something? Noct, are you sure you're not hiding anything from us?"

"And what do you want me to hide?" the aforementioned answered, blinking. "I haven't seen my father for almost two weeks. I have absolutely no idea what he wants to tell us."

Gladio had some suspicions about that. Now that the Kingsglaives had returned to Insomnia there would certainly be some changes in the role of the armed groups within the city. He kept on playing around with the idea that, if the Glaives would have been relocated in Insomnia, some of them could join the Crownsguard; Silia, for example.

"Anyway," Prompto went on, "It doesn't happen so often lately that we're all hanging around in Ig's car, right? With Noct's part-time and Gladio who disappears somewhere at night turning off his phone..." He gave him a mischievous look.

Prompto was exaggerating, as always, because they'd see each other almost every day, if not every night, but he felt cut to the quick anyway. "Actually," he said cautiously, without confirming or denying, "I workout at the Training Hall."

"At night?" Noctis inquired. He usually was too involved in himself to take an interest in his private life, but that day he sounded strangely communicative.

"Even at night," Gladio confirmed, brotherly kneeing him. "It's never enough. You should do it, too."

Prompto knelt on his seat – he never fastened his seat belt – and hugged the headrest, looking at him with the air of someone who knows a lot that Gladio didn't like at all. "So, Gladio, if you're working out at night, who's Hartwood?"
This time Gladio felt the blow. "And how do you know that name?"

"Ignis mentioned her a couple of times."

Gladio gave Ignis a killer look that he hoped was intercepted through the rearview mirror. He was the only one whom he had talked to about Silia, within certain terms, of course; he had told him that, from time to time, he'd meet with a Glaive on leave – nothing ambiguous or sketchy, just a casual friendship – and that they were training together. He had been almost forced to talk to him, because at the Crownguard's headquarters, periodically jokes were raining, and they had reached even his father's ears, although not Noctis'. Gladio had wanted at least Ignis not to misunderstand. Even if, after all, perhaps there was nothing to misunderstand, and everyone had understood everything before him.

"Who's Hartwood, Gladio?" Noctis also asked.

"Oh, Gladio likes to be discreet, so everybody thinks badly," Ignis replied before he could. "She's a woman who's helping him to train," he supported him. Gladio felt grateful.

"A woman who's helping you to train?" Noctis blinked. "I never heard that name. She's not a Crownguard. Who is she?"

"Nobody. Just a friend." He could have come clean with Noctis and Prompto, at that point, and perhaps he would have done it some time before if a part of him hadn't realized it wasn't that easy. The hours he and Silia would spend together were no longer a sporadic corollary of leisure to his days, but a moment he awaited impatiently. Whatever he had tried to bury for months, he was now having trouble keeping it at bay.

"Is she pretty?" Prompto asked.

"She doesn't need to be pretty to train with me. She's agile and very skilled with the sword. She helped me to develop a couple of new techniques. Maybe sooner or later I'll introduce you guys."

"Geez, how boring," the blond said. "It seemed too good to have something to make fun of Gladio for."

They reached the Citadel without the subject, much to Gladio's relief, being further broached. They left Ignis' car in the underground parking and went up to the hall, where Claire Aulus, one of his father's most trusted attendants, was waiting for them. They took one of the elevators to reach the wing reserved for Council's meetings.

Following Claire, Gladio began to perceive a palpable nervousness around him. The woman's gestures and her tense expression, the stiffness of the employees they met along the corridor, a feeble chatter in the background, convulsive, very different from the usual frenzy that animated the Royal Chancery...

No, Gladio told himself, there is definitely something wrong.

Claire didn't bring them to the Meeting Room, as he had already guessed, but into one of the private flat where the King and the Council used to retire. That wasn't a formal summons therefore, but in a sense, it was even more alarming.

The attendant opened the door and stepped aside to let them in. That contrived nervousness infected them; they entered the room tensely, almost intimidated.

His nervousness increased when he saw the participants in that unusual conversation; the King,
seated at one end of the rectangular table that almost completely occupied the room; his father, standing next to him talking in a low voice; Rubeus Scientia, who was taking notes on a small laptop; and Cor Leonis, who was staring at the emptiness with his arms crossed, thoughtful. In the corner, behind the King, leaning against the wall, was even Captain Titus Drautos.

Everyone looked up when they entered. Claire closed the door behind them, staying outside, and Gladio took a look at the serious expressions of the men in front of him for final confirmation that something very serious had happened. As did Prompto and Ignis, he bent his back in a short bow to the King and then straightened up, waiting for instructions.

"Welcome. Please, have a seat," Ignis' uncle greeted them, closing his laptop and gesturing toward the chairs. "Prompto, we haven't met for a while. You look good." He was trying to ease the tension, but no one followed his example.

Prompto mumbled an embarrassed 'thank you' in a low voice, and was the first to move a chair and sit down. Ignis sat next to him. Noctis remained standing, staring at his father, and Gladio preferred to stay up as well. He also leaned against the wall, like Captain Drautos, and waited to find out why they were there.

The King – more and more worn out every time he met him – folded his arms, looked at them briefly, and then paused to look at his son. When Regis was young, and not many years had passed, the resemblance to Noctis was impressive. Now it was lost in the folds of time.

"What I am about to tell you," the King said, "it has not been officially released yet. Only the members of the Council, Marshal Leonis, Captain Drautos, and some of the most trusted Royal Chancery employees have been informed. I demand you not to talk to anyone until it is public domain." Gladio looked at his father, slightly arching his eyebrow, but Clarus Amicitia's face expressed no emotion. He nodded imperceptibly, perhaps inviting him to listen carefully.

"Yesterday Chancellor Ardyn Izunia requested an audience here at the Citadel. He proposed a truce between Niflheim and Lucis. The conditions are as follows: the renunciation of the territories around Insomnia in exchange for the immediate cessation of hostilities. The Council and I decided to accept."

Gladio held his breath. A truce with the Imperials. After one hundred and fifty years of open war, they had come to that. He laid his hand over his eyes.

"Do not believe," the King went on, after giving them a few seconds to process the news, "that we have not carefully evaluated each option. Your maturity goes beyond your years, as you have been required by the roles you play, and I am sure you will understand perfectly that this choice was not taken with a light heart." He was talking to them all, but it was Noctis who he was addressing to. It was the destiny of the kingdom that he was soon to govern, after all, that was at a stake.

"Almost all crown citizens have never set foot outside the city. There is a world out there that almost none of us have ever seen. The war has never touched our people, so they are used to thinking of it as an integral part of their life, but it is not like that." He gave a deep sigh. "We've been at war for four hundred years and now it's time to accept that Lucis has no choice but to treat."

The King studied them carefully. Gladio felt his throat and chest paralyze, and he couldn't react. None of his friends could. He wasn't in a good position to intercept their looks, but probably, like him, they were trying to foreshadow a world where Niflheim reigned supreme – it's already doing it, he corrected himself, only that so far we have opposed with all our strength to this situation and from now on we won't. A world where, however, the citizens of Insomnia wouldn't have need to take refuge behind a Wall erected by long-time dead kings and kept up by the power of the Crystal.
"Father." Noctis' voice, limpid, was like fresh water in a hot day. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," the King replied softly. "We didn't summon you to discuss this. Everything has been decided. The Chancellor returned to Niflheim to announce that we have accepted, and we will shortly set the date of the signing of the treaty. You are here because Emperor Aldercapt has requested a further condition that concerns you personally, Noctis."

Gladio stiffened and felt his mouth twist in a grimace. Almost without realizing it, he took a step closer to Noctis. They couldn't have dared so much, he told himself. They cannot have requested Noct as a hostage. The King would never allow it.

The King gave him a benevolent look. "Do not worry, Gladio. They do not intend to do him any harm. Iedolas Aldercapt wants the truce to be sanctioned by a marriage between the heir to the throne of Lucis and the Oracle, who has been under their formal protection for years."

Noctis opened his eyes wide. "With Luna?" he murmured, incredulous. Gladio echoed his sentiment. Noct hadn't met Princess Lunafreya for years, but they had regular correspondence, and she was the only person towards whom his friend had a transparent and deep affection. It seemed too good a story to actually be true.

King Regis nodded. Since the Chancellor had already returned to Gralea to report the decisions of the King and the Council to the Emperor, everything had already been decided. It was time for Noctis to assume his responsibilities and his duties, like all of them, even if Gladio didn't believe that this duty would have been particularly burdensome for him. He tried to hold back the smile that had come to his lips. It was not the right time.

"When?" Noct asked.

"As soon as possible. But not in Insomnia. We haven't yet communicated this to Chancellor Izunia. I decided that the wedding will be held in Altissia. You will leave in the morning of May 13th."

We will leave. Gladio remembered the first time his father had presented such a possibility to him. When he was five and wanted to be a hunter, or maybe a wizard, he hadn't decided yet. Despite the tragic situation, despite their uncertain future, the idea of leaving Insomnia aroused in him a thrill of excitement.

"Prompto Argentum." Marshal Leonis spoke for the first time, and his friend stiffened in his chair as if he had been shot. "Tomorrow you will pledge as a Crownguard. You are ready now, and we want the Prince to surround himself not with an armed retinue on his journey, but with trusted people. You will reach Galdin Quay, trying to get as little attention as possible, and from there you will take the ferry to Altissia. You shouldn't face too many troubles on your trip. Few people know your appearance outside Insomnia, Prince."

"That's all for now," his father Clarus concluded. "We still have many things to discuss. Be available in the next few days because we will need to provide you with more details. Prepare yourself for the departure properly; each of you has been trained to cope with all kinds of danger, but for the first time you will be confronted with real enemies. I have no doubt that you will know how to deal with them in the way it's best."

Ignis and Prompto stood up. Gladio couldn't wait to discuss with his friends, on their own, about all that they had just learned. But the King turned again to Noctis. "Please, Noctis, stay a little longer."

Before leaving, Gladio paused to look at Captain Drautos, intrigued. Sensing his gaze, the Captain looked at him in turn. That was the man who had turned Silia into an elite fighter. Whenever she'd
speak his name, Silia's lips curved in a reverential smile. She owed everything to that man, she had confided to him, and for a moment Gladio felt his lips bending in an admiring smile of sympathy. The Captain, living up to his reputation as an unyielding man, didn't react.

II

A quarter of an hour later, sitting at one of Sotherby's tables, protected by the background music that prevented them from listening to the conversations at the other tables and, consequently, the other customers from listening to theirs, they found themselves unable to comment. Gladio kept on opening his mouth, looking for something to say, and closing it again afterwards, disoriented. Too many radical changes were about to happen for them to succeed in coming to terms with them.

"I'll have to pack all my kitchen tools," Ignis said, more to himself than to the others. "Just because we'll leave Insomnia, it's not a good reason to eat junk food at the service stations every day. And you shall deal with the camping equipment, Gladio, since you already have everything. We'll also have to bring our fishing gear. And exchange the currency before leaving. What car shall we take?"

Scratching his hairline, Gladio bit his lip. "Ignis, I envy your simple practicality. I cannot help but think about the end of a war that has been going on for four hundred years, that asshole Fedolas Aldercapt's smug smile, and people outside Insomnia."

Ignis blinked, focused. "We can think about the war and also the practical aspects of the journey, Gladio. One thing does not exclude the other, and we cannot leave unprepared."

"Even if that's true, I would think about weapons before pots."

"...tomorrow I'll pledge as a Crownguard."

Gladio gave a guilty look at Prompto and, he saw, Ignis also stifled his embarrassment with a mannered cough. Amid the chaos of news and communications, that – one of the few positive ones – had fallen by the wayside.

Not for Prompto, of course, who continued to smile blissfully. "I couldn't wait," he said. "I know I started training a lot later than you, but you both swore at eighteen and..." He lowered his head, and the bangs hid his eyes. "...I felt behind. I thought this moment would never come."

Gladio felt a deep movement of fraternal affection towards him. Although Prompto's enthusiasm was often irritating, Gladio was smart enough to notice that his manners aimed at filling that distance that Prompto himself kept from them. Perhaps it was because his nonchalant adoptive parents had never infused him with self-confidence, perhaps because of the uncertainty about his origins. Prompto had joined their group a few years before, and Gladio had come to love him as a third younger brother after having overcome an initial period of aversion, which perhaps, on closer inspection, concealed a certain amount of jealousy. He leaned over to ruffle his hair. "Congrats, Prompto. And don't worry, everyone has his own time. You're an extraordinary sniper, don't feel any less than us."

Prompto didn't answer, but blushed. "I will do my best to protect Noct," he declared, "at the cost of my own life. Even if he doesn't deserve Lady Lunafreya at all."

They laughed. The tension had been eased, and Gladio lifted his already cold coffee to his lips. "I agree. But I suspect that he'll hold with the princess a very different attitude than the one he reserves for us."
"I can't wait to see you, Luna," Prompto mocked Noctis, still laughing, quoting a phrase from the diary that the two exchanged through Umbra. A few months before, they had managed to pry it from his hands. "What I wouldn't give to read that diary now that their wedding has been arranged."

"Come on, guys, don't be indiscreet," Ignis reproached them. "I'm really glad for him; for her as well. Lady Lunafreya had a very unfortunate life. She deserves some happiness. And then, when Noct will be settled down, we can breathe and stop being his unwed escort."

Gladio choked on the last remaining coffee in his cup. He began to cough. "Ig," he gasped, "Stop talking nonsense. This voyage is anything but a pleasure trip. We should stay focused."

He said it more vehemently than he had intended. Instead of amusing him, Ignis' jokes had thrown a hood of anxiety and depression on him. A few days before he had allowed himself to think that perhaps, without forgetting his place and his obligations and his priorities and his family, perhaps, with the temporary return of the Kingsglaives to Insomnia, perhaps, who knows, he could begin to imagine a future where Silia was there as well. He had restrained at the last second from telling her, and again because she had given him a warlike, imploring, almost frightened look. Good thing she did, because now everything had changed. Now it was him who had to leave Insomnia.

Those thoughts made him feel disgustingly mean, and he felt even meaner when he saw that Ignis, his head leaning against his hand, was looking at him with irritation. "I was joking, Gladio," he said, with a sour hint in his voice. "Why are you so upset?"


"Sorry," he tried to defend himself. He liked to think he was the leader of the group, but sometimes the brattiest of them all was just him. "It's just that they dropped on us too much news today."

His friends didn't answer. Gladio glanced at his phone screen; it was half past six. He tried to call Noctis, but he didn't answer.

"Nothing?" Prompto asked.

"No. Well, no point in waiting for him any longer." Gladio pursed his lips and mentally started to list all the needed arrangements for their departure. It was not just about weapons and baggage. There was the itinerary to be planned meticulously, taking into account that outside Insomnia they wouldn't find supermarkets, hotels and service stations at all paces. There was other summons to the Citadel to be expected, because in fact, at that moment, they only knew that a truce would be signed and that they would leave on the 13th in the morning, just four days later.

He had the feeling that if he could not intercept Silia that night, he wouldn't see her again before leaving Insomnia. He stood up, looking for his wallet to pay. "I'll go, dudes. Given the short notice, I've to go for some errands. Stay in touch. Tomorrow evening we celebrate Prompto and his entry into the Guard."

He held out his fist, and Prompto struck him happily with his, smiling. "Will there be any girls?"

"No. Only the four of us males," he replied, winking, and left a few gil on the table. "Start getting used to it. A long car trip awaits us. Only us."

Prompto snorted, disappointed, theatrically prostrating onto the table. "Sooo boring..."

"Gladio..." Ignis grabbed him gravely, placing his hand on his forearm as he passed by. Gladio was sure that his friend knew perfectly that he was going to find Silia and that he would tell her all they had been ordered not to divulge. He opened his mouth to justify, to deny, but Ignis tightened his grip
on his arm.

"If you go to the mall, I need a new saucepan. Medium sized. I am afraid that mine is too
cumbersome to carry with us."

III

He waited for her for an hour. It was eight o'clock by then, and every minute he was losing sitting at
one of Samuel's tables watching the entrance was a minute away from the preparations for his
departure. But Silia still didn't answer her phone.

"I'm sorry, Amicitia," Samuel said teasingly, bringing an unrequested beer to his table. "Your
girlfriend blew you off today, uh? I shouldn't say that, but maybe it's better this way. The customers
got used to her, but five damned Glaives in uniform sitting here is a whole different matter."

Gladio was annoyed by his intrusiveness and by the lightness with which he spoke of Glaives by,
but then he had to remind himself that the bartender, in spite of his grouchy attitude of an angry
landlord, in those months had shown Silia cordiality and a concern not granted. So he forced a smile,
lifted the beer to his lips, and winked. "My girlfriend? Hartwood? If she hears you, she breaks your
place to pieces. We weren't supposed to meet, anyway. I just dropped in to see if she was here."

At that moment, his cell phone on the table rang. Gladio straightened up, grabbing it. It was her.

"Hello? I saw you were looking for me, Gladio."

Gladio took a deep breath to calm himself. "Yeah. I... dropped by Samuel's. I was hoping to find
you. Where are you, Silia?"

He heard feeble background music. "Hm," she took time hesitantly. "Near your house, actually. I
don't know how, but Sarah managed to drag me to some kind of party. Since, we can say, we are in
a deadlock..." She sounded embarrassed. "I won't stay for long," she justified herself. "Just to see
what happens."

"Wait, stop." A party. Near his home. Oh, for the Astrals. Cornelia Doge. Cornelia Doge and her
fucking parties. With all that had happened, Gladio had forgotten that it was a day like any other, for
ordinary people, and that Cornelia Doge last week had sent to his home another invitation for the
umpteenth party that, as usual, they had snubbed. "The villa with the stone lions on the gate?"

"That's the one," Silia confirmed. "I escaped to the terrace with a glass of wine. Caesar, Legato and
Samuel have refused to come. So Sarah demanded that I accompany her. She said that I had a good
time here in the city for months and that I could do her this favor. I couldn't say no."

While she was talking, Gladio was already on the street and was looking for the car keys. "How did
you get the invitation?"

"We didn't crash, if that's what you're thinking. Sarah met the landlady, I don't know when and
where, these past few days. Cornelia Doge, I believe you probably know her. She invited her, saying
to bring a friend or two, because she liked the idea of having some Kinsglaives at her party. She must
have run out of little monkeys in tutus to be thrown to the guests."

Typical of Cornelia Doge. Gladio started the car. "Good. I'm coming to save you."

"Ah." He didn't expect an explosion of joy, but not even an expression so lukewarm. "There's no
need, Gladio," she said dryly.
"There's need, indeed. I had a rough day and I want to have a glass of wine." He laid the phone between his shoulder and his ear, speeding up. "Cornelia Doge had invited me and my family, but it was completely pushed out of my head until now."

"No, Gladio," she replied. "I'm about to leave. Seriously. I'll stay only ten minutes."

"Silia." Her name came out with a sound a little too much like a prayer. "Don't leave. Wait for me there."

He heard her sigh. "Okay," she gave up. "You'll find me on the terrace."

**IV**

"Here you are."

Gladio approached her and leaned against the balustrade too. He wore the uniform of the Crownsguard, and was a little breathless, as if he had run. He handed a glass of wine to her.

"Thank you. How come in high uniform, Gladio?"

He scratched his hairline, lifting his glass to his lips, but didn't answer her question. "How are you doing, here?"

"Good. Sarah left an hour ago with a guy. Whoever he is, I owe him one."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Because at least she won't see us together."

"Silia, enough." He looked her in the eye. "What do you care? Let them talk. I don't care."

If Gladio had added only one more word, Silia would have left. She shouldn't have waited for him. After what Caesar had told her, two nights before, she didn't feel like she could face such a conversation with him. Amputation without anesthesia Cee had recommended to her, and here she was, drinking wine on the terrace with him, the two of them alone, at an elegant party.

"Are you enjoying the party?" he asked.

Silia shook her head. "Too many elegant people. Too much attention. I put on the Glaives' uniform because I didn't have a proper suit for the occasion. Look where it led us; when we got here, our hostess took us by the arms and showed us around like purebred parrots. Sarah was already drunk and did nothing but laugh. As for me, I don't think there is a high enough amount of alcohol to make me find the situation amusing." She emptied her glass. The party was embarrassing, but she had never drunk such a good red wine.

Gladio laughed. "Cornelia is a weirdo. She belongs to the old aristocracy of the city. If you knew what my grandmother used to say of her." He paused, thoughtfully, looking into the darkness beyond the balustrade. Silia wondered what was going on in his head. His voice on the phone had sounded strange to her. But she was feeling strange too. Once more, she missed the simple relationship they had a few months earlier, a complicity of camaraderie without shadows, devoid of implications.

"Listen" he began to say, but at that moment the windows of the balcony opened wide and a middle-aged couple came out, stopping a few meters away from them. The woman, very elegant, was
fanning herself. The orchestra had just started to play the *Valse of Fantastica*.

"The Valse of Fantastica," Gladio whispered with a smile. "What do you think about it?"

Silia blinked. "What do I think about what?"

Without any warning, Gladio grabbed her hand and dragged her inside.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she hissed. People were staring at them, and it was not the time to put her foot down and make a scene, or she would attract even more attention.

Gladio didn't listen to her. He put his arm around her waist, continuing to lead her to the center of the room, where other couples were already dancing. "Guess what? We are going to dance."

Silia tried to escape, turning her head so that he couldn't realize she was embarrassed. "You are insane."

He tightened his grip on her waist. "Can't you dance the waltz? It's very easy."

"I never danced and I won't start tonight."

"Don't make me beg."

"You don't have to. I refuse."

Gladio didn't listen to her, continuing to hug her waist. *We cannot go on this way*, she told herself while he turned her and took her hand. *We must not meet any longer.*

Gladio took her other hand and put it on his own shoulder, then hugged her again between her scapulas. Suddenly she thought of every time she had teased him, when she wasn't yet aware of how much she was attracted to him, and how she had once enjoyed his childish embarrassment. Now he was the cool one, the adult. He bent over her, whispering in her ear. "Just picture a square on the floor. One, two, three. One, two, three. C'mon, I'm sure you've learned more complex combat moves. This is a trifle. Step back. Step in diagonal. Step forward. One, two, three, one, two, three…"

"Enough, Gladio" she said weakly, but she began to follow his movements. It wasn't easy because Gladio was much taller than her. *A square on the floor*, she told herself.

"Don't look at the floor," he whispered. "Look at me."

He was right. She had learned more difficult fighting moves. The movements of the waltz were symmetric, fluid, repetitive, and soon she stopped paying attention to her steps and began to follow the rhythm.

"Look at me."

She looked at him. Gladio was staring at her, impenetrable, his mouth in a staid, melancholic smile. She gave up to the music, to his hands, and even let him spin her around. After an indefinite amount of time – one minute? five? – the orchestra slowed the rhythm, turning the waltz into a slow dance. Silia tried to get rid of his grip, but Gladio held her, shifting his hand down her back and moving her closer to him. Silia shivered when she touched his chest with her forehead.

"Enough, Gladio," she hissed with a raspy voice. "Is your father here somewhere as well?"

"No, he's not here. The King's Council has been gathering since yesterday. The Crownsguard is busy. Tomorrow the King will make a substantial announcement," he murmured, his breath on her
"What...?"

"Not now. We'll talk about it later. But I'll have to leave Insomnia soon, and we probably won't meet for a long time, so Silia, for the Astrals' sake, turn off your brain for ten minutes and dance with me. I believe it won't happen ever again."

"Gladio, I don't..."

Gladio closed his eyes, clutching his grip on her back. His tone was sweet, soothing. "Silia, please. Don't say a word."

She humored him. She closed her eyes too, following the slow pace of the orchestra, trying not to think to King Regis' announcement, to Gladio's next departure, to the simple fact that they couldn't let others see them, they couldn't stay so close, they couldn't keep up that way. She only listened to the music, Gladio's breath against her ear, the heat of his hand on her back, his familiar smell.

V

She washed her face one, two, three times. The restroom was larger than her two-room apartment, clean and scented, in white and gray marble. An elegant restroom of old times. When she felt she had calmed down, she turned around, leaning her back to the edge of the sink. She ran her fingers through her wet hair.

*I feel sick,* she thought. *I should have listened to Cee. Amputation without anesthesia.*

She took a deep breath. She was ashamed of herself; she was a professional, a war veteran, and she was behaving like a stupid little chick. She was a Coeurl, not a Kitty. She would leave that privy and face Gladio Amiticia.

He was waiting for her at the end of the hallway. He raised his head as she approached and smiled, but it was a forced smile.

"Let's leave, Silia, I don't want to talk about certain matters here."

*And I don't want to talk in a secluded place with you.* She tried to mitigate the terms, to resize everything to a healthy and daily normality. "All right. Let's go to Samuel's, then."

Gladio shook his head briskly. "No, not to Samuel's. Let's go to your place, if you don't mind."

"I don't think so" she replied in a breathless voice, unable to stop. Gladio blinked as if she had smacked him. She covered her mouth with her hand, repented, and shook her head. "I mean, Gladio, I don't want to go home yet," she lied.

He scratched his hairline, turning his gaze away from her. "It's okay. In any case I didn't mean-nothing, forget about it. But not the tavern, Silia. I cannot talk freely there. Follow me."

King Regis' announcement had to be particularly serious. She followed him, being careful that people didn't see them leave together, and she noticed with relief that Gladio wanted the same thing. "Go ahead," he whispered in her ear as they walked down the stairs. "We'll meet outside. Walk to the next avenue to the right, in front of the mansion with the horse statues in the garden. There's a lodge for the caretaker, but it's empty at this time, and the owners are here at the party. Wait for me there."
This excess of discretion, after they had danced together in front of who knows how many people, surprised and worried her. She nodded, and walked over to where he had told her. She could hear the cheery voices of the people who were leaving the party, but nobody saw her standing behind the lodge of the mansion that Gladio had recommended to her. A few minutes later he also appeared. For a moment Silia felt again uncomfortable for being in such an isolated spot alone with him, but Gladio gestured her to follow him and they set off.

They walked for a long time, both in silence, up to an elegant club that was still open. The sign read Liberty. Either of them hadn't a proper suit, but the maitre who welcomed them had to know Gladio, because he didn't comment and accompanied them to a quiet table at the end of the room.

"Sorry if I took you to such a place," he said, a bit embarrassed. "But I couldn't think of anywhere else. No one will disturb us here."

Silia smiled in order to take the edge off. "You usually bring your high-up ladies here for dinner, don't you?"

Gladio clouded. "I bring here my sister," he said, more acidic than needed. "But yes, I just happened to have dinner with some women here. Not lately. Is this a problem?"

"Gladio, enough." Silia saw a waiter in a black suit approaching them, and she felt uncomfortable.

"What are you having, Silia?"

"Nothing," she replied.

"Two whiskeys," Gladio said, as if she hadn't spoken. When the waiter departed, he turned to her. He moistened his lips, scratched his forehead for the umpteenth time, and leaned his chin on the palm of his hand. "I can tell you that you'll need it. Silia, what I am about to tell you hasn't been disclosed yet, even if it will be shortly, and it's an extremely delicate and confidential matter. If anyone finds out that I gave you this information, I'll be in trouble. Today an emissary from Niflheim came to offer their conditions for the yield."

"The yield?" Silia exclaimed.

Gladio nodded. "And King Regis decided to accept. He will sign the cease-fire."

Silia covered her mouth with her hand, hissed and asked, "What?"

"You understood well. The terms of the armistice, down to the bare bones, are as follows: immediate surrender of all cities and territories except for the city of Insomnia in exchange for the cessation of hostilities."

In addition to her sense of decency, the front, as Caesar had well noted, had anesthetized a wide range of their emotions. Between those there was panic, because you can't survive in war for ten years — you can't survive sane — without being able to turn that landslide that crashes upon you blocking your movements, blinding you and voiding your judgment in a gust of wind that scarcely straightens the hairs of your arms and neck. A Kingsglaive who wished to stay alive could allow himself to feel discouragement, rage, little nervousness, but not fear. And Silia, although she was prepared to die, had no intention to do it.

During her nine years and a half on the front, once she had overcome the first adjustment period, when she'd found out that you can get used to everything, very few times she hadn't been able to stop that landslide, with some justifiable exceptions. When she had seen Hans falling, for instance, the landslide had dragged her so much that she had torn out her ear-bud from which the Captain still
cawed the retreat order. She had crossed half the battlefield to reach him, although it was clear that he had died, even from that distance. She had loaded his corpse onto her shoulders and it was only thanks to her Squad 6 comrades' disobedience and Sarah's unfailing aim that the corpses to be recovered hadn't become two. For weeks after Hans' death she had struggled with her claws and teeth to learn again how to turn the landslide in a gust of wind. When she had woken up in the infirmary without her leg, in spite of the morphine and the healing spells, the landslide had crashed upon her again, and all her thoughts had nullified in an only, incontrovertible fact: I can't fight anymore. Only Captain Drautos' arrival had prevented her from going nuts.

Now she wasn't on the front anymore, but in an elegant restaurant with black-suited waiters. There wasn't a jormungand before her, but Gladio Amicitia, whom by now she'd known for months and toward whom she had feelings she couldn't deny anymore. It was not a danger that threatened her life and her comrades', but the news that King Regis, whom she had sworn loyalty to when she was a kid, was saving Insomnia, as his father Mors had done before him, by sacrificing the rest of his kingdom and all people who lived in it, and that Emperor Aldercapt would shortly rein undisputed over all Eos. The landslide fell upon her head and she didn't manage to stop it. She stood up by one step, knocking over her chair.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Silia!" Gladio scolded her with a harsh, low voice, making an exasperate gesture with his hand. "Calm down, you fool!"

He had never called her that before, but he was perfectly right. She leaned a hand on her chest; her breath had turned into short wheezes. She realized she was sweating and looked around to remind herself where she was. Then she noticed the chair on the floor and struggled to bend to pick it up without fainting.

She raised it up and sat down, leaning both her hands on the table to calm her dizziness. She felt Gladio's hand on hers and, although she was in a panic attack, she understood that she had to move her hand, that she couldn't allow him to touch her again.

"Calm down, Silia, please," he whispered. "Not here."

She nodded. She closed her eyes and took one deep breath after another. She pulled out her hand from his and took off her uniform jacket. The smell of her own sweat, aroused by that gesture, nauseated her. The same waiter of just before conveniently brought their whiskeys on a tray, pretending not to have heard the noise of the chair and her gross yell. She thanked him half-voice, and waited for him to leave before half-emptying her glass and starting to talk again. The landslide started to melt.

"Okay" she said, shifting her hair from her sweaty forehead, "Okay. I feel better. I feel good. I'm sorry. I overreacted. But..." She scratched her head furiously. "Gladio, this is huge. And unexpected."

Gladio nodded solemnly. "It won't be a very popular decision, I am aware of it. Everybody is, including the King."

"This is a euphemism, Gladio. Disorders and scuffles will happen. Perhaps Insomnia's people will be okay with this; what are they going to lose? Not a fucking thing, indeed, it'll be the end of the war for them. But for the people who live in the borderlands? For Kingsglaives' relatives? D'you have any idea about what this means?"

"There was no choice, Silia."
Silia hugged her shoulders in a gesture of defeat. "There's always a choice."

Gladio hit the table with his open hand. "What do you think? I don't like this armistice. My father doesn't like it. I can tell you the King doesn't like it. But we've been in war since before our great-great parents were born."

*And we have lost it,* Silia completed for him. "So do you support this decision? Emperor Aldercapt is a tyrant," she replied, with an incredibly bitter flavor in her mouth. "D'you think he'll be a just ruler with the cities that Lucis once owned? I've felt it on my head. With this armistice, King Regis has drawn a line between first-rate subjects and second-rate subjects that can be sacrificed for the common good."

Gladio looked away, a sign that he tacitly shared what she had just said. "I know King Regis personally. If he has accepted the terms, he must have weighted the decision and discarded all the alternatives. Have you no confidence in him?"

Silia sighed. Now that the landslide had melted, she was feeling empty. "Of course I trust him, Gladio. I don't share his decision, but I have made an oath." She leaned her right hand on her chest. "I've sworn to serve King Regis Lucis Caelum and the Kingdom. That's what I will do. It's not up to me to contest his decisions."

To her surprise, Gladio shook his head, annoyed. "Silia, you aren't in front of Captain Drautos. You don't have to swear before me, I'll never doubt your loyalty to the kingdom. We are just two friends who are talking open-heartedly."

"And I'm telling you what I think open-heartedly. I don't like this business and I don't trust Niflheim. Ambrosia has been already lost for years, but I cannot help but think about the other cities that will follow Ambrosia's fate for a weighted decision, cities where my comrades have a family. But it's necessary to make difficult sacrifices in war. I am a soldier and nobody knows it better than me."

At those words, Gladio smiled. "If there were more people like you to fight for the kingdom, Silia, we would have won this war a long time ago," he said, with a sudden sweet voice.

Silia felt she had blushed. She finished her whiskey. "When will the treaty be signed? Where?"

"Here in Insomnia, in a few days. The date has not yet been officially fixed."

"And what about your departure?"

Gladio nodded, tilting his head. "Niflheim wants to cement the armistice with a marriage between Noctis and Princess Lunafreya."

"Really? Good thing, this one, at least. So good to be suspicious."

"You won't suspect Princess Lunafreya, I hope. If there's someone heavily affected by this war, that's her."

"I don't suspect Princess Lunafreya. That poor girl is just a booty of war. I don't want to think about her. Prisoner in her same home, her brother at the command of the army who invaded and absorbed their country, and now she's been sold as pledge for a truce." She closed her eyes. "At least Prince Noctis will treat her properly, won't he?"

Gladio smiled. As always, when he talked about prince Noctis he had the stern and tender air of a big brother. "Noct, it's just between the both of us, is happy with this marriage. He and Princess Lunafreya have known each other since their childhood and I really believe that..." He smiled,
scratching his eyebrow. "Yes, this could be the happiest combined marriage in the history."

Silia also smiled. "Well, at least someone will gain from this situation."

"I'll leave with Noctis, Ignis and Prompto on the 13th. We'll drive Noctis to Galdin Quay, then we'll take the ferry to Altissia. The wedding ceremony will be held there."

"Altissia? Why not Insomnia?"

Gladio turned his gaze away. "I don't know everything, I'm a member of the Crownsguard, not of the King's Council. I can only suppose that King Regis somehow looks for the consent of the Secretary of Altissia."

"Accordo is subjugated to Niflheim," Silia pointed out.

"But it's quite independent."

"Who knows of your departure?"

"Few, including your Captain, and it must continue to be like that."

Silia blinked. "Did you meet Captain Drautos?"

"Yeah. There was him and Marshal Leonis. They are both formidable warriors, hard and inflexible men, but..." Gladio rubbed his eyebrow. "I don't know. They don't look alike."

"I can't tell you. I never spoke to Marshal Leonis. I've come across him a couple of times, though." She pursed her lips. "What will happen to the Glaives? There won't be the front anymore and for the defense of Insomnia the City Guard and the Crownsguard will be enough."

He shrugged slightly. "I don't know, Silia. There won't be a front anymore, but I doubt your army will be dismantled. There aren't many with your skills. You are the military elite of Lucis. Anyway, you can always apply for the Crownsguard." He winked at her.

"Gladio..." she said, pushing back the chair.

"Come on, don't leave, I just wanted to make fun of you. I don't think you'll be unemployed anyway. If there's something we'll always need, unfortunately, it's someone able to fight. But, Silia..." He laid his chin on his hand. "Do you ever wonder how it would be a different life? Have you ever thought about it?"

She shook her head. "No, I never ask myself, because I don't know a different way of life. Leaving the front has already been a radical change for me. And you, Gladio? Have you ever wondered what a normal life would have been like, untied from Lucis' royal family?"

Gladio frowned, as if he didn't expect a question similar to the one he had addressed to her. "It's quite different for me. Noctis, you know, is a friend, even before he's my protégé. I cannot imagine a life without Noctis. And I cannot imagine myself a friend of Noctis without being his Shield."

He wasn't telling her anything new. "Well, Gladio" she tried to change the subject, "A nice trip on the road awaits you. Four men and a car. You'll have fun, after all. "Better this way, she told herself, that's what we need. He won't be back for a long time, if he'll come back, and everything will be easier, between us, more normal."

As an answer, Gladio stretched an arm across the table and touched her fingers. "I'll miss our drinks
at Samuel's, Silia. I'm sorry for how I behaved before. Draggin' you to dance, I mean. I asked you not to leave because I wanted to talk. I know I wasn't authorized, but I had to tell someone, and I trust you."

Silia withdrew her hand. "You don't have to apologize. Nothing happened," she forced herself to say. And really nothing had happened, but, for the umpteenth time, they had moved a step closer to that limit they didn't have to cross.

Gladio smiled. "Anyway I had a point. Swordsmen hardly aren't skilled dancers as well. While you were in the restroom, Cornelia Doge came to greet me. She was ecstatic, but also regretted that my charming partner didn't have an equally beautiful dress. She was right. I couldn't help but wonder all the time how you would have looked in a long, low-cut dress."

"Ridiculous," Silia cut to the chase, feeling uncomfortable. "Anyway, it's very late, Gladio. And after what you've told me, I think that crucial days awaits me. I've to go. I need to sleep on what you told me." A clear cut, she told herself. *Amputation without anesthesia.* She got up, then, with embarrassment, she realized she couldn't put the consummations on her account as she did at Samuel's. And she had no money with her.

Gladio emptied his glass and stood up too. "Of course it's on me. My family often comes to this place. But, Silia, in the next few days I'll have a lot to do to arrange the departure, so I don't think..."

He didn't finish his sentence, but she understood. "Is this the last time we meet?"

Gladio looked at her piercingly. "Probably."

Silia pursed her lips. *Amputation without anesthesia,* she repeated. "Then let's say goodbye." She held out her hand, friendly. "Good luck, Gladio."

He sighed and then tightened his lips, but came closer to shake her hand. It was not an energetic and warm squeeze like the usual ones. Gladio lingered for a long time with his fingers around hers, staring into her eyes. "See you soon, Silia. I'll get in touch as soon as possible. Good luck to you too. Be careful."

"Thanks for the whiskey, Gladio."

"Thanks to you, Silia, for everything."

He didn't suggest to drive her home, and she didn't wait for him. When she was out of the restaurant, she lit a cigarette with trembling hands. Not seeing each other for a while will clear our minds. *Anesthetized amputation.*
The news she had learned from Gladio didn't take long to reach everyone else the next day. What she would have never expected was that it didn't come from Captain Drautos, accompanied by the due assurances about their future and the fate of their families and friends outside the Wall, but from the laconic voice of an announcer on the news, on a TV that happened to be on in the common room of the Kingsglaives' headquarters.

Silia was muzzy after spending a sleepless night crumpling the sheets, torn between conjectures and worries and in the grip of the uncontrollable temptation to activate the transmitter and look for the frequency of Legato, Caesar, Sarah and Sam to prepare them for the news. She was leaning against the wall, listening absently to the chatter of the others when Neil yelled to shut up and had run to raise the volume as much as possible. Disconcerted, she had listened to the news of the truce and the related unilateral conditions, without being yet able to believe that undeserved slap, that insult added to the injury. Her comrades had been informed of the fate of the kingdom together with the common crown citizens.

The announcement was listened to in a surreal silence. Silia, already prepared for the news, scrutinized the predictable reactions of her teammates and the others'; their mouths contracted in a shocked and indignant grimace, their eyes focused on the screen, the tendons of their necks tense as if they were preparing to warp against an enemy. She was ready to witness the righteous indignation of the Glaives, but their first – still stunned – remonstrance aloud, when someone managed to produce them, were sedated by Captain Drautos' sudden arrival.

"Glaives! Assemble in the briefing room," he ordered, coming out into the common room. "Now," he added impatiently as Altius tried to ask him something.

Two minutes later, neatly lined up at attention with their arms behind their back, they listened in disbelief to the Captain's feeble explanations, nothing more than what the newscast had said and, if anything, less than what Gladio had told her. The Captain had always been inscrutable, but sporadically in those fifteen years had abandoned himself to gestures of confidence with them; at that moment more than ever, they would have needed to be told that they hadn't been neglected. Although she was already aware of the news, she felt her face petrified with indignation.
If she was indignant, Libertus Ostium was out of his mind. He had always been a passionate man, to the point of often endangering himself and his comrades on the field because of his lack of clarity, and he was the only one to reply.

"But your home's out there too!"

"It is," the Captain answered, without a break. The story of Titus Drautos was the story of almost all of them, one of the reasons why they had followed him with blind trust and obedience. Thirty years earlier his village, in the northeastern archipelago of the Cavaugh region, had been invaded and absorbed by the Empire.

"Why would the King do this?" Libertus insisted, giving voice to the question everyone had on their lips and for which everyone already knew the answer.

Silia expected a violent reprimand, an exemplary punishment, especially since Libertus had leveraged on Captain's personal history, but there was none. Perhaps, after all, he knew they had every reason. "Because it'll end this damn war," he only answered bitterly, turning around. Silia could no longer recognize him.

"Crowe!" he ordered, when it seemed like he would leave without further explanations.

"Sir!" The girl straightened up quickly.

"Prepare to deploy. You're being sent to infiltrate Tenebrae."

"Tenebrae, Sir?"

"Mission details are classified. Report to my office for briefing in thirty minutes. And, Nyx, you're off the west gate. You've been reassigned to the castle guard. That is all."

Still stunned and amazed, they broke the lines as the Captain was still moving away. Silia turned to talk to Legato, next to her, but Libertus furiously moved forward, hobbling himself with his crutches.

"So this is what you were talking about, Luche?" he shouted, when the Captain still had to be within earshot. Probably the two of them had previously talked.

"You heard the Captain," Luche replied, calm as always, without letting himself be provoked. Luche, Nyx and Libertus had known each other for a lifetime; they had come together from Galahad. "This wasn't our decision to make."

"Not ours to make?" Libertus pounced on his comrade, but Tredd stopped him. "Those are our homes out there! Our people! And you're just gonna go along with this and abandon them?"

"If we don't go along with them, the Empire will unleash all hell on Insomnia."

"We'll unleash it right back on them!"

_Fucking empty chitchat._ The Empire had been beating the shit out of them for decades. Libertus could shout as much as he wanted, the situation didn't change. No matter how you looked at it, there was no way to escape unscathed and, though the idea was repugnant, the Captain had a point: though humiliating, it would be the end of a war that had been going on for too long, and not the worst. The Kingsglaives had failed.

"That fucking Libertus," Caesar snapped in a low voice. "He cannot control himself, that idiot."

"Well, he's right." Sarah crossed her arms, biting her bottom lip. Certainly she was thinking about her
sister's and mother's futures and Silia felt an affection that extinguished when she heard her following 
words. "Of course you can't understand, you don't have relatives outside."

It was an unjust and unhappy sentence, even if uttered in a moment of discouragement, and Caesar 
replied harshly before she could do it. "Don't be such a bitch. Don't talk as if we didn't give a damn."

"And you don't talk as if we were all in the same situation. Lydia and my mother are out there. 
Who's left for you?"

Their team had always been very close, especially because for almost two years they had been only 
six, but Caesar and Sarah would frequently squabble. As a rule it was up to her or Legato to 
intervene to reason with them, but at that moment she felt so frustrated that she would only make 
matters worse. "Look, I'm going out to smoke," she said resentfully.

She came down the hallway almost running, to prevent them from following her, up to the inner 
courtyard. Sarah and Caesar, Libertus, Luche and Furia were not the only ones who were arguing 
heatedly. She heard angry murmurs, over-the-top tones, some blasphemy. The news had divided the 
Kingsglaives.

She came across the courtyard on the right up to a pallet of bags of cement out of sight. The new 
headquarters would have been a beautiful building, when the refurbishing works had been 
completed, provided that the Kingsglaives would still be there. She had feared the dissolution of the 
army by decision of the King, but at that point it could also be Niflheim to request it as a collateral 
condition to the ceasefire. It may already have happened and they didn't know it yet.

She sat on a sack, running her fingers through her hair in an exasperated gesture, and lit the cigarette 
she held between her lips. She remained with her eyes closed, smoking and trying to clear her mind 
to concentrate.

On what? We have no orders, we have no directives. For the first time, the Captain seems not to 
know what the hell he's doing.

A still distant sound of heavy footsteps caught her attention. Silia recognized Marius from the corner 
of her eye. He also had a cigarette between his lips and was looking around. From where he was, he 
could not have yet seen her, and she didn't want to talk to him, in case he was looking for her. So, 
she slipped down the bag and took refuge with her cigarette in the gap between a stack of crates and 
the wall.

Marius was approaching and Silia hurriedly put out the cigarette, flattening herself against the wall. 
She heard the noise of a second pair of boots on the ground of the courtyard: someone had reached 
him. Furia probably, or maybe Bellum.

"Where are you going?" It was Luche Lazarus' voice.

"Can't I smoke when I want, now?" Marius replied polemically.

"Answer the transmitter when you're called, Marius." She didn't understand that new authoritarian 
nuance in Luche's voice. "You know we must always be available in these days."

"I know. But I couldn't answer in front of everyone. At what time?"

"At seven o'clock."

Silia wondered when Luche had become so familiar with Marius. She had never seen them interact 
so much but, after all, if they wanted to have a beer together or to chase tails, it was their fucking
business. She only hoped they would go and talk about it elsewhere so that she could walk away freely.

"Is that really necessary?"

Luche's voice was as sharp as a mesmerize's sword. "Do you want to back out?"

"Never ask that again."

Silia remained motionless, listening. It was not a simple guys' night.

"Then stop asking unnecessary questions."

Their steps began to move away, then one of the two Glaives stopped.

"Who else is in?" Marius asked.

"Certainly not your friend."

"She's not my friend and I don't give a shit. That was not what I meant."

Luche's voice softened. "Marius, there's nothing wrong. We are not monsters. And I am the first to find it a waste of precious skills in a world where there are too few of us able to fight, but there is no choice. Remember what's at stake."

The steps resumed moving.

What the fuck did I just hear? Silia waited a few more seconds before leaning out from behind the crates. Are they planning something against the Empire during the signing of the treaty? A new white noise began to buzz at the back of her head, and this time it was not Gladio.

At that moment her transmitter activated.

"Where have you been?"

"Smoking in the courtyard, like I told you. Can't I?" she replied sourly to Sarah. She leaned over to look into the courtyard, but Marius and Luche had moved away.

"Don't be hysterical. I'm with Sam and Legato. We're going to have a beer in your bar. We cannot talk about this shitty treaty while sober."

Jeez, now I'm the hysterical one, she thought, but she didn't say it. "What about Cee? Where is he?"

"With Nyx, trying to reason with Libertus. We'll tell him to join us there. See you at the main entrance."

II

The mood at the tavern was excited for the news of the armistice. Many customers, predictably, toasted the truce, but not all of them. Even the crown citizens, after all, were divided. When a festive voice broke away from the indistinct confusion, Silia and the others fell silent, their lips tight.

"How can they be happy with this shit?" Sarah whispered between her teeth, her hand trembling while holding the mug.
Silia recalled her depressing rendezvous with Balthier a few months earlier. She wondered if he, too, was celebrating the truce with his wife, or if the idea of an armistice with the superpower he had fought against for four years and because of which he had been mutilated disgusted him as much as them. Everybody only wishes the King to keep the Wall erected for a few more years, then his son will do it, and then his son's son. His children, she realized. In that exact moment Balthier was certainly thanking the Six because his children, with that truce, would know peace.

She looked up to peer at her comrades, worried that some of them would react to other customers' looks. A tall man with graying hair and a mocking air, in particular, that she knew to be a regular of the place, kept turning to their table, looking for a quarrel. Even Samuel – the bartender – kept looking nervously at them. It really had been a bad idea to come there.

Caesar joined them more than an hour later, and he was not alone: Nyx Ulric, the hero, deigned them of his presence. Silia gave a warning look to Sarah, and her friend had understood perfectly because she shrugged; she would not reopen the hostility with Caesar.

"Hello." Her comrade retrieved two stools from the near table and sat next to Sarah. He too, apparently, didn't intend to get back to arguing. "I hope you don't mind if I brought the hero with me."

"A hero downgraded to the City Guard," Nyx complained, sitting down next to Caesar. Silia gave him the finger, and Nyx smiled, raising his hands in an apologetic gesture. "Forgive me, Coeurl. I know you had to do this for more than six months. Anyway I find you well, in the civilized world, without mud and blood on your attire. How's the prosthesis?"

"Better than the real leg, but at the cost of months of hell." Silia sucked it up and held out her hand, which he squeezed energetically. They were not really friends, she and Nyx, partly because – as her and her former Squad 6 teammates used to – he tended to isolate himself with Libertus, Altius and Luche. Over the years, however, there had been workouts together, drinking, talks, and even some occasion to save each other's lives, and she recognized his superiority in the field.

"Come on," Sam said, nudging Caesar. "Spit it out. Altius told you what the mission with classified details is, right?"

Caesar looked sideways at Nyx, and in a flash of painful understanding Silia realized that Team 6 didn't exist anymore: Cee was now a teammate of Nyx and Libertus', just as the others had new comrades to watch their backs, if squads, now that the Kingsglaives had returned to Insomnia and a truce with Niflheim loomed, still meant something. Probably not, as Captain Drautos had pointed out, but she felt bad anyway.

Nyx answered with a slight nod and a shrug. "Crowe is going to Tenebrae," he replied, running a hand through his dreadlocks. "To escort Princess Lunafreya Nox Fleuret."

Silia moved on her stool, uncomfortable, but didn't speak. Crowe must have been instructed to escort the princess to Prince Noctis. In his hasty communications, the Captain hadn't divulged that the wedding would be held in Altissia, nor did the newscast. That information, as far as she knew, continued to be classified.

"What?" Sarah exclaimed, leaning over the table. "What's this story? Doesn't the princess of Tenebrae have men who can escort her to Insomnia?"

"I don't know what to tell you." Caesar lit a cigarette. "Even Crowe was not given too many details, just a fucking tiara to give to the princess and a motorcycle to get to Fenestala. Maybe Her Majesty wants a Kingsglaive to support her escort. Or it was an idea of the King. Don't you feel a little
teased, lately, you guys?"

They looked at each other silently with a disconcerted and resigned air. Nyx clicked his tongue in a gesture of impatience. "I don't know. Everything has changed. Until last month, though on a deadline, we knew what we'd do during the day and what we'd do the following day, if we were not dead: fighting. Now that we're back, we spend the day hanging around wondering what will become of us, we quarrel among comrades, and we are unaware of who knows how much detail about a war we have fought firsthand for years."

"But are you so sure that something has changed?" Sam crossed his arms on his chest. Outside the battlefield, it was unusual to see such a discouraged expression on his commonly relaxed and facetious face. "We have been out of the world, Ulric. Do you have any idea of what has happened to Insomnia in these ten years while we were fighting? How the crown citizens’ opinion about the Glaives has changed? Look around." He made a large gesture with his arms. "Are you so sure that a year ago we were aware of everything? I'm not, not anymore. I cannot recognize Captain Drautos."

"We lost the war," Silia whispered, and for a moment she thought of her mother. "We had already lost it when the Kingsglaives were founded. We only delayed the moment when Lucis' reign was forced to acknowledge it."

Her five comrades looked at her bitterly. They didn't answer because she had said what everyone was painfully aware of.

"I thought you shared your friend Amicitia's optimism." Sarah raised her eyebrow with a mocking smile.

She forced herself to calm down. They were all overexcited and she didn't want to fight too. "Gladio Amicitia has nothing to do with it but, if you really want to know, I don't think there's a right or wrong way to take this news. We haven't been able to defeat Niflheim. This is a fact. Was there more that could be done? I don't know. Perhaps, if in the last fifty years, instead of thinking of crystals and rings, someone at the Citadel had studied and experimented, by this time we would have some technological and non-magical weapon in our hands to repel the magiteks." She stood silent for a moment, challenging the others to contradict her. "But now look, the King's life energy is running out and we are no longer able to stop Niflheim's advance. The King has decided to sign a truce to save at least Insomnia. Tens of thousands people will live in peace, at least them. If it's right or wrong, who can say? But in war, they taught us that ten people's life is worth more than one person's life. Have you forgotten it? In three days have you already stopped being Glaives?"

No one stared at her face. Silia looked for Legato's gaze, the most controlled and rational among them all, but even he, his jaws clenched, kept his eyes fixed on his glass. She had uttered words that hurt her first.

Nyx straightened up on his stool. "The Coeurl is right. We are soldiers, and the King has decided. We have only two roads: deserting and continuing to fight as loose dogs, or obeying, as we have sworn to do."

"As for me," Sarah began to say softly, "I will stay. At least until the signing of the treaty, to know what will happen. But I won't leave my sister and my mother out there. I'll try to take them to Insomnia, and if it won't be possible, I'll leave the Glaives and return to Safir."

"I will stay." Legato was dry. "I have nothing to lose."

"Your face," Samuel pointed out. "After ten years of risking our lives at the hands of the Imperials, should we hold out our hands? And how, then? What will happen to the Kingsglaives?"
"I'll stay too," Caesar whispered. "The King opened the doors of Insomnia when I had nothing. Insomnia, now, is my home. Doesn't that apply to you too, Sam?"

Samuel stopped in the act of lifting his mug. His face expressed anger, indignation, and finally shame. He put down the glass, scratching the back of his head. "It was just to point out, what the fuck," he snapped. "I won't desert. I have nothing left out there."

None of her comrades felt the need to ask her what she would do. She wouldn't have deserted, it was clear, but she was feeling more and more dragged by an unbearable current: everything around her was changing again.

"And what will you do, hero?" Sam asked.

Nyx blinked over his glass. "What Caesar said also applies to me. This truce makes me indignant, but our job is to fight and obey, not to contest the decisions of the King."

They were almost the same words she had said to Gladio the night before. Silia smiled. She was about to ask if he knew what Luche was doing with Marius, but Nyx intercepted her look and smiled in turn, raising his glass in a toast.

"Pro aris et focis, then. For hearth and home. Let's drink out of this cup to the bitter end."

III

"To Prompto."

"To our departure."

"And to Noct's marriage."

They laughed, clinking their glasses. His friends never drank, so that toast was a surprising exception to the rule. They were back at Sotherby's, with four mugs of beer in their hands, and before entering they had promised aloud not to think about Niflheim and the truce, at least for a few hours, and to concentrate on the few positive aspects of the situation; Prompto had solemnly sworn as a Crownsguard, though his uniform – he was tinier than most of the other Guards, including many women, and there was nothing of his size – would be ready only the day before they left; in three days they would leave Insomnia and finally they would see the world outside Cavaugh; Noctis, at last, would be married to his beloved Lunafreya.

For one night, Gladio allowed himself to be a man of twenty-three and to be excited by all the news. The next day the worries, the summons, the preparations and the recommendations would resume, but for the moment he enjoyed his beer and the general enthusiasm. Prompto was uncontrollable, Noctis tried to conceal the euphoria showing off his dim attitude – but he kept smiling when he thought no one saw him – and even Ignis was more animated than usual.

"What will we do when Noct is married? Will we come back to Insomnia? Will we stay in Altissia?"

Noctis shrugged. "Everything is still very nebulous. My father said that he will have Luna leave Tenebrae towards Altissia before the Imperials discover that the wedding won't be held in Insomnia. But I still don't know what we'll do next."

Prompto arched his lips in a grin. "A honeymoon, maybe? You two alone, since with the cease-fire there won't be more dangers out there?"
Gladio was about to open his mouth to remind Prompto that it would not be so simple: Insomnia would withdraw the defenses from the last cities still under siege, but that didn't mean that the citizens would accept that decision without fighting. Peace would not have been so immediate.

But Noctis, red, moved away from the table so abruptly that he risked turning over with his chair. "Prompto, will you stop?"

"Has she already written to you through Umbra? My beloved Noctis, now finally..."

"Prompto!"

Gladio joined the general laugh. He reminded himself that at least for that evening he had decided to ignore the alarm bells that kept bothering him: the lack of a date for the signing of the treaty, the ignorance of what they would do after the wedding... too many silences, too many dark spots, too many unsaid.

"Who knows if the princess will have bridesmaids? You have lived in Tenebrae for months, Noct, what can you tell us?"

Noctis shook his head. "Apart from Gentiana, Luna has a maid, a woman of a certain age, but I don't remember any friends or attendants. She's very discreet."

Prompto stretched on the table with a depressed look. "Again, no girls in sight. I'll just have to live with it. Tell him something too, Gladio!"

Gladio raised his mug of beer. "Come on, Prompto, Altissia is full of elegant and beautiful ladies who are just waiting to ignore you."

Prompto tossed him a handful of paper napkins.

"Ignis, ask for an orange juice for the kid, he's already drunk. And one also for His Majesty, before some capillary broken by alcohol spoils his delicate complexion."

A single beer, in fact, when they managed to finish it – and by then it had become a broth – was enough for Noctis and Prompto to collapse on the table exhausted by sleep, but not before Prompto had picked up enough nerve to get up to ask for the cell number to the two beautiful girls at the next table. They told him that they already had younger siblings and rather glared clearly at Ignis, much to Prompto's dismay and fun for them. It was up to him and Ig, obviously, to pick them up from their seats and take them to Noctis' house. Prompto's parents, Gladio thought bitterly, hadn't showed up at his swearing-in ceremony and probably the day after wouldn't even notice their son wasn't home.

After making sure that His Majesty and the new Crownsguard were sleeping hard, Ignis suggested they stay there too for the night and offered to prepare an Ebony coffee pot. They drank it in the kitchen, in a relaxed silence, enjoying the cool evening air.

"So," Ignis said, adjusting the glasses on his nose. "Apparently we are almost there, Gladio. Is this not what you've always wanted?"

Gladio enjoyed the thick, bitter taste of the coffee. "Yeah. But not like this, I think. Sometimes our desires are satisfied in inscrutable ways. And what about you?"

"I'd be lying if I told you I'm not passionate about the idea of leaving Insomnia. Passionate and also a little worried. We have been training for a lifetime against dangers that we have never really faced. What if I wasn't up to it?"
"You will be. We have broken our backs for years. We'll find it out soon, anyway. Won't be long
now, uh?"

Ignis nodded. "Two days. How did Iris take it?"

Gladio snorted a laugh. "She's sorrier for Noct's departure than for mine, I believe."

"In fact, I was talking about Noctis' marriage. Her infatuation for our gloomy prince has not yet
extinguished, has it?"

"I don't think so." Gladio scratched his hairline, embarrassed at the idea that his sister was now
fifteen and that her childish attachment for Noctis might have turned into something more adult. "But
she said that she's very excited about the marriage, that Princess Lunafreya is amazing, and that she
hopes they can be happy. She made a sense of the impossibility of the whole thing long ago, Ig. She
still is an Amicitia."

"I'm positive. And you? Did you put everything in order, Gladio?"

"I'm well under way with the preparations, don't worry. I know that out there we won't find
hypermarts, but I dare to think that we'll do fine even if we find out that I forgot the hooks or a peg
for the tent."

"I don't mean that." Ignis looked away from his coffee and gave him a strange look. "Did you tell
Hartwood that you're leaving?"

Gladio didn't even try to lie. He put the cup back on the table, leaning his forehead against the palm
of his hand, and nodded. "Last night. I know I shouldn't have, but the announcement of the armistice
today has become public knowledge, and in any case I trust her discretion."

Ignis didn't reproach him. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't tell me you bade farewell with a handshake."

Gladio frowned. All day he had tried to shake off of himself the memory of the moment when Silia
had stopped resisting and had abandoned to her hands to dance that waltz. The way those cat-like
eyes had looked at him, melancholy, hungry. Her warm skin under her attire, the femininity he had
first glimpsed in her. Refraining had been physically painful. "Actually we have. Don't get any ideas,
Specs. Right now there are much more important things at stake than my personal happiness."

"You have always done everything you had to, Gladio, and even more. You are at least allowed to
desire."

Gladio sighed. In the actuality he had not failed in anything, but he wasn't able to completely and
serenely focus on the departure, making him unsteady on the inside. "You know what?" he said to
Ignis, or perhaps to himself, giving voice to the only thought that could alleviate his remorse. "Better
this way. The departure, I mean. It would have been a mess if..."

"...if?"

Gladio slapped the table, but managed to control the tone of his voice. "Do you really want me to say
it? If I would have let go, Ig. Let's not talk about it anymore. It's over now. We are leaving, and she's
waiting to know what the hell will become of the Kingsglaives after the treaty. We are two adults
with similar duties that don't allow for distractions."
"Your father is the Shield of the King as well," Ignis reminded him, "but you and Iris are here."

Gladio blushed. "My father didn't marry a Kingsglaive," he underlined, "but a good woman waiting for him at home while he practically lived in the Citadel. Not exactly the happiest bride of Insomnia."

"Now you're unjust. Your father loved your mother very much."

"It's true, but King Regis came before her. It's the same for me, with Noct." He stood up. "Let's get this over with. And please don't mention her to the others."

Ignis shrugged in a resigned attitude. "As you wish, Gladio. Good night."
Chapter Summary

While Silia awaits the crucial treaty between Lucis and Niflheim, Gladio says goodbye to his family on his last day in Insomnia. Two things he's not aware of: first, the date of the signing has been established; second, his father requested Silia to keep it classified.

I

A new summons was in an hour. This time, it seemed, for a matter of the utmost importance.

In those days Silia had kept on dragging herself from home to the headquarters, from the headquarters to Samuel's, and from Samuel's back home, in a mood of confused disbelief that had become resignation. By then, she and her comrades had decided to suspend every judgment until the signing ceremony, for which the date had not yet been communicated.

She checked the clock on the wall, putting her uniform boots on. Half past ten. She was putting on the jacket, despite the heat, when someone rang at her doorbell.

A tall, blonde stranger with eyeglasses, in civilian clothes, bent her head briefly in a respectful greeting as soon as she opened the door. She had the rigid, formal look of one who had taken orders for a lifetime.

"Silia Hartwood?" she asked, cordially but firmly.

"It's me," she replied. "Can I help you?"

The woman – who, now that Silia could look at her better, was closer to her forties than her thirties – made another half bow. Her bun was so tight that Silia wondered how her skin was not bleeding. "I'm sorry to have to bothered you. My name is Claire Aulus, and I am here on behalf of General Clarus Amicitia. Please follow me."

Two thoughts overlapped with arrogance. The first, clumsy and idiotic, that somehow Clarus Amicitia had heard about the party, immediately followed by the reflection that certainly, especially in such a historical moment, the General had much more important things to think about than his son's sentimental life; the second, that there had been no invitation and the possibility that she would refuse had not been foreseen. Silia bit her lower lip, annoyed, but nodded. After all, it was the request of a member of the King's Council.

"Very well," she said, "I'll follow you. But I have an official summons in an hour."
"You are not going to miss it."

Without changing her expression, Aulus waited until she had finished preparing and closed the door behind her, and then led the way. A Crownguard's car – a dark gray Mercedes with insignia on both sides and tinted windows – had been parked two streets away. She had believed that the woman would take her to the Citadel, but when she opened one of the rear doors and invited her to sit down, Silia found herself face to face with Clarus Amicitia. She hesitated for a moment, then pretended to be nonchalant, bent her head in a brief formal bow, and sat down next to him with her arms crossed. Aulus closed the door and got in the front seat.

"General," she greeted him. In spite of herself, she looked for Gladio's features on his face; they were not so much alike – his son was much more handsome – but his physical structure, his chin and eyes were very familiar to her. "Good morning. I am honored by this convocation, but I suspect it is not official."

The General crossed his arms too. "Good morning, Hartwood. You suspect well. This is just an informal conversation, but I do not hide from you that I would prefer it would remain private. Extremely private," he said.

Silia leaned her back against the seat, even though she didn't feel at ease, while Aulus started the engine. "And this informal conversation concerns..."

"It concerns a question partly private, partly public. Do not mind Aulus," he interrupted, probably noticing the quick glance she had given to the woman, "she is a trusted person." Clarus Amicitia touched what remained of his hairline, as if he wanted to scratch it, but then he restrained himself. The same gesture Gladio did. "Hartwood," he said, "I will get to the point. I know about you and my son."

"You have been misinformed, then" she contradicted him, stiffening immediately. "Because there is nothing improper between your son and me. You have my word." She was almost breaking it because her statement was truthful in deeds, but not in thoughts.

"Excusatio non petita..." the General declaimed without smiling. "I was not insinuating anything, Hartwood, but you know my son, Gladiolus Amicitia. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong. But..."

"And you have spent some time together in the last few months. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"And, I guess, a bond has resulted from that time together. I am not here to judge its nature, Hartwood. You are two mature and conscientious adults. I speak for my son because I know him, but I also speak for you, because you are a Kingsglaive and this must mean something."

Silia didn't answer. Anything you say can and will be used against you was a common formula of the City Guard she had been required to speak many times during the past few months. At that moment it perfectly fit her situation.

Perhaps understanding that he would not get admissions or denials on her part, Amicitia resumed talking. "I suppose I am not wrong if I speculate that Gladiolus told you about the treaty before the news was officially widespread. I don't want you to lie to protect him," he warned her, raising his finger, "no use. I only hope you were more discreet than my son, but even if you reported this information to some of your comrades, the Kingsglaives' reaction would not have been different. We
are not so indifferent as to not have imagined it beforehand. It doesn't matter. We're not here to talk about this, Hartwood."

Silia became impatient. The General had touched a nerve. "So will you finally tell me why we're here?"

Amicitia allowed himself half a smile. "A little too instinctive to be a member of the army, Hartwood. But this doesn't surprise me in a Glaive with seventeen reprimands on her curriculum for insubordination and disorder, and four honorable mentions for actions that go beyond the normal course of duty. You know, at the Citadel we always wondered who was behind the regaining of Bors."

The General must have read her dossier. Silia suddenly felt disadvantaged, her back to the wall. "You have not answered me yet."

"Your career is commendable, and moreover you had the opportunity to withdraw without dishonor after your mutilation and you did not. That's why I took some time to talk to you," Amicitia said. He paused, looking out the window. "I am positive you will understand, Hartwood, and you will do what is best. The signature of the treaty has been set for May 16."

"May 16?" Silia asked, containing her surprise. It was within five days. "I wasn't aware of it, and, I dare to say, none of my comrades."

"You will know it in forty-five minutes, during the briefing that Captain Drautos summoned at half past eleven."

"And why do you...?"

"Why am I telling you in advance, Hartwood? Because Prince Noctis, my son, and the two people who will leave with them do not know the date of the ceremony, and I would like – even the King would like – it to continue to be like that."

Silia blinked. She licked her dry lips. "The prince doesn't know the date of the signing of the treaty?"

"No need to repeat, Hartwood, you understood perfectly. I'm sure you imagine why."

"No. I cannot imagine what reason could push the King and the Council to keep something like that from the Crown Prince," she replied skeptically.

"As I said before, this is a matter both public and private. We fear that the treaty, Hartwood, can hide a trap. If you're no less intelligent than what your dossier suggests, you will certainly share our fears."

"Please, don't make fun of me, General. The marriage was arranged in Altissia to remove the Prince from the city during the signing. How did the emperor Aldercapt react, if I may ask?"

"You can ask. He will be informed only upon his arrival on May 14."

Her transmitter beeped, but she let it crackle. It had to be Sarah, or some of the others. She hoped it was Sarah, or some of the others, because she didn't intend to answer and if it turned out to be the Captain she would be in trouble. "You took countermeasures, I guess."

The General nodded. "You will officially know one of them in forty-two minutes. On May 16 the Crownsguard will be destined to protect the city. The Kingsglaives will take care of the Citadel's security. The Crownsguard is well trained, but many of the members have never had to deal with
Niflheim first hand. If anything happens, the Kingsglaives will be more ready to deal with it. I do not have to tell you to keep your eyes wide open."

No, General Amicitia didn't have to tell her. Silia now understood where that conversation would go, and she wouldn't be flattered by that circumstantial recognition of the Glaives' abilities. "So, going back to the main reason we're here, you want the Prince out of Insomnia during the signing of the treaty, and you're afraid I will inform Gladio."

He didn't deign to admit clearly she was right. "Hartwood, the boys must not find out about any of this. If the Prince suspects something, he would insist on postponing his departure. He is the heir to the throne, but he is still twenty years old. Do you understand?"

"No," Silia admitted. "I don't understand why he's not given the possibility to choose. Everyone should have it."

"We cannot afford this luxury." Clarus continued to look for her gaze. "If anything happens during the treaty, Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum is the last hope of the kingdom."

"If you fear so much a trap, why the hell did you agree to sign this treaty?"

"Because there was no choice." The General just raised his voice. "Hartwood, I'm not going to discuss this with you. Trust the King to whom you have pledged your loyalty fifteen years ago."

"I trust him!" she snapped, hitting the leather upholstery of the seat with the palm of her hand. "But stop saying that there was no choice. There's always a choice."

They peered each other in silence. Aulus, from the front seat, had turned to look at them, perhaps fearing a violent reaction. Who knows if she was armed.

"How old are you, Hartwood?"

"You know it. You read my file."

"Twenty-eight. You are no longer a girl, but there's still a lot that experience will teach you. Let me anticipate one: there are things that cannot be avoided."

They stopped at a traffic light. Without warning, Silia opened the Mercedes door. "Goodbye, General Amicitia."

"Hartwood, immediately close that door."

Silia's body responded to that dry and peremptory order as it had always been used to doing in the last fifteen years; it obeyed. Humiliated, her voice was reduced to a whisper. "I don't want to be involved, General. I won't see your son until his departure, but if it happens, I won't lie to him. I am a soldier, not a diplomat."

"You would put the life of the heir to the throne in danger just not to lie to my son? Who did you swear to serve, Hartwood, the King and the royal family or Gladiolus Amicitia?"

She hated him for saying it. She moistened her lips, massaging between her eyes. She knew exactly what it was her duty to do, but it was repulsive to her. "Order it to me, then."

Clarus Amicitia blinked. He didn't answer.

"In the name of the King, order me to keep them classified – this conversation and the information
that Captain Drautos will give us in an hour. Order it, and I will do it. I've already told you, I'm a soldier, not a diplomat."

The General opened his mouth in what sounded like a sigh. "This is an order, Hartwood."

Silia nodded. The transceiver beeped again. "I obey, General."

"Aulus, pull the car to the side, please. Hartwood, forgive me if I do not drive you to the headquarters directly, but I suppose it's not the case that they see you get out of a Crownguards' car."

Silia couldn't have agreed more. When the car pulled up to the sidewalk, she opened the door again to get off. "Goodbye, General. Give my homage to His Majesty. I never had the opportunity to thank him for giving me and my mother a home when we arrived at Insomnia. I have always served him faithfully and, in spite of everything, I trust he has acted for the best."

For the third time, the transceiver beeped. Silia got out of the car, trying to answer the communication, but Clarus Amicitia leaned forward to put a hand on her arm. "Hartwood, thank you. I hope we will meet again after the signing of the treaty."

She didn't smile. "Why do you thank me? I'm just obeying an order."

II

When coming home that evening, she saw a shadow on the landing in front of her door, for a moment she thought, she hoped, she feared, that it was Gladio.

"Waiting for someone else, uh?" Marius smiled sardonically before the elevator doors closed behind her, as if he could read her thoughts in those few moments of hesitation. "I'm terribly sorry."

They had barely exchanged a greeting since the Glaives had returned. Now that she could see him closely, she found him thinner, tired, with several more scars on his face and arms, but for years he had been so helplessly hostile towards her that she couldn't sympathize with him. She didn't give him the satisfaction of seeming troubled. "Marius, how did you find out where I live?"

He tilted his head back against the wall. "I just asked around. How's your leg? From your movements one couldn't really tell you have a prosthesis."

Talking to Marius Gaunt on the landing of her house in Insomnia was as shocking as talking to an Anak in a meadow. "To what do I owe this sudden interest?"

The tone he used to reply was unexpectedly low, almost a whisper. "Silia, I want to talk with you. Will you let me in?"

"No," she simply answered. She advanced into the corridor to her apartment, turning her back to him. She introduced the key into the lock and pushed the door. Only then she realized that Marius had used her first name, not 'Hartwood', 'Kitty' or some offensive nickname.

He took a step forward, holding out his arm, but lowered it before touching her. "Silia, let me in. I cannot talk to you in the landing. I shouldn't even be here."

"Yeah, you shouldn't be here."

"Silia, for the Six, I won't touch you with a finger, if that's what you fear. You have my word. But let
She turned, pissed off, pointing the key at him as if it was a weapon. "First, don't you dare believe that I'm afraid of you. Second, I spit on your word." She wanted to kick him out of the corridor, but for a moment on his face, after a long time, she recognized the old Marius, the childhood friend who had surrendered to the Imperials to let her escape. Perhaps because after a long time, he was calling her by her name.

She reluctantly surrendered, also to show that she wasn't afraid of him. "All right, come in. But if you do something odd Marius, this time you won't get away with just a broken nose. I'm not twenty-two anymore."

Marius preceded her inside without replying. Silia switched on the light and closed the door behind their backs, then led him into her room. Without an invitation, Marius sat on her bed, just as Gladio had done months before, without taking his eyes off her. Silia occupied the chair in front of the desk, alert.

"So?" she urged him. "I cannot remember the last time we spoke to each other without insults. Let's listen to what you have to say."

He moistened his lips. He hadn't yet replied to any of his lashes, and it amazed her. "Silia, let bygones be bygones, shall we?"

Silia felt that her lips curled in a sneer. "What bygones, Marius? We were friends when we were two brats. Almost siblings, I'd dare to say. Now we are two stranger adults who cannot stand each other. You saved my life when we were children, and only due to this I kept from tearing you apart every time I wanted to, as I did with Tredd or Sonitus. What bygones are you talking about, exactly? Your continuous insults over the years? Your growing contempt towards me?" she frowned. "Or when you once laid your hands on me?"

He took everything with a stiff, tense expression. "I'm sorry for that time. I was drunk. And I was beside myself."

It was the first time he had apologized for that episode. She had never been able to get over it because, despite their relationship had deteriorating years before, his gross and violent aggression had finally turned him into a stranger. Marius was unrecognizable that night, but she was too nervous – for the news of the armistice, for the meeting with Clarus Amicitia, for Gladio's next departure, for the future of the Glaives, for the conversation she had unwillingly grasped – and over the years she had accumulated too much resentment towards him to soften. "That's not a fucking justification."

"Yeah, I guess not. Now, if you've poured out everything, let me talk."

"I haven't even started, actually. But go ahead."

Marius scratched his beard. It seemed to take a lifetime for him to decide to talk. "You knew about the armistice before we found out about it on the news, right?"

Silia kept control over herself. "Marius, did you drink? How could I have known about the treaty? I have worked together with the City Guard these past few months, not with the Crownsguard, least of all with the King's Council. I had no way of accessing this information."

He frowned. "Oh, is that so? So it isn't true that you're screwing with the prince's gorilla?"

"Where did you hear that?"
Marius grimaced in an expression of derisive skepticism that made her want to slap him. "Where did I hear that? Where they all hear it. A Kingsglaive on leave in Insomnia who's fucking the Prince's Shield, and you expect people in uniform won't talk about it?"

Silia sighed. *Zen*, she repeated. She smiled, mocking. "Oh, for the Six, the oldest story in the world. It's not true but, even if it was, I can't understand why the fuck you care about who gets into my pants."

"I don't care who gets into your pants, Silia. I came to talk to you because I wanted to understand what happened to you in these past few months; if it's true that you've become the bitch of the Crownsguard."

At that insult, Silia instantly covered the three steps that separated them and grabbed his throat without even blinking. If Marius had reacted, the situation would certainly collapse, because there was no one there to separate them. But he just seized her wrist, quietly, and they remained that way, closer than they'd ever been in the last twelve years, looking at each other in the eye. "Get out of my house," she hissed.

"Answer me, Silia."

"I've nothing to answer."

"I want to know if you share the King's decision. If, after ten years of risking your ass, you agree to hand over our lands to Niflheim."

"We no longer have any land to be handed over, you and me," she reminded him. Reluctantly, she let go of his neck, and the grip on her wrist faded as a result. "There is no alternative. It has been going on for too many years. There were too many deaths. My mother was right, this war has already been lost for years. It's time to face reality and compromise."

Marius stood up, hiding his hands in the pockets of his jacket. "I guess that's what your Guard's friend told you. But you can't compromise with others' lives, Silia. Are you so completely blinded that you don't notice that King Regis has lost his mind and sold us all out? Do you remember Ambrosia? Where two children enjoyed sabotaging the imperial troops?"

"We are no longer children," she replied. "Now we can do better than tearing the tires of their duty cars. King Regis gave us the power to do it."

"He gave us, you said well," Marius pointed out, rubbing his eyes. "From next week on, Niflheim will be our ally, by decision of King Regis. Other cities like Ambrosia will be sold to the enemy. Like Bors. And your leg, Silia?" He approached her and touched her prosthesis, searching with his fingers for the point of attachment on her thigh, without stopping to look her straight in the eye. "What did you miss this for?"

"Marius, stop," she hissed, trying to push her leg aside, but he held it back. "I don't know what the fuck happened to you in the last year. Actually, I don't really know what happened to you in the last fifteen years. But let me remind you of something." She untangled herself by thrusting him. "We swore to the King. He welcomed our families when we were practically beggars escaped from an occupied city. He welcomed us, two poor children who lived in the barracks of refugees, gave us his power and allowed us to be part of the military elite of the kingdom. Do whatever the fuck you like, desert, if you want, you and your friend Luche, but I won't abandon him in a moment like this. This is the last chance you have to get out of my house with your legs."

"Luche? What did you hear, Silia?"
Marius had a shake, light but hostile, that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Without making the mistake of looking at her swords, leaning next to the window, she snapped and grasped them.

"Enough to know that you've something in mind against the Empire."

Marius slowly raised his hands. Again his derisive smile returned. "Don't do anything stupid, Silia. I don't know what you heard, but I'm not up to anything. And I don't want to attack you. I gave you my word."

"Gaunt, get out of my house."

Holding his arms in midair – a sign that something on her face must have convinced him that she was not joking – Marius finally headed for the door. "I'm not up to anything," he repeated. Silia urged him by pointing one of her two swords against him. "But remember one thing, Silia; tonight I risked my ass again to cover you."

"What the fuck do you mean?"

He shrugged without answering, turning to leave. Perhaps they had not talked so much in the last few years, but Marius knew very well that she wouldn't attack him like a coward.

She sat up in her bed upset, because, although they had shared their childhood, although they had been comrades in the last fifteen years, she didn't know anything about Marius Gaunt. She laid down, trying not to think about what the next days would bring, wondering what really had occurred in that room. She pushed the phone off her bed with her foot because she didn't want to give in to the temptation to call Gladio to hear his voice. They had already said to each other everything that could be said.

III

Being at the Training Hall with his father for the first time in so many years, was for Gladio a plunge into the past and a mocking twist of fate. He was there because the task of dealing with weapons, ammos and healing items had fallen onto him, and he had to load the bags in his car and bring them to Noct's that night along with the camping gear and the rest of his personal baggage. While he was gathering everything, his father had called him on his phone, an uncommon thing in itself, to ask him to speak one last time before he left. Only the two of us, he had made clear, probably knowing that he had arrived at the Citadel with Iris.

And there they were, walking silently side by side, accompanied by the familiar training noises – clashing of wooden swords, struggling grunts, orders shouted and amplified by the echo of the gyms.

They went out into one of the outdoor halls, an empty, quiet place. When he was outside, for a moment the light of the sunset hurt his eyes. Twelve hours more, he realized, shielding his face with one hand.

"So," his father said with a quiet sigh, as if he could read his mind. "Here we are, Gladiolus."

"Yeah," he simply answered, then asked him the fateful question that kept on tormenting him and the others. "Has the signature date at last been set?"

Clarus sat on a bench. Looking at him now, a man with such a rigid and concentrated expression and lips so thin as to give the impression that they would break rather than smile, it was impossible to
recognize him in the muscular brawny young man of the pictures taken during his journey alongside the King in 725. "Not yet. But I wanted to update you on a couple of security measures that the King and the Council decided to undertake for the occasion. On the day of the signing of the treaty, the Crownsguard will be reassigned to the protection of the city. The Kingsglaive of Titus Drautos will take care of the defense of the Citadel and the King."

Gladio struggled to control his surprise. His father was staring at him. A few voices of his alleged relationship with Silia had reached him, but how much had he trusted them? "The Kingsglaives?" he articulated. Another twist of fate: he had suggested Silia to join the Crownsguard, and now the Kingsglaive army would take over its functions. He wondered how she had taken it, provided she had already been informed. Among them was the tacit promise of letting the night of the party be their last meeting, and he would not call her to find it out. "Is it a temporary measure for the treaty ceremony or a definitive provision?"

Clarus shrugged. "We will see. Peace will change many things in the city, Gladiolus. I have another thing to tell you. On that day, Cor Leonis will be on patrol outside the Wall with a small contingent - Darius Magnus, Alexandra Steinus, Devan Lochlann, Adrian Quintinus, Marvin Laurentin, August Cadogan and Irwin Osman. Few valid men, in case something goes wrong."

Gladio rubbed the back of his neck in silence. It was obvious that the King feared a dirty trick by the Imperials, but it was the first time he had heard it explicitly spoken from his father. "Hm," he tried to defuse. "So when we come back, possibly the others and I will end up stealing the City Guards' work."

"No point in thinking about it now," Clarus cut it short. "Focus on the trip. Crownsguard, City Guard, Glaive or Shield, it does not matter. The task of the Amicitia family is to protect and support the King."

"D'you think I can forget it?" he hissed, annoyed by the fact that his father had thought it necessary to point it out.

Clarus looked him in the eye. "No," he finally said. "I don't think so. Protect Prince Noctis, Gladiolus. Protect him not as the next king, but as a comrade and a friend. He will need it from now on."

Gladio opened his mouth to reply that those recommendations sounded superfluous and even offensive to him, but his father's gaze froze him. He felt again a six-year-old child, intimidated, unworthy.

"Yes, sir," he replied solemnly, straightening himself in the military salute of the Guard.

Clarus lifted a hand, perhaps to touch his arm, or to let him down, but did not. He nodded, apparently satisfied, and got up from the bench. "I will leave you to your last preparations, then. I too have to go back to my duties."

"Father," he held him back. "Iris is here at the Citadel. She brought you a change of clothes and is waiting for me to reach her. Do you think you can find an hour or two to have dinner with us? You know it would mean a lot to her, even if she didn't ask you for it. I don't think it will happen again soon."

His father moistened his lips, and for a moment Gladio was sure he would refuse. To his surprise, he smiled. "I think so. But I have some business to attend, first. At Liberty, I guess?"

"At Liberty" he smiled too. "I booked a table."
Clarus walked away. "See you there in an hour, then."

Gladio joined him, but his father stopped in the act of crossing the balcony door to enter. He turned to him, hesitated for a moment then added, "Gladio, I have one last thing to say to you."

"Hm?" he blinked.

Clarus crossed his arms. "I am proud of you. You turned out just as I wanted. You were born with a big burden on your shoulders, but you have trained them enough to hold it properly. I demanded a lot from you, but you always did everything that was needed, and even more."

Gladio recalled the words – the same – that Ignis had addressed him two nights before. As a child he had always harbored a vein of resentment towards his father, for his constant absence, for making his mother unhappy, and because for how much he and Clarus had grown close over the years thanks to his training as a Crownguard, for Iris he had remained almost a stranger. Now – he realized for the first time with extreme clarity – he found out that he had become exactly like him; he had taken so long to notice it because for twenty-three years all the duties and sacrifices that, implicitly or explicitly, had been requested of him hadn't burdened him, but now things had changed.

"Thank you, father," he replied, lowering his head.

"Just try not to leave anything behind."

Perhaps, after all, he was on to something. For the first time in his life, Gladio looked at Clarus Amicitia's face and lied. "I have nothing to leave behind, father. You should know that."

IV

After a pleasant dinner, they bade farewell without too many formalities or amenities; his father held out his hand and Gladio squeezed it firmly. A goodbye between two grown up men more than between father and son, but he would not have expected anything different.

"Be steadfast, Gladio." Were his last words before getting on the taxi that would bring him back to the Citadel. "Protect the Prince."

Gladio drove Iris home. With her, he did give himself up to a brief moment of affection; he parked the car in the driveway and went down to take her to the door. Without being able to hold back, feeling awkward and embarrassed, he hugged her.

"I'll catch you as soon as possible, Iris," he whispered. She had grown tall. "Look out for yourself."

"I'll be fine," she promised him. "You have to be the one to look out, big bro. But I'm sure you'll do well. You have trained so much that you'll stand up to any danger."

Gladio had to cross his arms to prevent himself from hugging her again. He merely brushed her face, moved. Two hours before he had lied twice to his father when he had told him he would not leave anything behind. "I think I have to go now."

"Have a safe journey. Say goodbye to everybody for me. And be careful."

"See you soon, Iris. Don't let boys hover around you too much, now that I won't be here to scare them anymore."
Iris threw her head back and laughed. It was her who came forward to hug him again.

Gladio got back into the car with a smile on his lips. *Nine hours*, he told himself, looking at the clock on the ignition control. He turned on the radio, rolled down the window completely and started the engine. His intention was to go to Noctis' house and stay there until the next morning. But when he went on the avenue that would lead him to the center of Insomnia with his sweaty hands on the steering wheel, his heart pumping fast, his mouth dry, he found out that he had always known how it would end.
Driving to her building was easier than he had imagined; indeed, he found himself there without even knowing how. When it came to getting out of the car and walking with his own legs up to the door of Silia's apartment, that was another story. He stayed in the hallway for a long time, shifting his weight from one leg to the other.

Don't leave anything behind, his father had told him. If he didn't come, he would have left her behind forever, in a limbo of possibilities and remorse that perhaps he would carry around for his whole life.

Fuck it, he said to himself, whatever happens, happens, and rang the bell. He waited for two, ten, twenty seconds, his stomach stuck in his throat. Silia didn't open. No noise could be heard through the door. He hadn't warned her of his arrival, of course, and at that hour she had to be at the tavern or hanging around with her comrades. Served him right.

He was about to turn around, but he couldn't give up and retrace his steps empty-handed. So he rang again.

This time the door opened immediately, as if she had been there the whole time. She was wearing a tank top, a pair of old shorts that were tiny enough to show the joint of her prosthesis, and her hair was disheveled. For a moment he thought he saw a flash of panic in her eyes, but she recovered easily; she frowned, with a surprised and quite annoyed look.

"I feared it was Marius again, and I had opened up to smash his face. What are you doing here? Won't you leave tomorrow?"

"Marius?" he gasped. Now that it was his turn to talk, he felt awkward as if he were to do it in a foreign language which he was not too familiar with. "I'll leave tomorrow. Anyway, Silia, I just wanted to, hm, say goodbye."

Silia leaned against the door frame without letting him in. It was the same posture, possibly involuntary but very eloquent, that she had assumed the first time he had showed up at her door. Perhaps, on closer inspection, Silia had understood everything already by then and she was trying to batten down the hatches before it was too late.

"We had already said goodbye, Gladio. You must have a lot of stuff to arrange. And I guess you'll
want to be with your family. Iris. You don't know when you'll come back. Go to them."

"I had dinner with them." He wanted to justify himself. "And you're right; I don't know when I'll be
back. So..." His voice was reduced to a rustle. He couldn't go on. He looked at her in the eyes lost,
feeling like an inexperienced boy at his first time, hoping for an invitation, a suggestion. "So, if
you're not waiting for someone else, will you let me in?"

Silia's arm shuddered. Gladio was sure that she would close the door in his face.

"To hell with that," she whispered angrily. She grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and pulled him
inside, and before Gladio could realize it, she was kissing him and he had lifted her up and slammed
against the wall. For an indefinite amount of time, he was beside himself. He forgot Noctis, his
father, the journey, Insomnia, the truce and all the rest while Silia undressed and touched him, and he
found himself in the bedroom, on the bed, on her, inside her, without knowing how he had come to
that.

It was more of a desperate struggle than any sex he had experienced until then. It left him blank,
exhausted, unrecognizable to himself for being able to lose his head that way. For a moment, it
seemed that they would have started again immediately. Without a word, Gladio kissed her again and
she spread her legs to welcome him. But then he made the mistake of pulling her astride his waist to
change position, and for the first time since he had arrived, they looked into each other's eyes, suddenly lucid.

Silia blinked and her lips trembled, as well as her hands on his chest. Gladio opened his mouth to say
something, perhaps that he was sorry, or that he wasn't sorry at all, or that he felt like shit for letting
himself loose that way, or that he was happy to have done it – all things would be equally true. But
she laid her fingers on his mouth.

Slowly, she pulled away from him silently, and got out of bed. She retrieved her top and pants, put
them on, and lowered to get cigarettes and a lighter from the table. Without giving him another
glance or a word, she went to smoke in front of the window, leaving him on the bed in a state of
mind that he could only define as prostrated.

Euphoria, guilt and dizziness gave way to a dull rage. She couldn't ignore him like that, as if he
wasn't there; yet he was naked in her room, after all those fucking months in which they had desired
each other and couldn't afford to touch. He got up, reached her at the window, and grabbed her wrist
while she was carrying the cigarette to her lips. Her forehead crumpled into an incredulous
expression. "What the...?"

"I'm still here," he pointed out, hard. "Where the fuck, are you?"

She stiffened, looking away, but she didn't take her hand from his grip. "...would you have a
whiskey?"

That empty offer was better than nothing. He nodded in acceptance, only to dull his senses, and
released her wrist. With a sigh she barely held back, Silia passed him to go into the kitchen, the
cigarette between her lips. He heard her move in the other room, open a door and close it again
afterwards. Gladio took the opportunity to put on at least his boxers. When she came back with a
bottle and two glasses, the cigarette was gone.

She sat on her bed – she actually sank into it – and filled both glasses. Gladio imitated her and held
out a hand so that she could pass one of them. They began to drink in silence, without looking at
each other. The whiskey was excellent, strong, and gave him a shake which at that moment was
more than welcome.
Finally Silia cleared her throat. "You should not have come."

"Perhaps you're right. But we couldn't part like that."

"Like what?"

"With a handshake."

"Why not?"

Gladio scratched his hairline. "Because it's been months that I wanted to do it, and I don't know when and if we'll have another chance. I don't know when I'll be back, Silia. I don't know what will happen to me after the wedding, where I will stay. I only know that my place is..."

"...at Prince Noctis' side," she completed for him in a monotonous tone, as if both were reciting the most famous poetry in the world. Silia drank again, slowly, for a long time, from her glass, tilting her head back. Gladio looked at her throat and in spite of the bitter moment, he felt aroused again. "Gladio, I know it."

"I'm sorry," he simply said.

He tried to touch her face, to kiss her, but she pulled away from the bed. "Gladio, there's nothing to explain, nothing for which you should justify. We are a man and a woman who have lost their heads for ten minutes. It happens. We are not the first and we will not be the last. Perhaps we should have done it before. After all, it's just sex, it never killed anyone." She went back to the window.

It was a clumsy alibi for the both of them, but hearing her flatten what was between them still hurt. And it managed to shake him better than the whiskey had done. He got up too and started collecting the rest of his clothes. He glanced at the clock on the wall and was amazed at the fact that he had entered her house only thirty minutes before.

"Have a good journey, Gladio. Take care," she bade him farewell prematurely, with her back turned, while he was still dressing.

"Keep a lookout in the next few days," he said, fastening his belt. "Who knows when the hell the date of the signature will be set. If everything goes well, I'll try to get in touch with you as soon as we arrive in Altissia. We'll take it easy, so don't expect my news too soon," he tried to play down with a smile.

Her neck wavered. She had nodded. "The next time we meet Gladio, I hope we can drink a glass at Samuel's toasting peace, even if obtained at a hell of a price."

Gladio took his jacket, hung it on his forearm and approached her with the intention of forcing her to turn around. He couldn't accept saying goodbye without looking at her face. Instead, he threw his jacket to the floor and surrounded her shoulders with his arms. He caressed her face, brushing her wet eyelashes, her cheekbones, her nose, and then her lips.

"When Noctis will be married to Princess Lunafreya and the dust has settled a little..." he began to whisper in her ear, leaning over her, stroking her jaw curve, and gently girdling her neck. He managed to hold back in time what he really wanted to say. He hesitated. "...I'll try to come back and see you," he concluded. "I'll tell you about the trip, about the wedding, you'll tell me about the ceremony. And..."

"Gladio." He had never heard her pronounce his name in that tone. Shortly before, in a similar voice, she had arched beneath him. "Go away, Gladio."
Gladio nodded. "See you soon, Silia." He let her go, slowly, and moved to the door. He didn't turn around anymore and she didn't accompany him.

II

"Finally you deign to show yourself."

Ignis moved to let him in. Six boxes were already stacked in the entrance to Noctis' apartment and Gladio felt guilty. He put down his camping gear, the bags with the weapons, and his baggage. "Sorry," he said. "Dinner went long."

Ignis looked at him sideways, but before he could say anything, they were interrupted by Prompto. "Hey, Gladio! We didn't see you coming and you didn't answer your phone so we were going to call your father! How was your dinner?"

Gladio shuddered at the narrow escape and scratched his hairline. "Iris was very sad; for Noctis' departure, of course, certainly not for mine. Where is His Majesty?"

"Ending up packing without you!" he heard him moaning from the other room. Gladio refrained from emphasizing that they too had things to do at the eve of their departure and instead they were there to help him. Gladio found him in his room.

While they were emptying the last drawers, Gladio's thoughts inevitably continued to slide towards Silia. Noctis noticed something, but had misunderstood the meaning. "Are you concerned about the treaty?" he asked out of thin air, folding a shirt.

"Oh," he replied, guiltily. "Of course. I don't like it, I told you."

"Me too. I discussed it with my father when I could talk to him. He said not to worry, to leave everything in his hands and to think only of my marriage."

Gladio shoved two t-shirts into the box. "How do you see it, Noct? With Niflheim. Honestly."

His friend shrugged, concentrating on folding another shirt. He had never succeeded too well in doing it. "I'll never forgive them. For what they did to Lucis, for what they did in Tenebrae. I hate Emperor Aldercapt. If it had been up to me..."

"What about if it had been up to you, Noct?"

"I would not have signed the treaty. People outside Insomnia are always my people. I would have fought to the end."

Gladio sighed. Perhaps, after all, everyone continued to underestimate Noctis. He put his hand on his shoulder. "There is not always a right and wrong answer, Noct. All choices come at a price. Even not signing the armistice would have one."

Noctis nodded slowly without answering. "I can't pull it together."

"Noct! Gladio! Ignis made pancakes!"

Gladio forced a smile. Don't leave anything behind, he repeated. "Come on, let's close this box and go to the kitchen."

They ate at the table, continuing to talk about their imminent departure. Prompto was ecstatic: he
continued to chat in a freewheel, apparently unable to stand still. He hadn't been able to meet his parents to show them his new Crownsguard's uniform, he had told them, and it certainly must have hurt him, but he didn't show it. "What will the world be like outside Cavaugh? So far I've only seen it in photos or on TV!"

Gladio ran his fingers through his hair. He had discussed it for a long time with Silia who had described it without too many frills. "Don't be so excited." He started gesturing to give him an idea of the map. "Leide, around Insomnia, is mostly desert; some gas stations, but nothing else. It's as if everything stopped thirty years ago. Good landscapes for your photographs, I don't doubt, but they make me sad. Galdin Quay, on the other hand, is a jewel. There is a luxury hotel. From there we will sail to Accordo. Altissia is a fantastic place, it seems."

"Gladio is very knowledgeable about the outside world," Ignis commented, adjusting his glasses on his nose. "You know, in the last year he started attending bars."

Gladio felt the blow uneasy then decided to respond properly. "Well, I learned a lot."

"Oh, I do not doubt it."

He arched an eyebrow in his direction. Ignis ignored him, getting up to put the dirty dishes in the sink.

"By the way," Noctis said, lifting the last bite of pancake into his mouth with his usual impassive look. "Since my car was virtually requisitioned, Captain Titus Drautos had a Kingsglaive drop me home. I think his name is Nyx Ulric."

Gladio jumped as if he had been shot.

"A Kingsglaive?" Prompto snapped, excited. "I saw some around these last few days, but I've never had the chance to talk to one of them. They're not very popular in the city, are they? They're kinda intimidating, huh? They look superb, tough. And their Captain seems to have seen everything in his life."

"It's the front," Ignis explained, cleaning the dishes. "Here at Insomnia we often forget that there is a war outside. Not everyone is so lucky."

Noctis pushed his plate away with a disgusted expression. "And in a few days they will be even less."

"I know," Ignis went on, "that the Glaves will be in charge of defending the Citadel and the King on the day of the treaty while the Crownsguard will be reassigned to the protection of citizens. I guess your father has told you, Gladio. Cor Leonis is not enthusiastic about it, it seems to me, but I suppose the Kingsglaves are more experienced than us against the Imperials, if anything happens."

"Yes, he told me." Gladio hoped that the topic would end there.

"What about you, Gladio? Did you meet any Glaive?"

Gladio hated Prompto for a moment. He took his plate and went to put it in the sink between Ignis' hands. "Someone," he answered evasively.

"Gladio, how sharp you are! You don't really like Glaves, do you?"

Ignis burst out laughing so hard that his glasses fell into the sink. Gladio retrieved them, taking advantage of it to elbow him.
"What's wrong with you, Ignis?" Noctis asked.

"I am sorry," he said, drying his glasses. "I was thinking of something funny."

"Let's play King's Knight," Gladio cut it short.
Omnia munda mundis

Chapter Summary

The Royal Retinue begins its journey. Meanwhile, in Insomnia, Crowe turns up dead and Nyx Ulric has an heart-to-heart with Silia about it.

13

Omnia munda mundis
May 13-14

I

She stayed awake all night in front of the window, where Gladio had left her, unable to lie down again on those sheets.

When hours before she had found him in front of her door, uncertain and frightened, she herself had remained so disoriented that she hadn't been able to adequately oppose; months of self-control – she had thought angrily while, with his stentorian voice reduced to a raspy murmur, he asked her to let him in – swept away by a ringing bell. In that space of a moment between when she had pulled him inside and had pushed everything else away, she had believed that perhaps, after all, it was all right. He was about to leave, and there would be no consequences. For months they had been very aware of their respective priorities and no reason why they couldn't do it even afterwards, especially since there would be hundreds of miles of Eos between them.

But then, when they had looked at each other, she had understood that it couldn't be that simple. Nothing was so simple, ever. She had felt like a person suddenly torn from sleep; an ordinary person, not a Glaive, because Kingsglaives always slept with one eye open – instructors had accustomed them to it during their first training period by throwing them out of their bed in the middle of the night, and woe to those who were not awake and well present to themselves. Suddenly she had understood that their gesture wouldn't have made him or her better, that it wasn't a full stop but a door ajar; a huge bullshit. She had withdrawn like a scared virgin, unable to utter a single word until he, understandably angry, had shaken her. When he had grabbed her wrist, she had been about to tell him everything. The damned signature of the treaty that his father had ordered her – no, not ordered, asked, she had wanted him to order her in order to have a silly shitty alibi – not to tell him, in the name of the security of the Prince. How anxious she was about the signature and what would happen afterwards. How sorry and relieved she was that he would leave a few hours later. But instead, luckily, she had only offered him a damn whiskey.

She still couldn't believe that she was able to experience such a range of discomfort after ten years of war. She hadn't been able to look him in the face since he had been about to kiss her again and she was sure they would start again; since she realized she was about to cry. Who knows if it was the beginning of what they called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Looking at the Citadel all night, smoking one cigarette after another in front of the open window, Silia had retraced the moment of Gladio's arrival countless times, and every time it had ended the
same way: she had pulled him inside. At six o'clock – the Citadel Square, already illuminated by the light of dawn, was still almost empty – a luxury car stopped at the end of the staircase. Silia distinctly recognized a tall boy with glasses who she supposed to be Ignis, another blond boy who was certainly Prompto, Prince Noctis and Gladio who were descending the steps. They all were wearing informal clothes. Almost halfway there, the King also came out of the Citadel, limping, accompanied by Captain Drautos, and the boys came back to receive his latest recommendations, or what perhaps was a less formal leave than what should have happened in the Throne Room. Shortly after, they got into the car and left in the direction of the western gate.

When the car went out of sight, Silia got up.

II

Gladio was forced to simulate a compound curiosity as they crossed the West Gate, but his mouth was dry, and he thought he could hear his heartbeat resonate from the tips of his ears to his toes. A wild and untamed landscape, broken by the electric poles that followed each other like tall and slender mahjong pawns, stretched as far as the eye could see. A warm wind that didn't meet any architectural obstacle was lashing at his face, ruffling his hair, bringing sounds and smells of an unknown world.

He looked back to check that the West Gate, guarded by City Guards born in Insomnia, had not disappeared into thin air, and that the asphalt road on which the Regalia was traveling didn't extend endlessly on the horizon as if it had always been there. But the gate was still there, of course.

He turned again; his comrades were as bewitched as he was, and they didn't say a word for miles, not even Prompto, motionless, squeezing his camera without having the mind to use it. And then, out of nowhere, Prompto put both his hands on the side of the car, leaned over and shouted. It was an unconscious cry, long and pure, an explosion of noisy and enthusiastic freedom. He shouted for all of them; Prompto, because he was twenty, they were all a little over twenty, and even though they were three Crownsguards escorting the Prince of Insomnia to marry the Princess of Tenebrae, the whole world stood before the their eyes, and they were ready to devour it.

III

Their enthusiasm died a couple of hours later when the Regalia left them stranded in the middle of the street.

"Ignis, don't tell me," Gladio groaned at the eleventh or twelfth attempt of his friend to start again. "Don't tell me."

Ignis sighed. "If you want I won't tell you, Gladio, but the facts do not change. The Regalia no longer works."

"What does the fuel gauge say?" Noctis asked.

"Do you think I could have forgotten to fill up on the eve of such an important journey?" Ignis pointed out, adjusting the glasses on his nose. "It could be the battery, but I don't know about cars, I am afraid."

"No point in staying in the car, waiting for it to start magically," Gladio cut it short, opening the door wide. "Hammerhead can't be that far away. Let's get a lift and come back with a tow truck."
Prompto took the initiative and began to gesticulate, but without success. They all began to wave, uselessly, for more than a quarter of an hour; cars, vans and fire engines darted beside them without even slowing down. His Majesty Noctis, already tired and bored, sat behind the Regalia. Prompto laid down for dead on the asphalt.

"Damn, thought people were friendly outside the city," Gladio let out when the umpteenth car overtook them, leaning on the side of the car next to Ignis. Perhaps, he thought, loading strangers is not as safe as in Insomnia.

"You can only go so far on the kindness of stranger." Ignis tried again to restart the engine. The car gave a snort, as if it were an old crankshaft and not a young scion of mechanical engineering, and refused to move.

"Just gonna have to push her all the way."

"I've already pushed myself to the brink of death," Prompto mumbled.

Gladio was sweating under his jacket. He didn't expect such a hot day. He took it off, threw it over his seat, and walked around the vehicle to reach Prompto and Noctis. "Oh, get up," he spurred them, irritated, hitting them with his foot. Insomnia had just disappeared behind them and already Noctis was sitting on the ground waiting for someone to solve his problems. "C'mon, car isn't gonna push itself."

Reluctantly, with a sigh – distressed Prompto, annoyed Noctis – the two got up. They positioned themselves on the opposite sides of the Regalia, while Gladio resigned himself to pushing it from behind. After all, he was the one with the most physical strength.

"I thought the car was supposed to move us. Noct, did your father do this on purpose to test us?"

"Don't talk nonsense."

"Save your breath to push," he scolded them. "Ready... steady... push!"

They pushed. The car slowly began to move. Gladio had a feeling that the two, trusting in his physical strength, weren't working very hard. Moreover, the Regalia wasn't a small car.

"Unbelievable..." Noctis grudged.

"Not exactly a fairy tale beginning, huh, Prince Noctis? Let's just hope this isn't some omen," he added aloud.

Noctis clicked his tongue. "Gladio, do me a favor..."

...don't jinx it, he thought he wanted to tell him. "What?"

"Push it by yourself."

"Forget it. Move your royal ass, Noct."

"You won't even notice if we just let go," Prompto gave him support.

They continued to push silently for what seemed to him a very long stretch. There was still nothing to be seen that resembled Hammerhead on the horizon. His father could have at least given him old Cid's number, just in case.

"The map said Hammerhead was right there."
"Literally next door."

Ignis laughed. There, at the wheel, Noctis and Prompto's stupidity had to be much funnier.

"Looks that way on a world map."

"The world's a big old place... filled with wonders."

Sweating under his hair that continued to fall on his eyes, despite the situation, Gladio couldn't help himself but smiling. And now it's ours.

IV

"Oh, by Shiva."

Sarah was the only one to breathe while knocked down by the umpteenth unexpected news of the last few days; they looked at Caesar with blank eyes.

"Murdered, did you say?"

Caesar nodded. He was pale, his jaws tense, and he continued to avoid their look as if ashamed of his displeasure. In these six months he must have been very close to Crowe. It couldn't be otherwise. "Like an animal. And she was abandoned half-buried among the waste. I feel sick just talking about it."

"Fuck you," Sarah spat, as if she had some poison in her mouth. "Fuck you. And we are signing a treaty with them."

"Don't be so hasty, Sarah." Legato seemed to be focusing on a spot in the corridor that was interesting only to him. "There's no evidence that the Imperials did this."

"And who the fuck do you think it was?" Samuel scratched his beard furiously. "The Princess' dog?"

"The Captain told Nyx he won't allow the investigation to be hampered by the treaty." He seemed the first who couldn't believe it. "Damn, she didn't deserve dying like this. She was so kind. And very skilled with magical power. What the hell did they throw at her?"

Samuel hit the wall with a fist. "Are we just going to let it slide like this? One of us, killed this way?"

"Sam, enough," Silia tried weakly to calm him down. The fury of her comrade was fuel to the fire of the indignation that she was desperately trying to hold back. "We had said to stay calm until the treaty would be signed. It's not the case we feed each other's tension, now that the Imperials have arrived. There's already a climate of revolution out there, with all these people rioting across the city."

"What about Libertus?" Sarah asked. "How did the hothead take it?"

Caesar stiffened. "Not well. He was crazy about Crowe. He deserted. I guess he won't be the only one, from here to the signing of the treaty." He ran his hands through his hair. "But Silia's right. Let's not talk about it anymore. Sorry, I need to stay alone for a while."

Silia flickered with apprehension. She reached out to hold him by his arm. "Caesar, you aren't going to...?"
He shook his head. "No. No, Silia, don't worry. I don't take back what I said the other night at the bar. But I'm going to see how Crowe's story will go on. It's one thing to obey orders, another being killed in this unworthy way without your Captain – your King – doing everything possible to have the culprit condemned." He put his hand on hers, squeezed her fingers for a moment and then freed his arm. "C'ya later."

He hadn't taken five steps and Nyx emerged from the curve of the corridor. He had a box under his arm. "Oh, Caesar," he greeted him, giving him an affectionate pat on his shoulder. He didn't smile. "Guess you told the others. Hello guys."

"Nyx, I'm sorry for..." Sarah started to say.

Nyx shook his head, stopping her with a vague gesture of his hand. He looked straight at Silia. "Thank you. If you don't mind, I need to steal the Coeurl for a while."

Silia blinked a couple of times, surprised. "Me?"

"You," he replied dryly. "I need to talk to you. I was going to bring this home. It's Crowe's personal belongings. D'you mind walking with me for a little way?"

Inevitably, Silia looked at Caesar, who shook his head imperceptibly. Her friend said farewell to them with a hand and walked away down the corridor.

"All right," she said. "Let's go. C'ya later, guys."

A few minutes later – they had just left the headquarters, and Nyx hadn't yet begin to talk – it started to rain; a summer drizzle, warm, but persistent, and getting worse. Along with the noises of traffic they could hear the indistinct clamor of a gathering of people. Another demonstration.

"Nyx, let's stop someplace."

He didn't even slow down. "What's it, Coeurl, have you become so delicate that you cannot bear ten minutes of downpour?" he asked with a derisive sound in his voice.

Silia decided to ignore his zinger. She brushed her already wet hair off her forehead. "Why didn't you just contact me at my frequency if you wanted to talk?"

"'cause I'm always afraid of interference and I don't want people to hear us speak by chance. More, if I can talk with a comrade face to face, I prefer it. I don't have to tell you: certain conversations consist of what is not said while speaking."

They looked up at the procession that, defying the ever-increasing rain, paraded beside them in the street. Someone in the crowd recognized their uniforms and pointed at them furiously. They continued to walk briskly, ignoring them, followed by insults hurled like bullets - cowards was the most flattening one. It was amazing how, on one side or the other, they all came to the Glaives, first for having been at war and now for not being at war anymore.

"Then let's hear what you want me not to tell you."

"As you want." Nyx kept his head slightly bowed forward. "Crowe is dead. The Captain assures that there will be investigations, as Caesar must have told you, but I want to understand why she was sent to take Princess Lunafreya and she has arrived yesterday morning at Insomnia with her brother, the High Commander Ravus."

She shrugged. The answer was so obvious that she hesitated to say it. "Crowe never reached
"That's ok, but the Princess knew nothing about the mission. I was on watch in the Throne Room when the King received her. How could the Princess not know about a member of the Glaives in charge of escorting her?" Silia opened her mouth to reply that she didn't have the slightest idea, but Nyx continued, taking off his jacket and using it to cover the box. "And that's not all. The Prince is no longer at Insomnia, is he? The King said so."

"If the King said so, it must be so," she answered cautiously.

Nyx stopped. He studied her carefully, looking for that non-verbal communication he was talking about. "Silia, please. I don't care about your business. Gossip, for me, counts less than zero, but experience has taught me that if you hear twenty people say the same thing, a kernel of truth is always there. At least admit you know the Prince's Shield, or d'you want to deny even that?"

Caesar told him. Given the circumstances, she couldn't feel anger. She sighed, denying was useless. "I do," she simply answered. "I know him."

Nyx started walking again. "Well, that's a start. Did you know about their departure?"

"I knew it."

"Good. What else do you know, Coeurl?"

"Are you asking me to divulge confidential information?"

"Maybe, if it came to your ear, it's not so classified, don't you think?"

They looked at each other sideways. "What the fuck do you want to know from me, Nyx?"

"I already told you. I want to know what Crowe really had to do."

"I don't know it for sure."

"Then tell me what you suppose, by the Six."

She looked at him again for a while, suspiciously, then decided to answer him. She knew little, after all, and soon it would be public news. "The royal wedding will be held in Altissia, not in Insomnia. I think Crowe's mission was to escort the Princess to Accordo before the Imperials discovered it. As for what happened after, I have no idea. Maybe she stumbled into an airfleet of the Niffs, a general recognized her uniform and wanted to play the Glaives a dirty trick before the truce."

Nyx shook his head, clicking his tongue. "Crowe was incognito. And also why risk a diplomatic incident just a few days before the signing of the treaty?"

She had already thought about it too. She shrugged. "I have no idea. What's going on in your head, Nyx?"

He lowered his voice, and the sounds of traffic and rain almost covered his words. "I fear the Imperials knew exactly about Crowe's mission."

"And that the marriage would be held in Altissia, you mean? The Emperor Aldercapt was officially informed about this only when he arrived in Insomnia. Crowe was already on her way, actually she must have already reached Tenebrae by then."

"Officially doesn't mean a shit," he pointed out. "Who else knew about marriage?"
"The Prince and his comrades – apart from Gladio Amicitia, two Crownsguards, his trusted friends, people off the hook. The King, of course, and the Council. Marshal Cor Leonis and, I suppose, the Crownsguard must have been informed. Captain Drautos. Some trusted attendants of the Royal Chancery. I don't know anything else, Nyx. If it's any consolation, the Prince and his friends haven't been informed of the date of signing. All seems to me a perverse game of cards: each of us sees only his own hand."

Nyx bit his lower lip. "And what he can peek at others' hands. Not really a secret departure, huh?"

"Maybe they didn't want it to be that much. Can you imagine someone inside Insomnia selling the Prince to the Imperials?"

"I cannot imagine anybody and anything anymore, Coeurl. Whatever certainty I had in my life, it has dissolved in the last two weeks."

She could understand him perfectly. "It's also true for me, Nyx, but there are things I still try to believe in, otherwise we might as well take off these uniforms, like Libertus did. Do you think he'll come to his senses?"

Nyx shook his head slowly. Now they were both soaked, their uniform stuck to their chests, their hair on their foreheads. "No, Coeurl, I think this time it really ended. The news of the treaty upset him, but he, for Crowe..."

It was not necessary for him to continue. Fraternal affection or love, things didn't change. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "Really, Nyx. We have lost many comrades in the war, but such a thing is..." she looked for the right word for a long time, and she didn't find it. "Inconceivable," she contented herself.

For the first time, something like a smile appeared on Nyx's lips. He stopped, and so did she. They were in front of a bar, but neither of them was in the mood for a drink. "Thanks, Coeurl. Also for this conversation. It's nice to see that not everyone has gone crazy. Now I have a slightly clearer picture of things. I'll keep my eyes wide open."

She smiled too. "Since you're going to keep your eyes wide open, hero, let me give you some advice: keep one on Luche."

"Lazarus?" Nyx returned to stiffen. "And why?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I heard him talk to Marius. I didn't want to eavesdrop, but they didn't see me and they exchanged sentences that I didn't understand well. I fear they're up to something. Maybe I just misunderstood, but..." She recalled Marius' reaction when she had named Luche. "I've a bad feeling, Nyx."

Nyx frowned, and she couldn't blame him; she too would be outraged if anyone had made any allusion about the integrity of one of her teammates. "Lazarus and I have known each other for a lifetime," he reminded her. "Whatever your friend Gaunt has in mind, I don't think Lazarus is involved."

Needless to insist on that point, she understood. "Marius is not my friend. He was, a long time ago, but things have changed. Do what you want Nyx, I didn't mean to offend or accuse anyone."

Nyx sighed tightly, and seemed to soften. "Four years ago, when Division 17 of the army of Tenebrae ambushed us, we in Squad 3 saved ourselves only thanks to your instincts. I'll do as you said, Coeurl, but believe me, Lazarus is a loyal man."
He held out his wet hand and Silia grabbed it. "It was just a fluke that time. Anyway, I'll see you, Nyx," she said goodbye. "If everything runs smoothly on the day of the treaty, we'll go and have a drink all together."

"Coeurl," he said hesitantly, lingering with his hand around hers. "Just tell me one thing. Do you think it was all useless?"

He was certainly referring to Crowe's death, but not only that. Silia looked him in the eyes, retracing her last fifteen years in a few seconds. "No," she replied, not at all certain, to be honest. "Not until we have a sword in our hands and we use it for the right side."

Nyx shook his head imperceptibly, withdrawing his hand. "I'd like to have your certainties."

"I don't have any," she had to admit. "I'm just trying to keep my head on my shoulders and think as little as possible."

"I can't believe it," he winked. "You're too smart to behave like a chocobo with blinders, Coeurl, and I see you as nervous and alert as you were on the front. Better this way. Beyond the speeches about oaths and loyalty, I think it's time to start asking a few questions."

Nyx raised a hand in a last salute, brushed his wet hair, and resumed walking the sidewalk without turning around with his box. With a sigh, Silia stuck her hands in her jacket pockets and headed home.

They were less than forty-five hours from the ceremony.
The day of the ceremony has finally come. Unaware of what's happening in Insomnia, Gladio and his friends enjoy their first trip outside the Crown City, not without some trouble. Meanwhile, the Kingsglaives prepare to deploy. Things start to fall apart soon.

I

He definitely would have never imagined that the beginning of their journey would be like that: an uninterrupted sequence of bummer and emotions as intense as they had never experienced in Insomnia.

They reached Hammerhead exhausted and soaked in sweat – all but Ignis, who had saved for himself the seat at the wheel declaring, not quite wrongly, that they had designated him as a driver and as such he would behave – where they had met Cid Sophiar and his granddaughter Cindy, a beautiful blonde who helped him in his garage. Clarus had often talked about ol' Cid when Gladio was still a boy, but he had expected a solemn and muscled old man, the natural evolution of the adventurer he had always seen in the photographs, not a curved and dry elder with acerbic manner. Cid had received them badly and treated them as callow brats wrapped in cotton wool – something not too far from the truth – as if he and Noct were strangers’ sons rather than his old comrades'. According to what his father had told him, Cid had quarreled with King Regis thirty years earlier, shortly after their precipitous return to Insomnia, when the Imperial troops invaded Leide, Duscae and Cleigne with their then new magitek infantry and littered the territory of military bases. Clarus had never told him the reason for their dispute, but Gladio suspected that Cid, unlike Regis, hadn't accepted King Mors' decision to withdraw the Wall to the Crown City only and had preferred to live outside the borders of an armored city. Cid had a son back then, but Gladio only knew his name: Mid. He must have been Cindy’s father.

From that moment on for Gladio, there had been a series of first times, so many that he had found out, with a hint of dismay, the thought of Silia had slipped into a corner, just as it ought to be. Just as the night he had left her apartment, on the eve of his departure, he had despaired it would happen.

There had been their first hunting missions, for example. Gladio couldn't believe that they would end up working for a living, but ol’ Cid, they learned with consternation, wouldn't repair their car pro bono, not even in the name of the friendship that once had tied him to his father and to the King; on the contrary, he had asked them a load of dough, more than what they had brought with them. It had never happened in his life to go broke and being unable to take money from his bank account in
Insomnia.

They had done well enough in their first fights against dangerous and belligerent living monsters; Gladio had realized with satisfaction that their fighting styles, thanks to the training of the past few years, fit perfectly. Prompto attacked from afar with his firearms, sometimes interrupting to take undoubtedly impressive photographs, even if, according to Gladio, they weren't worth the sting of a Reapertail stuck in their ass; Ignis, as always, kept a supporting position, his hand always stretched over the bag of healing items; Noctis threw himself head bowed in battles, often warping on the enemy without bothering to warn them. "You don't have anything to prove," he had shouted in Noct's face, pissed as hell, his heart still in his throat with concern, at the end of a fight during which he had fallen to the ground and saved himself only thanks to a Phoenix Down. "Wanna get to this fucking wedding alive or not?" Empty words.

On the evening of the following day after leaving Hammerhead – this time into and not behind the Regalia – heading for Galdin Quay, they had camped outside Insomnia for the first time. Gladio had independently assumed the duty to set the camp up, without asking or accepting anyone's help, happy with the effort to plant the stakes, raise the tent, unroll the sleeping bags and prepare the fire. The smells of sand and grass and soil, the plastic hint of the tarp of the tent, the scent of freshly cut and then burned firewood inebriated him.

When the others had retired into the tent after Ignis' impeccable dinner, he lied down for hours on the folding chair under the stars; he had never seen them so bright because he had never been so far away from the artificial lights of the city. He entered the tent late at night, after having enjoyed every moment, every smell, every sound of the nature where they were plunged.

II

"Oh, for the Six." Prompto threw himself face down on his bed. After consulting, they had decided by mutual agreement – which didn't include Ignis – to spend a good part of what they had earned in the last two days to sleep in the beautiful floating hotel in Galdin Quay. The port was closed because of the armistice, they had found out from the people sipping drinks at the bar, and the ferries were out of service. They had been warned of the inconvenience even by a redhead weirdo who they had met on the pier and whom he didn't like at all. "All goes wrong, huh?"

"You can tell. The Regalia first, then all those quests to repay ol' Cid, now the closed port." Noctis snorted, stretching very little regally.

"D'you expect a pleasure trip, Prince?" Gladio opened the curtains and leaned against the windowsill, smiling. He didn't believe he'd ever get tired of looking at the sea. It resembled nothing he had ever seen.

"There is little we can do." Ignis was taking advantage of that short break to leaf through the tourist brochures he had found on the dresser. "Did you know that Galdin Quay was once a poor fishing village? Thirty years ago, after the invasion of Leide, it was turned into a maritime crossroads for connections to Accordo, but since military air transport has taken over, it has become a luxury tourist spot."

"Blah, blah." Prompto covered his head with a pillow. "School ended two years ago for me, Specs."

Gladio didn't care for Ignis' local history classes, but he couldn't wait to explore the place and take a swim. "We should go gather information," he suggested, winking.

"I agree," Noct approved. "At the fishing spot."
"And at the spa," Prompto added.

"And on the beach," he concluded, getting up and taking off his jacket.

Ignis sighed. "All very disinteresting proposals. Since we're stuck here, I suppose there's no harm. But I also want to go and have dinner at the Mother Pearl Restaurant."

"Hurray!"

**III**

Silia stayed more than half an hour in the shower, a record for her. That morning, awakening in a state of plain calm, she had made a decision that hadn't yet shared with the others: even if she didn't know what Captain Drautos' orders would be – whether they would continue to serve the Citadel with the Crownsguards' functions, as they had been instructed for that day, or in the city instead of the City Guard, as they all feared – she would leave her apartment and go stay in the headquarters lodgings with her teammates. They were her family, and although she blindly trusted Legato she wanted to keep an eye on Sarah, Caesar and Samuel and be there to stem their unstable mood.

It wasn't necessary for her to do it at that moment, but, feeling that it was mostly a superstitious gesture, Silia began to tidy up her room in view of her move. She had a few outfits, and spread them out on the bed; she gathered the books she hadn't read yet – she couldn't take to the headquarters all those she had bought during her past months in Insomnia; she emptied the wardrobe and the drawers, not much. The whole operation took only a few minutes.

Finally, she retrieved from under the bed the box with her belongings that had returned with her from the front, some of which she hadn't touched since she had been transported to Insomnia after her injury. She held for a long time her father's photograph, whose colors had faded in a blurred ocher, just as she had done the day she left her home in the refugee district to join the Glaives, then she put it back in the box. She did the same with Hans' plate – HC03S6, she knew his number of matriculation by heart – the first man she had ever loved; it had been delivered to her since he no longer had anyone to be informed of his death. Legato had given it to her secretly because she had jeopardized her life and her comrades’ to try to save him during the mission in which he had died, and the Captain, enraged by the personal involvement not too difficult to guess, had punished her by assigning her at the guard shift while Hans' funeral was celebrated. She found Thomas' broken glasses that had accidentally ended up through her stuff in the chaotic days just before she was sent back to Insomnia. A photograph that portrayed her on the day of her oath as a Kingsglaive – she hadn't changed that much since then. A wooden horse that a child in Bors had given to her during the party held for the victory.

It wasn't much. It was incredible how twenty-eight years of her life had left almost no concrete trace, almost nothing that was worth preserving. After pondering if it wasn't better to throw it away, she also put in the box Gladio's pass for the Training Hall, which she never had the opportunity to return. Finally, before letting it slip into the box, she sat on the bed with her father's Cosmogony on her knees.

*Always fight for your hearth and your home*, she read and read, touching her father's spelling with the tip of her finger. When, in the welcome speech to the new recruits, the Captain had declaimed the Kingsglaives' motto, *Pro aris et focis, For Hearth and Home*, Silia had felt a painful grip on her chest. That was the definitive confirmation, if anything was needed, that she had chosen well and that her father would be proud of her.

Two days earlier he had told Nyx she had no certainties. She had one, after all.
Silia got up and began to dress and arm herself. They were an hour from the meeting at the Glaives' headquarters for the final briefing before the ceremony.

IV

While she watched the road waiting for the parade with the top brass of Niflheim to pass, Silia considered that the situation was so far-fetched that she didn't find it so hard to get out of it. Stiff in a guard stance, her arms crossed behind her back, she continued to patrol her area, supporting the City Guards who, in riot gear, staked out the roadside, aimed at identifying any signs of danger from the citizens crowded on the sidewalk. It was not so unlikely that someone would attempt a foul play against the motorcade, as the dissenting demonstrations of the past few days had shown. Although the perpetrators would have had all her sympathy, the orders were to nip any disorder in the bud and then to follow the procession to the Citadel.

"Hartwood. That's you, right?" she heard.

One of the City Guards pulled up the visor of his protective helmet to be recognized; it was Crux. She hadn't seen him since they had parted in the Citadel hall. Silia wasn't allowed to move from her position, nor to pull up her hood to be recognized in turn. She merely raised a hand in a gesture of greeting. "Hello, Crux."

Crux lowered his visor and got back into the lineup. "It had to be you, as small as you are. No offense. I heard about your retreat," he said aloud, to make himself heard above the crowd's shout. "Along with everything else."

She raised a hand again to cut off the subject. "We'll talk at a better time, Crux, maybe in front of one of those smoothies that..." The transceiver beeped. Without taking her eyes off the crowd, Silia pressed the button to answer, moving away. "Hartwood speaking."

"Hartwood, it's Khara. What's your current position?"

"Citadel Square, west side, at the intersection with the Twelfth. What's up, Khara? The parade is coming."

"Who's within your reach?"

"Nerva, Helias, Hevel, Nesim."

"Listen to me carefully. We're all urgently summoned to the headquarters."

"To the headquarters?" Silia blinked. "Niffs are going to pass in front of us, Khara. I've got other orders."

"And now they're revoked. Alert the others. See you at the headquarters."

The beep suggested that Pelna had closed the communication, probably to give the same instructions to others. Doubtful, Silia sought the Captain's frequency for confirmation. He would have reprimanded her for contacting him despite instructing Pelna to warn them, but she found that counteraction inexplicable. The Captain didn't answer. His silence was incomprehensible in such a moment, when anything could happen.

Without knowing what to think, Silia turned to Elea and called her name aloud, reached her, and lowered her voice so that neither the City Guards nor anyone in the crowd could hear them. "I just closed a communication with Khara. Orders have changed. We are called back to the headquarters..."
immediately."

Elea blinked. "Why in the fuck?"

"Don't know anything else. Let's call the others."

They communicated the news to Miles, Sigrid and Sarah. Their comrades shared her perplexity, but there was nothing else to do.

A City Guard moved from his position to ask them if there were any problems.

"No problem at all," Elea put him back in his place, hurriedly. "Keep your position and tell your colleagues to do the same."

V

She had expected to find the Captain at the headquarters, not Nyx Ulric acting like him. Her surprise turned into alarm as Nyx updated them: first, the Captain was untraceable; second, Pelna and Nyx had found out that Crowe had been murdered 32 miles south of the walls of Insomnia, which confirmed her comrade's suspicions about a leak; third, the Princess of Tenebrae had disappeared; last but not least, an enemy airfleet was in position just outside the Wall.

"What if this is a diversion?" Miles asked.

"Not likely. Tenebrae's Princess is onboard," Nyx replied. "We've got two jobs: save her and stop those Niffs ships from flying on Insomnia."

"We go in teams," Luche echoed him, without anyone having given him the authority to do so. "Standard infiltrate and extract. Nyx, you command. We'll follow. The Glaive stands together, Captain or no. For Hearth."

"And Home!"

An airfleet. What the hell can they do with an airfleet if... She had a bad feeling. She hadn't seen Marius, nor some of the others, like Norton, Amber, Aron. Pelna hadn't been able to reach out to them or they had deserted?

Before Nyx could get away, Silia passed between her arming comrades, joined him, and grabbed his arm. "Nyx, wait!"

"Hartwood, we don't have time," the companion shot dryly. He seemed to have leapt into his role of second in command quickly enough.

Silia shook her head. "Find enough to listen to me. I won't come with you."

"What the fuck does that mean, Hartwood?" Nyx freed himself with a jerk. He was sweaty, agitated. "D'you want to argue with me at a time like this? These are King's orders."

"Shut up and listen to me," she replied, forgetting for a moment that she couldn't afford to speak like that to Nyx, not as long as he represented the Captain's and King's authority. "The Wall, Nyx. Niflheim's airfleet cannot penetrate the Wall. If the Imperial ships are already in formation, they must have something in store."

Nyx, who had opened his mouth to reply, closed it. At least it seemed she had earned his attention.
"All right, Hartwood, let's hear, but hurry up. What are you up to?"

"Return to the Citadel, as per initial orders, and support the Guards at the Shrine doors. Probably nothing will happen and I'll get the umpteenth disciplinary note, but there's also the possibility that there are moles at the Palace. You said it yourself. Let me go. They won't expect it, and a man down won't affect the outcome of your mission."

"Five." Legato came up beside her, resting a hand on her shoulder. Even Sarah, Sam and Caesar had come forward. They must have heard their conversation. "If something happens in the Shrine, you can't stop it by yourself. We'll come with you. This is not a request." He slowly articulated his last sentence, challenging Nyx with his eyes, but tightened his grip on her shoulder.

"All right, damn it." Nyx lowered the hood over his face. "Hartwood, you may be right. And Harsh certainly is. Reach the Guards and protect the Crystal. I'll inform the King and the Captain."

VI

At the entrance to the Citadel they were allowed to pass immediately. They hurried through the hall, spectrally deserted except for a dozen City Guards, and parted ways at the elevators. They had talked along the way about the few details of their mission, if it could be defined as so and decided that, as a precaution, Legato and Samuel would reach the Shrine from the west end of the gallery and she, Caesar and Sarah from the opposite end, in order to encircle a possible threat.

"D'you really believe something will happen?" Sarah asked as they got up.

Silia shook her head. "Dunno. We'll find out soon."

Her transmitter activated. "Hey, Coeurl..." Samuel started to say. "...will you finally tell me if you nailed that chick from Quirm?"

"No, I think I won't tell you this time either, Sam," she replied with a smile.

They all laughed. It was a superstitious banter that had been going on for six years, whenever they were about to go on a mission, since she had left a bar in Quirm with a girl who had mistaken her for a young man. She had always refused to tell the others how it had ended, despite their insistence, and now it was no longer a matter of reticence or modesty but a way to wish that there would be another chance to talk about it.

"Again all five on a mission, huh?" Caesar smiled. "It's as if Squad 6 is reunited again. I wish Thomas was here too."

"I missed you guys," Silia whispered. The bleak uniform hood kept her from looking at their faces. "I hope we'll just have to unnecessarily guard a closed door. The Captain will break our asses."

They fell silent, because they had reached the floor and the elevator doors opened. With a last nod, they walked the landing swiftly and stealthily towards the entrance of the gallery.

"Leg," Silia whispered to her transmitter. "We are in position at the east end of the gallery."

"We're in position too at the west end," Legato's voice crackled. "Status?"

Flattened against the wall, Silia stretched to peer at the corridor. She didn't see anyone, but the gallery curved and from there she couldn't be sure the area was clear. "No one in sight and absolute silence. I don't like it."
"Same here. Why aren't the Guards patrolling?"

"On three, in the gallery," she said, nodding to Caesar and Sarah to get ready. "See you at the door of the Shrine. One..." She couldn't get to two.

"We are under attack, Silia, they were waiting for us!"

"Leg! How many are-"

The communication broke off. Swearing, Silia made a dry gesture to the two comrades and they hurled themselves into the gallery. Two enemies fell – no, they warped – on them, immediately engaging into battle. Parrying the first blow, Silia recognized the Dominator almost before identifying her comrade.

*Marius.*

"Gaunt? Norton?" Caesar exclaimed. "What the fuck...?"

Marius didn't answer, nor did Norton. They were outnumbered, but they attacked them with ferocity. They weren't fighting to stop them. They were trying to kill them.

"Marius, what the fuck are you doing?" What he was doing was clear: they were there to seize the Crystal. Marius Gaunt, Norton Chad and anyone who attacked Legato and Samuel – Amber and Aron, she guessed – had turned to the enemy.

Marius didn't answer, continuing to press her closely. That was best strategy to ensure that Sarah was unable to give her magical support without risking hitting her too. She tried to disengage and move away, to cast herself or give Sarah a way to do it, but the gallery was too narrow and Marius kept on marking her, even though he too was at a disadvantage in close combat due to the size of his Dominator. She was so focused on trying not to get killed by her childhood friend that Silia realized too late a fundamental thing: they were pushing them back towards the landing. Her gaze darted to look for a space between the wall and Marius where she could insinuate.

"Sarah, I need cover!" she shouted.

Before Marius, alerted by her cry, could react, Silia flung one of her two swords over her opponent, as far as possible in the corridor, and warped. Marius, she saw from the corner of her eye, tried to warp as well, but he was hindered by Sarah and couldn't help but fight.

She warped again closer to the Shrine. She smelled the blood almost before appearing close to the six bodies in riot gear ripped to the ground in displaced positions. One's head, she had time to see, had been smashed, perhaps by a bullet of medium caliber, and at least two others had been riddled with blows. She didn't have time to check if the other two were still alive; she stepped over them, through the wide open doors that led to the Shrine.

There was no one inside. The Shrine was empty and silent and beyond the windows, past the control panel that regulated the access to the area reserved exclusively for the King, Silia saw the cylinder of adamantite that contained the Crystal and led its power, conveying it into the artifact that kept the Wall erect.

Looking at her back, keeping an ear to the noise of the clash that was taking place in the corridor, Silia approached the control panel. She wouldn't know where to lay her hands to activate or deactivate it, but it wasn't necessary; the Crystal was there, just before her eyes. Marius, Chad, and whoever was fighting against Legato and Samuel must have killed the Guards, but it seemed that, after all, they had arrived in time to stop them. Five minutes later and maybe...
It was a happy thought that lasted a blink, the time she took to notice the flashing red devices.

*Oh, for Odin's cock.*

She leaned down to examine the nearest one. She counted five of them around the place. In her military training she had learnt some vague rudiments of defusing bombs, but these weren't like anything she had ever seen.

*If I don't do something,* she told herself, feeling the hair on her arms and nape standing on, *the Shrine is lost.*

She turned to the door to shout a warning to her comrades and prepare herself to cast a *protect,* but in that moment the bombs stopped blinking and hell broke loose.

Chapter End Notes

Note: if you like this story (or even if you don't like it), I would like to receive your opinion! Thank you for reading!
Chapter Summary

Silia manages to survive the explosions in the Shrine. In the Hall of Ceremonies the King is in danger, but her former comrade (and childhood friend) Marius Gaunt is alive as well and she is forced to fight.

15

I

"Slowly... slowly!"

"Prompto, put away that damn camera or I swear I'm gonna smash it."

"What the heck is that thing?"

Hidden behind the ledge of a rise, Gladio and his friends stared at the most huge and monstrous bird he had ever seen in his life. It was as big as a rig, black and white as a swallow, and had a second pair of wings the size of an eagle's on either side of its head.

"I believe it could be a Zu," Ignis explained. "It's generally tame."

Noctis moaned in disbelief. "Tame, that thing?"

"If you do not bother it," Ignis said. "I once heard of a Zu that leveled a village to recover one of its eggs."

Gladio shuddered. "Great to know, since I've got the damn feeling that it's made the nest just above the vein we need to mine."

They remained silent for a while, looking at the giant bird.

Prompto snorted. "Why just don't go back and tell that Ghiranze he asked us the impossible? I'm sure he knew it!"

Gladio had no doubts, otherwise the jeweler/journalist or whatever the hell he was would come to get his gem by himself. He regretted not having obeyed his urge to punch him when he had blackmailed them. If he had broken all his teeth, perhaps it would've made it hard for him to tell that the Prince of Insomnia was at Galdin Quay, leaving for his wedding in Altissia. Told you we shouldn't accept."

"We're here now," Noct said with a sigh. "It can't possibly sit all day on its nest?"
"I believe that's what happens when a beast incubates its eggs."

"Damn, we've no time." Gladio became impatient. "Let's approach slowly. Maybe we can put a hand under its arse and get the gem."

They went out into the open and slowly sneaked towards the Zu. It was truly majestic, and Gladio wished not to be forced to fight, not only because he doubted they would come out in one piece, but also because they were bothering a beast that hadn't hurt anyone and he didn't want to end up killing it only to bring a damn gem to that Ghiranze.

Suddenly, with a screech that deafened them, the bird spread its wings and jumped up. Gladio snapped on Noctis to shield him with his own body, fearing that the beast would have flung itself on them, but the Zu flew away without paying them any attention.

The four of them remained crushed on the ground, incredulous, watching it fly away without being able to still believe in so much luck. Noctis' hair tickling his chin reminded Gladio that he was still on him. He stood up.

"I can't believe it," Prompto whispered.

"Yeah, and with this I think we have re-balanced all the bad luck of the past two days." Shaking off the dust from his elbows and knees, Noct also stood up. "Gladio, thanks, but next time, warn me so I avoid breaking my chin on the ground."

Gladio opened his mouth to tell His Highness to go to hell, but Prompto groaned. "No, I... I meant that I cannot believe it flew away before I could take a picture of it."

"Oh my, Prompto." Ignis quietly leaned down on the nest and, carefully moving the Zu's eggs aside, began to tap the vein to detach one of the gems. "You can still wait here for it to come back. Meanwhile, we'll make our return to Galdin Quay, if you don't mind. I would be displeased if Mother Pearl restaurant runs out of oysters **au gratin**."

With the gem in their possession, they descended again the ridge towards the Regalia. It was late in the afternoon and the sun had began to lower on the horizon line. They were far from the shore and couldn't see anything but a semi-desert sweep.

"I'm warning you," Gladio said, as they climbed into the car. "If Ghiranze doesn't keep his word and grants us a pass for the next ferry, I'll swing at him in a way that he'll be the one to end up in tomorrow's papers."

II

"**Harsh for Squad 6. We are in position, Sir.**"

*Among the Kingsglaives there's no hierarchy, but Legato Harsh, the eldest among them – not much older than she is, actually – has been appointed as responsible for Squad 6 for their first field mission. A choice due more to his enviable cold blood, Silia believes, than to his age.*

As your first mission, *the Captain had explained to them three days before, pointing to the map on the screen, we will reach Valdis Plain, fifty miles from Davor, three hundred from the western front. The area is still quiet, some minor incursions, but the inhabitants of Davor begin to feel the Imperials breathing down their necks. You will operate in three areas: Squads 1 and 2, sector A; Squads 3 and 4, sector B; Squads 5 and 6, sector C. The corresponding areas of the map had flashed on the*
Your task is to guard the Valdis Plain and hinder the movements of the Imperial troops. I will coordinate you from Davor, but I will not take the field with you; this is your baptism of blood, and you must learn to operate without having your backs covered by one of us. Remember that the eyes of the Crown City are on you. You are the hope of the King and the Kingdom. Do not betray their expectations.

Silia looks around herself. They're eighteen, bent in guard stance, waiting. There is no place to hide in Valdis Plain, but they don't need it, because the vegetation is so low and scarce that they would see their enemies coming from miles away. The faces of her comrades are hidden by the uniform hoods, so she can't see their expressions, but she hopes they'll keep their heads. Squad 6 was formed three weeks earlier, just enough time to deepen some connections she had already made during their years of training, not enough to confide in her new comrades up to trusting them with her life. But that's what they'll be forced to do in the years to come. For three weeks they had shared the same shack, they had eaten, slept, shit together, they had studied each other to learn their respective strengths and weaknesses and trained to adapt their fighting styles to teamwork. They'll have to coordinate with all the other Glaives, of course, and be ready to join them, if necessary, but their teammates' asses will be their priority.

She got to know some of them quite well during her training: Sarah, for example, two years younger than her, glued to her heels three days after their arrival at the facility; they grew up together, two of the few girls among the recruits. She's very close to Hans. She doesn't know Legato that well, but she has observed him a lot, even before they assigned them in the same squad, and she has decided that he's one of the most promising Glaives. Leon knows how to prepare exceptional magic flasks, and they risked blowing up – together with the shed where they secretly prepared them – several times. Arlen is able to cast phenomenal healing spells. She doesn't like others too much: Samuel talks nonsense, all the time. Thomas seems like a coward to her. Nathalie doesn't know how to work in a team. She wouldn't entrust a dead hamster to Ianus. But they are her teammates and she'll have to learn to trust them.

Not an hour passes and they hear – even before seeing them – the engines of a fleet of Imperial airships flying over the area. A small fleet, judging by the roar of the engines, and in fact there are only twelve scoutships, Silia quickly counts, looking up. She hears Gaye wondering how the hell they can be already there, but she's not surprised at all by their sudden arrival: a small army displaced after years of military inactivity of the Kingdom of Lucis must have attracted their attention. Of course the Niffs don't know yet who they are, they sure think of a group of rebels in the area. In Gralea they'll be amazed by knowing that Insomnia is counterattacking.

The airships scatter, starting their descent, and firing a few barrels of machine-gun. Silia is about to cast a protect, then remembers that others have the role of support, and in fact the artillery discharges crash against an opaque magic wall. She wonders whether there are humans or magiteks on the airship, and how, at that moment, they are reacting to the discovery that the armed group is able to use magic.

The shots of machine guns continue for a few minutes, as if the enemy wanted to test the tightness of the magic walls, then they cease. In the distance, Silia sees the burst of a thunder combined with a fire casted by another squad – the 3 or 4, judging by the sector – hit one of the airships, and she can hear the shouts of exultation of some Glaives. The damaged aircraft starts to lose altitude. Samuel, next to her, comments that if this is the beginning the Imperials will do well to hide. Silia tells him to close his mouth and don't jinx it.

"Don't look at what the others are doing," Legato recalls their attention, pointing at two airships that
are landing half a mile from them. "Look at them."

They do it. The doors of the airships open and magiteks begin to come down. Protected by the magic wall, Squad 6 members don't move; one of the first things they learned is to evaluate opposing forces before launching into offensive actions. The magiteks start getting in formation and fire at them, but the wall still holds. Silia counts them as they come down: ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, forty. Who knows how many of them there are.

"Forty," she hears Hans say, next to her. "But I don't think they have unloaded all of them. I bet there are at least as many still inside."

"Forty or a hundred, we haven't been ordered to sit here and wait for their batteries to run out," Samuel replies. "Let's go."

Samuel is first to cross the magic wall and attack. Silia looks at him holding her breath — he has forty rifles aimed on him — but someone in the rear casts a new protect on him. Other comrades surpass her to throw themselves on the magiteks. Her blood quivers, she would like to run with them and start fighting, but she feels her legs are paralyzed, her breath stuck in her chest.

No way, she realizes. Not now. I've been trained five years for this. At the final exam I fought almost even with Magellano. These are just fucking armed mannequins.

"Silia." Hans is still by her side. He raises a gloved thumb in a joking gesture, and even though his face is hidden by the hood she bets that he's smiling with arrogance. "If we stay here, there'll be none left for us. Let's move our asses."

She can't show Hans she's frightened. She gives him the finger with fake confidence and throws a sword, warping near the first airship. She hears some applause — few in her squad have already learned to warp — then, when she starts to move easily among the enemies, hitting them at the back of their neck, behind their knees, between their shoulders, amazed at how slow they are, how predictable their moves, she no longer hears anything. She only sees mechanical heads, arms and legs to knock down, projectiles to avoid, swords moved too clumsily to hit her.

And then she comes face to face with an MA-5; a mechanical armor of latest creation. Silia looks around herself: she and her comrades have scattered in the area during the fighting, and at that moment she's alone in facing it. Her heart seems to collapse and then expand, almost exploding; that MA is huge.

Without thinking about it, Silia casts a thunder. She hopes that electricity can damage the circuits, but the spell leaves it unscathed.

It's shielded, she deduces, for Odin's cock, it's shielded and it's huge. Again she feels her legs go numb, but when one of the long mechanical arms of the MA rotates and shoots a laser beam ather, they move perfectly, and she goes out of reach. Its legs, she thinks, feeling ridiculous to use human limb names for such a mechanical monster, I have to unbalance it. If I throw it on the ground, that stuff will never stand up.

Now that she's thinking clearly again, she feels better. Never rely on brute strength, the instructors used to repeat her ad nauseum during the training sessions, leave it to those who have muscles and wield swords large as electric poles; use spells, use your agility, use your head. She can do it, she believes, she's sure, even if the MA continues to target her with laser beams, missiles and gusts. How many fucking weapons can it have?

Silia keeps on jumping around without being able to reduce the distance between them. She tries to
cast a protect on herself, but she's starting to be exhausted and unfocused. Resistance has never been her strong suit.

"Silia, I'm here!"

She recognizes Karla's voice. She cannot turn around to check her position, but she cannot be far away. "Karla!" The explosion of a small missile just next to her makes her voice barely recognizable. "Karla, I can't get close! Cover my back!"

Her comrade obeys – Silia immediately sees her field of vision become opaque – and, breathing a sigh of relief when the missile cracks the magic wall without breaking it, she uses her last magical power to warp on the MA's leg. She narrowly misses it, but her sword still sticks near the opponent's feet, thus offering her the chance of targeting the legs.

The armor's alloy is very hard; it's like sawing the trunk of a tree with a Swiss army knife. Hopping and tumbling around the enemy to avoid its physical attacks, she continues to hit the same point, the thinnest one, trying to destabilize the MA.

But then the MA changes target. The nozzles from which he shoots missiles and laser beams raises, pointing – or so Silia supposes – in Karla's direction.

Inside the armor there must be an extremely advanced magitek, programmed to target supportive enemies, or an Imperial in the flesh. Silia doesn't waste any more time wondering: while her barrier falls apart, she pulls out from the pocket of the uniform a *crio* flask prepared that morning at Davor, infuses her swords with its power, and continues to hit the feet of the armor with all strength left in her.

Perhaps the enemy's shield has begun to yield, because the foot of the MA freezes and she manages to break it, just in time to divert the laser blow aimed at Karla. The MA crashes on the ground, and Silia, trusting in a new protect of her comrade, throws herself on the armor and starts smashing the cabin with both her swords. "Do you hear me?" she growls, not knowing if the magiteks after all understand the human language, "I'm gonna open this thing like a can of sardines and pull you out."

The opaque glass of the cabin starts to crack while the MA struggles and contorts in the attempt to get back on its feet and grab her. Blinded by fury, Silia continues to hit. She sees movements inside the cabin when the glass breaks, then she hears a roar.

The next moment, or at least the next moment she can recall, she finds herself lying on her back, she has blood in her mouth, and her ears buzz. She plants her elbows on the ground and pulls up her back. She looks around: the MA is a pile of smoking scrap and she doesn't see any other enemies. She won, it seems. And, above all, she's still in one piece, or so she believes.

"Silia, can you get up?"

Balthier. When did he approach? "What the fuck happened?"

He grabs her from under her armpits without much ceremony and pulls her up. "We were coming to give you support and the MA self-destructed. You were uncovered, Silia. Sarah casted a protect just in time. The explosion threw you away but you're whole."

"Sarah?" she croaks, trying to stay up. Her throat hurts, and she pulls off her hood to breathe better. She spits a lump of saliva and blood. She has bitten her tongue and the inside of her mouth. "Karla was supporting me. Did something happen to her?"

She turns and sees her three hundred yards away, along with Sarah, apparently unharmed. No
enemy in her proximity, neither alive nor dead. She approaches her in quick steps, almost in a rush, as far as dizziness allows her. She already knows what happened without needing to ask her. She just looks at her face, now that she has torn her hood off, her waxy color, her sweaty hair stuck to the sides of her face, the expression turned upside down.

"Silia, I'm sorry."

"Did they hit you? There's a fucking good reason why, while that fucking MA exploded on me, was not your fucking protect to save my fucking ass?"

Karla doesn't even try to lie. Silia only realizes that some of their comrades – Balthier, Hans, Sarah, Asar – have approached and crowded around them, tense, ready to intervene.

"I'm sorry." Karla holds out her hands to calm her down. "But when the MA aimed the cannons at me..."

"...you shitted in your pants and instead of casting a protect on yourself and then on me, you ran away." Silia cannot help herself. She was scared, fucking scared, because there was no instructor to cover their asses, because those were real magiteks ready to kill her, and because, for the first time in her life, she risked dying. She punches Karla in the face so hard that she staggers and falls back on her skinny ass.

"Silia!" Balthier tackles her and blocks both her arms. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Lemme go!" she shouts. She feels out of her mind. "People like her will get us killed. She cannot stop casting protect just because she's scared! We are all scared!"

"Silia, stop now." Legato approaches. "It's all over. Calm down."

"No! It's not all over!" she realizes, trying to free herself. "It's just started! It's just started and I was about to blow up with a fucking MA on my first mission because this bitch wasn't where she should have been!"

Legato slaps her. A sharp blow, more noise than anything else, but it helps to calm her down.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but the fact that Karla is in the back to cast protect doesn't exonerate you from keeping your guard high."

Balthier still doesn't leave her arms. Perhaps he fears that she will lash out on Legato as well. But Silia lowers her head, clenching her teeth, and her mouth fills with blood again. She feels humiliated for losing control, but even more because Legato is right. She takes a deep breath, spits blood again, and straightens her head. "Balth, you can let me go now. I'm calm."

The grip around her forearms loosens. Karla, she only realizes at that moment, has remained on the ground and is crying. She feels guilty for that punch, but she doesn't apologize to her. She puts her uniform hood back on.

"Captain, Harsh for Squad 6. The area is clear. No casualties."

Silia, of course, can't hear their Captain's reply. "Received," Legato answers, and closes the communication. "We can go back to Davor, for today," he then communicates to her and to the others. "Please tell everyone. The Captain wants to discuss today's fighting."

For the first time Silia looks at her watch. She's amazed at realizing that only fourteen minutes have passed since they saw the airships. Only now she really understands what the Captain meant when
he warned them that real battles last for a few minutes.

III

Silvia opened her eyes and saw the sunset sky through a gash in the ceiling, framed by clouds of gray smoke. She struggled to understand what she was looking at, and for a moment she thought she was in the Valdis Plain, on the ground, and felt fucking pissed off with Karla for not covering her back. Her ears were buzzing like never before, her head ached atrociously, and her lungs felt irritated by something in the air she couldn't identify. Then she saw the adamantite cylinder that protected the Crystal move upward, carried by an Imperial airship, and remembered where she was and what had happened.

*For Odin's cock,* she cursed, straightening her back, but at that movement everything around her started swirling and she found the chipped marble of the floor against her cheek. A tremendous nausea brought an acid surge up through her esophagus, and she threw up. *For the Six, my head, my fucking head.*

She forced herself to remain still, regulating her breathing. Head wounds were dangerous because the *heal* spell didn't repair the damage to the internal organs, and she had already seen Glaives dead for apparently inexplicable reason the next day after healing a tear to their scalp without worrying about excluding a concussion. She touched herself gently to assess the damage; the reinforced plate of her hood was smashed and she brushed the jagged edges of a wound that stretched from behind her left ear to the center of her head. She had managed to evoke a magic wall just in time, and only thanks to that she wasn't shredded in the Shrine, but a last out-of-sync explosion had flung her against the wall.

"Sarah!" she cried, coughing, but she doubted she could make herself heard. Her head seemed to explode. She reactivated the transceiver that, thankfully, still worked. "Caesar! Are you okay?" she tried again. Her voice sounded as distant as if it were from a deep well.

No answer, or maybe she didn't hear it. She could only hear an annoying whistle. She put her hand on the wound and casted a *heal.* The pangs of pain gradually subsided and so, she supposed, did the bleeding. The nausea didn't. She could only get up and cross her fingers.

*The Crystal. Bloody damn. They took the Crystal.* She struggled to her feet, trying to clear her mind. The Crystal was gone. Niflheim had set a trap for them. So, eighteen floors below, in the Hall of Ceremonies, the King was in danger. She had to get up and reach him, even if she felt like a swarm of Killer Wasps had decided to make their beehive inside her head.

"Guys!" she cried again, and this time she heard her voice more clearly. "Are you OK? Those fucking Imperials have taken the Crystal!"

She ran out of the hall. The corridor was half-collapsed due to the explosion that involved not only the Shrine, but also the galleries. In front of her, through the slashed wall, she could see the city in chaos – airships flying around, magitek troops swarming, fire and brimstone. The Citadel Square, which until a few minutes before was crowded with people gathered to witness the ceremony on the big flat screens set up for the occasion, was covered in debris and citizens were scattering all around.

She looked for her comrades and, to her dismay, she found them. Caesar and Sarah were lying on the floor, as well as Chad. On the other side of the gallery, in sight, Legato and Samuel, Amber Nesrin and Aron Kitz, all lying face down.

*Damn,* she cursed, running to kneel by Sarah, the closest one. She had a gash on her stomach so
deep that her intestines had come out of it. It hadn't been Marius' Dominator. The cut was too large, and she supposed it was Chad's work. Sarah hadn't died helplessly: a fire spell had burned Chad almost to the bone. None of the Glaives had Sarah's magic power.

Caesar was a little further. She didn't need to lower herself to examine him. He was lying on his stomach and his neck was almost sliced through. A moan clambered up her throat but she restrained herself, clenching her mouth with one hand. She was a Kingsglaive, and she was still on a mission. She didn't have time to mourn her comrades because at that moment, over the curve of the corridor, she saw that Marius had dragged himself into the tunnel towards the landing, leaving behind him a bloody trail. Leaned against the wall he had cast a heal as well, and was taking care of a deep wound on his chest.

Out of her mind with rage, Silia threw herself at him to make it over, but halfway through the planned distance, the warp failed and she found herself kneeling on the ground without a sword, incredulous. After failing a warp six months ago and having lost her leg for this, she had trained a lot and had never missed one more. It must have been the aftermath of the blow to her head: she couldn't focus. She threw the second blade closer and tried again, but this time she couldn't even start.

"What the fuck...?"

She raised her head on Marius. The pale light of the heal in his hands had vanished, yet the wound on his chest was still open and bleeding, she could see it even from there. They looked at each other for a moment; they both had their hoods down over their faces, but she imagined precisely her former comrade's confused expression.

*I can't feel no longer the power of the Crystal.*

It was just a moment. Silia started to retrieve her swords and Marius grabbed his Dominator. She couldn't tell which of them had an advantage at that moment; Marius was a dangerous opponent, but his wound hadn't completely closed and she didn't know what other damage he had incurred during his clashes; as for her, warping and magic were out of the game.

She was pervaded by pure hatred so ferocious that she almost felt her blood flowing backward in her veins. She had always hated the Niffs since she was a child, but they were her natural enemies; Marius, on the other hand, had been almost a brother to her, yet he had betrayed their army, surrendered Insomnia and the Crystal to Niflheim, abandoned their King, and killed her teammates. She wanted to tear him apart. She had killed few men during the war, but now she felt a sharp desire to slaughter her childhood friend.

She tightened her grip on the handle of her swords and prepared for a fight, blinded by anger, but a new series of explosions from below distracted her from that purpose and forced her to reason.

*No time for this. The King is the priority.*

"I can't kill you now, Marius," she hissed, her voice so low that perhaps he didn't even hear her. "But it's not over." She dived into the corridor in the direction of the landing. Her duty was to reach the Hall of Ceremonies and protect the King. Marius could just try and stop her.

He did it; despite his wound, he moved with impressive speed, blocking her advance and pushing her back with a lunge. Silia jumped backwards, avoiding it, and Marius was back on her. They exchanged quick blows without either of them prevailing, then they separated to catch their breath. They were both quite in bad shape.

"You couldn't have just left, huh?" she heard him say. Marius pulled off his hood, showing his face,
pale and twisted with pain. The clash with Sarah and Caesar hadn't left him unscathed. "I didn't want to kill you, only the Astrals know how true it is."

She couldn't believe him. "Don't fake sympathy a traitor like you can't feel, Marius. Now get out of my way or fight."

"Only the Astrals know how true it is." Marius was breathing hard, his face sweating. "It must have been you, in Altius' place, did you know it? The former Squad 6 would have unleashed hell. I convinced them that it was not the case; Altius was easier to overpower and who knows what a fuss the Prince's Shield would have raised if you had disappeared. I came to your place to reason with you. But no use, you really are the bitch of the King and the Guard. You even came to snoop here in the Shrine."

Her lips were trembling. She had no time to waste, but a stream of questions and insults ran down her tongue. "You convinced who, Marius? How many of you are behind this? So it's you who killed Crowe, you bastard pieces of shit. What the fuck's Aldercapt promised to make you betray the Captain that has trained us, besides the King?"

Marius shook his head, taking a step to his left. "As usual you didn't understand shit, Silia. Too blinded by your fucking idealism. If I had to do it over I would let you rot in the refugee district instead of talking about you to the Captain."

Silia jumped and flashed to Marius' right, trying to get over him. The wall of the gallery and part of the floor had collapsed, and she realized too late that it was what he wanted. Marius also jumped, vibrating a blow in her direction with his Dominator.

_We'll both fall down_ , Silia thought. _This was what he wanted._

Silia blocked the blow, but the impact bounced her and they start falling. She couldn't warp, she had nothing to hold on to. She saw the gallery moving upward, Marius a few meters from her. They were on the eighteenth floor. They wouldn't survive.

She didn't give up. She turned on herself, in a straight position, without letting go of her swords. Warping or not, she was still a Glaive. Then she shifted her weight, trying to divert the trajectory towards the white marble facade of the Citadel; she aimed both swords, and with a horrible screech, she pulled their tips to the facade trying to slow down the fall. Marius did the same.

Finally, with the roar of her heart in her throat and the whistling of the wind in her ears, she managed to cling to a ledge without losing her swords. It was the rose window that looked on the main facade: she could see, several feet below, the stairway on which that bastard Aldercapt and his high officers had climbed not even an hour before to go to the Hall of Ceremonies.

She didn't need to look for Marius; he too had managed to cling to the rose window. They jumped up, a few meters away, and looked at each other panting.

"Let's get over with it," she spat, returning to her guard stance. They began to fight again on the edge of the rose window. In that narrow platform the Dominator had no room for movement. Marius also noticed it, because he tried again to press her to the edge and push her down, but this time Silia was careful to keep her back covered. Marius finally became impatient, pulverized the windows behind them and she found herself back inside, fighting in an office.

_This could go on for hours_ , she considered, rolling to her side while Marius' weapon split a bookcase in two. _As long as the bleeding won't knock him down. If I had time..._
She jumped on a table and hurled herself at him, aiming at his neck, but Marius parried, and at the same time he kicked the table, unbalancing her. Silia fell practically on the Dominator. She felt a terrible pain in her shoulder, a feeling of tearing. Marius was ready to finish her.

Not yet. She grabbed his hand that held the handle of the sword, before he could rip her shoulder apart, and pushing herself with both legs she jumped back, managing to free herself from the blade. She walked away, exhausted; whatever advantage Marius' wound had given her, they were now even.

He gave her no breath. He was on her again, and she, weakened and unfocused by the pain, lost her balance. She found Marius straddling her stomach, his blade a few inches from her throat, held back only by her twin swords. Her arms were trembling with exertion, and the left one, with the wound on her shoulder, would have held up just for a while. A few seconds, and her head would no longer be attached to her neck.

She concentrated all her strength on holding the block, staring into Marius' eyes. For Shiva, she thought. Is this really the boy I grew up with? Ten years at war and I'm gonna be killed by Marius Gaunt?

For a moment she thought of giving up. She could no longer hold that contrast, and her sight began to cloud. Marius weighed tremendously on her stomach, she couldn't wriggle away.

Your legs. Use your legs.

She arched her artificial leg at an angle that would have been impossible for the real one and she thrust a violent kick into Marius' neck. She saw him squinting, surprised, and Silia took advantage of that moment of hesitation in which he eased his grip on the Dominator to slide down, clasp his neck with both her legs, and crush it between her shins.

Marius let go of the Dominator to grab her legs in a last desperate attempt to free himself. She didn't wait for him to suffocate; she cut his throat with her swords.

The grip on her legs gave way, Marius' dead body fell on her, his head on her chest. Soaked with his warm blood, she gasped as if she had never breathed in her life, trying to calm down. She was about to throw up again, or to scream, so she stuck her hand in her mouth, biting it, to avoid doing both things.

"Calm down," she said aloud, moving Marius' body away from her. She didn't look at him. He was an enemy, a fucking enemy, and she had killed him in a fair combat that he didn't deserve. Calm down now. The King must be your priority.

It was a titanic enterprise, but she calmed down. She remained on her knees, her forehead on the floor, her shoulder in a hell of a lot of pain, trying to regulate her breathing. She rose slowly, rubbing the blood from her eyes and mouth with her right arm.

For Odin, one never gets used to the smell of death. It was a black, viscous odor, made of blood, rancid sweat, body fluids and secretions, steel and fat and burnt flesh. She hadn't smelled it for months, because it had been months since she had found herself standing on a battlefield among the corpses of friends and enemies. That was the moment of the counting of the fallen, provided that they were able to do so, and strictly after taking care of their own wounds, to avoid that there was one more fall. For the count of the fallen there was no time, her teammates had died who knows how many floors above, and she couldn't count on the magic anymore to heal her shoulder. She could stand up, and that was enough. She exited the office and started running in the corridor towards the stairs.
She activated the transceiver. It was sticky with blood. She tried to call the Captain, but he didn't answer, so she looked for Nyx's frequency.

"Ulric." The first time she spoke his name, it came out like a gasp. "Ulric, damn it, answer. Are you there?"

Nyx answered. She could hear the roar of a car engine in the background. "Hartwood?" Was that a suspicious note in his voice? "Are you alive?"

Silia wasn't surprised. She had insisted on going to protect the Crystal, and the Crystal had been stolen. "More or less. Nyx, it wasn't us. I swear it on the King. I swear it on my father and on what I have most sacred. But I failed. We've been held back by other Glaives. They had placed bombs in the Shrine, and an Imperial airship carried the Crystal away through the breach in the ceiling opened by the explosions. I am the only one left. Now I'm heading to the King in the Hall of Ceremonies."

Perhaps Nyx believed her, or he thought it was no longer important. "No use, Hartwood. The King is dead. While the airship was taking away the Crystal, General Glauca broke into the Hall of Ceremonies and killed him. Nobody from the Council survived."

Silia stopped her run. "How?" she sobbed.

"Your intuition was right: the kidnapping of the Princess was a trap to get us away from the Citadel and the King and take the Crystal. If I had given you more men, maybe..."

She leaned against the wall, rubbing her eyes. She felt emptied, confused, nauseated. "No. Marius Gaunt, Norman Chad, Amber Nesrin and Aron Kitz were waiting for us in the gallery, but the bombs had already been placed. They knew perfectly that we would arrive. They were with Niflheim, Nyx, how the fuck is that possible? Our comrades?"

"They weren't the only ones," he heard Nyx reply. "On the airship where the princess was held prisoner, some of ours revolted and attacked the others. An Ultros did the rest. I doubt anyone else survived except us."

"The princess? Did you manage to save her?"

"She's with me now. She has the Ring of the Lucii, and I'm bringing her safely out of town."

"Good. At least one of us managed to do something useful." She slid down, her back to the wall. No reason why she should rush.

"Hartwood, are you hurt?" Nyx's voice crackled again. "Be careful. We can no longer count on magic."

"I can see that. Any idea 'bout the reason?"

"I can't tell. Perhaps another trick of the Imperialists. Maybe they've shielded the power of the Crystal. Watch your wounds."

"I don't think it's serious, but I failed, Nyx. The city is lost. I failed," she repeated.

Nyx's voice was tired, dry, peremptory. "I don't have time to give you psychological support, Hartwood. Contact the Captain for instructions."

"I've already tried," she replied. Calm down, she repeated herself for the umpteenth time. "I await instructions, Ulric. I am not able to communicate my current position because I have fallen from the
"There's very little you can do now. Go out of town, and if you meet someone else, someone you trust blindly, tell them to do the same. But be careful. People will shoot on sight at the Glaives after what happened. If you aren't able to talk to the Captain for different instructions, meet me at Galdin Quay."

At that moment, Silia thought she couldn't trust anyone blindly, not after the death of Sarah, Legato, Samuel and Caesar. "Galdin Quay?" she repeated.

"Yes. The princess must get to Prince Noctis. Hartwood, I cannot talk anymore, I'm closing the frequency. If nothing changes, see you at Galdin Quay. Pro aris et focis, Coeurl. Be steadfast."

Silia would still have much more to ask, but she just leaned her right fist on her forehead, even though he couldn't see her. "Pro aris et focis, Nyx. Be careful."

Pro aris et focis.

Silia kept on repeating those words, getting up, thinking of her father.

For hearth and home. For our family and homeland.

Her homeland had been invaded again. And she no longer had a family, because her teammates had been killed, but there were other families in danger. She couldn't save them all. She couldn't evacuate Insomnia. But Iris Amicitia, Gladio's sister, was in town. Nobody from the Council survived Nyx had said, so at that moment Iris had no one else.

She had to find a car and get out of the city before the Imperials installed checkpoints, if it hadn't already happened. She would look for Iris, whose surname was too dangerous, and would take her to safety before reaching Nyx at Galdin Quay.

The elevators still worked she noticed, coming to the landing. She stepped in one to go down into the underground parking lots. Before entering, she remembered what Nyx had told her about the Glaives, so she took off her uniform jacket and t-shirt with the emblem of the Kingsglaive, soaked with her blood and Marius', and threw them on the ground, leaving only the leather jacket on. Her hood met the same end.
Chapter Summary

Silia reaches Gladio's house to get his sister to safety.

16

Silia had never been to Gladio's house, she knew his address and district. It was the same as the villa where, a few evenings before, she had attended Cornelia Doge's party. She kept a low profile along the streets, forcing herself to drive to her destination without diverting and engaging unnecessary clashes. She didn't want to reach Iris too late, as had happened with the King, but she had to lengthen her route to avoid the columns of running people and the debris caused by the explosions, therefore it took her more than twenty-five minutes.

She stopped the Volvo she had confiscated in the underground parking of the Citadel outside the gate of the villa and turned off the engine, leaving the keys in the ignition. She took her swords; the residential area for the time being seemed to have been spared from the fighting, but she preferred risking the distrust of Gladio’s sister rather than having to fight unarmed against a suddenly arriving magitek squad.

A two and a half meters high wall surrounded the well-tended garden, and she easily climbed over it rather than waiting in front of the gate. She walked on the dirt floor, her senses alert, often turning to check the road. On the first floor of the mansion, beyond one of the bright windows, she distinguished a female face even before reaching the entrance porch. It was only a moment, because the face disappeared almost immediately from the window frame. Relieved, Silia moved under a cone of light and placed both her swords on the ground, within reach, raising her arms to show she had no bad intentions.

"Iris!" she shouted, well aware that she could attract attention. She avoided pronouncing her last name. "I'm a friend of Gladio, my name is Silia Hartwood. I'm here to get you to safety."

The window didn't open.

"Iris, there will be roadblocks everywhere in a while and if we don't mix with the crowd leaving the city we'll catch their eye".

She waited a few moments more before rushing to the intercom, but it wasn't necessary. Someone opened the window, but this time it was the wary face of an old man with white hair and mustache who looked out. Jared, she supposed, the Amicitias’ butler. He was armed – a semiautomatic gun, she thought – a precaution that Silia approved, as long as the man didn't decide to put a bullet in her head.
"Mr. Hester, there's really no more time. Magiteks, or worse, daemons, could come at any moment. And it's not the case that you let yourself be found at the General's house. Anyone else with you? Your grandson?"

If the man was surprised that she knew his name, he didn't show it. "It's none of your business," he replied. "I don't know you. So far as I know, you could be with the Imperials.

"Listen," she replied, "If I were with the Imperials, I wouldn't stay here under your windows arguing so peacefully. I don't want to hurt you." She raised her head. "Iris. You're fifteen. You like sewing. Sometimes your brother takes you to eat at Liberty, that nice restaurant with red curtains. Your mother Senna liked it very much."

The girl came back to look out the window next to the old man. She blinked, intrigued, but still seemed undecided. "If you really are a friend of Gladio, what's his favorite food?"

"Ramen," Silia promptly replied, and, in spite of everything she had suffered in the last hours, she smiled. Her mouth hurt. "Ramen with meat. He sure has a simpleton's tastes."

Iris threw her head back and laughed. Good sign. She put her hand on the old man's shoulder and they seemed to consult.

"That's fine," the man concluded, looking out again. "We're coming."

II

Iris had tried to contact Gladio, she told her, then her father, but without success. The lines didn't work. Silia had left her phone at the headquarters, trusting in her transmitter, so she had no way to try to call someone else who wasn't the Captain or her comrades.

As she feared, they found a roadblock at the East Gate. At least twenty magitek soldiers, Silia counted as they approached, and human officers checking the cabins.

"A roadblock!"

"What do we do now?"

"Easy, kids."

Silia diverted in a back lane, turned off the engine, closed her eyes, ignored the pain and tried think. "It's all right," she whispered, more to herself than to the other occupants of the car. "Mr. Hester, I've seen you limp, but the car has the automatic transmission. D'you think you can drive?" He nodded, and opened his mouth to speak, but she didn't give him the time. "Get behind the wheel then. And please lend me your jacket for a while. Iris, if you've documents with you, anything with the Amicitia's name written on them, throw them away. I don't think anything will happen, but better safe than sorry and the name of a Council member isn't safe now."

"I didn't take any documents," Iris reassured her.

"Good," she cut it short, wearily. She opened the door, got out of the car, and waited for Jared Hester to do the same. She took the jacket he handed her and put it on, then rubbed the blood away from her face and head the best she could. She still looked as she had been in a slaughterhouse, but better than nothing. It would have been safer to throw away the plate with her serial number, but she only put it off and hid it in her boot. If they searched them, it'd be the last of their problems.
"What are you up to?" Hester asked, getting behind the wheel.

"Trying to pass without arousing suspicion," she simply replied. She unsheathed her swords, sat down on the passenger side, and lowered to hide them under the seat. She couldn't leave them. She could no longer count on magic and would have no other way to defend herself and the others. She also removed her transceiver after trying for the last time to get in touch with Nyx and the Captain. "We are a family of refugees who want to reach their relatives in Lestallum. I was wounded during the bombings. They won't suspect an old man, a woman and two kids."

It worked. The Imperial officer just gave her a look. There were too many cars in the queue, and the Imperials couldn't prevent the evacuation of the citizens or, more likely, they wanted to encourage it. As soon as they crossed the East Gate, Silia told Hester to divert into the fields immediately after the bridge. They would have risked encountering daemons, but they wouldn't get stuck in the traffic of fleeing cars. "I can fight," she tried to reassure them. "If daemons appear, I'll take care of them."

As they drove off the bridge, Talcott's scared cry made her skin crawl. Silia straightened her head suddenly, alarmed – she had been about to faint and hadn't even noticed it – and turned, a hand already stretched to her swords.

Iris had surrounded the child's shoulders and was trying to comfort him, but no enemy was threatening them closely. Inside the city walls, between the columns of smoke, a colossal and chilling appearance froze the blood in her veins.

*The Walking Death. Think of a ten-times-size Iron Giant with only one eye and a huge beating heart, able to fire rays of energy so powerful as to blow up a building. If they have more of those monsters, I don't know how much longer the Wall can hold.*

A Diamond Weapon. Looking up, though it was hard to be certain from that distance, Silia distinguished more than a reddish glow. They had more of those monsters, after all.

"What's that?!" Iris asked.

"The Walking Death." Silia's hands were shaking with pain, tension and adrenaline. "Mister Hester, keep driving. We can't do anything. I'm not up to it. A single one of those creatures routed the last stronghold of the Glaives."

Hester accelerated without a word. Silia forced herself to look away from that creature that, for the second time, had touched her path without crossing it, and focused on the road before her.

An hour later – Insomnia no longer visible behind them – Gladio's sister, the old man and the child, immobilized in a nervous silence, began to revive.

"That creature..." Iris said in a whisper. "I had never seen anything like it. For a moment I believed that an Astral, maybe Titan, had showed himself to save the city."

"The Astrals don't show themselves for so little," Silia answered, skeptical. "And Niflheim, as you have seen, doesn't rely on Astrals but on biotechnology."

"Had you seen it before, Miss Hartwood?"

"No, but they told me about it. They call it Diamond Weapon."

"How far is Lestallum, grandpa?" the child interrupted them. It was obvious that he wanted to be safe as soon as possible.
"It should be about ten hours by car without stops, but on the main road. Certainly we'll take more, since we're proceeding on secondary roads." He glanced at her for confirmation.

Silia felt faint, and recovered her swords and the transceiver. Nyx would certainly have left for Altissia without her. For the umpteenth time, she looked for his frequency, then the Captain's, but now she couldn't even hear the white noise. The line seemed completely dead, or she had gone over reach.

It was all for the worst; they had no water, no food, and – she considered looking at the tank indicator – they'd be forced to stop to refuel sooner or later. With a grimace of pain, she began to fumble with her wounded arm on the navigator's keypad. She felt her hand numb. "We'll re-enter the main road in an hour, maybe two. Let me drive, Mr. Hester. We'll stop for a few hours later in a service area. Rest if you want. D'you know anyone in Lestallum?"

"No," the old man replied, without pulling over. "But it doesn't matter. Iris couldn't stay in Insomnia." He took a deep breath. "Let me drive and catch your breath, Miss Hartwood. I am the butler of the Amicitia family. The child is Talcott, my grandson. But I see you already know who we are."

"Talcott and Jared have been like family for a lifetime," Iris added. "When the explosions started, we locked ourselves up. We tried to contact Monica Elshett and Dustin Ackers, two Crownsguards very close to my father, to understand what was happening and what was safer to do. But we were unsuccessful."

If Elshett and Ackers were still alive, they had better things to do than to answer the phone, Silia reflected. "Don't worry," she repeated once more. She was worried. "Once in Lestallum you can contact Gladio."

"Jared," the girl whispered. "Do you think that the King and dad...?"

"I'm sorry," Silia heard herself say. "The King died and nobody in the Council has survived."

"How can you be sure of it?" Hester asked. He turned pale, but didn't get agitated.

"That's what they told me," she replied. "But it's true. And by now, those responsible are flying to Niflheim with the Crystal."

Iris took a deep sigh that softened Silia but, when looking up to peer at her through the rear-view mirror, she saw her pained but dry face, she realized that Iris had the same blood as Gladio and her father.

No one spoke for a long stretch of road. Silia watched carefully that no violet and bluish flashes – that usually preceded the daemons' appearing – were in sight in the darkness. She was supported only by the adrenaline that hadn't yet stopped running through her. Every now and then she daydreamed, as if half-awake, and had to shake her head to think clearly.

She felt the viscous aura of the daemons almost before seeing them. Jared Hester had seen them too because he slowed down and, without speaking, laid a hand on her knee. Silia looked around: they were on a dirt road, and they couldn't steer or go back without alerting the daemons, nor pass in between them.

"Brake gently," she whispered "and turn off the engine."

Jared Hester obeyed. The purple glares flickered for an instant, in alarm, but they didn't approach.
"What...?" the child began to say.

"Shht," Silia silenced him. She retrieved her swords and took off Jared's jacket. She didn't believe that she'd be able to use her left arm decently. She couldn't check the wound on her shoulder, but she could move her arm, even if painfully, so there were no fractures or serious damage to muscles or nerves, but certainly it was not good. She rubbed her face furiously to stay clear. "Stay calm in the car. If you hear my whistle, Mr. Hester, just pull the gear in reverse and run like the wind towards the main road. They'll be too busy with me to go after you."

She stepped out of the car silently, then snapped and lunged toward the purple aura. Attacking the daemons as they materialized was the best way to get rid of them quickly.

_Hobgoblins._ Three, she counted, when they became perfectly tangible. She went around the first and jumped on his back, hanging on one of his horns and cutting his throat. The daemon screeched horribly.

The other two hurled themselves on her. Silia used the body of the dying daemon to shield herself before it decomposed, as it always happened to the daemons for who knew what fucking reason. She parried the miasmatic attack of the second Hobgoblin, holding her breath, and pierced him with a raising hit. The third almost reached her with a double fist. She avoided it by rolling on the ground, jumped and fell on his back with a lunge, then flicked another blow and cut off his head. Before the Hobgoblin on the ground could get up again, she pierced him too. She lowered her guard only when they disintegrated.

It hadn't been a challenging fight, but she felt dizzy and breathless. Her left arm, which she had tried not to use but had in any case labored, throbbed tremendously. She returned to the Volvo, exhausted, to reassure her protégés.

"It's all right," she said, opening the door. "We can go on now."

"Are you okay, Miss Hartwood?" Iris asked.

"I was already hurt. They didn't even touch me," she replied, collapsing on the seat. She had a craving for smoking, but she had left her cigarettes at the headquarters, foreseeing that she wouldn't have had the chance to smoke on such a crucial day.

"Cool!" For the first time, she heard the child express himself in an animated way. "'twas like watching a movie on TV!"

Iris leaned against her seat. "What happened to you, Miss Hartwood, if I may ask?"

Silia licked her lips. "I had a long day."

"I am sure you had, but are you feeling okay?" the girl repeated.

"Enough to get you to Lestallum safe and sound, as you have seen." She wasn't so sure; luck had assisted her and only three common Hobgoblins had appeared, but they could have been Iron Giants or Pyros. Without spells or magic flasks – and without a functional arm – getting rid of them would have been a serious problem. "Mr. Hester, go ahead. I think it's better to go back to the main road."

"Wait, Jared. Miss Hartwood, now that we're safe..."

"We're still not safe, at least until dawn, and maybe not even after," she contradicted her.

"Why don't you let me have a look at your shoulder?" she went on. "I brought a first aid kit."
Before she could answer that there was no need and not even time to waste, Hester backed the girl. "Iris is right. That shoulder has been bleeding for who knows how long. Since you have self-appointed yourself as our bodyguard, try not to faint."

Silia gave in. If she hadn't stopped the bleeding, sooner or later it would have happened. "Fine," she agreed. She got out of the car and changed places with Talcott. When the man started up again, she untied her protection vest with a sigh of relief and took off her top undergarment. The child covered his eyes blatantly with both hands, and the old man carefully avoided looking back. Embarrassed, Iris handed her her jacket to cover up her breast and then began to rummage in the first-aid kit. "Who did this?" she asked.

"My childhood friend." "Friends of the Empire." She crouched in the seat, giving her back to Iris so that she could examine her shoulder. The girl began to wipe the blood on her back; shortly after, her hand froze for a moment and she gave a sob.

"What's up?" she asked. "Is the wound so bad?"

"No... I mean..." She gently touched her back. "Your tattoo... this is by Tebaldus Verma, isn't it?"

"It is," Silia confirmed, without dwelling on details. "Damaged?"

"I'm afraid so. There's a hole on your shoulder, Miss Hartwood. Partly on the left mustache."

"That's a pity," she let slip. She was fond of that tattoo, but she knew that sooner or later it would have happened.

"Did Gladio bring you to Mr. Verma? He doesn't work with everyone, you know. On the contrary, he chooses his clientele very strictly. Gladio had promised me that I could have one, but... oh. I'm sorry. You must be cold." She hastened to open a pack of gauze, crumpled a good stretch and passed it to her. "Put it on the front wound. Press down hard."

Silia jumped in pain. Marius' sword had passed her from side to side. She groaned when Iris also dabbed the exit hole and lifted her arms so that she could pass a bandage under her armpit and around her shoulder.

"How do you know Gladio?" Hester asked, without taking his eyes off the street. After her confrontation with the daemons he seemed even more suspicious.

"We're friends," she repeated.

"You already said that. But I've never met you. You are armed, you have routed three daemons in a matter of minutes and you're certainly not a Crownsguard and, I suspect, not even a City Guard."

"It's long to explain," she tried to wriggle away again.

"We have a lot of time."

Silia sighed. "I'm with Insomnia, or at least, with what's left of it, please don't doubt it."

"Why did you come looking for Iris?" Hester asked again. This time he looked up to peer through the rear-view mirror. "You don't even know her."

"I know Gladio."

"You're the Glaive, aren't you?"
Silia looked up in amazement and met the old man's gaze who was still staring at her in the mirror. *The Glaive*, he had said, not *a* Glaive.

"Where were the Glaives during the fall of Insomnia?" Iris asked, her voice absorbed, as if she wasn't conscious of having said it aloud. They knew nothing, then.

"On the wrong side, many of them," she answered sincerely.

"What about you, Miss Hartwood?" Iris asked, just as frankly.

Silia smiled. She shook her head. "Call me by my name please, Iris. I was on the right side. But I couldn't do anything."

"And who could?" Hester was looking again at the street now. "What do you mean with *the wrong side*"

She took a deep breath. "That they have betrayed. Some Glaives have come to Niflheim's side."

This time, Hester turned to her, and Silia feared they could crash. "I beg your pardon?"

"Look at the road, please. I said that the Glaives have betrayed."

"But how...?"

"Don't ask me," she interrupted him, exasperated. She began to get dressed. "I don't know how nor why. I only know I was attacked by my former comrades. The Imperials stole the Crystal in front of my eyes, but the rest took place far away from me, and our line doesn't work. I cannot communicate with Captain Drautos."

They were back on the main road. Silia leaned over to tinker with the satnav and found the nearest gas station. "In twenty miles we can stop at the Coernix service area. In the meantime, if you like, I'll tell you what little I know. I can drive again, Mr. Hester."

Hester shook his head. He put a hand under his jacket and pulled out the same semiautomatic he had in his hand when he looked out the window. For a moment, Silia feared he wanted to shoot her, but he grabbed it by the barrel and handed it to her. "No, Miss Hartwood. You are a Kingsglaive; if the Imperials or other daemons attack us, it's better if, between the both of us, it's you who have your hands free."

III

The idea of stopping at the Coernix service area, predictably, was not very original. Other fugitives from Insomnia, all unarmed civilians, she noted, had had the same idea, so they found no vacant place in caravans or motels to spend the night. They at least managed to get water and food, and above all – for her – antiseptics and painkillers.

They ate in silence in the car, little the other three and nothing at all her, because, although she needed to be lucid and strong, she couldn't get anything but a handful of pills down and she struggled to keep even those in her stomach.

Finally – it was half past two in the morning – Iris and Talcott fell asleep in the back seats of the Volvo, and even Jared Hester collapsed, exhausted, in the passenger seat. Although dead tired, Silia crouched next to the car with the swords in her hands, lit one of the three cigarettes that she had begged from a civilian in the parking lot and that he – moved by her bloody clothes or perhaps
intimidated by the swords she had on her belt – had given to her, and tried to concentrate to stay on guard.

She could have spared that effort, because suddenly, in the dim light, she found Hester standing in front of her, and for a moment she thought it was a dream. Stunned and embarrassed, she realized she had fallen asleep, or that she was very close to it. Her shoulder was aching again, a continuous and pulsating pain, as if Marius was continuing to turn his sword in the wound.

"Miss Hartwood," Hester whispered and leaned down beside her.

Silia looked at him in a daze. "What time is it?"

"A quarter to four." He was holding a paper cup, which he handed to her. It was hot. "I went to get some coffee. I apologize if I woke you up, but you keep spasming. How are you feeling?"

What a perfect armed escort I am. "I'm fine," she lied. She wasn't fine at all. She was at the very end of her strength, her shoulder bloody hurt and she had never felt so lacking in reference points. She drank what he had brought her: a large, hot coffee. At that moment she loved that man who could have been her grandfather.

"Miss Hartwood, listen to me," the man said softly. "I don't know what your life has been like in the last few years, but now there's absolutely no reason that you stay on guard. They're all fugitives here, and no one has recognized us. There's too much light for the daemons to show up. I'm grateful to you for escorting me and the kids out of town, but Lestallum is still far away and I need you to be clear. So, try to relax and sleep a little. If you collapse, it won't help either yourself or us."

"I'm sorry," she blurted out. She kept repeating it from the previous afternoon: to her dead comrades, to Nyx Ulric, to herself.

"Don't be sorry. You did everything you could, and even more, since you diverted to come and save us. Think about what you can do from now on, and remember that you'll need your left arm."

Without leaving the handle of her swords, Silia nodded slowly. The old man was right. They were a five-hour drive from Lestallum, and she needed at least some rest. "Fine," she gave up. "I'll sleep for a while. You should sleep as well. We'll leave as soon as the sun rises."
The morning after the signing of the treaty, Gladio and his friends find out what happened to Insomnia. Meanwhile, Silia reaches Lestallum with Iris, Jared and Talcott.

When Gladio opened his eyes, without recognizing any of the locations where he was used to waking up, for the third day in a row he struggled to remember where he was and how he had ended up there.

He stood up, yawning loudly, and as always he devoted his first glance to Noctis, still sound asleep on his bed. He smiled, rubbing his eyes. When in Altissia, they would have to organize a good bachelor party. He already had a couple of ideas.

The view of the sea, which could be glimpsed through the gaps between the curtains, cut off his breath. They were at Galdin Quay, he had to remind himself, outside of Insomnia, and within a few hours, if Dino Ghiranze had been of his word, they would have been in Altissia.

It was still seven o'clock. Ignis, as an early riser, was no longer in his bed and Noctis and Prompto, if he didn't wake them up, would sleep for a long time. He would have liked to go down to the beach and take a bath in the still cold water, but the sense of alarm that had been stuck in his throat like a pin since the previous night was still there. He leaned toward the bed table to pick up his phone, checked for missing calls, and tried again to get in touch with his father. The telephone, just like that night, gave a strange, distorted trill. Without too much hope, he tried to call Silia again, then Iris, but the result was the same. It wasn't just his cell phone that didn't work; even the others' ones couldn't make calls.

Contrary to his predictions, Noctis moved, moaned, and then straightened his back. He stood looking around in dim light, probably, like him, dazed and oblivious to be in the outside world, then rubbed his eyes.

"G'morning, Your Majesty" he greeted him, putting the cell phone back. "Did you like your bed?"

Noctis mumbled something he didn't understand, yawning. The beds of that hotel, to be honest, were much more comfortable than theirs, or perhaps they seemed to be because they had spent the night before in a tent. Without warning, Prompto snapped to his feet on the bed. "Wazzup?" he mumbled. "They attack us?"

"Yeah, in your dreams," Gladio chuckled. "I'm gonna take a shower."
Ignis didn't show up until twenty minutes later; by then, dressed and ready, they were starting to wonder if they should call him. He entered the room with a newspaper in his hand and when he raised his head Gladio saw that he was tense, pale. Iggy looked at Noctis, moistened his lips, but couldn't speak.

"What's that look for?" Noctis asked, with an alarmed note in his voice.

With a bad feeling, Gladio came up to him and took the newspaper.

"It's in all the papers," Ignis said, without specifying what.

It was not necessary for Gladio to open it: the first page was screaming in huge letters INSOMNIA FALLS. He stood still, reading the headline, stunned, without being able to go further.

"Insomnia… falls?" Prompto spelled slowly next to him.

"This is your idea of a joke?" Noctis' voice was incredulous, just a little shrill.

"Noctis, I need you to calm down so I can explain," Ignis coaxed him. His calm voice managed to calm him too. His hands were starting to sweat and he was crumpling the edges of the newspaper by scrolling through the article. Bombs placed at the Citadel. Multiple explosions throughout the city, especially the center. The Crystal had been stolen. A terrorist attack during the signing of the treaty.

Was the treaty signing yesterday?

"I'm as calm as I'm gonna get!" Noctis exploded, approaching Ignis with wide strides.

"There was an attack. The Imperial army has taken the Crown City."

"As treaty room tempers flared, blasts lit the sky. When the smoke about the Citadel had cleared, the King was found… dead," Gladio read aloud. He struggled to recognize the sound of his own voice.

"No, wait… hold on, in the treaty room? Was the signing yesterday?"

They looked at each other, pale, incredulous.

"We had no way to know," Ignis whispered. "Nobody told us. How is it possible?"

"But the wedding! Altissia!" Noctis continued to inveigh.

"I know, that was the plan. Yet the reports about the invasion are all the same. How could every headline in the kingdom be wrong?"

Noctis' eyes were clear as if he was about to cry, but he didn't. "...lies," he said softly.

"…if only," Prompto added.

Gladio dropped the paper. It was time to stop talking and decide what to do.

"What else do we know?"

"Nothing."

Already while he was saying that sentence, Gladio realized how insane it was. "Then we should go and see to be sure."
"You mean, go back to Insomnia?"

"Yep. Carefully," he tried to downsize. "Let's have a look."

"With the Crown Prince in the car? Gladio, we can't. It's risky," Ignis contradicted him. "We should go on towards Altissia."

"And how?"

They stared at each other, without hostility. He didn't want to compete with Ignis in a clash of authority, but at that moment he found simply illogical to persevere in following directives that had been given to them before a crisis. "It's up to Noct to decide," he cut it short, taking his phone and leaning it once again on his ear after having composed his father's number, without much hope. If the king was dead, his father was dead as well. He couldn't imagine a different scenario. Iris, with a little luck, was supposed to be safe, because she would have watched the ceremony from home – so, despite her insistence, his father had considered it more prudent. As for Silia, at the time of the attack she must have been on the front line. He tried to call her too, but put down the phone on the first note of that unnerving trill. It was not yet time to get alarmed or cry.

"No line yet."

"We'll go back to Insomnia," Noctis decided. "I want to see with my own eyes."

II

Returning to Insomnia, they learned, was impossible. A well-organized checkpoint at the East Gate – a dozen magiteks and even a MA – suggested that the other three accesses to the city were equally well guarded. They couldn't do anything but divert to a side street, park, and climb a hill to take a look at the city from a distance. In order to pass they were forced to break down some magiteks – the first ones for all of them. They weren't much of a problem at their level, but having an army after them sure was not pleasant.

They found themselves, side by side, contemplating their city from afar. Gladio jumped when Prompto managed to tune into a newscast via the internet. Nothing more than they already knew, it sounded, until the composed voice of the announcer told anyone who was listening that Prince Noctis and the Oracle, Princess Lunafreya, had been declared dead. Noctis had a wave of irritation so violent that Prompto let the phone fall out of his hands. "All lies," Noct had cried, and Gladio knew perfectly well that he was distressed by the possibility of the Princess being dead. He tried to calm him, reminding him that he too, according to the news, had to be dead, but Noct refused to listen. Again Noctis tried to call his father, and so Prompto, and himself, in an exasperated gesture, brought their cell phones to their ear. The telephones rang in vain as a huge imperial battleship flew above them heading over to their city.

And then, unexpectedly, Noctis shuddered. "Can you hear me?" he yelled. Gladio approached him, believing that finally he had managed to call the King, but on the other end he heard Cor Leonis' voice. He was disappointed, but it was the first friendly voice they heard and the Marshall surely would give them news. The Immortal confirmed the King's death, but for the rest he asked them to join him at Hammerhead.

It was dangerous, Gladio was perfectly aware of it, staying there, but they lingered silently looking at the city that had given birth to and raised them.
Gladio was amazed at not feeling anything. Coming out of Cavaugh was like going through an enchanted portal that had thrown them into another dimension stripped of their past, their families, and their roots. And that portal had now closed: Insomnia, so radically different from the outer territories as if to look like the dream of a distant future, was now unattainable.

They had been cut off from their own city and he felt nothing but a mild sense of anesthetized loss.

"Can you believe it?" Prompto said in a whisper. "Until a few days ago we were there, and now it seems like another world. Is this really happening?"

"It has already happened," Ignis said mercilessly. "Insomnia as we knew it no longer exists."

"But has it ever existed?" Prompto insisted. "I mean... look around. We really were doing our stuff, eating and drinking and having fun while outside..." he made a wide and lost gesture with his arms, "everything was this way?"

Gladio thought back to Silia, to her pungent and derisory words. He wondered if she had managed to survive. "We've always known," he said in a dull voice, "that there was a war outside, the Imperials, monsters, people who barely survived while we'd go the cinema, play sports and King's Knight."

"And at last the war reached us," Ignis completed for him. "It reached us and took everything away from us."

"Not all." Noctis kept looking at his city, his kingdom. "Insomnia's there. It's standing. And there are still people, a lot of people, alive. I am alive, and so are you, and that's my and your city. We'll be back. We'll make people come back. And the Imperials will pay for it. There will be hell to pay."

Noctis held his fists so tightly that his knuckles were white. His harsh, nasty words shook Gladio like a slap. He was the Shield of the Prince. It was up to him to encourage his friends and bring them forward. In all likelihood his father was dead, Silia was dead, and he didn't know what had happened to his sister, his friends, all the people he knew in the city, but he couldn't afford the luxury of thinking about it at the time. He laid a hand on Noctis' shoulder.

"There'll be hell to pay," he nodded. "We'll take everything back. The Crystal, the city, the kingdom; the right to live in peace, this time seriously, everyone, even those outside the Wall."

"Let's meet Cor Leonis," Ignis suggested. "We have nothing more to do here. And it's dangerous. They could see us."

"Let 'em see us." Prompto's voice was nervous, on the verge of tears. "Let 'em come."

"Don't be foolish, Prompto," Ignis said, moving a few steps toward the Regalia. "We would not help anyone if dead. Let's go to Hammerhead."

Noctis didn't move.

"Noct?" Gladio called him. "We've to go."

"...yeah," he finally answered. "Let's go."

Suddenly Gladio realized that Noct had just become King Noctis Lucis Caelum. A king without a kingdom and without an army that possessed only his father's favorite car, a sword, and three comrades ready to give their life for him. It was difficult to superimpose that new identity on the small figure of his taciturn and capricious childhood friend, but he would have had to get used to the idea.
He took one last look at the silhouette of the city that stood far beyond the bridge, and again, for a moment, it seemed a mirage to him. He narrowed his eyes, almost expecting it to fade away, but it didn't happen.

No turning back.

They went to retrieve the Regalia.

III

Silia wandered dizzily through the streets of Lestallum. The city was in chaos: cars of refugees kept on arriving from Insomnia, and who knows how many others would pour in during the days to come. Her bandaged shoulder resumed hurting like hell every time the effect of the painkillers was exhausted, and the few hours of agitated sleep had not helped her so much.

They had to leave the car at the gates of the city; with all those people, circulating was impossible. After making sure that Iris, Talcott, and Jared Hester had settled at Leville Hotel, she had gone out in search of other drugs, and by listening to the speeches of the people she had learned that the Imperials had blocked all the civil transports from Galdin Quay for days. She had no way of finding out whether Nyx and the Princess, or even the Prince with Gladio and the rest of his retinue, had managed to reach Accordo.

The square in front of the hospital was crowded with people. Because of the bombs placed by the Niffs, the magiteks, the destruction caused by the Diamond Weapons and the daemons that swarmed the streets at night, everywhere she'd turned she saw wounds far more serious than her shoulder, which actually needed only stitches. She was abruptly pushed away by two civilians who ran carrying a stretcher with a wounded man; he was missing a leg.

Until yesterday, she thought, depressed, *I could have helped. Today I can't even heal my own shoulder.*

She turned to retrace her steps. She would have to spent the night at the hotel and the next day everything would have been much less tragic.

"I need help! Can somebody help me?"

A few feet away from her, a man with a kid in his arms was trying to make his way to the hospital entrance. Silia recognized with horror Gregor Gaunt. Because of the deteriorated relations with his son during the years on the front, she had never looked for him in Insomnia during the months of her rehabilitation, and she hadn't seen him for almost fifteen years. He was aged, of course, but very recognizable. In an impulse that she couldn't hold back, ignoring his request for help, she turned, lowering her head and tried to get away unobserved among the people.

Too late.

"Silia! Silia Hartwood!" The man reached her, cutting through the crowd, and grabbed her shoulder in a desperate gesture. "Silia, it's you, right? Help me. I need a heal."

Silia whirled around, for a moment in the blackest panic. Everyone around was watching them. She didn't know whether to fear the siege of a crowd demanding healing spells that she was no longer able to perform, or the onslaught of refugees enraged with the Kingsglaives. "Gregor, are you insane?" she cried, "Shut up, by the Six." Without knowing what to do, beside herself, she took the child from his arms – he didn't seem so seriously hurt – and gave him an imperious gesture. "Let's get
out of the way, damn it!"

"Silia, did you see Marius?"

*For the Six. It's a nightmare, a fucking nightmare, and tomorrow I'll wake up in my apartment in Insomnia, or, even better, on an iron cot, on the front, with my leg still attached to my thigh. Without answering him, Silia only focused on getting away from the hospital and all those people. Gregor followed her closely.*

With the unknown child in her arms, his knees clinging around her hips, his little hands grasping her shirt, she headed out of the square and wedged herself in the labyrinth of alleys of Lestallum, looking for a secluded corner. She stopped only when they were at the back of a closed shop in a blind, empty street. Breathless, feeling hot and feverish, Silia put down the child on a crate and collapsed on the ground, trying to catch her breath.

"Silia, are you hurt? Sorry if I assaulted you like that." Only then she realized that Gregor was distraught, in shock. He ran a hand over his eyes and in his sweaty hair. "For the Astrals, I can't believe it. You don't know what we went through to get here. Where's Marius, Silia? I've no news from him, and Lucius..." he pointed to the child. "He can't move his arm. He was overwhelmed by the crowd while we're trying to leave Insomnia. Can you help him? He needs a heal."

*A nightmare. A fucking nightmare.* Silia got up and took off her jacket. She was sweating, her shoulder was bleeding again and she had to tell Gregor Gaunt that his son Marius was a traitor and that she was forced to kill him with her own hands. "I can't cast a heal, Gregor," she said instead, "since the Imperials stole the Crystal. No more magic. But let me see if I can do something. Who's the child?"

Gregor blinked, stiffening. "Are you kidding me? He's Marius' son, Silia, his name is Lucius. How the hell do you know nothing? What happened between the two of you in these past few years? And where is he?"

Silia stared at the terrified child. For a moment she felt the ground was missing from under her feet, as if she were walking on the deck of a ship. *No, it's not a nightmare. It's a joke.* "I don't know where Marius is, Gregor," she lied, not knowing if she was doing it more for Gregor, for the child, for herself, or perhaps for Marius. "We were not together during the attack. I'm sorry. I have no news from any other Glaive. The city fell, the King died, and I had to take some people to safety." She couldn't look at the child. With trembling hands, she took off his shirt and gently examined his shoulder.

"They're saying crazy things." Gregor was so close to her that she could smell his sweat. For years he had been as close to a father as she had ever known, even if he wasn't her own, and finding him suddenly aged, out of himself, depending on her – that less than twenty-four hours before had killed his son – hurt even more. "They say that besides the King, the Prince and Princess Lunafreya are dead too. Someone says the Glaives have betrayed."

"It's true," she replied, remaining vague. The child complained when she tried to gently rotate his arm. His shoulder was swollen and purple, but it seemed only a dislocation. The blood, she saw, came from an excoriation to his back, not from a protruding bone as she had initially feared. "Some of our comrades went to the Imperial side. The treaty signing ceremony was a trap."

Gregor moaned. "I hope Marius is fine. I hope those damn betrayers haven't killed him. If you see him, Silia, will you tell him we're in Lestallum and we're fine? Maybe he thinks we went to Cador."

"Cador?" she asked, confused. They had fought near Cador for months, five years before, but then
the front had advanced against them. The town had been annexed to the Empire.

"Where he met Luc's mother," Gregor said simply. "Rella. She passed away a few months ago, but Marius managed to get Luc to Insomnia. He entrusted him to me."

_A woman and a child... So you really had lost your mind, Marius. Did you negotiate with the Empire for your son? _"It's just a dislocation," she said, feeling her voice as metallic as a robot one. "I can fix it."

"Seriously?"

"It must be seen by a doctor anyway, but at least it will not risk compromising nerves and blood vessels while you wait for the crowds to queue up."

Gregor sat on the crate next to the child, stroking his head. "Luc, have you heard, Silia will fix your arm. Do you know she's known your father since they were younger than you?"

_For Shiva, I have to get away from here as soon as possible._ "Listen to me, Luc, right?"

The child nodded, more animated. His curly hair, oval face, and brown eyes were those of Marius. He looked very much like the child who she had grown up with in Ambrosia. "Luc, now it will hurt, but I promise, then you can move your arm. You have to trust me. Lie down as if to sleep."

Luc let himself lie docilely on his back, his hand clutching his grandfather's. Silia folded Hester's jacket and put it under his head. "Here, like this. Can you count, Luc?"

"Silia, are you sure...?"

"Now I'll say: one, two, and three. At three all will be over. Are you ready? One..."

She grabbed his wrist and forearm and twisted his arm without even reaching the two. The head of the humerus slid beneath the shoulder bone and the child shrieked and began to whine.

"I know, I lied." In spite of herself, Silia smiled, rubbing his shoulder. "But there's no need to cry. Try moving your arm, Luc."

He sat up. With a grimace, the child moved his arm. He immediately changed expressions. "It moves!"

"Gregor, listen," Silia cut short. "You have to find a bandage and some ice. Immobilize his arm, cool his shoulder, and give him one of these pills every four hours." She held out one of the two bottles of painkillers she had bought. "Try to go back to the hospital the day after tomorrow. The most seriously injured, unfortunately, will be dead, or stabilized. Perhaps they will even be able to make an X-ray of his arm. Now I've to go."

"Silia," the man still held her, grabbing her wrist instead of the bottle of pills. He was waxen. "I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't met you. Stay with us for a while. We haven't seen each other for fifteen years. Marius hasn't told me about you anymore, and I have no idea what happened between you, but I'm glad to see that you're fine and what a woman you've become."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Gregor, but I can't. I escorted some people here, but now I have to go on. I have things to do."

"What things, Silia? Insomnia has fallen."
"It's true, but Niflheim didn't. Then I still have things to do."

Gregor tightened his grip on her wrist, then, unexpectedly, smiled. "By the Six, you don't know how much you remind me of Karl. The same look. The same fierce pride. You can't even call it courage, because courage implies fear."

If she had really had so much courage as Gregor claimed, she would have told him everything. Instead she rested a hand on his, continuing to avoid his gaze and, if possible, she felt she hated Marius even more than when she had faced him in the gallery, even if she probably had before her own eyes the reason why he had betrayed Insomnia. "Gotta go, Gregor," she said softly, freeing her wrist. "Be careful. Don't go around naming the Glaives lightly."

The man nodded. Silia tried to say goodbye, but he kept staring at her. "Then you be careful too, Silia. Thanks for what you did for Luc. I never got to tell you something, and I want to do it now: don't blame your mother's memory. She has never been like you and Karl. I talked to her a few weeks before she died, I tried to convince her to come away from the refugee district, but there was no way. She preferred to pretend she no longer had a daughter rather than live waiting to know she was dead. Try to understand and forgive her, if you can."

At that moment her mother couldn't have been further from her thoughts. She hadn't blamed her for a long time. She had understood many years before, she had understood it on the front, that blood ties alone don't make a family, can't erase the distances between two people who don't understand each other and who have nothing in common, and that there are ties much more solid and visceral, like the one who had united her with her now dead comrades.

She ran her hand through the child's curls. If Marius had survived – if he hadn't been in her way – perhaps his son would have lived in Insomnia under the imperial control, or in Gralea, happy and carefree, perhaps without even knowing the price his father had paid to guarantee him a safe life. "Be strong, Luc. Good luck. Goodbye, Gregor."

"Silia, wait!"

Silia, who had already started to move away, stopped, but without looking back.

"Karl would have been proud of you."

IV

She never knew where she found the strength to run or how she managed to get back to the hotel, but she found herself in the Leveille lobby, slumped against the stairway handrail, out of breath and with the roar of her own heartbeat in her ears. She had been about to head straight to the Volvo to leave the city, after departing from Gregor, but then she had realized she couldn't leave like that, without telling Iris and the others who were waiting for her. Moreover, perhaps they had managed to get news from Gladio.

She pulled herself together, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and climbed the stairs. When she entered the room where they had settled, she found Jared at the window, Iris and Talcott on the bed. The two kids got up immediately, reaching her.

"I saw you come back in a hurry. Did something happen, Miss Hartwood?" Hester asked. He looked at her. "You don't look good. Have you seen a doctor?"

"No. Too many people. There are many who come from Insomnia with wounds far more serious
than mine, and I can't waste any more time. I must go on. If Iris helps me in rearranging the bandage, I can stand for a while. I only came back to make sure you don't need anything else." She hesitated. "Did you manage to talk to Gladio?"

Iris shook her head, disconsolate. "I'm sorry, Silia, but the phones are not going yet. I'll fix your bandage, but you should stop at least for the night. Your shoulder is bleeding again and Jared is right, you don't look any good."

Silia sat on the bed, embittered, and took off the t-shirt that she had obtained at the market and had already stained with blood. Iris slid behind her, loosening her bandage. The gauze was soaked. "Silia please, are you sure...?"

"I'm sure," she interrupted her briskly. She put two more pills in her mouth. "And are you sure you'll be okay?" she asked, looking at Hester.

The old man approached her, limping. He didn't smile. "Miss Hartwood, we'll be fine, but remember what I said to you tonight: try not to overdo it. What are you up to do now?"

"I've to join my comrade Nyx Ulric and Princess Lunafreya at Galdin Quay." And leave Lestallum before bumping again into Gregor Gaunt and Marius' son. "I heard that the Imperials have blocked the port, so actually I don't know if they managed to leave for Altissia. Perhaps not even the Prince managed to leave in time."

"By this time Gladio and the others will have known about what happened to Insomnia," Iris mused aloud. "I hope they're fine. But the newscast is giving false news. They say that both the Prince and the Princess are dead. How can it be?"

"I told you before, Iris: propaganda," Hester replied. "People will be calmer if they believe there is no hope left. And, I regret to say, perhaps right now we'd better let them keep on believing them dead. They will be safer this way."

Silia put on her leather vest and t-shirt again. "They'll be fine," she said. She had never fought against a beast like Gladio, and if the other two had half his strength, the Prince was ironclad. Who knew where the hell they were at that moment. Who knew where the hell Nyx was with the Princess. If her comrade had been stuck in the port and had decided to get her someplace safer, within the following day they could have been anywhere. "Damn it, I've never missed mobile phones so much."

"If you can't get in touch with Captain Drautos and the other Glaives, Silia, you could go to Cor Leonis." Iris looked for Jared's gaze for approval. "My father said that the Marshall's contingent yesterday was destined to patrol outside Insomnia. I'm sure he's organizing something and he certainly knows where the Princess and Noctis are."

"The Immortal, huh? The problem doesn't change, Iris, I don't know where to find him."

"I'm sure Cid Sophiar knows."

Silia blinked, looking up at Hester. "Cid Sophiar? That Cid Sophiar? For centuries I haven't heard about him anymore. Is he still alive?"

"He's pretty much alive, Miss Hartwood," he confirmed. "He has a workshop in Hammerhead. It's not exactly on the road to Galdin Quay, but even if it was a dead end, at least you will be nearer, provided the Imperials haven't put up roadblocks between here and Leide. Do you know how to get there?"
Silia took a deep breath. She didn't have much choice: either Hammerhead, or Galdin Quay. "I'll go
to Cid Sophiar. I'll find the road to Hammerhead with the Volvo sat-nav." She stood up from the
bed. It was time to move. "Iris, please, keep your surname still hidden. Even Lestallum isn't safe."

"Roger," she promised, and smiled. Once again, Silia was impressed by her resemblance to Gladio.
"Are you sure you won't wait for tomorrow to go?"

"Sure." Silia lowered to remove her ID plate from her boot before regretting it. "Listen. Would you
like to give it to Gladio if you see him before me?"

"Of course I will!" she exclaimed, taking it. She put it on slowly, as if it were a treasure and not a
piece of tin. "If you don't mind, I put it on so I won't risk losing it."

Silia opened her mouth to tell her that it wasn't exactly a lucky talisman, but she stopped; after nine
years on the front and the fall of Insomnia, it was still in her possession and not delivered to the
headquarters for the recognition of her corpse. Perhaps, after all, it had brought her some luck. "Of
course I don't mind." She smiled, hiding it under the neckline of Iris' sleeveless hoodie. She was
already an inch taller than her, but if blood was thicker than water, as they say, Iris would become a
solid woman. "You're a good girl, Iris, and very pretty. You don't look like Gladio at all," she lied.

The girl puffed her cheeks, pleased. "That's not true. Everybody says we're two peas in a pod. Do
you want me to tell him something from you, Silia?" she winked.

"No, it's not necessary. Sooner or later I'll be able to get in touch with him. Good luck, Iris.
Goodbye, Mr. Hester. Talcott, look after your grandpa and Iris, will you?" she concluded, lowering
herself and holding her clenched fist towards the child.

Talcott smiled and laid his own fist on hers. "I promise, Silia."

"Talcott!" his embarrassed grandfather reproached him, "Is this the way to speak to an army officer?"

"I've never been an officer," Silia contradicted him, straightening herself, "'Silia' is fine. I hope we'll
meet again soon. Please take care, or Gladio will kill me."
Chapter Summary

Gladio keeps on supporting his friends firmly although he's more and more certain Silia didn't make it. Marshall Cor Leonis entrusts a new task to Noctis: recovering all the Royal Arms from the tombs of the Old Kings. Meanwhile, Silia reaches Hammerhead to talk to Cid Sophiar, but horrible news are far from over.

18

De via in semitam degredire

I

King Noctis Lucis Caelum's royal retinue came back to Hammerhead with a mood quite different from the one that had animated them when, sweaty but galvanized, they had reached the station for the first time, pushing the broken down Regalia. Ignis drove quickly because everyone wanted to arrive in Hammerhead and get news from Cor Leonis before it got dark and they were forced to camp. They got there at sunset, parked in front of the gas station and rushed out.

Cindy was working on a car. She greeted them and immediately looked down again, with grief. "I'm sorry", she said, biting her bottom lip. "I don't know what else to say. This is heavy. Whatever I can do for you, just let me know."

Noctis immediately cut her short. "Cindy, where's the Marshall?"

"He's already gone. Two hours ago a hunter arrived. Dunno what they discussed, but he took his motorbike and left."

"Damn!" Gladio hissed between his teeth.

Ignis didn't get agitated. "Cindy," he asked, "Where's your grandfather? Can we talk to him? We apologize, but we hardly have any news and we'd like to know more about what happened."

"Sure," she answered. "He's in the hangar. Guess he's waiting for you."

So it was; Cid Sophiar was sitting in dim light at the back of his garage. He was holding a wrench, but he wasn't working. "Come in, sons," he invited them, tiredly. "Guess you've a lot of questions. Cor's always possessed by the devil. I tried to convince him to wait for you, but you know how he is."

"Cid." Noctis was the first to speak. "What happened?"

Cid grimaced. "What you already know: Insomnia has fallen."

"Is there any news from the survivors?" Ignis asked.
Cid kept passing the wrench from one hand to the other as if he couldn't stay still. "Most of the civilians are unharmed and were evacuated to Lestallum. But the King and the Council..."

Gladio didn't even blink, because Cid wasn't telling them anything he hadn't already imagined and for which he was prepared for. His arms crossed, he kept staring at the dirty floor of the garage. "I knew it. My father would never leave the King's side. What happened to the Crownsguard?"

"Of those who were in Insomnia, as far as we know, only Ackers and Elshett managed to leave the city. They immediately got in touch with Cor. No news from the others. They were on the front line. I don't think anyone else survived."

The Crownsguard. Alastor, Gwenda, Rainer, Michel, Lowell, Richard... the scions of the noble families of the kingdom. They had accepted him when, at fourteen, he had been admitted into the Crownsguard. They had raised him. He had eaten, drank and trained with them. And now there was only Cor Leonis' small contingent left, along with Dustin, Monica, and the three of them. He still couldn't believe they were dead.

"And the City Guard?" Prompto asked.

Cid shook his head. "Probably someone evacuated with the survivors, but what could they do against the Imperial army? They attacked in force. They unleashed never seen daemons."

Gladio took a deep breath before asking the question to which he already knew the answer. He didn't have high hopes for the Kingsglaives' fate; no matter how exceptional in fighting they were, they couldn't have engaged a clash with the overwhelming troops deployed by Niflheim and come out alive.

"The Kingsglaives?" Noctis asked, anticipating him. "Is it possible that they couldn't do anything to protect the King? The Citadel was entrusted to them during the signing of the treaty."

Cid tightened his grip on the wrench. His bushy eyebrows tore into a furious expression. "Cor Leonis didn't tell you everything, then?"

"What else did the Marshall have to tell us?" Ignis asked.

"The Kingsglaives have betrayed. That fucking bastard Titus Drautos and his trained dogs sold themselves to the Empire."

For a moment, Gladio was sure he hadn't understood. Cid Sophiar couldn't have said what he thought he heard.

"It's not possible," Noctis said quietly.

"Oh, sure it is, son," Cid Sophiar said in a compassionate and ironic voice. "But I understand your dismay. Nobody had any warning. How could they? Drautos has lost many men against Niflheim in recent years. Too many, maybe, now that I think about it. Some strategic victory, many losses. But I don't know much else, Cor stopped short. Probably next time you meet him he'll have some more news for you."

"Damn bastards," Noctis whispered.

Gladio tried to collect his thoughts quickly. He moistened his lips, looked up at Noctis and only then he noticed that Ignis was staring at him. He shook his head, opened his mouth to express his outrage, but no sound came out. Silia couldn't have survived.
"The Crystal and the king's ring... what they have been after all along..." The old man readjusted his hat on his head. "All talk of peace was merely a pretext. A trap."

"They played my father for a fool."

Gladio felt anesthetized by the long sequence of events and news, but not so much as to not receive those words like a slap in his face.

"Don't kid yourself." Cid took over before they could do it, but without anger. "Reggie was certainly not born yesterday as you were. Lucis got dealt a losin' hand and your old man played it the best he could." The corners of his mouth, framed by deep wrinkles, bent for a moment in a smile, as if King Regis had played a last trick on his enemies. "He saw this comin' a mile away and he wasn't gonna go down without a fight. In the end, though... well, it just wasn't enough." Cid bent on his knees again. He closed his eyes, then straightened up. He put the wrench on the counter. "I can't tell you more. Talk to Cor. He's waiting for you at the Royal Tombs, to the northeast from here."

"Cid..." Prompto tried to ask, but the old man wasn't listening.

"I can't even remember the last time I saw Reggie," he added in a thoughtful voice. "Feels like a lifetime ago." Bent with a hand on his kidneys, as if they were aching, Cid Sophiar passed between them to get out of the garage. He looked like he had aged ten years in a few days.

Embittered, Gladio postponed the moment when he would allow himself to mourn his father and Silia to a few hours later, when they would retire for the night. When he raised his head, he saw Noctis staring at the counter where Cid had placed the wrench. Next to the tool, there was a photograph taken in Hammerhead portraying Cid, Cor Leonis, the king, and his father.

II

The sun was about to set, so instead of heading directly to the Tombs, they thought it was more prudent to stop for the night. None of them ate a lot, even though Ignis insisted on cooking anyway.

He would have liked to offer a word of encouragement to Noctis, but he was the first to retreat into the trailer without a "goodbye" or a "goodnight", clearly suggesting that he didn't want to talk again about what had happened; Prompto followed him a few minutes later. Sometimes Gladio had the impression that an invisible dividing line separated him and Ignis from Noctis and Prompto, as if there were a generational gap between them and not two or three years of difference. Perhaps Prompto would have managed to give Noct more comfort than he did.

Only then did Gladio, seated in front of the trailer, allow himself a despairing sigh. He had immediately loved the silent and almost deserted nights outside Insomnia, but at that moment he felt a sense of deep desolation. He would have liked to drink something strong, but since they had left Insomnia, with daemons everywhere and now ambushing Imperials that chased them, he couldn't afford not to be clear. He ran a hand through his hair and looked at the fire. Cor Leonis would have suggested what to do, given them news and directives, but the responsibility for carrying on the group and keeping Noct safe was his own. He lowered his head and rubbed his eyes; the pain from the death of his father and Silia grabbed his chest and he had to take a deep breath so as not to be overwhelmed.

"Are you all right, Gladio?"

"How could I be?" he retorted, without opening his eyes, but he regretted the bitter tone with which he had answered Ignis' question. His friend had lost his uncle, just as Noctis had lost his father and
Prompto knew nothing about his parents, and all of them had lost their homes, their city, and certainly friends and affections of whom they still didn't know – and had no way or time to know – the fate. "Sorry, bro. Guess this was the worst day in our lives."

"You can say it," Ignis replied, without getting offended, sitting next to him. "I still cannot believe it. It all seems like a horrible dream to me."

"Me too," he sighed. "But at least Iris is fine. She texted me just a while ago. A little good news in this shitstorm."

"I'm sorry for your father."

"And I'm for your uncle. But so many people died that..."

Ignis took a piece of cloth from his pocket, took off his glasses, and began to rub them in wavy, obsessive movements without looking at him. "What Cid said about the Kingsglaives..."

"Not Silia," he interrupted him, indignant. "You don't know her, for fuck sake. She'd never..."

"Please Gladio, don't. You know her, and that's enough for me," Ignis interrupted him in turn. "I only meant to ask you if you have heard from her."

Gladio shook his head. "Her phone is off."

"This doesn't mean anything."

"I'd like believe it, but you heard Cid. If she wasn't on the front line, I doubt she let her traitor comrades have their way."

Ignis seemed to reflect for a while. "Gladio, you cannot be sure. We know nothing about what happened. Maybe she's in Lestallum. We'll ask Cor Leonis. We'll ask around."

Gladio felt his lips twist into a grin. "We'll ask around what? If someone has seen one of the Glaives, the traitors of the kingdom? To Cor Leonis?"

"Gladio." Ignis spoke his name softly. "Let some time pass before giving up on her."

"You know I like to face bare reality." He rubbed his sore neck. "My only comfort is that I left Insomnia thinking I had made a huge mistake, and instead, lo and behold, it proved to be one of the best choices in my life. At least I've no regrets."

Ignis didn't need to ask him what he was referring to. Certainly he had already guessed it when Gladio had arrived late at Noctis' house breathless and distorted, on the eve of their departure.

He forced a smile, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder as he stood up. "Let's not talk about it anymore. She wasn't a girl, she wasn't a harmless civilian. She was a Kingsglaive. I'm sure she kicked a bunch of asses before she gave up."

III

The following morning Cid Sophiar dismissed them with a certain rough kindness, giving them some indication about how to reach the Tomb of the Wise. None of them had any idea why Cor Leonis awaited them there. They got into the car silently.

The Tomb was located northeast of Hammerhead, just beyond a hunter camp known as the Prairie
Outpost, and they reached it in less than half an hour, although at some point they had to leave the Regalia and proceed on foot because the road didn't go all the way there. It was one of the havens of the Meldacio Hunter HQ, a place where hunters stopped to rest, exchange information and buy or sell goods. The outpost was small: a watchtower, a tank, some wooden shack, remains of ancient buildings with peeling walls, skeletons of cars abandoned for who knows how long. Only small tables and chairs and piles of freshly cut wood revealed a recent human presence.

When they arrived, half a dozen hunters were at the camp. Nobody recognized them as the crown prince and his retinue, or perhaps they didn't care too much about them – since King Mors had scaled back the Wall, the hunters no longer answered to any authority. They found Monica Elshett in one of the shacks; she was the first face of Insomnia that they met after the attack and moreover, she was a friend of his family as well as a comrade of the Crowsnguard so Gladio's voice almost broke when he greeted her. Monica sadly confirmed that, as far as she knew, she and Dustin were the only Crowsnguards who had managed to evacuate from Insomnia, but she firmly blocked the barrage of questions by referring them to Cor Leonis, who was waiting at the Tomb.

Gladio had seen the tombs of the Lucian Kings only in photographs, or in old engravings or illustrations, and the solemnity of that simple structure – a large platform in gray stone surmounted by an indented dome – gave him a strong sense of unease. Turning to look at the others' expressions, he realized he wasn't the only one.

"The Tomb of the Wise," Ignis whispered. "The first king to erect the Wall."

"Who knows why the Marshall summoned us here?" Even Prompto, unusual for him, spoke in a low voice. He didn't even try to take out his camera to capture the sacred place.

Approaching the entrance, Gladio threw back his head to look at the cloaked statue with feminine features that overlooked the gate. Almost without realizing it, he stepped aside to let Noctis enter first, but remained alert: even though Cor Leonis was inside, he had no idea what else was waiting for them.

The air changed immediately as they began to descend the steps leading to the heart of the crypt. The temperature was significantly lower, inside, and the atmosphere predictably closed, wet. Gladio wondered how long that tomb had been sealed before Cor Leonis set foot in it.

They didn't have to go down for long; the inside of the tomb was smaller than he had imagined. The Immortal was giving them his back, facing the sarcophagus of the Wise. "At last, Your Highness" he welcomed them. Cor Leonis wasn't called the Immortal just because he had survived Gilgamesh Trial and an incalculable number of dangers; he was forty-five, but it was as if his body simply refused to grow old.

The Marshall's presence seemed to revive Noctis. "Yeah. Wanna tell me what we're here for?" he asked harshly.

"The power of kings, passed from the old to the new through the bonding of souls," Cor Leonis solemnly proclaimed, holding both his hands over the human figure carved on the sarcophagus, as if he could perceive some kind of power. "One such soul lies before you. To claim your forebears' power is your birthright and duty as king."

"My duty as king of what?" Noctis remarked sarcastically.

"Now is not the time to question your calling."

His friend gave a disbelieving cry. Cor Leonis, ignoring his disrespectful reaction, kept on, "A king
is sworn to protect his people."

"And yet my father chose to protect only one prince. Was that his calling? Forsake the masses to
spare his own son?"

This time Cor Leonis responded him, slightly raising his voice. "And how long will you remain the
protected? The king entrusted the role of protector to you."

"'Entrusted' it to me? Then why didn't he tell me that when you summoned us to tell about the
wedding? Or on the stairs of the Citadel, the day of our departure? Why did he stand there smiling as
I left? Why..." Noctis' voice broke, and he leaned against the coffin, as if it were his father's. Gladio
lowered his head so as not to see him cry. "...why did he lie to me?"

The Marshall lowered his voice. "That day he didn't want you to remember him as the king. In what
time you had left, he wanted to be your father. He always had faith in you, that when the time came,
you would ascend for the sake of your people."

"...guess he left me no choice," Noctis whispered, pulling himself together. He raised his right hand
on the grave and Gladio suddenly felt the awakening of an ancient power. He couldn't move a
muscle while a dazzling sword lifted from the statue, blinding them and brightening the mausoleum,
then it fell on Noctis and pierced him, ethereally, almost ghostly, floating around him like a magic
wall. Noctis grabbed it and the sword disappeared, breaking into white light crystals.

"The power of kings goes with you, Your Majesty."

IV

"So," Prompto summed up, "There are thirteen Royal Arms, belonging to the Ancient Kings of
Lucis."

"That's correct," Cor Leonis confirmed. They were proceeding on foot, following the Marshall,
toward the Keycatrich Trench, where they'd find the second weapon. "At the moment, apart from the
Tomb of the Wise and the Tomb of the Conqueror where we're heading, we don't know the position
of the others. I asked for the help of the Meldacio Hunter HQ, which also offered us one of their
camps to make a base. The hunters hate the Empire as much as we do, and Ezma Auburnbrie will
give a reward to anyone who will report useful information."

"Auburnbrie?" Noctis asked.

"She's the leader of the Hunter HQ." Cor Leonis made a grimace that might be a smile towards
Noctis. "I'm sure you'll meet her sooner or later."

Prompto stepped beside the Marshall. In his presence he had always been visibly uncomfortable, as if
he didn't feel like he deserved that honor. "We met an Auburnbrie shortly after we left, when the car
broke down. His name's Dave. He had broken a leg somewhere near Hammerhead and we rescued
him."

"Dave Auburnbrie," Cor nodded. "Not really bright, if I may be honest. Many people think he'll
never succeed his mother."

"Cor." Gladio interrupted the preliminaries. "While we're going to Keycatrich Trench, can we finally
know what happened?"

The Marshall held a short sigh. "Of course. But let's not stop. We've got a lot to do today, and I want
"C'mon, then." Noctis looked calmer, after having poured out into the Tomb.

"I've to premise," Cor sounded as if he wanted to justify himself, "that there are still many obscure spots in this story; some of them may be lit only by dead people. I wasn't in town at the time of the ceremony, as you know, so all the information comes from Dustin and Monica, and..." Cor turned to Noctis. "Before it wasn't the right time to tell you. I received a message from Gentiana, on behalf of Princess Lunafreya."

"From Luna?" Noctis stopped suddenly. "Is she fine?"

"Easy. The Oracle is safe in Lestallum, for the time being, and she's continuing to help people affected by the Starscourge, as she has always done, and not only," Cor reassured him. "The High Messenger reached us at the hunter camp to inform me about what happened in Insomnia. A few days before the ceremony, the Princess tried to escape from Tenebrae to reach you in Altissia, but she was intercepted by her brother Ravus and escorted to Insomnia. I know that the King had asked Titus Drautos to choose one of the Kingsglaives to accompany her to Accordo, but apparently he or she never got to Tenebrae."

Gladio knew nothing of all this and wondered if Silia had been aware of it. Once again, he dismissed the thought of her death. He would use it to further fuel his hatred for the Empire.

"The High Messenger told me that the Princess was abducted by General Glauca on the eve of the signing and that she was held prisoner on one of the Imperial airships stationed south of Insomnia, outside the Wall. Now we know that he was the traitor of Titus Drautos. It was a diversion to ward off the loyalists from the defense of the Citadel and the King. On the airship, the Glaives fought each other."

_Oh, by the Six._ Gladio rubbed his eyes.

"In the meantime, someone placed bombs in the Sanctuary. Lucian rebels against the treaty, probably with the complicity of other Glaives, by now who can say? The Wall collapsed and, while an airship was taking away the Crystal, the Imperials attacked the city en masse."

"How could Luna leave?"

"A surviving Glaive named Nyx Ulric managed to land unharmed at the Citadel along with the Princess."

"Nyx Ulric? I've met him. He drove me home some day before our departure."

"Apparently they managed to reach the King who made them escape through a secret tunnel, asking Ulric to escort her to Altissia, but something went wrong. While they were trying to leave the city, Captain Titus Drautos gave Ulric the order to return. The Glaive didn't suspect anything and obeyed. What I am about to tell you now is the most unlikely part of the whole story. The High Messenger wasn't of many words, so I won't be able to go into detail. Nyx Ulric clashed with Titus Drautos wearing the Ring of the Lucii."

"The Ring?" Noctis said slowly, incredulous. "How could he use the Ring?"

"The Ring belongs to the Royal Family, but the Old Kings can grant their power to anyone who they deem worthy."

"And have they considered a Glaive worthy?" Noctis grimaced. "After what they did?"
"You heard what the Marshall said," Gladio couldn't help but say hardly. "Not all Glaives have betrayed. They were deceived by their own Captain. Attacked by their own comrades."

"Nyx Ulric has reactivated the Old Wall," Cor Leonis kept on. "He fought against General Glaucia. He managed to defeat him, but the Ring carries a price of blood, and Ulric paid it. And so the military elite of the Kingdom of Lucis ended."

Gladio looked at his hands. He was clenching his fists so hard that when he opened them he had bloody furrows on his palms. He glanced an expressive look at Ignis, who the day before had encouraged him to ask Cor Leonis for news of Silia, and shook his head. And so the military elite of the Kingdom of Lucis ends, he repeated to himself.

"How did the Princess get to Lestallum?"

"The High Messenger reached her just outside the city and escorted her to safety. You shouldn't worry about the Oracle. She has shown she well knows how to look after herself."

"Finally, good news!" Prompto rubbed the back of his head. "Let's hurry up and continue towards Lestallum, then!"

A fairly recent metal fence had been set up to mark the Keycatrich Trench area. A red and black danger sign, probably placed there by the Meldacio hunters, warned the unwary visitors of the presence of aggressive Varmints and dangerous daemons. Gladio wished they wouldn't be there after sunset, even if they could count on the Immortal. They went on past it.

On both sides of the valley it was still possible to recognize the walls of some houses, but for the rest there was nothing left to say that once there stood a town. On the other hand, the area was still littered with military vehicles and rusty magitek carcasses.

"Once, Keycatrich was a prosperous city." Gladio had never heard Cor Leonis talk so much. "Cid Sophiar's granddaughter, Cindy Aurum, was born here. When King Mors withdrew the Wall, the city was invaded by the Imperials and then by daemons. People took refuge first in the trench, then in the Prairie Outpost, then scattered all over the outlands. Right here Regis, Clarus, Cid, Weskham and I fought against the Empire. They had just lined up the new magitek infantry and we had the worst. The Empire entered these territories as if they belonged to it by right."

Walking, Gladio saw the huge statue of the Founder King, the only structure still standing. He was about to point it out to Noctis, but they were interrupted by magiteks – not carcasses and not rusted at all.

"And those?" he asked loudly, making his broadsword appear. "Souvenirs from your war?"

"No," Cor contradicted him, drawing off the katana. "Those are Axemen. New models."

"We'll have to force our way."

"Does this bother you, Gladio?"

He smiled. "Not at all."

It took little time to get rid of the magiteks, a little bit more to pull down the MTK-G, but thanks to Cor Leonis, who probably was still Lucis' best fighter, the clashes weren't a problem.

Finally they stopped at what looked like the entrance to a mine – probably the trench from which Keycatrich had taken its name. Cor gestured toward the opening and then held out his hand to
Noctis. "Here's where we go our separate ways. Take this key. It unlocks the door to the other tombs. Seek them out, and lay claim to the power they hold. You'll need it."

"And what will you do?"

"I'll keep an eye on the Niffs. Find out what they're up to. But you should focus on your own task."

"I will. You take care."

The Marshall nodded then shifted his gaze to Gladio and the others. "Make sure you'll do your best. This time it won't be as easy as with the Sword of the Wise."

Gladio looked at the darkness behind him. For some reason, he imagined it.

IV

Silia parked the car in front of the garage. She was stained with blood, sweat and dust, and her left arm was seriously starting to worry her, especially after the clashes at the Imperial blockade. She was thankful that the previous night she had at least stopped to sleep on a rest area just outside Lestallum, or she'd never have gotten that far.

She had never been to Hammerhead. The garage, the gas station, a diner, two shops and a caravan apparently made up the entire outpost. She was greeted with suspicion by a beautiful blonde girl in skimpy oil-stained clothes. The girl interrupted her fumbling inside an engine to look at her destroyed car and at her – in this order – with an expression furrowed by perplexity and diffidence.

"Hi," Silia told her amicably, stepping out of the car. Because of her weakness and the many hours she had spent driving, her legs barely held her. "I'm looking for Cid Sophiar, can you help me?"

The girl scrutinized her. Silia put herself in her shoes: she was bloody and beaten up, armed with military equipment without recognizable signs, patched up the best she could. "D'you come from Insomnia?"

"From Lestallum, but in the first place, yeah, from Insomnia. I'm not with the Imperials," she added quickly.

The girl didn't seem to trust her word too much. "I'm Cid Sophiar's granddaughter," she said. "We don't want trouble."

"And I don't mean to cause you trouble. Can I talk to him?"

"It depends." An old man – old Cid, she guessed – stepped out of the garage, rubbing his greasy hands onto a dirty rag. "You come from Insomnia, armed and bloody, two days after the fall of the city. You could be a deserter, a jackal, or worse, an Imperial lookin' for information. What are you?"

Silia had already decided along the way to speak frankly with Cid Sophiar, who had been a great friend of King Regis. She unfastened the belt with her swords, a difficult gesture with one hand, and threw it to the ground. She raised her right hand in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm a Kingsglaive. But, you have my word, I didn't take part in the betrayal of some of my comrades."

"So you deserted," Cid deduced, merciless. "Tell me why I should talk to you."

"I didn't desert. My name is Silia Hartwood. On the evening of the fall of Insomnia, my comrade Nyx Ulric, who was traveling with Princess Lunafreya towards Altissia, and who had the King's
authorization to take the command in absence of Captain Drautos' directives, told me to join him at Galdin Quay, from where he would leave. I took a long detour to bring Iris Amicitia, General Clarus' daughter, safely to Lestallum. There I found out that all connections to Altissia are cut off, but since the night of the attack I have no news of Captain Drautos, nor Nyx Ulric, nor any of the Glaives, so I'm trying to find Marshall Cor Leonis to know what to do. Jared Hester, the Amicitias' butler, told me that perhaps you can help me. That's why I came to Hammerhead."

"What happened to your shoulder?"

"It was a traitor Glaive, the day Insomnia fell."

"And to your car?"

"I broke through an Imperial checkpoint this morning to get here from Cleigne."

Cid Sophiar blinked. For a long moment he examined her, as if to probe her true intentions. "You have a desperate face," he finally concluded. "Not a lying one. I've to give you some news that hasn't yet leaked. Captain Drautos was with rebel Kingsglaives."

Silia felt herself fainting. "It's not possible," she said, indignant. Cid Sophiar or not, that old man couldn't dare to imply something like that. "Captain Drautos fought against the Imperials for ten years."

"And so your companions did, and you have well seen what they have done," he pointed out, without breaking up. He turned, beckoning her to follow him. "Come in and have a glass of water, girlie, you're about to faint."

"I'm not a girlie," she answered, though it was true she was about to faint. "I am a Kingsglaive, and what you're saying is insane."

"And of insanities, in the past two days, we've heard a lot." Cid readjusted the cap on his head. "The war is over, Kingsglaive. He emphasized her title with sarcasm. "You said you're lookin' for Cor Leonis. He'll tell you everything, if he wants to trust you."

He took a few steps away. Silia watched his bent back, incredulous. It couldn't be true. "On the radio," she tried again, "they said that Prince Noctis died in Insomnia. I know it's not true, because the Prince left the city three days before the signing of the treaty. The radio also said that t'was a group of rebels who stole the Crystal and killed the king, and that the Imperials even supported the evacuation of the city. They're saying so much bullshit that..."

Cid Sophiar turned. "This doesn't come from the radio. And the Oracle, Princess Lunafreya Nox Fleuret, doesn't say bullshit. Talk to Cor Leonis, girlie. He'll tell you everything you need to know."

"The Oracle?" she repeated, blinking. "Do you have any news about the Princess? Has she arrived safely in Altissia with Nyx Ulric?"

"The Princess is safe in Lestallum and I've no idea who Nyx Ulric is."

"So what...?"

Cid interrupted her. "You'll answer one of my questions now. Why, among all, did you rush to rescue Clarus' daughter?"

Silia wondered why he was so interested in that, but then remembered that Cid had been Clarus' comrade, so it wasn't so strange that he was interested in the fate of his daughter. "I'm a friend of
Gladio," she replied reluctantly. "And I thought it was dangerous for the daughter of a member of the Council, sister of the Prince's Shield, to stay in Insomnia."

For the first time, Cid Sophiar pouted his lips in a hint of a smile. "You thought well, girlie. Now come and sit in the diner before fainting. Even though you're so tiny, I wouldn't be able to lift you up with this back of mine. We've someone who can take a look at your shoulder. Cindy will fix your Volvo and later I'll give you the coordinates of the place where Cor Leonis has made camp."

Silia shook her head. "I can't rest. I've got to find out what happened to Nyx Ulric. If what you said about Captain Drautos is true, I've to warn him. Any news from Prince Noctis and his retinue?"

"They stopped here on the day of their departure for a breakdown and then again yesterday, with very different faces, after having heard of the fall of Insomnia. They failed to leave Galdin Quay. Now they're with Cor Leonis."

Silia took a moment to close her eyes and thank the Astrals. They were fine, and they were near. "Can you mark me on the satnav where the camp is located? If I hasten, maybe..."

"If you hasten maybe you can put out your left arm permanently. I thought you Glaives were smarter than this. Or is it just you who are stupid?"

"Haven't you understood that yet, grandpa?" Cindy leaned against the car she was repairing before Silia arrived. She had listened to the exchanges between her and Cid in silence. With almost bare breasts, the clothes soiled with oil and grease, she looked like one of the pin-ups on the posters that some of her comrades loved to hang in the barracks. "She said she's a friend of Gladio."

"Blondie," Silia blew in a sour voice, cutting to the quick. "My city has fallen, my king is dead, my Captain has betrayed. They've hollowed my shoulder and as a Glaive I'm a walking target. I'd say that really it's not the time for fairy tales and gossip, d'you think?"

Cindy gave a feline smile, unimpressed. "C'mon, there's no need to be shy."

"I'm not shy!"

"Look, girlie," Cid sighed. "Whether you're chasing the Prince or your lover, if you get back in the car you won't go far. I'll tell you for the last time and then it's your business: come in and rest. Meanwhile, Cindy, try to fix up that wreck. This time as a payment for the work we'll settle for first-hand information about what's happened in Insomnia."
De via in semitam degredire

Chapter Summary

The Prince and his retinue face their first serious dangers. Finally Gladio receives an unexpected phone call.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I

Cor Leonis was, as always, goddamn right. On the other hand, if he hadn't always been goddamn right, he wouldn't have survived long enough to be known as the Immortal.

To enter the Tomb of the Wise and recover its Royal Weapon they simply had to go down a staircase.

The entrance to the Tomb of the Conqueror instead was hidden within a maze of tunnels, galleries and dead ends infested with daemons. It took them two hours to find a working generator, reactivate – and luckily it still worked – the electrical system to get past the automatic gates, get rid of the Goblins that kept popping up on all sides and attacking them from behind, and track three times Noctis who kept going away by himself leaving them behind.

Now they were in front of an Arachne. A big, fucking Arachne. A sort of giant anthropomorphic black widow that had fallen from above and that would certainly have impaled him if he hadn't had fast enough reflexes to tumble to his side.

A bullet hit the beast before it could fall on him again. The Arachne uttered a shrill cry, as if she didn't expect such an affront, then jumped backwards, disappearing into the darkness.

"Gladio, are you okay?" Prompto shouted.

"Not a scratch!" Gladio stood up, summoning his broadsword. Noctis warped onto the monster and nailed it to the wall in a corner with the Sword of the Wise, but the Arachne shook him off. They tried to attack her at the same time, but she was fucking fast and resilient and she kept throwing herself at them, dividing their ranks using dreadful electrical attacks and targeting them with spheres of energy.

"Beware of her miasma," Ignis yelled. "It's a daemon, not a beast. Move carefully. Let's round her up!"

Avoiding her attacks, slowly, cautiously, they succeeded in encircling the monster on all four sides. But then the Arachne emitted a terrible shriek that resounded like hundreds of nails on as many
blackboards, and at her call four creatures similar to her – small Tarantulas, where 'small' meant the size of a hunting dog – seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

"Here, now there are five of them." Ignis liked to state the obvious.

"Ew, so disgusting!"

Since the journey began, they had never been in such a mess. The Arachne, despite her enormous size, charged them continuously, regardless of their blows, and the simple touch of her electric aura or her energy spheres was enough to make them fall to the ground stunned by high tension. The Tarantulas, although less dangerous, were equally fast.

Ignis finally managed to calibrate a fairly precise and powerful blow with his spear and shear off one of the Arachne's legs at the joint, but two Tarantulas were on him from behind and Gladio saw his friend drop and, even worse, he saw blood.

"Ig!" he yelled, alarmed. He was too far away and the huge body of the Arachne was between them. "Prompto, cover him!"

He didn't need to ask, because Prompto had already freed Ignis of the small enemies and was helping him recover his strength with a potion. Avoiding yet another sphere of energy, Gladio leaned against the wall and took a breath, trying to focus.

Arachne. Arachne. I'm a fuckin' idiot.

"Stop, stop, stop!" His cry bounced between the walls of the cave. He saw that he had managed to get his comrades' attention. "Prompto, take Ignis. Move back. Noct, tell me you still have a fire flask."

"Got it. But what..."

"Use it then. But aim it well and immediately warp backwards, or we risk being roasted too."

It was a moment. Once again, Gladio was pleased to note how they cooperated well; Prompto passed his arm behind Ignis' neck and both ran towards him. Gladio let them enter the tunnel and remained in guard stance, out of the scope of the flask, but close enough to Noctis to lend him support in case of need.

Noctis flung the ampoule and warped backwards. Gladio felt a burst of heat, and the light generated by the fire after hours in the dark hurt his eyes, but he stood ready to give the coup de grace.

It wasn't necessary; the Arachne and the Tarantulas, burning, disintegrated into a mush that seemed to be absorbed by the bare stone, just as it had happened to the Goblins.

Panting, soaked in sweat by the clash and the sudden increase in temperature, Gladio turned to the others. "Shit. Thankfully it's over. Iggy, how are you?"

Ignis was still on the ground. He broke another bulb, took a deep breath, and then rubbed his forehead. "Better now, thank you. The claws of those beasts were poisoned. If we hadn't bought antidotes in Hammerhead, it would have been problematic."

"What was that monster?" Prompto asked, dusting off his knees and elbows.

"An Arachne. Weak to the fire element," Gladio answered, overlapping Ignis' voice. His three friends turned to look at him, amazed. "What's wrong with ya?"
"Since when do you know all these things, Gladio?" Noctis crossed his arms. His forehead was bleeding because of a superficial scratch. "At Insomnia you only talked about wrestling, training and fighting tactics."

Gladio was glad it was dark because he couldn't control the bitter grimace that was distorting his lips. It hadn't occurred to him right away, but Silia had told him one evening that she and her squad had faced a herd of Arachnes somewhere on the western front. One of my teammates, named Karla, was horrified by insects. Can you believe it? A Kingsglaive who's afraid of bugs. Although, these anthropomorphic spiders are taller than you, Gladio. When one of those things went for her, she started hurling so many fires on it that at one point she collapsed to the ground. At least she hit their weak point.

"Just a coincidence," he cut short, preceding them in the tunnel. Suddenly, he missed Silia terribly and felt breathless, without space, as if the walls of rock had closed in on him. He looked at the screen of his phone; they had been in there for two and a half hours, but it seemed like two days. Who knew how the inhabitants of Keycatrich had endured there for weeks, maybe months. With a shudder, he wondered how someone could live without the sunlight.

The entrance to the Tomb of the Conqueror looked like the Wise's one: same friezes on the portal, same cloaked female figure that towered over it. Noctis took the key received from Cor Leonis from his pocket, but before introducing it into the lock, in an unexpected gesture of caution he turned to him and Ignis. Gladio nodded. That tomb had been sealed for centuries. He didn't believe that this time they would find nasty surprises lurking.

So it was; the crypt was empty except for the sarcophagus of the Conqueror. As it happened in the Tomb of the Wise, it was enough for Noctis to reach out his hand to awaken the power of the Old Kings. The stone axe lit up and shone, floating in the air, then fell back on Noctis, stabbing him without hurting, and for a moment it swirled around him before breaking up into fragments of energy.

"Well," Prompto said, when everything around them was dark and silent again. "Only eleven more to go."

II

The sun outside the trench blinded them. They stood for a moment stunned, shielding their eyes, breathing the clean air.

"How long have we been inside? Two years?" Prompto asked.

"Less than three hours," Ignis pointed out.

"I'll tell the Marshall we came out alive." Noctis leaned the phone against his ear. "Hi, Cor? We are done here."

"Finally picked up," the Marshall replied. Noctis had put the speaker on. "Thought I'd lost another king."

Gladio scratched his hairline, wondering how he could joke about that, especially since they had barely escaped the cave in one piece. He heard Noct ask him what their next move was going to be.

"Actually, I have a task to entrust you. The Empire's begun the construction of a new base along the road west to Duscae. I need you to put it out of commission. If that base is finished, getting out of
Leide will become extremely hard."

"Roger," Noctis replied. "We'll take care of it."

"I'm already in the area. Look for Monica at the Prairie outpost. She'll fill you on the details. See you soon." Cor hung up.

"Hm," Prompto commented. "I heard 'Empire', 'new base' and 'put out of commission', or am I wrong?"

Noctis stretched, starting to walk. "Not wrong. Damn, we never stop. Let's go to Monica."

They set off. They were exhausted, but luckily it seemed they had cleared the valley of all the annoying magiteks.

"The Immortal is really tireless," Prompto said.

"Yeah," he confirmed with a smile. "There's no one like him in all Eos."

"He fought alongside your father, huh, Gladio?"

Gladio nodded. "He joined the Crownsguard when he was only thirteen. And he became King Mors' Shield instead of my grandfather just two years later; the youngest to gain that role, for what we know."

"What had happened to your grandfather?"

"He also wanted to get into the Taelpar Crag to challenge Gilgamesh. But, unlike Cor, he didn't come out alive."

"What a story!"

"Yeah. My father never forgave my grandfather. He didn't even mention him after that."

They took the road back to the Prairie outpost on foot. They were all more relaxed, Gladio noted, after having overcome the difficulties encountered in Keycatrich unscathed. Coming back to fight with a precise goal was galvanizing.

Monica welcomed them again with her usual phlegm, complimenting them for having found the second Royal Weapon. They didn't have the Immortal's strength, so they decided to stop for an hour to eat and rest, while she updated them on the details of the mission, before retrieving the Regalia and reaching the defensive line north of Duscae.

The Malacchi Hills were a good natural wall for the Leide region. They had protected it from the infantry magitek for a long time, Ignis told them, but that also worked on the contrary: placing Imperial bases in the few passable steps meant cutting out Leide.

As planned, Monica accompanied them to a secondary access, a narrow hole in the rock that led to an unguarded corner of the base. The instructions were to split into two groups: Noctis would sabotage the base from within along with the Marshall, while Ignis, Prompto, Monica and Gladio would act as a diversion. The idea of parting from Noctis didn't excite him, but he couldn't think of better arms than those of Cor the Immortal to watch his back.

"You go give 'em hell," he encouraged him with a pat on his back. "We'll do the same on our end."

Noctis lifted his thumb in a confident gesture and then crept into the crack. They waited, on alert,
fearing that something might go wrong and that he could be spotted on the other side before joining Cor – or worse, while he still was crawling in the crack – but Noctis came out the other side and reassured them before going away.

"Ok, it seems to have gone well." Prompto began to warm up. "What's the plan? Knockin' on the door and then running away?"

"Actually," Monica said, "The Marshall and I had something like that in mind. We'll use a couple of these." The woman fumbled in her bag and showed them a magic flask. "We'll pretend we want to attack the blockade frontally. Most of the Snipers will turn their attention to us, hopefully, leaving the Prince and the Marshall free to act almost undisturbed."

"Let's not waste time, then," Gladio urged them on. They circled the base, careful to keep out of sight against the rocks, and returned to the main road. The armored automated gate was at least 25 feet high and certainly magical flasks wouldn't be enough to knock it down, unless the Marshall had managed to find someone who knew how to prepare high-level ones.

"Prompto!" Monica said, as soon as they found a rock big enough to offer them cover.

"Y-yes-sir!" His friend stiffened.

"I'm counting on you. Try to pull down as many of them as possible from the walls before the infantry comes out."

"Yes-sir!"

Monica looked at the three of them again for a moment. She smiled. "I saw you train and become deadly adversaries in a few years. Let me see what you are able to do in the field. On three... One... two... three!"

She flung the magic flask against the giant gate. It was a low-level bomb that made more smoke than fire. An alarm activated instantly, and magitek riflemen and snipers appeared on the walls. Prompto, bent over the rock, totally still and concentrated, knocked them down with quick and precise hits. It was disconcerting how his friend's expression changed radically when he was holding a firearm. He may not have their physical strength, but as for aim and steady hand he had no rivals.

There was something to fight for everyone. Prompto put a dozen down before the gate opened to let the infantry out, as expected by Monica, and they went to meet them; Axemen, above all, like those with whom they had clashed at Keycatrich. They seemed to never end and, moreover, other snipers and riflemen had arrived on the walls to offer them covering fire. Gladio soon realized that Monica wasn't on his and his friends' level and covered her back as he would have done with Noctis; it shocked him, because she had been one of the Guards who had trained and raised him and she had much more experience than him. As he charged the magiteks he realized for the first time with an alarming sense of anxiety that, apart from the Immortal, there was no longer anyone on Lucis' side who could fight like them and, above all, that it was not yet enough.

"There's more?" Prompto asked, when they were the only standing creatures. They waited in guard stance, looking towards the gate.

"It seems not." Monica wiped the sweat from her forehead, lowering herself to her knees to catch her breath.

"Are you all right, Monica?" Ignis gently helped her getting up again.

"I am, thank you, Ignis. My congratulations to the three of you. You were fast, precise, well-
coordinated." She turned to him. "I wish Clarus could have seen you, Gladio."

Gladio stuck his hands in his pockets, forcing a smile. "Thanks, Monica. But I'm sure he'd have to say something about that." He frowned in a stern expression, trying to imitate his father's low, husky voice. "Too slow! You gave him too much space, Gladiolus! What was that sweeping? You're not a demolition team!"

Monica laughed wearily. Prompto and Ignis also joined in the laughter.

"He's right," Ignis said. "Clarus was really demanding."

Prompto nodded energetically. "Oh yeah, my legs were shaking every time he'd talk to me."

"Nothing was ever good enough for him," Gladio kept on, and he felt the corners of his mouth tremble, "When I was young, every time I was convinced I'd done everythin' to perfection, he'd jump out with a remark. Only the day before our departure..." He scratched his hairline. Even on the eve of their departure, actually, after telling him for the first time in his life that he was proud of him, he had advised not to leave anything behind. That thought dragged – inevitably – another one with it. But it wasn't the moment. "I wonder how His Majesty is doing."

They took a breath for a few minutes, waiting. They still could hear rumblings of clashes coming from within, which, he guessed, was a good sign.

And then, finally, the automated gate began to rise again. Gladio was extremely relieved to see Noctis and Cor standing unharmed in front of them.

"You made a big mess out here," the Marshall greeted them. "Great diversion. Are you all okay?"

"Smooth as silk. The Imperials couldn't take their eyes off us," he joked. "And what about you?"

"I'm fine as hell. The Marshall hardly left some for me."

"I suppose we can now retrieve the Regalia and continue."

"I'm afraid we can't." Cor had gazed upward, beyond the walls of the base. Only then did Gladio hear the engine of an airship – small, judging by its roar – approaching. In a few seconds, the Imperial vehicle was visible: it flew over the base and stood for a moment above them. They all stood ready, the weapons in their hands again, fearing a barrage of blows.

"Stay right where you are!" a metallic voice crackled by an amplifier. They were not magiteks, then. It was an Imperial in flesh and blood, the first they met from the fall of Insomnia. Gladio tightened his jaw so hard that his teeth hurt.

"Well well, if it isn't Cor the Immortal. So, you're still alive," the voice declaimed. "But this time you won't survive what I have in store for you. Your legend ends here."

"Who's that, Cor?" Noctis asked.

"Loqi Tummelt, I suppose." Cor clicked his tongue, frowning resignedly. He didn't seem worried. "A young Imperial commander. He made up his mind to kill me."

"Dangerous?"

The airship hatch opened, and an armored cuirass, three times bigger than the one they had faced at Keycatrich, appeared.
"He isn't. But that MA-X armor could be a problem."

It jumped off the airship, along with a dozen other Imperial Snipers. It must have been at least fifteen feet tall and half a ton heavy, but he landed with an agility Gladio would never have expected.

"Monica, wait at the bike outside of the base. The diversionary action was tough for you," Cor ordered. "You guys, c'mon. Let's put out these nuisances first." The Marshall unsheathed his katana and hurled himself on the nearest magitek.

They got rid of them in a hurry – after having nailed more than a hundred of them, they had soon learned to bypass the magiteks and hit their weak spot, the nape, and to move away from those on the point of self-destruction – and concentrated their strength on the MA. They didn't have to wait long for a counter-offensive: the armored cuirass was equipped with guided laser missiles, and Noct was the only one able to approach quickly enough, thanks to his warping, and hit it. Sheltered, with his long-range attacks, Prompto could cause him some damage, but Gladio, Ignis and even Cor had to tumble zigzag before being able to get close to it. Particularly the Marshall was constantly targeted. Yet another missile exploded so close to Cor that Gladio was quick to take a potion to come to his aid, but when the cloud of dust dissolved he saw that he was unharmed.

"Gladio!" The Marshall cried. "I'll keep him busy. You're the only one, with that broadsword, to have any hope of unbalancing it. Aim for his legs. If you can't make it, take the Prince and leave."

"Forget it. We won't leave you alone here, Cor," Gladio replied. Breaking down that Imperial, for him, was now a matter of principle. He took a deep breath. "I can do it. But be careful."

Cor put himself in a guard stance. "Loqi!" He roared, to make himself heard above the noise of the clash. "A while ago you said that today you'd have put an end to my legend, but it seems to me that you're simply enjoying shooting missiles. Instead of playing like a kid, face me man-to-man."

The MA, who was trying to get rid of Noctis, turned to Cor. The missiles focused on him. Gladio wasted no time in seeing how the Marshall was doing: he hurled himself as fast as he could towards the armored cuirass, put his feet down, and began to deal blows to his legs as if his life depended on it. At the fifth hit, finally, the left leg of the armor collapsed, and the MA folded to the ground like an agonizing spider with flashing eyes. Without agreeing, all five of them were on his limbs so that he couldn't get back on his feet. The alloy was fucking resistant, but finally they managed to tear them apart. Only the cabin remained.

"C'mon!" Noctis made the Sword of the Wise disappear and summoned the Axe of the Conqueror. "Let's r…"

"Retreat!" Cor yelled. "Immediately!"

They obeyed without asking questions, and fortunately, because a few seconds later the MA self-destructed. Incredulous, panting, they stood looking at the smoking remains of the armor at a safe distance.

"Shouldn't we see if he's still al...?" Prompto started hesitantly.

"I don't give a shit," Gladio spat. His fury hadn't yet subsided. If Tummelt had been alive in that cabin, he would have torn him to pieces with his bare hands. For all he knew, two days before he might have been in Insomnia, shooting at the unarmed citizens with his fucking automated armor. "He got what he deserved."

"Gladio, calm down," Ignis tried to sedate him.
"Why should he calm down?" Even Noctis, soaked in sweat and bent over with his elbows on his knees, had his face petrified with rage. "Gladio's right. He's an Imperial. He was about to kill us. If he's not dead, I'll take care of it."

Prompto violently shrugged his shoulders and advanced towards the smoking scraps without giving them a word. He summoned his weapon again and stood in front of the remains of the cabin. Without anyone being able to stop him, he aimed his Cocytus and fired four quick repeating shots.

"Prompto!" Ignis snapped to their companion, perhaps believing, as well as Gladio, that he wanted to give him the final blow, or maybe that a last explosion could hurt him. Prompto didn't listen. He knelt down and opened the armored door, probably burning his hands in doing so; half his body disappeared for a moment inside the cabin, then he emerged pulling out a man in an Imperial armor who, when Prompto ripped off his helmet to let him breathe, turned out to be a bloody boy who was perhaps twenty.

A boy, he told himself, moistening his lips, is this the enemy?

Although both him and Noctis had made a show of force, neither moved while Prompto retrieved a potion from his pocket and broke it on Tummelt's chest. The boy moaned, rolled on his side with a grimace and coughed. He opened his eyes, and his expression contracted into a smirk of hate, disgust and surprise. He looked like a child inside his father's armor.

"Can you get up?" Prompto asked, still kneeling beside him.

"Why the hell did you do it?!" Tummelt sat up, looking around. "I'd have killed you. I will kill you."

"Tummelt, cut it out." For the first time since they had defeated the armored cuirass, Cor Leonis spoke. He had the lenient tone of a too patient parent. Gladio wondered what had happened between the two of them in the past. "You lost. Thank Argentum you're still alive. Not everyone was of the same opinion."

"The base is full of still working vehicles." Ignis' voice was so sharp that he could cut off the armor of an Adamantoise. "Take one and get away. I advise you to seize this opportunity and not to try again to mess with us."

Tummelt stood up cautiously. He was unarmed, but he looked at Cor Leonis – not at Prompto, who had saved him, not at Ignis, who had offered him an escape route, not at the Prince of Insomnia – as if he wanted to attack him with his bare hands. "This isn't over," he threatened. "You'll still hear from me."

Gladio sedated Noct's jerk by clawing his shoulder. When the Prince turned at him indignantly, he shook his head. Breaking up an MA without looking at the driver's face was a thing. Attacking a defeated and unarmed boy in five was another story.

No, that's not it, Gladio realized. None of us has ever killed a man. We tore up beasts, daemons and magiteks, but none of us has ever killed a man. His hand that was clasping Noctis' shoulder shook; he hated the Empire with all his strength, for what they had done to the city, his father, the King and Silia; yet looking at Tummelt was enough to make him lose all his boldness.

Tummelt moved away without attempting any dirty trick. They watched him get into an Imperial truck, start the engine and get out of the base at full speed. Confused, embittered, Gladio looked at Noctis, who kept his head down, Prompto, still kneeling on the ground, and Ignis, next to him.

"Why did you do it?" Noctis asked Prompto, but without anger.
Prompto shook his head. "Nobody deserves to die roasted inside an armored cabin. Not even an Imperial. If he attacks us again, we'll defeat him as we have already done."

Gladio heard an amused snort on his left. The Marshall's lips were posed in one of his rare smiles. "One day your kindness will kill you, Prompto," he said. "Use a potion for your hands."

Prompto obeyed and then stood up. "Yet, Marshall," he replied, looking down, "Today you've shown that you know how to deal with Loqi Tummelt, but you haven't killed him before. Am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong," Cor replied, hesitating for a moment. However, he didn't give them any explanation. "I'd say that we have finished here. Seeing you in action puts my mind at ease. It's clear I don't need to worry any more. I'll return to watching to the Niffs. 'Till next time, take care. Lend me your phone for a moment, Your Highness."

Noctis handed him the phone. Cor opened the map app, typed for a moment on the screen, then scored a dot, zoomed, and showed it to them. "Here. Northeast of Hammerhead, between the mountains, there's a valley where there once stood a hunter outpost of the Meldacio HQ. Auburnbrie offered it to us to make a base. It's a place easy to watch and defend. That's where my contingent is, along with hunters, refugees from Insomnia, people who still want to fight."

"Are you gathering an army?" Noctis asked.

The Marshall shook his head decisively. "Nothing like that. Only volunteers who hate the Empire, to keep an eye on their movements and support you. We've had a regular army for centuries, Prince, then an army of elite soldiers, and that wasn't enough to stop Niflheim. You – the four of you together – can do it. Come on, go now."

A little few to stop an Empire that has virtually control of all Eos and now also the power of the Crystal, if they learn how to use it. Gladio sighed tightly. It wasn't a moment for insecurities. He took a step to follow the others, who were already moving away, when he decided that, after all, he wanted to give it a try.

"Talkin' about elite soldiers, Cor," he said casually, almost distractedly, "Before going on there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Ask away, Gladio."

"D'you think some Glaives could have survived?"

The Marshall looked at him sideways, and for a moment Gladio wondered if even he had listened to the allusions about his relationship with Silia that many directed to him at the Crownsguard HQ. "No news from any Glaive. If anyone other than Ulric hasn't betrayed and survived, he's well hidden somewhere."

Gladio doubted that Silia would be well hidden somewhere. "It's only been two days, Cor," he tried again, mindful of Ignis' words.

The Marshall crossed his arms. "Why all this interest? I told you what the Kingsglaives did."

"Forget it," Gladio cut short. "It's just that... I've no news of a person. Never mind."

"Go to the others, Gladio," he reprimanded him, but without harshness. "Your priority now is to reach Lestallum. I'll be in touch as soon as I've news about other Royal Weapons."
Gladio raised his hand in a gesture of goodbye. He turned to reach the others.

III

They couldn't make much progress before the sun – earlier every day – started to fall. It would set in an hour, so they decided to proceed for a while and then make camp before reaching Lestallum.

Gladio felt exhausted by that interminable day and was about to doze off when his phone rang. He looked at the screen. It was Cindy's number. He didn't understand, however, why she had called him instead of Noctis.

"Yo, Cindy, somethin' happened?"

He heard a soft sigh, then a humid sound. "Hi, Gladio."

Forgetting he was in the car, Gladio jumped up, bumping his knee against Prompto's seat, then fell back badly on his own. "Shit." He plunged a hand through his hair. "Shit. By the Six. Silia. Is that you, Silia?"

"Why so amazed?" she asked, almost offended. "Are you fine?"

Gladio couldn't help but smile. "Fine as hell. Silia, I tried calling you for days. I feared that..."

"I've not betrayed, Gladio."

"Don't even say it. I didn't believe it for a moment. But tell me what happened. By the Six, I'm so..." He looked up. Noctis was staring at him, perplexed. From the front seats Ignis, with an ill-concealed mocking smile reflected in the rearview mirror, and Prompto, eyes wide open in a shocked expression, were watching him as well. He tried to pull himself together, straightening up with dignity. "I'm glad you made it. Are you hurt?"

"Nothing serious. I'm in Hammerhead. Cindy has lent her phone to me. Cid told me that..."

"What are you doing in Hammerhead?"

"Gladio, please listen to me. Cid told me you left from here this morning. Did you manage to meet Marshall Leonis?"

"Yeah, he told us lots of things. Now we're going to Lestallum."

"Perfect. Your sister is at the Leveille Hotel, along with Jared Haster and Talcott. I brought them there yesterday, then, since the connections to Altissia are cut, I came to Hammerhead to ask Cid where I could find Cor Leonis and get instructions from him."

"Wait, easy. You brought Iris to Lestallum? I'm so..."

"For the Six, Gladio, let me talk. Tomorrow I'll go to Marshall Leonis' camp. Cid is loading the coordinates in my satnav. I'm afraid he won't be happy to see me, and if I were him I wouldn't trust me at all. Can you contact him? I'd like to avoid being arrested, or worse, shot, before I even have time to explain myself."

Gladio scratched his hairline. "Of course. I'll tell him he can trust you. You'll be a great help to him. But, hm, Silia..."
"What, Gladio?"

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Don't worry about me. It's just a wound on my shoulder. I've been on the front for almost ten years, Gladio. I survived worse things."

"I'm sure of it." He rubbed his eyes. "But I wasn't talkin' about that. I know about your Captain."

"About that fucking bastard Drautos," she corrected him, furious. "I don't wanna talk about it. I've another thing to ask you: have you heard of a Glaive named Nyx Ulric? He should be with the Princess. Last time we talked they were heading to Galdin Quay."

Gladio blinked. "Silia, I'm sorry. The Princess is in Lestallum, but Nyx Ulric is dead. So you don't know what it's...?"

An electrostatic noise prevented him from hearing, but he thought he heard a curse.

"...all know more than I do."

"What?" He tapped the phone on his ear. "I can't hear you anymore, Silia."

"I said, I was in that fuckin' city, in that fuckin' shrine, I saw with my own eyes that fuckin' Crystal fluctuating away, dragged by an Imperial airship, yet it seems that you all know more than I do."

That sounded so Silia. Gladio had to throw back a laugh. "Silia, listen. Go to Cor Leonis. He won't shoot you. He'll explain everything to you in detail, and you too will have much to tell him. Will you let me know you're still alive from time to time?"

Again silence, so long that for a moment he believed the line had gone dead. "I feel so guilty, Gladio. For everything. For the King, for the city, for the Crystal and for your father. I should have glimpsed some signals. I should have done something more."

Gladio looked at his companions. Now they were showing disinterest, but he was certain that they weren't missing – and it couldn't be otherwise – a single word. Time had come to give them some explanation. "It's not your fault. It's nobody's fault if not the Empire's. See you soon, Silia."

"Be careful, Gladio. I'll cover your back the best I can from the Immortal's camp. As long as he does shoot me at sight as soon as I'm under fire. I left the uniform at the Citadel, but I still lived in Insomnia for months."

"We'll be careful. But, if you don't want him to shoot you at sight, don't speak to Cor Leonis by calling him the Immortal. Stay in touch. And you be careful, too."

Silia closed the conversation. Gladio allowed himself a last uncontrolled smile before raising his head and facing his friends, mortally embarrassed. The flash of Prompto's camera blinded him.

"Prompto!" He roared. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I've immortalized your face," he replied, amid the laughter. Noct and Ignis were laughing too. "Now tell us again that this Hartwood isn't your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"Please Gladio," Ignis cried out. "Denying is quite offensive."
Gladio scratched furiously his hairline. He took a deep sigh, moistened his lips, then looked at Noctis. "Oh, all right. I didn't lie anyway. She's not my girlfriend. Dunno what she is, it's not that simple. She's a Kingsglaive."

Noctis stiffened immediately. Gladio laid a hand on his knee. "Noct, I know what you're thinkin', but Silia isn't a traitor."

"And how can you be that sure?"

"Twas she who brought Iris to Lestallum. And, even if it weren't so, I would entrust her with my own life."

He understood what he had let slip when no one followed his words. Everyone was staring at him, even Ignis through the rearview mirror. Gladio felt better now that he had blown the whistle and the rest came out spontaneously. "She's been in town for six months because of a serious injury, that's how we met. We'd see each other in the evening in a bar to talk about what was happenin' inside and outside Insomnia, then we started trainin' together. You had to hear how she'd talk about your father, Noct, she's one of the most loyal people in the kingdom I've ever met." He felt obliged to justify himself: "In any case, nothing explicit has happened between us," he lied. "We couldn't afford it, we both knew it; we had duties. But I'm in love with her. I never told her."

"And does she love you back?" Prompto asked.

Gladio smiled. "I think so." He leaned back, hugging his knee. It had never occurred to him that his feelings could be one-sided. He and Silia had never exchanged a word about it, precisely because their relationship had evolved so gradually, obviously and embarrassingly, that it didn't need to be discussed. "I don't know what exactly happened on the day of the betrayal of the Glaives, we didn't talk that much, as you heard. I was afraid they had killed her."

"She's in Hammerhead, right?" Prompto asked. "Why don't we go back? You'll want to see her. And now I'm curious."

Gladio shook his head. "She'd kick my ass all the way from Hammerhead to Lestallum. My duty is here, with Noct, she knows it very well, and she's doin' hers. She's reachin' Cor Leonis to keep on fightin' for the kingdom of Lucis. Probably sooner or later our roads will cross again. For now, it's enough for me to know she's fine."

"What does she look like? Is she pretty? You never introduced her to me."

He felt guilty for Ignis. Now that they were far from Insomnia, with all that had happened, his scruples seemed far less important. Even if he didn't want to admit he was in love with her, he could have at least introduce her to them as a friend. "I wanted to. To everyone. We had begun to see each other more often, and I... then the Chancellor arrived and our departure was decided. How's Silia's like? She's older than me, even if she doesn't look like it. She's pretty. I like her. She has cat eyes, green and brown. Among the Glaives they used to call her the Coeurl, because she's very agile and graceful, even if she's tiny."


Gladio was amazed by Noctis' comment. He too smiled, encouraged. "She is. She has survived on the front for more than nine years. Then, she lost a leg; that's why she was at Insomnia. But she was then implanted with a cutting-edge prosthesis and recovered perfectly. You should see her fight. She's small but deadly with swords; little heckling in training and she'd beat the shit out of me. More, she's very smart. She reads. She knows a lot about the history of Eos."
Noctis gave half a smile. "That's where your sudden love for books comes from. When I saw you reading in the car for the first time, I almost had a heart attack."

"Ah-ah!" suddenly Prompto exclaimed, making them jump. "I knew I still had it!"

"What are you talking about, Prompto?"

"Few months ago I saw Gladio with a girl. They were walking around and chatting. I thought of taking a picture of 'em and then making fun of him, but it slipped my mind. I bet it's her, Hartwood, right? She looks like you said!"

Prompto triumphantly handed him the camera. Gladio jerked when he recognized Silia. He didn't remember when the photo was taken, but they were probably going to the Training Hall. Silia was in civilian clothes, and she was laughing, with a relaxed expression. But what surprised him was his own face. He had a hand on his forehead and he too laughed at something, perhaps a joke that she had made. In the picture he wasn't even touching her, but their complicity was unequivocal.

*What an asshole I've been in denying it for so long,* he told himself with a smile. *With these faces, everyone must have understood except us.*

"Let me see," Ignis said, and took the camera from his hands, looking away from the street for a moment. He examined the picture like a connoisseur. "She has a pretty face," he approved. "And a smug stride. She must have a temper. You can see it from how straight she holds her shoulders."

"Sure, she has a filthy temper," he confirmed. "Cheeky. Smutty."

"I didn't know you were into girls like that, Gladio," Prompto observed. "I thought you more of the type... dunno, sweet and caring girls. A lovely wife."

"Instead I fell in love with a fury that slices the daemons."

Noctis seized the camera and looked at the picture carefully, unfathomable as ever. "I," he said, uncertainly. "I think I've already seen her."

"Probably," Gladio said, "She helped the City Guard during her months of rehab. She was often seen in the Citadel."

"She's the woman who was watching us from the window of the Training Hall a few days before the Chancellor arrived." He leaned back to return the camera to Prompto. "She was there for you. Why did you never tell me about her, Gladio?"

Gladio tightened his lips. "Because..." he glanced at Ignis for help. He certainly couldn't tell Noct, his prince, his best friend, that he couldn't stay with Silia because he was his priority. "Sorry, Noct. It's complicated. I never admitted it to myself and I didn't want to be forced to do it," he lied again. Partly. "I realized it when Insomnia fell and I thought she must be dead."

"I've never had much sympathy for the Glaives," Noctis confessed.

"She fought for your father and for the kingdom," Gladio pointed out. "Some Glaives have given their lives to defend the city. Think of Nyx Ulric. He saved Princess Lunafreya. He sacrificed himself to stop Drautos."

"Gladio is right," Ignis said. "Moreover, we don't know exactly what happened."

"I like her hips," Prompto interrupted them, cheerful. "But from this picture I can't tell if she has big
breasts. What about her breast, Gladio? Is she 'boing boing' like Cindy?"

Ignis laughed and, after a clumsy attempt to hold back, Noctis also joined in the laughter. Gladio didn't find the topic so funny.

"Prompto, you're really a pervert!"

"What are you talking about? Thin girls with big breasts are fabulous!"

"Anyway she doesn't have big breasts, far from it. It's common in muscular women."

"What a pity!"

"I like slender girls," Ignis confessed. "Pretty, slightly languid, girls. Cindy is too bosomy for my liking."

"Bo-what?"

"It means that she's busty." Noctis went to Prompto's rescue. "As for me..." he smiled, "I like girls who are slim, blond and sweet."

"We know it perfectly, Noct," Ignis chuckled. "And Princess Lunafreya is a real beauty. At least for this we should thank the Imperials. It's not so common that a combined marriage is with the first love."

Gladio relaxed in the seat with a smile, listening to their cheerful chatter. Prompto continued to praise the beauties of Cindy, on whom – evidently – he had a crush. For the first time since Insomnia had fallen, they were sharing a moment of joyful superficiality. His father was dead, the king was dead, Ignis' uncle was dead, and none of them had a home anymore. But his sister was safe and, somewhere, Silia was alive.

"Oh, heck," he exclaimed, picking up the phone again. "I've to tell Cor that Silia is heading to his camp. Right now, Glaives are walking targets."

Chapter End Notes

The English translation of the Latin titles of the chapters so far:

2. "In birra veritas" > It's the true name of Samuel’s bar in Insomnia. The real Latin motto is "In vino veritas", meaning that drunk people usually say the truth.
3. "Quae volumus, credimus libenter" > "we willingly believe in what we want to believe"
4. "Gratia gratiam parit" > "grace (or kindness) results in grace (or kindness)"
5. "Dulce bellum inexpertis" > "War is sweet for who hasn’t experienced it yet"
6. "Nemo solus satis sapit" > "No one can be wise enough on his own"
7. "Frangar, non flectar" > "I'll break but I won’t bend"
8. "Dubitando ad veritatem pervenimus" > "We’ll reach the truth by doubting"
9. "Quies ante tempestatem" > "The calm before the storm"
10. "Tertium non datur" > "A third option is not given"
11. "Alea iacta est" > The most famous Julius Caesar’s quote, it means “the dice has been cast”, so “this is the point of no return"
12. "Silent leges inter arma" > "In times of war, law falls silent"
[In the first part of the chapter, Clarus starts to say: “Excusatio non petita…” The whole phrase, "Excusatio non petita, accusatio manifesta”, means that when someone justifies himself or apologizes for something without been asked to, he’s self-accusing.
13. "Ultima decidit" > “The last hour is the decisive one”
14. "Omnia munda mundis" > "Everything is pure for pure people"
15. "Quid vesperat ferat, incertum sit" > “Don’t say a day is good until night”
16. "Honesta mors turpi vita potior" > “An honorable death is better than a shameful life”
17. "Vanitas vanitatum, et omnia vanitas" > “Vanity of vanity, everything is vanity (or useless)”
18. "Stat magni nominis umbra" > “Only the shadow of an excellent name remains”
19. "Qui vincit non est victor nisi victus fatetur" > "He who wins is not a winner until the loser admit it”
20. "De via in semitam degredire" > "(diverging) From a road to a small path"
Dei facientes adiuvant

Chapter Summary

Gladio meets Iris at Lestallum and shares a moment of fraternal affection with her. Silia reaches Cor Leonis' camp and tells him her story, but yet another bad news about her former Captain awaits her.

Chapter Notes

"Pro Aris et Focis" takes a break. The story will be updated at the end of August. Thank you all for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

20

Dei facientes adiuvant

I

Entering Lestallum was kind like going back to the civil world. The city was vast, modern, although not as futuristic as Insomnia and the war didn't seem to have scratched it.

"Let's not let our guard down," Ignis reminded them, parking the car, "It looks like a quiet, autonomous town, and it is, but only because the Empire needs the Exineris industries to keep on producing energy from the Meteor. And although they're not particularly fond of Niflheim, the inhabitants of Lestallum have never forgotten that King Mors left them outside the Wall."

"What a beautiful place," Prompto noted admiringly. He kept taking photographs. "And look at all these half-dressed women on the street!"

"Of course, with this heat!" Noctis took off his jacket and hung it on his arm.

Ignis chuckled. "Beware of the women of Lestallum, Prompto. In Insomnia there's gender equality, but here they tend to command because the founder of the town was a woman and, by tradition, it's them who mainly work in the Exineris industries. Perhaps Gladio can give you some advice about how to behave with firm-handed women."

"If you find it out, tell me too. The first time I met Silia she told me I was too young for her. The second one, she blasted me with insults and called me an idiot, then questioned me at the City Guard HQ. The times after, she called me ignorant, privileged, a noble swanky and dunno what else."

Laughing, they climbed the flight of steps that led up from the parking lots to the main avenue. On their left, beyond the panoramic terrace, they got a splendid view of the mountains and the Disc of Cauthess. On their right, the town was built vertically, dominated by the intimidating silhouette of the Exineris Power Plant. Compared to Insomnia and its vertiginous glass skyscrapers, Lestallum, with
its flowerbeds, palms, low-rise buildings and colorful awnings, was much more welcoming, picturesque and vivid. Since he had received Silia's phone call, Gladio's mood had greatly improved, and perfectly matched the lively atmosphere of the town.

He was eager to see Iris again, of course, but he willingly supported the others who, after so much time in the barren and semi-deserted lands of Leide, wanted to make purchases, have a word with the people and look around. They sat for lunch at the table of an elderly street-food seller who talked plenty about the surroundings – dangerous places, rest areas, hunters' outposts – and brought them a delicious curry.

"We have heard," Ignis put it out there, when the man returned to pick up their well-cleaned dishes, "that the Oracle is here in Lestallum."

The old man smiled. "It's true. Fortunately, the news of her death was a false alarm. She has treated some people infected by the Starscourge and healed injured others."

Noctis straightened up on his chair. "Do you know where she is now?"

"No, I'm sorry. But if you see a crowd of people praying, be sure she's there in the middle."

Gladio touched Noctis' knee under the table. "And Niflheim? Any trouble since when Insomnia has fallen?"

"Not yet. But, if you want my opinion, something stinks. A group of rebels kills the King and steals the Crystal during the signing of the treaty between Niflheim and Lucis?" The old man shook his head, skeptical. "Nobody believes it. Many crown citizens have taken shelter here, so the Imperials will arrive soon, I'll bet you anything."

So we'll better hurry up and go away, of course when we'll figure out where to go.

Stuffed, Gladio pulled his chair away from the table. It was time to meet Iris. "Thank for everything. Can you tell us how to get to the Leveille Hotel?"

"It's easy, just turn the corner on the left and then straight on up the avenue to the top. It's one of the highest buildings in town, you can't miss it."

They paid the man and parted. They reached the Leveille a few minutes later, and already Gladio was hurrying to enter, when for a moment he felt the ground fail from under his feet. He froze, astounded.

"Whoah! Did you feel that!" Prompto exclaimed.

Ignis nodded. "A slight earthquake. On the street, just now, someone was saying that they are more and more frequent. I didn't know that Lestallum stood on an earthquake zone, though."

Gladio listened to Ignis' words with one ear because Noctis had lowered his head and was holding it with both his hands, as if it ached.

"Wazzup, Noct?"

"Huh... nothing," he tried to downplay. He raised his head, blinked a couple of times, and pushed his finger between his eyes. "My head just started throbbing."

"Are you okay?" Prompto asked, worried.
"Yeah, don't worry. Must be the heat."

He was lying. Gladio always knew when Noctis wasn't telling the truth, ever since he was a kid and pretended to hurt himself during the training to finish the session early.

Nevertheless, Noctis smiled and was the first to go up the steps and enter the Leveille so he couldn't say anything.

In all likelihood Iris had been waiting for them for a while, or maybe she had seen them coming from the window, because as soon as they entered the hall she descended the stairs, approached, and hugged him briefly. Gladio cuddled her for a moment, then they parted with embarrassment. His sister, at some point in the past few years, while he was busy with Noctis, had become a woman who sometimes he found hard to recognize. He paused to look at her face, as if he hadn't seen her for a lifetime and wanted to make sure it was her; she seemed tired, sorrowful, but steadfast.

"How are you doin', Iris? I was worried."

"I'm fine, Gladio," she nodded, smiling.

Seeing her cheered him up more than he would have expected. He stroked her head clumsily, and she giggled, then escaped to walk to Noctis and the others. "Look at you guys, holding your own out there."

"You look good, Iris," Prompto replied. "Everythin' okay?"

"I could say so, all things considered." She winked in his direction. "Did you hear from our armed escort, Gladio? Is she fine?"

He nodded, scratching his hairline. "Yeah, she called me. She was in Hammerhead, but by now she must have reached Cor. We'll talk about it later."

"That's a relief! What about you? You will stop for a while, won't you?"

"That's the idea. Let's go upstairs, Iris. We want to hear from you what happened."

II

Iris talked for a little over a quarter of an hour. During the signing she was home with Talcott and Jared, so – fortunately – she hadn't witnessed the crucial events that had taken place in Insomnia during the attack, thanks to his father's foresight, but they exchanged details about what had happened.

"Most of the damage was suffered by the Citadel and the center of the city," she concluded. "The rest was almost intact when we left, but as we crossed the bridge we saw..." Iris shuddered visibly. "Diamond Weapons, Silia said."

"Oh, for the Six." Gladio lowered his back, leaning on his elbows. "I hope something in the city still stands."

Noctis blinked. "What's a Diamond Weapon?"

Gladio replied with a marked sour shade in his voice; Noctis had really lived out of the world. "A giant daemon made by the Imperials. Had you taken a faint interest on the progress of the war, you'd know that it destroyed the last stronghold of the Kingsglaives before their return." His friend replied with an annoying shrug.
Ignis sighed tightly. "I heard about it, too. No one had ever seen a creature like that before. And they had more than one, did you say? It was really fortunate that you managed to leave Insomnia before they broke loose."

Iris nodded. "We have to thank Silia. To be honest, we didn't want to trust her at first. But she knew our mother's name. The Liberty. When I asked her what my brother's favorite dish is and she answered 'ramen with meat', I had no more doubts," she chuckled. "She helped us get past the checkpoint and to Lestallum. But you haven't told me yet about what's happened to you since you left the City."

Gladio glanced at Noctis, who nodded slightly. "Hm. I'll sum it up for you: the day we left the Regalia broke down and we spent all our money to have it repaired at Hammerhead."

His sister opened her mouth in a delighted expression. "At Hammerhead? So you met Cid Sophiar?"

He nodded with a grimace. "Yeah, and he didn't even want to give us a gil discount."

"Then," Prompto said, continuing to list, "We got stuck in Galdin Quay and an idiot named Dino Ghiranze recognized Noct and blackmailed us by sending us to poke in the nest of a Zu, in exchange for a passage to Altissia."

"The followin' day we learned about the fall of Insomnia." Gladio lowered his head, tightening his jaws. Being sent away from the city without that substantial information continued to burn like salt on a partially closed wound. "We didn't even know that the signature would be held so soon after our departure. Nobody told us. We had no idea what was best to do, so we tried to go back, but the gates to Insomnia were all guarded. It was good that you escaped overnight, before they set up better checkpoints."

"Fortunately," Noctis concluded, "Cor Leonis got in touch with us. He said that my father..." he seemed to carefully choose his words, "wanted me to find the tombs of the Old Kings to claim their Royal Weapons. He accompanied us to the first two. We came to Cleigne to track down the others."

Iris snapped to her feet. "I'll keep my eyes and ears wide open! Your Majesty, if there's anything else I can do for you, just ask." She bowed her head in a gesture of deep respect.

"There is," he confirmed uneasily. "Stop calling me 'Your Majesty', Iris. We've known each other since we were kids and I don't want you to address me that way. And perhaps you can tell me..." he hesitated. "Got any news from Luna... the Princess, I mean?"

"She was in town, but unfortunately she has already left. We heard she helped a lot of people. We couldn't meet her, but I'm really happy she's safe."

Noctis was the vision of disappointment, but managed to smile in return. "Yeah, it's good to know. Thanks, Iris."

"We'll have dinner all together tonight, right? Talcott and Jared will come too, of course."

"I saw the apartments have a kitchenette. If you like, I will take care of it."

"Really? You don't mind? For months I haven't eaten something cooked by you, Iggy!"

"I don't mind at all. Especially because you eat vegetables without complaining like someone else I know."

They all laughed except for Noctis. Iris leaned to Gladio's chair.
"Gladdy, can we talk for a moment, please?"

"Of course," he replied, caught off guard. He followed her into the bedroom. Perhaps she wanted to talk about Clarus – they hadn't yet had a chance to exchange a word about him – or perhaps Silia. He was still closing the door behind him and Iris pulled a chain from her neck and put it in his hand.

"It didn't seem nice to me, giving it to you in front of everyone."

Gladio held in a startled exclamation. It was a small plate with an engraving of Bahamut and a serial number he knew by heart. One evening at Samuel's, fiddling with it, Silia had said absently that she found it a macabre thing, and in her case useless, since there were no emergency contacts on her file and there was no one to inform of her death. Well, now you can request that they send it to me, Silia, if something happens to you, he had answered without thinking, before realizing – in this order – that the simple thought of such an event dug a bloody hole in his guts, and that the whole situation was starting to get out of his hand. Silia had raised her head suddenly, amazed, then had looked away and changed the subject.

He gripped the plate, laying his fist on his forehead. Silia must have remembered it, or maybe not; maybe she just wanted to let him know that, even in the midst of all that chaos, there still was a bond between them.

Iris was looking at him, her head tilted, a feline smile on her pretty face. "I knew it. Why didn't you ever tell me you had a girlfriend, Gladio?"

"Because she's not my girlfriend." His every attempt to deny, by then, had become weaker and more ridiculous.

"Yeah, sure, sing it to someone else." Iris stretched, smiling. "I like her a lot, anyway. Jared and Talcott as well. I just wish I'd met her in happier circumstances."

Gladio felt unexpectedly pleased. "Oh, does she have your approval, then? When you were a child you used to say that I could go out only with girls to your taste."

"A woman who can put such a look on your face? Of course she has my approval."

He sat on the bed, embarrassed. "I hope she's still in one piece. She was hurt, wasn't she, Iris?"

She nodded. "I cleaned and bandaged her shoulder by myself. A neat hole made by a sword. But don't worry, it wasn't as serious as it seemed, judging by how she got rid of the daemons along the way to Lestallum."

"Jeez, she's more restless than Cor Leonis. She could have stopped here for some days."

"I'm sorry, Gladio, we tried to convince her, but she didn't want to listen to reasons. Once I managed to text you, she was already gone. She was in a hurry to join her comrade Nyx Ulric and the Princess."

"Yeah, Ulric." Gladio sighed. "It's good she lost contact with him. Had she knew what happened after, she would have been with Ulric to die."

"So..." Iris whispered, sitting next to him. "Captain Drautos has always been General Glaucia."

Gladio nodded. Silia had learned of Drautos, probably from Cid Sophiar, but she was still unaware of everything else. He hadn't felt like telling her by phone, not while, in a voice that seemed to come from the spirit world, she apologized for faults she didn't have. Cor Leonis would tell her. Perhaps he
"From the very beginning. You can't even call it 'betrayal'. He broke into the Hall of Ceremonies, Cor said. Nobody from the Council has survived."

His sister shuddered. She laid her hand on his shoulder hopefully. "Silia also said so. Are we sure, Gladio? No hope?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, Iris, I'm sorry. It was the King who reported to the Princess that the members of the Council had died." He took her hand. "Well... it seems we're just the both of us now."

She nodded. "Dad has done his duty. He did it every day of his life until the end. I miss him so much, of course, but he died as he always lived: fighting alongside King Regis."

"By the Six, Iris, when did you become a woman?" he asked, smiling. He squeezed her hand. "Our old man would have proudly inflated his chest like a Cockatrice hearing you talkin' like that."

She laughed, rubbing her eyes, and Gladio realized that it wasn't for laughter, but pretended not to notice. He just squeezed her hand again. "Do you remember," he teased her, "How many shades of red his face reached when you ran into the dining room proudly declaring you had become a woman?"

"Gladio!" Iris flung her hand out of his grip, purple. "Why did you have to remind it to me? I was ten!"

Gladio sank laughing into the bed. "And Talcott, who was three, asked if you were going to marry and leave home."

"Gladio!" she yelled again, jumping on him astride and punching his chest. "Stop it!"

"Clarus took us all to have dinner at Liberty. Even Jared and Talcott came with us," he continued. "That night, before going to bed – you were already sleeping – I found him alone in the library with a glass of wine. He asked me to sit down with him for a while. I did it. It never used to happen. He told me that in moments like that he missed our mother terribly and that he was sorry to have let you grow up without a female presence."

Iris had lowered her head. Her hands on his chest were trembling a bit.

"I lied to him. I told him that you were a strong child and that you didn't need a mother. I told him he didn't have to worry if he couldn't stay with you as much as he wanted, because I was there. I've always felt a little resentment towards our father's egoism, Iris, but at that moment I didn't want to burden him."

"You weren't lying," she whispered.

Gladio straightened up. "Now it's you who's lying."

"No. You always took care of me, Gladio, even when you were a child yourself, and despite all your tasks."

They didn't speak for a while. For years he hadn't felt her so close.

"What will happen now?"

He shrugged. 'I'd like to tell you, but I don't know. We no longer have a home, we no longer have a city. And I can't stay with you for the moment bein'. But Cor has promised me that he'll make sure
you're safe, and I trust Cor."

"Bro, don't worry about me. We'll be fine. I was talking about you and the others. Noctis is now the King, but how will he claim Insomnia?"

He couldn't tell her he had no clue. He smiled. "Trust him. Trust me. We'll take back the Crown City, Iris. We'll be back home. It's a promise." He held out his hand to her.

"It's a promise", she repeated, taking it. "Thank you, bro. I'm so happy you're here. Now I'm going to help Ignis with the dinner. D'you know there's a lovely open door market just nearby?"

She got up. She crossed the room, touched the knob of the door, but before opening it she turned to him again. "One last thing, bro."

"Hm?"

"Have you ever told it to Silia?"

"Told what?"

"That you're in love with her, of course."

Gladio simply shook his head.

"Next time you'll meet, be sure you tell her. Life is too short, and I'd never really understood that until a few days ago."

III

Five minutes after entering the Hammerhead diner, Silia had collapsed against the table, unconscious. Six hours of total blackout, she had discovered later, waking up on a cot in a trailer with an IV, her shoulder bandaged and her arm tightly tied against her body. Her fever had abated a little, it seemed. She had managed to get up and go back to the garage, across the street, where Cindy was working on her car. The blonde girl had told her that the doctor had cleaned and sewn her shoulder while she was unconscious and that the cut was so neat it hadn't damaged too many bones, muscles and joints. Since the sun was setting by then, Silia had allowed herself to stay for the night. She had called Gladio to hear from him – the relief in his voice, for the Six, Gladio thought she was dead, there was still someone in Eos who cared whether she was alive or not – and then, again sitting at the diner, eating the food they had put before her, she had given the promised information to Cid Sophiar, to his granddaughter and – inevitably – to the dark-skinned man who had cooked her dinner.

Despite her immobilized arm, she had no problems along the way to Cor Leonis' camp; the suture made by a skilled hand, the fourteen hours of sleep and whatever they had injected into her veins had almost put her back on her feet. She had a few problems when the two guards at the entrance of the camp pointed their guns at her – they must have recognized her, and it wasn't so strange, because she had been in Insomnia for months – and four others joined to seize her weapons, search her, and finally escort her in the Marshal's pavilion. In other circumstances, she would have felt almost flattered by that deployment of forces.

As it had happened with Clarus Amicitia, it wasn't the first time she saw Cor The Immortal, but she had never come face to face with him. Now that she could look at the man closely, she was amazed at how attractive and youthful he was. His eyes were narrow, hard-edged and blue, his face – on the contrary of her own – was devoid of any scar, and he hadn't a single white hair. And yet, she realized, he must have been forty-five by then.
The Marshal also looked at her from head to toe, probably with less indulgence. Silia was coming to think that Gladio, for some reason, couldn't get in touch with him, and that she was in deep shit, when Cor Leonis beckoned his men to lower their weapons. "I received two calls concerning you, Kingsglaive."

Silia opened her mouth, surprised, to ask him whose the second was, but he didn't let her continue. "But I haven't become the Marshal of the Crownsnguard by letting others judge a potential danger for me. So tell me your story. I will decide on my own if I believe you or not."

She straightened, calmer, and saluted with her left hand. "My name is Silia Hartwood, Marshal. I was a member of the Kingsglaive. I've always been faithful to Lucis and to King Regis."

"Good," he answered skeptically. "Let's listen to what you have to tell." Cor Leonis sat on a chair behind the wooden desk. He pointed to another chair, which she took and carried in front of him. For a moment she wondered if he had done so with regard to her condition: apart from her arm hung from her neck, she still had on her face the signs of the clash with Marius. "Go ahead," he told the men who had escorted her there, "But don't forget who you are in front of, Hartwood. No wrong moves. Come on, we haven't got all day."

Silia moistened her lips. Judging by Cor Leonis' expression, though, she did not doubt it would be a long conversation. "I spent almost ten years on the front, but at the end of October I was forced to return to Insomnia to undertake a rehabilitation path because of an injury."

Cor Leonis nodded. "The Glaive who worked with the City Guard. I remember you. Why so many months, Hartwood?"

"A Jormungand ate my leg."

The man's gaze inevitably pinned to her legs. "You must be joking."

In response, Silia laid her foot on the table and pulled up the trouser leg, showing him the prosthesis. Then she put herself together again. Cor Leonis didn't comment in any way, if not gesturing for her to continue.

"Drautos sent me back to Insomnia for the prosthesis to be built and implanted, and for rehabilitation, with the reassurance that once I would be fit for combat again, I could have returned to the front, but it never happened. In May it was the Kingsglaives who returned to Insomnia after having lost the last stronghold."

Cor Leonis looked at her as if he was ripping off her clothes and skin to read her inside. "Here, let's talk about these last months. Did you have any suspicions about the betrayal of your comrades?"

"Of course I didn't, or I probably wouldn't be here." She recalled what Marius had said: she should have been killed in Crowe's place. She shuddered.

"Where were you during the treaty signing, Hartwood?"

"At the place Drautos had assigned me. I was patrolling the Citadel Square awaiting the passage of the parade. The directives were to keep an eye on the citizens so that they wouldn't cause unrest and then follow the Imperials inside the Citadel during the signing. Five of us had been assigned to the area. But before the procession arrived, Pelna Khara, one of my comrades, gave us orders to return to the HQ. Nyx Ulric, another Glaive, had discovered that Princess Lunafreya had disappeared, and he believed he knew where they were holding her. There was an airfleet in position 32 miles south of Insomnia. Ulric had been authorized by the King to act as second in command, since Titus Drautos
was untraceable."

Cor Leonis nodded. "You went to her rescue, then?"

"Not me. An airfleet would never have managed to penetrate the Wall, I thought. I figured something must be wrong. I told Nyx that I would go to the Shrine to support the City Guard in the protection of the Crystal. The former members of my squad came with me."

Apparently more interested, Cor Leonis leaned toward her. "Go on, Hartwood."

She went on. "They were waiting for us," she said. "Once in the gallery, my squad and I were attacked by other Glaives. While my comrades were fighting, I managed to reach the Shrine. The Crystal was still there. I thought for a moment that we had arrived in time to prevent them from seizing it, but then I saw the bombs. They exploded soon after. I managed to survive, but I hit my head." Silia touched her eyebrow, looking away with shame. "When I regained my senses, the Crystal was moving away, carried by an airship. Too far to warp on it. I took care of my head wound and tried to reach the King, but in the gallery a Glaive named Marius Gaunt, who had survived the clash with my teammates, attacked me. We were no longer able to use spells, I have no idea why. Perhaps they did something to the Crystal, perhaps the Crystal had strayed too far from the King, or perhaps the King was already dead. We dueled, and in the end I had the better hand, but I didn't come out unscathed." She paused.

"Hartwood," the Marshal interjected. "Did you know that your Captain was behind all this?"

Silia shook her head. "Not until Cid Sophiar told me so. I've repeatedly tried to contact Drautos for instructions, but it was useless. At last I managed to talk to Nyx Ulric. He was in a car with the Princess and was escorting her to Altissia to rejoin Prince Noctis. They were heading for the East Gate. Nyx informed me that the King and all the members of the Council had been killed by General Glauca and that there was nothing more to do, and told me to meet him at Galdin Quay, from where they would sail for Altissia. Before leaving the city, I went to look for Iris Amicitia to take her to Lestallum. There I learned that all the connections between Galdin Quay and Altissia were interrupted. Our line no longer worked, so I thought I'd come looking for you. It was Cid Sophiar who told me where to find you."

"So Nyx Ulric didn't tell you that General Glauca had pulled all the strings?"

"No. He only told me that he had broken into the Citadel and killed the King. I suppose he was complicit with Titus Drautos."

She didn't like at all the way the Marshal frowned. "It's not like that, Hartwood. General Glauca and Titus Drautos were the same person."

Silia felt like, at the Liberty restaurant, she had felt when Gladio Amicitia had told her about the armistice: on the verge of a panic attack. This time, however, the awareness of being observed and judged by Marshal Leonis allowed her to maintain control of her actions and emotions. She fixed her eyes on the veins on the wood of the table, trying to reconver the hum in her ears into the ordinary noises of the tangible reality: male voices, orders shouted in a dry voice, heavy steps, clashing of iron and wood. But the veins of the table also shouted in the voice of Cor Leonis that the High Commander of the Imperial Army who slaughtered them, and the Captain who had looked for her in her slum and had judged her suitable for the Kingsglaives, training and encouraging her for fifteen years, were the same person. That thought dragged another, distressing and urgent, that she couldn't hold back.

"Have we fought for the Empire all of his time?"
Cor Leonis blinked, then presumably understood the unsaid. He was sincere: "Hartwood, I don't know. I wasn't on the front with you," he said hastily, then his tone softened. "I can only tell you that neither the King nor the Council nor myself, for what it is worth, have had reason to suspect Titus Drautos. The only sure thing we know is that he has earned a place among the high military hierarchies of Insomnia, he has created and trained the most powerful military army that the kingdom has ever seen, and then he has sacrificed three quarters of it over the years and the rest a few days ago."

It wasn't enough. Silia rubbed her eyes, getting up. She wanted that conversation to end there. She wanted time, and silence, to review ten years of battles, sweat, blood and suffering, looking for clues that could betray the true identity of Titus Drautos that she had failed to grasp.

"Hartwood, sit down, we're not done yet." The Marshal drew her attention by beating the palm of his hand dryly on the table. "You came to have directives and to know what happened to Insomnia, so listen to the end. Titus Drautos, or General Glauca, if you prefer, is dead and has brought his secrets to the other world. It was Nyx Ulric; he fought against his, your traitor fellows, and killed Drautos in battle. He used the Ring of the Lucii, which the King had entrusted to the Princess, sacrificing his life to do it."

Silia sat down again, resting her head on her hand. "How would Nyx use the Ring of the Lucii? I believed that only the royal family could do it. Damn it. Damn it." She tried to control her anger. You really were a hero, Nyx. I wish you hadn't done it by yourself alone. "Had I known what he was about to face I'd have come back. But the King was dead, the Crystal was gone, and... damn it," she repeated. "I'd have come back. I'd have wanted to look in his face, that bastard Drautos, and..."

"And you would have died, Hartwood," the Marshal completed for her. "As Nyx Ulric died. And you can't win a war just with martyrs and heroes."

It was a kind of rough encouragement, she realized, but at that moment she wasn't able to appreciate it. "Any news from the Princess?"

"The Oracle managed to get to Lestallum, but she has already left. The Prince and his retinue have reached the city as well, but they missed her for a short time, it seems."

Silia nodded slowly. Not everything was lost, after all, even if not thanks to her. "Good to know," she whispered. "Do you still believe that I am a traitor, Marshal?"

Cor Leonis was still staring at her, looking for her gaze. "No, Hartwood. I think you had the misfortune to find yourself between two fires."

Well, at least I won't be shot by the Immortal. "You haven't told me yet who made the second call on my behalf."

The Marshal crossed his arms. "Cid Sophiar. He called me shortly after Gladio Amicitia, if you want to know. He told me not to take out the wounded kitty that was coming to my camp before letting her meow, since he had bothered to pick her up from the diner's floor. So, Hartwood, what are you going to do now?"

Silia tried to hold the bitter smile that threatened to bend her lips. "I don't know. I'm here to find that out. I no longer have the magic of the King, but I still can fight with my own strength. The war isn't over, as long as the Prince lives. I am at your command, Marshal Leonis, if you accept me."

The Immortal's thin lips twitched for a moment. "Then welcome aboard, Hartwood. I think I can find some errand for two arms as young as yours."
Chapter End Notes

"Dei facientes adiuvant" > Gods help the willing men
Abyssus abyssum invocat

Chapter Summary

Silia starts to get familiar with Cor Leonis' camp. The Royal Retinue meets again a red-haired weirdo and follows him to the Disc of Cauthess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

21

Abyssus abyssum invocat

I

Life at Cor Leonis' hunter base, Silia found out, wasn't so different from life on the front: a small camp of volunteers of all kinds, mostly men, sorted into tents, pavilions and barracks. Cor had introduced her hastily to a handful of people who had in turn introduced her to other people. The hierarchy at the camp was simple, though nuanced: everyone accounted to Cor Leonis; but the hunters, she realized, maintained a certain degree of autonomy and reported to the Meldacio HQ.

Her arrival caused a bad mood. Despite the heroism of Nyx Ulric, who had saved what remained of the kingdom, people talked about the Glaives, indiscriminately, as the worst traitors in history. No one showed her open hostility because no one would dare to challenge the Immortal's will, but understandably they didn't make her feel welcome, nor did she, secluded in a gloomy silence while obsessively thinking and rethinking what Titus Drautos had done, try to integrate in any way into their activities and conversations.

Monica Elshett and Dustin Ackers, the Crownguard officers Iris had told her about, were actually friendly to her. They sincerely thanked her for bringing the girl to Lestallum; they had looked for Iris at the Amicitias' villa before leaving Insomnia, Silia learned, but she had arrived first. Perhaps at the Marshal's request, they filled her with more details about what Cor Leonis had told her during their conversation. They offered her a meal, water, and brought her a doctor who could take a look at her wounds. Silia tried to decline, but Elshett, with kind resolution, retorted that it was an order from the Marshal, not a compassionate offer. Reluctantly, she had to yield; sheltered in a pavilion used as an infirmary, she undressed, and let the doctor confirm what she already knew: that she had a neat hole in her shoulder, that the work done at Hammerhead had been clean and perfect, and above all that she was dehydrated.

She tried to follow the doc's advice and rest but, two hours after falling asleep, she awoke with a strangled cry in her throat, annihilated by a dream she couldn't remember. Someone was asking her if everything was alright. Still panting, crimson with shame, she put her jacket on with shaking hands and left the shed to smoke a cigarette in a lonely place. A difficult enterprise in the dark, in a camp she wasn't familiar with and crowded with people still awake; but in the space between two crates of stocks, on the eastern edge of the base, she found it.

That was one of the worst nights in her life, and she had many nights to compare with it. Now that she had stopped zigzagging between Leide and Cleigne in search of directives and was in a safe
place led by someone who could give them to her, the fall of Insomnia, the death of her comrades, the clash with Marius, the meeting with Gregor and the child, the betrayal of Titus Drautos – too much, far too much – fell on her. She entered and left a delirious sleep tormented by terrible nightmares, holding onto her jacket, fighting not to lose her head. For hearth and home, it was her father's belief, and the Kingsglaives had wreaked havoc with it.

She clung to the thought that she still had Niflheim to hate for all of that.

II

She had expected that Marshal Leonis, after accepting her at his camp, would forget about her existence, busy as he was with a thousand commitments of coordination, but the next day he summoned her again to his pavilion.

"You look awful, Hartwood" he greeted her.

"Thank you, Marshal."

"Can you move your arm?"

"I can" she cut short. Not painlessly, but she had suffered much worse wounds.

"Good." He pointed to the man sitting at the corner of the pavilion, in dim light. "Do you know Darius Magnus?"

Silia scrutinized him, shaking her head, and he examined her in turn. Between thirty and thirty-five, she supposed, grizzled hair, sculpted and long-limbed, good-looking. A Crown Citizen down to the marrow. He wore no uniform, but everything about him shouted 'noble blood', so she would bet he was a Crownguard.

"The Meldacio HQ has reported to us the presence of a particularly aggressive flock of Doublehorns, fifty miles southeast of the camp. They attack anything that moves, even cars on the road. I entrust this hunting mission to the two of you."

An hour later, Silia wondered what Cor Leonis had meant with the two of you, since Magnus didn't move a muscle during her fighting. Anyway, even without using her left arm too much, she had no problem getting rid of the beasts.

"Did you come for a picnic, Darius?" she asked without resentment, reaching him on the flat stone he had been sitting on, quietly smoking for the whole time of the fight.

He shrugged. "Your fault. You didn't give me time to finish my cigarette before attacking them."

"Tell Marshal Leonis that if it was a test, I found it quite offensive."

In response, Darius handed her his cigarette pack. Silia was almost finished with the ones she had bought in Lestallum, so she accepted his offer.

"It was not a test; the hunters offered us the base and cooperation with us, and in return we give them a hand with hunting quests. If you really want to know, the Marshal has sent you to keep you busy. The last thing we need is a nutty Kingsglaive."

Silia stiffened, freezing with the cigarette still fading in her mouth. The thought that someone had reported her nocturnal movements to the Marshal humiliated her.
"Don't make that face, Hartwood." Darius leaned forward her to light her cigarette. "You're a Glaive. Everybody at the camp is keeping an eye on you, and they will do it for a long time. And don't be ashamed for last night; older and bigger men had nightmares after what happened to Insomnia. Come on, let's get back."

That afternoon, a few hours after their return, Darius looked for her again. Seeing her wandering, a woman in charge of the armory had abruptly asked her to verify the functionality of the firearms, since a Glaive had to know about it, and that was what she was doing when he found her.

"I looked for you for a quarter of an hour" the Guard said annoyed, entering the armory. "What are you doing here, Hartwood?"

"The woman in the armory, I think she said her name's Lavinia, asked me to check the guns."

Darius pulled back a tuft of hair that fell over his eyes and produced a kind of cheeky smile. "And by chance all those you've checked so far are working perfectly?"

Silia nodded. Darius gave a dry laugh.

"You won't find non-working weapons in here, Hartwood. Lavinia has played a nasty trick on you. She never liked Glaives. I bet she's going around boasting right now. Easy, Hartwood" he said, amused when she slammed the rifle she had in her hands, "You only have to report to the Marshal here. If anyone else who's not him or for him tries to give you an order, just ignore it. Get up and come with me."

"Is it an order?" she asked, frowning.

Darius smiled again. "Just an invitation."

They left the armory. It was six o'clock, and the sun had begun to set – it was happening sooner and sooner, despite the season – and Silia gladly breathed the evening air after having spent the last hour inside the hot sheets of the armory. Darius stretched beside her. "I am curious: why did a former member of the military elite agree to do corvée work without even blinking?"

Silia shrugged slightly, following him. "Perhaps you confuse the Glaives with the Crownsguards, Darius. Military elite or not, most of us were of humble origins, and on the front we had no attendants. I spent so much time cleaning the latrines for unrest or indiscipline that in comparison, checking a couple of rifles is a joke. I suppose there's a lot to do in the base, besides of fighting, and I don't want to be picky."

"Don't talk about the Crownsguards in these terms before the Marshal, otherwise he really sends you to the latrines. Anyway, you're right, we have a lot to do here at the camp and we don't need picky people, even if there's someone who thinks he's still at the Citadel. You're practical, Hartwood. I've set up my mind that I like you."

Silia ignored his last statement. She hadn't yet decided if she liked him. "Where are we going?"

"I'll take you to do some exercise. It'll be good for your arm. Maybe."

As they walked to the south end of the camp, Silia heard excited voices, male and female; a dozen people in a makeshift field were playing handball.

"Do you know the rules of handball, Hartwood?"

Silia grinned. "What rules?"
"Perfect. Come on."

"I don't think that..." she began to say, but Darius had already entered the field, taking advantage of a moment of pause, and had raised his arms to make himself heard. "Alexandra, I brought you another player."

The people in the field looked at her. "We don't need another player, Darius" Alexandra – a muscular, blonde woman in her thirties – replied dryly. The tone suggested more that they didn't need her.

"More, we don' need a lil' girl like her. She'll get hurt." He was a stout bald man with a black beard. Alexandra made a vague gesture in her direction. "As for this, I've my doubts and frankly I don't give a shit if she gets hurt, Stephan. That's the Glaive who got here yesterday."

"Are you kiddin' me, Aldric?" the man – Stephan, it seemed – exclaimed. He looked at her, and his features stiffened with rancor. "We don't like Glaives" he said openly, without specifying who we included. He ran a hand over his shiny, sweaty head. "We didn't like them before, let alone now. We hoped you'd helped us by eliminatin' yousselves."

Silia didn't point out to him that it was thanks to Nyx if the Oracle was safe and the Empire hadn't gotten away with the Ring, as well as with the Crystal. She looked for a moment at Darius, who had put her in that situation. He was watching her waiting for her answer – everyone was watching her to find out how she would react.

"I'm no longer a Glaive" she simply declared.

"Yeah, very convenient now, right?"

"I don't know if it's convenient, but that's what happens when your comrades and your Captain turn to the enemy and spit on everything you've always believed in and fought for."

"Are you going to be long?" Alexandra asked, annoyed. Silia had already guessed it, but by the way Stephan stiffened, she realized that the blonde woman must be a Crownsguard. "My sweat is drying on me. Since you're here, Hartwood, just play."

"I suggest you to redo the teams, Alex" Darius told her. "Move Devan and Marvin into yours. Hartwood will play on the opponent's one."

"Darius, fuck you" a blond man insulted him with a little joking grin. He glanced at her contemptuously, examining her from head to toe. "Let's do as he says, Alex. I could use a good laugh."

"Fine. Just let's go back to playing."

Silia understood thirty seconds later that all the worthy opponents were on the opposite team. She wondered, with a certain amount of irritation, whether Darius had suggested it to provoke Alexandra, to test herself, or because he thought she could stand up to the three. Breathe, she told herself. It's just a fucking handball game.

At first no one deigned to pass her the ball, nor did she commit herself to get actively into the game. She watched the movements of her companions and adversaries carefully, analyzing their speed and physical strength as if she were on the battlefield. Devan and Marvin – she still had no idea who was who – were two panzers: robust, physical, but not very agile. Alexandra was clearly the one to keep an eye on. The other two of her team, a thin man in his forties and a woman with a bad scar on her
face, didn't pose a threat.

Finally, one of the women who played on her team found herself surrounded in front of the door, and was forced to pass her the ball. Silia shot, a little unconvinced, to grab it, but the blond man – Marvin or Devan – was on her. He casually dealt her a nudge so hard to one side of her head that he could have crumpled her nose if he'd hit her face, and he took possession of the ball in her place. When she turned to him, the man winked, shrugging his shoulders in a gesture like *stuff happens*, and moved away to the opposite side of the field.

That was the first of a long series of voluntary fouls against her. Nothing particularly violent or warlike, they were simply trying to provoke her. Silia was still reluctant to let herself go; she was afraid of injuring someone and consequently incurring in the Immortal's wrath on just her second day at the camp.

"Hartwood, ya understand that you have to take the damn ball and put it inside the door on the other side of the field, right?" Stephan asked. "If ya'r afraid of hurtin' yousself, just piss off."

"Fine" she heard herself reply. "But if *you* hurt yourself, take it up with Magnus."

The ball was in the blond man's hands. She snapped, and without giving him a chance to react, grabbed it, returning him his nudge under his chin and placing her foot behind his heel to unbalance him. Marvin – or Devan – fell, and she took advantage of those few seconds when everybody stared at her with surprise to hurl herself towards the door. Alexandra tried to block it, but Silia dodged her and threw the ball between the poles that worked as improvised door.

"Goal."

From that moment on the game continued fiercely. Stephan and her other two teammates began to pass her the ball whenever they could. Her attention was caught by a little guy – not as much as she was – with black curls, young and fast, that played on her team. Spirits went hotter and hotter; nobody was holding back their strength anymore, and soon – as Darius perhaps had wished – it became a private matter between her, Alexandra, Marvin and Devan.

After winning again another violent scuffle against the blond and the red guys together, Silia managed to score her seventh goal. She turned, panting with her lips closed – she was starting to get tired – just to find the game was still and everyone was staring at her. Silia followed Alexandra's look: her shirt hung torn down her side, and her bandage had loosened. She must have taken a fair blow during the last tackle, because some stitches had broken and she was bleeding again. In the adrenaline of the match she hadn't realized.

"So?" she said aloud, astonished, wrapping the bandage around her shoulder. "Are you all already tired?"

"Let's end it here" Alexandra ordered dryly. Her team was at a disadvantage of eight goals. "Next time, warn us you're hurt, Hartwood."

"If it's for me, I can go on" she replied quietly.

"That's why I've never liked the Glaives" the blond guy snapped, pointing to the blood dripping to the ground from her wound. "Fucking fanatics. Tear your shoulder for what, a game?"

*These people have never been at war*, she realized. None of them must have ever been in the need to fight to the death, and few of them, in all probability, had suffered a more serious injury than a fracture. Many had never seen a daemon and some had never stuck their nose out of Insomnia before
the fall of the city.

"I'm tired too" Alexandra cut it short. She returned to the sidelines, and the others followed her. "See you around."

Silia didn't answer. She sat on the ground to catch her breath, rubbing her shoulder. She looked around for Darius, but she didn't see him. Instead, she saw Cor Leonis leaning on the fence where she had last seen Darius, so she stood up, trying put herself together, as much as she could with her tattered shirt and bloodied shoulder, and joined him.

"Good evening, Marshal."

"Hi, Hartwood." Cor Leonis kept his arms folded. "Did the Glaives used to play handball as well?"

"For a while we played on the front as a pastime. It's an easy and frantic game, you just need a ball or something that looks like that."

"And then what happened?"

Silia shrugged. "We went heavy with that. Our only limitation was the prohibition of using magic, but for the rest we'd beat like hell. Drautos didn't like these dangerous entertainments, he'd say they distracted us from real fights and drew energy from us, but he tolerated them. Until one of us hurt his leg, kept it hidden so as not to incur Drautos' wrath, and got himself killed during a retreat the next day. Handball, and in general any pastime with which we could hurt ourselves, apart from training, was banned. End of story."

"So I suppose that this match was a trifle for you."

Silia gave half a smile. "Besides the Glaives, in Insomnia I played a couple of times with Gladio Amicitia. Without taking anything away from your men, Marshal, there's no comparison." From her first game with Gladio she had gone out with two cracked ribs. Nothing serious, since she was already in rehabilitation for her leg.

Darius reached them. "Hartwood, you could have told me that your wound was serious." To her surprise, he threw her a towel and a bottle of water. Perhaps it was his way to apologize. "This is the first and last time I attend to you," he warned her. "Don't lose the bottle. The drinking water pump is in the west part of the field, near the kitchen shed. Don't use it to take a shower."

"Darius told me you did well today. I'll give you other urgent assignments from the Hunting HQ, if you feel like it; something more decent than checking the functionality of perfectly functioning rifles."

Silia looked sourly at Darius, who in turn responded by raising his eyebrow, then saluted Cor Leonis.

" Enough of that military salute, Hartwood, we're no longer in the army" Cor Leonis said in response. "And by the way, I'd like to have a word with you. Darius can also look like he comes out of a women's magazine, but he's one of my best Crownsguard and has a brain that works nicely. Did you understand why he involved you in this little match?"

Silia took some time to reply, because that confidential joke about Darius sounded so out of place on Cor Leonis' lips. Darius didn't react to the joke or the praise: he was looking at her, waiting.

"I hope he didn't mean to let me socialize, seeing how it ended."
"That, too" Darius replied. "In the next few months, or years, as far as we know, you will fight with these men shoulder-to-shoulder. Some of them will never accept that you were a Kingsglaive, but it doesn't matter. I don't want them to like you. I want them to remember that the Glaives may have betrayed, but they were war machines, and that now they can count on the skills of one of these war machines. But there's yet another reason. Apart from Alexandra, did any of them catch your attention, Hartwood?"

Silia thought about it. "The dark little boy. He's very fast."

Cor Leonis smiled, another thing that looked out of place on his thin lips. "Claudio. He's the son of two Crownguards who didn't make it. He's sixteen, he has some offensive skill, but that's not his strong point. He's an excellent rear. Any other?"

"Marvin and Devan. They're Crownguards as well, right?"

The Marshal nodded.

"And the muscular brunette on my team?"

Darius scratched his eyebrow. "Joann Aldin, I think. A hunter. Why did she strike you?"

"She's very strong, and despite that she's fluid in her movements. Give her a two-handed sword, if you haven't already done so."

The bandage on her arm had loosened again, and she began to reassemble it. Her shoulder was stiff and a little sore, and she was annoyed at having to go to the infirmary again for new sutures, but that couldn't have been helped. She realized that the second reason why Darius had thrown her into the fray was because he and the Marshal wanted an outward eye on their men.

"Hartwood, I'm glad to see that you're not the type who complains of wounds, but don't overdo it with your arm. In case you hadn't noticed, Insomnia has fallen and the closest hospital worthy of this name is in Lestallum. I would also like to remind you that there's probably no one left who can put his hands inside your prosthesis, so take care of your right leg."

Darius looked down at her leg questioningly, but didn't ask anything. Silia made a vague gesture with her hand. "Long story" she said. "I'll tell you, Darius, if you tell me where I can get new clothes."

"In your size? Good question. There are no children in the camp."

III

Gladio woke up numb and chilled in their room at the Leveille Hotel. The Greyshire Glacial Grotto where – thanks to Talcott's insight – they had retrieved the Swords of the Wanderer the day before, was an ice cave with subzero temperatures, and the fights against the daemons they had to eliminate – more Goblins, more Arachnes, Ronins – hadn't been enough to warm him up. He had endured the cold stoically, because he didn't want to hear Ignis' scolding and Prompto's teasing about his under-dressing, but now he had a chill. He sneezed, and his head rang like a bell. That reminded him of Noctis, his head-throbbing, and the reason why they had come back to Lestallum.

"Are you feeling fine?" Ignis asked him, with concern, when he came down for breakfast. He had overslept, which was unusual for him, and his friends were all already seated at the table.

"I'll be better after a hot coffee and an aspirin" he replied, blowing his nose. He sat between him and
Noctis.

"That's because you like acting cool and going around with an open, short-sleeved jacket and nothing more" Prompto teased him, as Gladio had predicted.

"Shut up. By the way, how are you, Noct? Your head?"

Noct didn't look good. His eyes were red, rimmed by dark circles, and he kept rubbing his temples. "Headache is more frequent now. I keep seeing the Disc of Cauthess, as I told you yesterday. The visions are clearer and clearer."

"Then we all agree that we should go and have a look." Gladio sipped his coffee, blissful. Bitter and scorching Ebony. The day now was starting to take a turn for the better.

"Fine, but how do we get to the Disc of Cauthess? The Imperials control the area."

He handed the coffee pot to Ignis, who poured what he supposed to be his second or third cup. "For now, let's go down to the terrace below the parking lots" Ignis suggested. "I think I saw some panoramic binoculars there, which are pointing just right on the Disc."

"I can confirm that" Noctis said. "Iris took me there yesterday morning."

"How was your date?" Gladio pricked. "I hope you didn't behave as sour as a lemon with her, as usual. My sister has been through a lot in the past few days, and she deserved to have a little fun."

Noctis nudged him. "It wasn't a date, we just hung around. And stop showing attitude, big bro. I've not been sour with Iris."

"Good for you."

"Speaking of dates, big bro" Ignis intervened "did Silia get safe and sound to Cor?"

Gladio nodded. "Last night Cor sent to me a pretty concise message. He only wrote The Glaive got here. I'll find something for her to do. I tried to ask him if she's fine, but he replied I warn you I won't use this phone to give you news about your lover." He dropped his hands on his thighs. "Touché. At least I'm assuming she's fine."

The hearty breakfast – and the aspirin – put him back together on his feet. Iris and Talcott didn't come back in time to say goodbye, but Gladio detained a few minutes with Jared, to thank him once again for staying with his sister for so long and to beg him to take care of her for a little longer.

They went down to the panoramic terrace. Bent on one of the binoculars, Gladio glimpsed a familiar silhouette: a tall man – perhaps a little shorter than himself – wrapped, despite the heat, in a black trench coat that went down to his ankles and a black and white cape with damask patterns. More than his body, it was his hair of an unusual red-violet color that allowed him to reconnect the man to the weirdo they had met on Galdin's pier.

"What a coincidence" the man said, straightening up to greet them. His voice was unpleasant, mellifluous and chanting.

"It is?" Gladio retorted, defensive, moving one step closer to Noctis.

The man ignored him. Even the last time they had met him, his hallucinated glance slid over him, Ignis and Prompto without looking at them, and it always ended up lingering over Noct. "Aren't nursery rhymes curious things?" he asked. "Like this one: 'From the deep, the Archaean calls... yet
on deaf ears, the god's tongue falls. The King made to kneel, in pain, he crawls'."

A snake, finally Gladio realized. *A snake that swings its head rhythmically right and left to distract us, while its tail hits.*

"So how do we keep him on his feet?" Prompto humored him.

The stranger passed between them, shrugging. "You need only heed the call. Visit the Archaean and hear his plea." He stopped, turning around. "I can take you."

*And now we're going to follow the snake in its den.* Gladio looked at his comrades, certain that they would end up accepting. They had no choice, after all. The Archaean was calling Noctis and his head was getting worse and worse. And the Disc of Cauthess was guarded by the Empire. For a moment, he was tempted to seek advice from Cor. He touched the phone in his pocket.

"We should go" Noctis decided.

Gladio withdrew his hand from his pocket. Noctis had made up his mind, and they couldn't ask the Immortal for help whenever they were uncertain about what to do. They had to get by on their own. "All right" he said reluctantly. "But let's watch our backs."

"I suppose we can start, then?" Ignis' tone, addressed to the stranger, clearly suggested that he wanted to deal with him as little as possible.

"No delay, huh? I like it." The man walked towards the flight of stairs. "Come with me to the car park. That's where I left my automobile. But I fear she's a dear old thing, not suitable for a Prince. I'd suggest we proceed in two cars."

**IV**

They followed his red car – not as old as the weirdo had professed – up to Duscae. It took them hours, and since Noctis drove, it wasn't exactly a pleasant journey, but they declined the man's proposal to stop and rest at the Coernix Service Area because they wanted to get to the Disc as soon as possible. None of them liked him; they didn't have the faintest idea how he could know about the Archaean and Noctis, and they couldn't figure out whether he was helping them or cooperating with the Empire.

"How the hell will he make us pass through the Imperial blockade?" Gladio asked aloud. If his nuts had been about to freeze in the Greyshire Grotto, the temperature was now unbearably high. The heat generated by the Meteor was already unsustainable, and the closer they got to the Disc, the worse it got.

Ignis, who had the face of someone who was not exactly enjoying his first trip in the passenger seat since they left Insomnia, folded his arms. "We'll see. We'll be ready for anything."

"Oh, I'll be ready to crack his ass if he tries to pull some dirty trick on us."

The weirdo parked the car in front of the armored gate of the Imperial base. Gladio had expected that before approaching too close he would pull over to explain to them how he intended to let them pass, but it didn't happen. He merely honked his horn.

*He's crazy*, Gladio said to himself, resting a hand on Noctis’ seat, ready to shout at him to put the car in reverse and run away. *He's crazy and he'll get us killed.*
"Hello?" the man shouted merrily. "It's me! Be so kind as to open up!"

In the tense silence that followed, the base gate burst open.

"I can't believe it." Prompto's voice was as thin as a thread. "They really opened up."

The man turned to them and winked. "I may not look like much, but I do have some influence. Aren't you glad we came together? Come on, don't be shy. No one will give you trouble. Your audience with divinity lies ahead."

"It's a trap" Gladio whispered, summoning his broadsword. Ignis and Prompto did the same, but Noctis started up the engine again.

"It doesn't matter. We are here now, so we'll go ahead. If it's a trap, we'll face it."

"It's not a trap" the man replied, almost offended. "But you are right to want to be ready for anything. I brought you to the Archaean, after all." He started the engine too. "Time has come to say farewell. Be strong, Prince."

They crossed the gate while the stranger drove away on the same road they had come from. Gladio kept tightening his grip on the handle of his broadsword. He had a bad feeling.

No one, however, hindered them along the road; in fact, the Disc seemed deserted, as if the Niffs had withdrawn just before their arrival. Imperial airships were parked or perhaps, judging by the rust and vegetation that in some cases was beginning to cover them, abandoned, on both sides of the road. The crystalline formation that had originated from the crash – or rather, from the almost-crash, since the Archaean had stopped the impact of the Meteor and was still there to hold it, even though Gladio wouldn't have believed it until he had seen with his own eyes – like columns of petrified smoke, was now close.

The heat was getting worse and worse as they went down into the Disc, and after a few minutes Ignis suggested to park the car because a worrying warning light on the console informed them that the engine was overheating. They continued on foot, gasping.

"Will there really be Titan?" Prompto asked.

Noctis seemed to have no doubts. "Why shouldn't he?"

"Dunno. I never really believed it, I guess. The gods and all the rest, I mean."

"If I'm honest" Gladio said "I never believed it too much. I mean, I believe in Gods' existence, of course, but whenever I'd hear people talking about them as if they were really on this world, I'd shrug my shoulders." He looked up at the point of impact of the Meteor, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Now that I'm here, though, it wouldn't surprise me to see the big face of the Archaean peeking out of those rocks."

"I suppose it will really happen." Ignis also had no doubts.

Noctis stopped abruptly. Prompto let slip a surprised cry, gesturing towards a spot in front of them. "Is that what I believe it could be?"

Only then did Gladio realize that they were no longer walking on bare rock: the man's hand had worked that area of the Disc, who knows how long before, even if the earthquakes had semi-destroyed anything they had built. Around them, like broken fingers still bent to protect the relics of the Old King, ruined walls stood, the remains of what thousands years ago, must have been a Royal...
"I can't believe it. It's a royal sarcophagus!" Noctis came forward. "No mistake. I feel the strength of the Old Kings."

"The Mystic. Somnus Lucis Caelum" Ignis said. "The first king of Insomnia. I wasn't expecting to find a Tomb here."

Silently, Noctis advanced to claim the weapon he was entitled to, but as soon as the Blade of the Mystic disappeared in his hands, an earthquake, much more powerful than all those they had felt so far, shattered the earth beneath their feet.

Gladio lurched for a moment. All around them it was a crumble of rocks. Noctis, kneeling on the ground five or six steps away, was holding his head between his hands.

"Noct!"

His friend tried to get back on his feet, but the ledge began to sink in. The Mystic's sarcophagus fell, and Noctis tried to climb back to the solid ground, but what remained of the base of the Tomb collapsed, dragging him down with it. Gladio didn't think about it for a moment; he jumped and let himself slip behind Noctis, clinging to a protrusion and grabbing his hand before he fell into the void.

"Gotcha! C'mon, pal, pull yourself up!"

With a last effort, Gladio lifted Noctis beside him, and they laid there for a moment, side by side, panting, while the earth continued to tremble.

"Are you o-" he started to say, but stopped, terrified. The huge Meteor, in a shattering of rocks, splinters, debris and dust, rose up before them, and they came face to face with Titan.

They were in the presence of one of the Six.

Chapter End Notes

Abyssus abyssum invocat > "One hell summons another"
Ex malis eligere minima

Chapter Summary

Gladio struggles to keep Noctis alive in the Disc of Cauthess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

22

Ex malis eligere minima

I

The enormous bulk of Titan was towering above them, dreadful, terrifying. Gladio felt unable to react, as filled with terror as he'd never been in his whole life; they were in the presence of the Archaean.

One of the Astral's eyes, the intact one, red, the size of a man's head – the other was pierced by a splinter of the Meteor – pinned on Noctis. And then Titan spoke. His voice was like a storm, deafening, heartbreaking, equally incomprehensible to human hearing, and Gladio covered his ears, wishing it to end.

I'm dreaming. I hit my head as I slipped and this is a dream.

"Goddamn... This is the Archaean?"

Noctis' rude exclamation distracted Gladio from his dull stupor. He appealed to all his cold blood to put himself together. "Yeah" he forced himself to joke, getting up, although he couldn't take his eyes off of that apparition. "Seems we woke the big guy up."

"He's trying to tell me something... but what?"

"Noct!" Prompto's voice echoed from afar. He and Ignis, it seemed, were unharmed, but a 20 feet high almost vertical precipice separated them. "You okay?"

"We're fine! Don't worry!"

"Thank heavens you're safe. Is there a way back up?"

Too steep. Perhaps Noct might have been able to warp there, but if they hadn't found another way he'd have remained there forever to keep the Archaean company.

"No!" Noctis shouted in response. "But there's a path. Gonna see where it leads!"

"We'll try to get down! Be careful!"

With one last glance at Titan, if even more disturbing now that he was merely observing them
motionless, they set out with Noctis ahead of him.

"Try not to rush off on your own as usual, huh?" he warned him, annoyed.

"And you try not to get left behind."

Gladio bit his tongue to not reply as they climbed up the rocky path. Everything around them was hot, scorching; the rocks they leaned against burned their skin and they had to be careful not to step on the pools of molten stone. Gladio kept on brushing his sweaty hair away from his eyes. If he'd thought he had been in trouble in Keycatrich Trench, he hadn't seen anything.

Yet even in that seemingly uninhabitable place they found beasts: large birds with blue feathers perched on the rocks, which looked at them suspiciously.

"Let's not dist-" Gladio began to say, not eager to fight at all, but Noctis had already engaged in the clash, and they were involved in a futile battle. As if they could afford to waste energy and bodily fluids in the hell they were going through.

"What the fuck, Noct!" he snapped, reaching for him, once they had taken the beasts out. "Was that really necessary?"

He had never seen Noctis so tense. His temples throbbed and his jaws were clenched. It was obvious that he had attacked them just to pour out his anxiety. "Are you going to shut up for a while?" he provoked him.

"I'm just offering sound advice. Isn't this hard enough?" Gladio tried to tone it down.

"Just shut the hell up."

Relax, Gladio. He had to struggle to not lay his hands on him.

They went on for a few hundred feet then had to inevitably stop because the path they were laboriously following had collapsed. The only way to continue was to walk a rock edge just wider than his feet. Beyond there was so deep a chasm that they would hardly survive the fall, especially because of the lava and flames at the bottom. He would have given anything not to do it, but there was no choice.

Cool. Acrobatics: level 1; Acrobatics on hot rocks: level 3.

He brushed his hair back from his eyes for the umpteenth time, sighed, and waited for Noctis to come closer. "Gotta go from there to continue. I go first. Be careful, no room for error here."

As if to confirm his words, the earth trembled.

Acrobatics on hot rocks during an earthquake: level 7. He turned his back to the stone wall and began to move sideways along the edge. "C'mon" he urged his friend.

Noctis nodded. "No time for chill, either. Make it quick."

An earthquake, stronger than the previous ones, persuaded him for a moment that he had reached the end of his days. He gritted his teeth, bent his weight against the rock wall, and tried to keep his balance. "Hold up!"

"Jeez, my head!" Noctis wavered for a moment, and Gladio kept himself ready to go back to grab him, but his friend managed to straightened up.
"Are you ok?"

"My head keeps throbbing!"

"Hold on. We are almost there!"

As if wanting to contradict his words, Titan held out one of his huge hands towards Noct.

_This is the epic level. "Run!"

Noctis jumped sideways, avoiding the hand of the Archaean. "You run! You're in my way!"

"I'm going as fast as I can!"

A tree. A fucking half-dried tree. As the earth crumpled beneath his feet, Gladio hung on a protruding branch, hoping with all his heart that it held his weight, seized Noctis by his arm and threw him literally three feet away on to the solid ground, leaping behind him just in time to avoid another slap of the Astral.

"Good thing he summoned you," he gasped, out of breath. "If that's his welcome, hate to see how he treats intruders."

No matter how long they continued to climb, they couldn't see the exit from the crevasse. The Archaean no longer seemed willing to talk, after all, and Gladio was starting to believe that he had lured them there to kill Noctis, driven by inscrutable reasons.

"Jeez, I'm sick of this endless walking" Noctis said for the umpteenth time, stopping to rest.

Gladio was blinded by rage. Exhausted or not, he snapped forward and grabbed him by the neck of his shirt, lifting him up. "And I'm sick of your endless whining!" It had been years since he had lost his temper with Noctis so much. "Calm the hell down! Are you a man of royal blood or not?"

Noctis got rid of him violently. "Above all else, I am just a man, Gladio!"

He shoved him in disbelief. "Just a man? You're pathetic! The kingdom's fate is in your hands! Your life ain't yours alone! Stop for once thinkin' only about yourself!" He moistened his lips, raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture to calm his friend and himself. "We Amicitia are the King's sworn shields. Guard the king with our lives... that's the way it's always been." He patted his chest. "I've embraced my duty and I take pride in it. So, if you can't focus, just tell me and I'll focus for you. It's my job, so let me do it. Alright?"

"...alright." Noctis' voice now sounded as if it came from the spirit world.

Gladio rubbed his eyes, embittered. He and Noct periodically collided, and always for the same reasons, but now his friend could no longer afford to waver. On the other hand, he could afford even less to lose control. "I'm sorry" he said, calmer, "but I had to get it out. C'mon. And don't forget, don't rush ahead on your own."

As they went on, he remembered the brawl at the bar two years before. That was the moment when he had fully understood what it meant to be a Shield. Apart from training Noctis, until then he had merely been close to him for most of the day and had made sure that he didn't get into trouble. But when an ordinary evening of fun had been about to degenerate and the drunken stranger had pulled out his knife, Gladio had understood three things in the space of an instant: the first, that he could easily disarm the assailant by crushing his arm but that it would be safer for everyone if he physically had shielded Noctis with his body; the second, that he had no fear of being wounded or killed
because Noctis' life came before his own; the third, that Noctis' life came before his own not because he was his Prince, but because he was his friend and he fuckin' cared about him.

"Hey, Gladio?"

"What now?"

"About your father... I'm very grateful to him."

Gladio lowered his head. "Did you hear what I told you before? He was the King's Shield. He only did his duty." He opened his mouth to add something less abrupt, but Noctis' phone ringtone interrupted him. "Isn't that your phone?"

They stopped to answer. "Ignis! Where are you?"

Gladio raised his head because half a dozen Imperial airships were flying over the fault. Wherever the Niffs had gone when they arrived with the creepy guy, they were back now. Some magiteks were already in formation above them.

"Got cut off" Noctis said seconds later. "But it sounds like we're about to have Imperial company."

"I noticed that. About to get even hotter in here."

They had to get rid of some Imperial Snipers and Swordsmen to go on. Titan tried again to communicate with them, in his archaic language, unknown and thundering, and again Noctis leaned down on his knees, shaking his head as if it was about to explode.

"What the hell is it you want? Quit screwing with my head!"

To kill them, probably, because he dealt a tremendous fist in his direction that destroyed the path they were on. Once again, Noctis fell, and this time Gladio was too far away to grab him, but when he managed to lean out he saw that his friend had warped.

Titan's head was bent towards Noctis. Gladio wasted no more time and began to climb back down the fault to reach him. His lack of hesitation was quite proper, because the Archaean's foot, as big as a truck, fell on Noctis. Gladio jumped on him and pushed him away.

"Are you ok?" Noctis coughed in the dust. "Once again, I owe you, bro."

"Don't worry about it. Run!"

They ran while Titan's fists fell on them, destroying the fault. They ran, tumbling to avoid his attacks, climbing, almost exhausted, without time or breath to consult.

"He won't give up!"

They couldn't go on that way for long. They were at the end of their strength. He had no choice. Gladio stopped abruptly, letting his friend pass over him, and he went back, summoning his weapon.

"I'll stop him. Go!"

If they had told him, a few years before, that he would have blocked Titan's hand with his sword, he would have laughed. Yet there he was, his muscles tense, his jaws clenched as he used every bit of energy left to counteract the unstoppable force of the Astral.

"What the fuck are ya still doing there?" he yelled, still feeling Noctis' presence behind his back. His
arms and legs were shaking from the effort. "Go!"

Noctis, for once, listened to him, warping onto another outcropping of rock. Gladio tried to disengage to reach him, but this time it was the Archaean who blocked him, obstructing his way, as if he wanted to stop him from reaching Noctis.

"Quit it!" he shouted, not at all certain that Titan would have heard or understood him. "Have you summoned us here to kill the Prince? What do you want?!!"

Another sweep. Gladio avoided it, and found himself on the ground, the Archaean's hand looming over his back. *It's over*, he thought, but Titan's hand pressed his body to the ground without killing him.

"Lemme go, damn it!" He couldn't break free. He began to hit blindly with his broadsword.

"Gladio!"

Ignis' voice. He made up his mind to remember the relief he was feeling at that moment hearing it for the next time Ignis would complain about the mess in their hotel room, about the physical beatings he inflicted on Noctis during their workouts, or his simpleton tastes in food.

Ignis and Prompto joined him. They both attacked Titan's hand and managed to make it retract enough to allow him to free himself.

"Where's Noct?" Prompto asked.

"Try the other hand."

"No time to be witty."

"It wasn't a joke."

Gladio ran to the precipice where he had seen Noctis warp. Titan was raging on him now, with all his four limbs. In the midst of those clouds of dust and splinters of rock, he could hardly see his friend.

"Noct! We're coming!" Prompto cried, but in the deafening noise, from that distance, Gladio doubted that he had heard them.

"We have to get off." Ignis clung to the edge, let himself slide, and began to climb down the steep slope. Nobody proposed to precede him; he was the most agile of them. "Be careful. Between all this dust, rocks and Titan's blows, it will not be a walk in the park."

"Remind me to add 'mountaineering' to my CV, if we get out of here alive." Prompto made sure the camera strap was secured to his neck, then followed Ignis' path.

Gladio waited for the earth to stop shaking due to yet another tremendous tread of the Archaean against Noctis before starting to descend too. "Above or below 'surviving a fight against Titan', as long as we get out of here alive?" he shouted, but his friends didn't hear him.

The descent was arduous, exactly as he had imagined: they came down exhausted, their hands skinned and burned. Gladio shattered a potion as they ran toward Noctis. It didn't completely restore his strength, but gave him back some energy for what would come later.

"Did you miss us, Noct?"
Noctis was soaked in sweat, and seemed to keep himself upright through sheer force of will, but was unharmed. "Got here at the right time" he gasped.

Prompto patted him on his back. "Yeah, to get ourselves crushed!"

It wasn't time for talking because Titan's foot fell on them, so they made their weapons reappear, targeting his limbs. But it was like trying to take down a mountain with a shovel.

When around them, the Imperial airships they had seen shortly before, landed, Gladio understood it was over. They couldn't defend themselves from the magiteks, the laser cannons of the aircrafts and Titan. He prepared to put up a fierce struggle.

The laser sights of the cannons began to target Titan. The Empire, for who knows what fucking reason, was helping them. The Archaean was soon too distracted by those unexpected intrusion to focus on them.

"Let's not think about the Imperials now!" Ignis yelled. "If we want to get out alive, we have to attack the Archaean!"

"You mean, *kill one of the Six?*" Prompto cried, terrified.

"We have no choice!"

They continued to attack Titan's limbs. Noctis, warping, managed to score more hits than they did, but despite the support of the Niffs the Astral kept on a seemingly desperate undertaking.

But then, the unthinkable happened. The four Royal Arms that they had retrieved – the Sword of the Wise, the Axe of the Conqueror, the Twins of the Wanderer, the Blade of the Mystic – began to circle around Noctis, as if infusing their power to him. Gladio himself felt full of energy again, and all four attacked with fresh vigor and effectiveness. In fact, his broadsword seemed as light as a feather and as resistant as mithril, Prompto's shells were crashing against Titan's body as if they were bombs, Ignis' spear was sharper than ever, and Noctis kept warping as he had never done before. But it still wasn't enough.

"Icy flasks!" Ignis shouted, in a brilliant intuition. "If we freeze him, we can manage to break his arms and legs!" He hurried to recover some magic flasks. He threw them one each. "On my count! One... two... three!"

They threw the flasks on Titan's nearest arm. Gladio looked breathlessly at Noctis as he warped on the huge limb even before finding out if, after all, the Archaean was immune to frost. He wasn't: the Mystic's Blade pierced the frozen rock, and Noct, dangerously riding Titan's arm, stormed it with powerful blows.

Titan threw back his head and roared. The earth shook under their feet violently, as if it were to crumble and let them fall into the center of the globe. Despite the pain in his head due to the deafening noise, and the dust that rose up, Gladio saw the Astral surrounded by a golden glow that seemed to penetrate inside his body. A devastating explosion blinded him, and he thought he was dead.

When he opened his eyes, Titan was gone, and they were the only living beings among the smoking remains of the Imperial airships. Shaking his head to get rid of the annoying ringing in his ears, Gladio managed to get up, and so, he saw with relief, did the others.

He reached Noctis and hauled him onto his feet.
"You okay, bro?"

"Yeah" Noctis answered after a long moment. "He spoke to me. At last he spoke to me. He showed me Luna."

"The princess?" he blinked, but at that moment another explosion threw incandescent rocks around them. He shielded Noctis. "We'll talk about that later. We've to get out of here."

"And how?" Prompto's voice was on the verge of panic. The earth was still shaking, they were surrounded by lava and flames, and they could see no way out.

Again the hum of an engine, coming nearer. They raised their heads.

"The Empire? Again?"

The door of the Imperial airship, like the mouth of a big beast, opened. Gladio recognized the silhouette of the red-haired weirdo standing inside the hangar. "Fancy meeting you here!" he said, as if they were in a daisy meadow, when the aircraft landed ahead of them.

"You?!" Prompto cried.

"It occurs to me I never formally introduced myself. Izunia. Ardyn Izunia."

This must be a fuckin' joke.

Ignis removed his steamed up glasses. "Imperial Chancellor Izunia?"

"At your service," he declaimed theatrically, taking off his hat. "And more importantly, to your aid."

They stood looking at him in disbelief.

"I guarantee your safe passage. Though, you're always welcome to take your chances down there."

"The Empire had also guaranteed a truce with Insomnia, if I recall properly" Ignis replied, sour.

"If you prefer be buried among the rubble, be my guest."

Perhaps we do, Gladio thought, but then he evaluated the size of the airship and the maximum number of magiteks it could contain. If things went wrong, they could kill the Chancellor – and doing so, given how much he liked the guy and what he had done to Insomnia, wouldn't bother him so much – and hijack the vehicle.

Ignis must have done the same reasoning. "Dying here is not an option. We have no choice, Noct."

"I know" he agreed. "We follow you, Chancellor."

II

They had faced many fights since they left Insomnia, but this time they really barely made it out. Sitting on the metal floor next to Noctis, exhausted but with the weapon still tightly in his hand, he remembered the conversation he had with Silia the night before the Kingsgaives returned, the same night he had almost kissed her – twice. I've been perfectly trained for every circumstance since I was a kid, he had told her, And yet I've never put my life at risk. I cannot even imagine what it would be like to risk it every day. Now he had no difficulty imagining it. Everything he had learned in training had saved his life, and saved Noct's.
"What now?" Noctis asked.

"Dunno. We've just faced an Astral. We're on an airship of the Empire and that's Chancellor Ardyn Izunia. Gimme a moment to process."

The airship lifted in flight as the hatch closed again. It was the first time for all of them on a flying vehicle, and Gladio was beginning to feel a little sick. He hugged his knee.

"You know, that fight in the bar came back to me. Before leaving Insomnia, it was the only time I really acted as a Shield. That's when I truly understood what my role is."

Noctis leaned lightly on his shoulder, or perhaps it was the roll of the aircraft that pushed him nearer. "Ah, the drunk stranger with the knife. What a fright, huh?"

Gladio nodded. "Never been so close to shitting my pants in my whole life." Before facing Titan, of course.

"You?"

"The hell d'you think?" he retorted, almost offended. "I was twenty, I had insisted on taking you out for a walk around the bars, and I almost let the Crown Prince – in theory under my protection – be stabbed. For the Six, had I moved a fraction of a second later..."

"Had you moved to break his bone neck, instead of putting yourself between him and me, you wouldn't have almost lost your eye."

Gladio touched his scar. "We've already talked about it. It was better this way."

"Gladio..." Noctis lowered his head. "I'm so sorry."

"Noct, it's been three years now, and the fact that you provoked him didn't authorize him to..."

He shook his head. "I'm talking about the fault. I'm so sorry I showed myself as weak. And never again say that the brawl in the bar was the only time you acted as a Shield. Ever since we were kids, you've always thought about my well-being first – you, and so did Ignis – sacrificing everything else. I'm trying to do my best to live up to it. But it's hard, damn it. Luna, my father, the Astrals, the prophecy... what if everyone is wrong?"

Gladio didn't answer immediately. He was touched, because for some time they hadn't talk so openheartedly, he and Noct, but also fucking worried about what awaited them. "It doesn't matter" he replied without harshness. "It would still be your duty to do your best. And we'll be close to you anyway. As I told you, Noct: what you can't do, I'll do for you."

He held his fist towards him. After a moment of hesitation, without smiling, Noctis leaned his.

"Thank you."

"What will you do with us now?" Ignis was asking Ardyn Izunia.

"Why, grant you a safe passage, just as I said."

"Pretty generous offer for an Imperial" Prompto objected.

"Come now. Is it fair to begrudge a man the circumstances of his birth?" he winked.

"We'd better think about how to retrieve the Regalia" Gladio intervened, "It's still in the fault."
"Damn" Noctis cursed. "What about now? I bet it won't seem real to the Imperials, to lay their hands on my father's car."

"Don't look at me!" Izunia anticipated them. "I've no say in it. Emperor Aldercapt doesn't know that his precious Prince of Insomnia at this moment is on one of his airships together with his Chancellor. They'll be looking for you everywhere. Be quiet and enjoy your trip, I'll drop you as soon as possible in a safe place. Then you can look for your car."

Gladio glanced at Noctis, shrugging slightly. *What choice do we have at this moment?*

Chapter End Notes

> *Ex malis eligere minima* > "choose the lesser of two evils"
"A Rogue Behemoth, huh?" Silia took the information sheet about the mission that Cor Leonis was handing to her. It was the third in a few days, but she had been careful not to force her left arm so her shoulder was healing well. She believed she could handle it.

The Marshal nodded. "In the ruins north of Leide. The hunters are reluctant to deal with it."

Silia read the available data under the small map that located the area where the beast prowled. 68 feet in length from its nose to its tail. Weighs 165 tons. It has chased and swept away some trucks on the road. Maximum danger. "I can believe it."

"Hartwood." Cor Leonis looked up from the rest of the documentation. "There are sixteen other quests. I am not used to interfering, but this time, under the circumstances, I will: are you sure you want to take care of it right now?"

Silia was pleased by that sort of rough interest. "It's weak to fire," she simply answered.

"And you, correct me if I'm wrong, no longer have the magic of the King."

"I still can use the elemancy. A well-made fire flask and it will go to the ground. And I've my right arm. And a prosthesis made with an alloy of steel and Bandersnatchs' claws. I don't throw myself head down in the clashes, Marshal, I don't want to commit suicide. If I sign on for it, it's because it doesn't bother me."

He raised his hands briefly then lowered them, as if to reply that it wasn't his business anymore. Silia put the paper in her pocket and bowed her head to depart, but Cor Leonis spoke again.

"Hartwood, before you go, tell me: have you had any contact with the Prince and his retinue these days?"

Silia shook her head, surprised. "No. The last time I heard from them I was in Hammerhead. I have yet to purchase a new phone. Why are you asking me? Did something happen?"

"Nobody is hurt, if that's what you mean. They're currently at the Wiz Chocobo Post, in the Duscae region. They're stranded. The Empire took possession of the Regalia in the Disc of Cauthess."
"The Disc of Cauthess? "Warm place for a trip. Have they traced another Royal Tomb?"

"They did, in fact. But they went there because the Prince was summoned by Titan."


"The Archaean."

"The Astral?"

"The Astral."

She opened her mouth to ask him if he was shitting her, then closed it because she didn't believe that Cor Leonis, among his many undoubted skills, was endowed with the faintest sense of humor."

"The Prince has friends in high places."

Cor Leonis moistened his lips. He didn't seem amused by the irony she was trying to mask her bewilderment with, but he didn't show impatience. "Tell me what you know about the Lucis Caelum bloodline."

That was their first real conversation since she had arrived at the camp. Silia hadn't dared to ask him anything, up to that moment, about what the Prince was doing to reclaim the kingdom that belonged to him. She wasn't entitled, and obeying without asking wasn't new for her. "I have read several biographies of the Old Kings and the books of Cosmogony. I don't know where legends end and where reality begins, of course. It is said that when the Starscourge was unleashed for the first time, the Astrals chose the first protector of the Crystal, the progenitor of the lineage of the Lucii, and the first Oracle, from which the royal family of Tenebrae descends."

"When darkness veils the world, the King of Light shall come," the Marshal declaimed, absorbed. Silia knew the words of that prophecy by heart, but now that they were in Cor Leonis' mouth they assumed the solemn tone of an incontrovertible truth. "You are convinced that Prince Noctis is the Chosen King."

"Aren't you?"

She sighed, choosing her words carefully. "The Chosen King. He who will defeat the Darkness when the Starscourage will be unleashed once more. I apologize for my bluntness, but it's quite difficult for me to associate him with that kid, and despite the hard times we are experiencing, it's quite difficult for me to believe that we are on the verge of the apocalypse."

"Probably two thousand years ago people didn't think they were on the verge of the apocalypse either, Hartwood." Cor Leonis spread his arms in a gesture that perhaps wanted to invite her to look around. He had the tolerant voice of someone explaining something obvious. "The Starscourage is already under way. People, whole villages, have been disappearing for years, nights are infested with daemons. And days are getting shorter."

Silia shrugged. "Marshal, there have always been daemons, for all we know. And there has always been an Oracle healing the infected from Plasmodium."

"Hartwood, did you receive a schooling?" There was an amazed note in Leonis' voice so palpable that Silia couldn't hold back a zinger.

"As a matter of a fact, I didn't. I couldn't study, but I read, Marshal, so I know that people don't turn
into monsters by magic like in fairy tales. Were you, like Gladio, convinced that the Kingsglaives were a bunch of louts?"

Cor Leonis frowned. "Hartwood, don't be so sensitive. I was just asking."

"You haven't answered me yet: do you believe that Prince Noctis is the Chosen King?"

"King Regis was convinced of it, and I trust King Regis. Even the Oracle, Princess Lunafreya, is convinced of it, and she's challenging Niflheim and her own brother to help Prince Noctis claim the kingdom. She's interceding with the Astrals so that they lend their strength to him. That's why Titan summoned him to the Disc of Cauthess: to test the Chosen King. And he considered him worthy of his favor."

Silia lowered her gaze. She had touched magic with her hand since she was a child, but to accept that the Astrals, who hadn't been interested in the mortal world for two thousand years, could intervene to overthrow the fortunes of the Kingdom of Lucis, was out of her reach.

"I see you're still skeptical."

Silia closed her eyes and took a deep breath, rubbing her eyebrows. "Marshal, since I got here a few days ago, you told me that Titus Drautos had always been General Glaucu, that a Kingsglaive wore the Ring of the Lucii, that the young prince Noctis is the Chosen King of the prophecies and that the Astrals are calling him before them to prevent an apocalypse. I think I need some time to process."

"Time, Hartwood," he replied softly "is a luxury we don't have."

She straightened up. "Marshal, don't doubt. Chosen King or not, Prince Noctis is all that remains of the Lucis Caelum bloodline I've sworn to serve. I'll do all that's necessary, whatever his path and his destiny will be." She bent her lips in a half smile, bowing her head again. "I'm grateful to you for sharing this information with me. I hope I'll be able to repay your trust."

Cor Leonis stared at her for a few seconds more, than lowered his gaze to his folders again. "Since you're here to give me a hand, and I need both of them, Hartwood, ask Darius to come with you to take care of that Behemoth. And if you can, take his horns. Onophrius, the gunsmith, can do something with them."

II

The Rogue Behemoth hunt revealed to Silia that she and Darius Magnus had a good mutual understanding in battle. The man's litheness, the solidity of his biceps and the alert shadow of his gaze hadn't deceived her: Darius was one of the most skilled swordsmen she had ever met, and within a few months, with some direct experience of the battlefield, he would be able to kick her ass. They had followed the trail of the gigantic beast furtively, communicating with each other without speaking, until they sneaked up on it with a fire flask. They had attacked it on two fronts until it had collapsed to the ground, they walking away unscathed; later they had stopped at the Prairie outpost to restock and toast to their successful hunt, the both of them with a horn tied behind their back. Darius was a man of few words, and three quarters of those that would come out of his pretty mouth were pure and acidic sarcasm, but he was sharp and not devoid of a sense of humor that she found similar to her own. No doubt he was a swanky noble, but a swanky noble with solid balls.

That night, Silia was busy shortening the sleeves of a well-crafted men's leather jacket that she had purchased at Prairie – a complicated task with one hand, since she had tightly tied her offended arm to her chest. She was leaning against one of the shacks, taking advantage of the light of the lamp, when she recognized not far away the voice of one of the volunteers who had sought refuge from
Insomnia.

"I don't understand how the Marshal can trust a damn Glaive," the man was saying, evidently unaware that she was there to listen. He stopped to take a puff of smoke. "Doesn't he fear that she can feed to the Empire info about the Prince?"

"As for this," Devan replied to him with a contemptuous note in his voice "no worries: she's fucking with his Shield. That's why the Marshal has a special care."

"Are you listening to them?"

Silia started. She was so focused on their voices and on her sleeve that she hadn't seen Darius coming.

"I'm listening," she replied. The conversation didn't resume, probably Darius' arrival had revealed to the two man her presence.

"Don't you mind if they talk like that?"

"Frankly? No," she lied. Actually, the idea that they thought the Marshal treated her with special care was somewhat annoying. "Right now I only mind about fixing these damn sleeves. Finding decent clothes in my size is harder than breaking down a mad Behemoth, it seems."

Darius sat next to her. "Give it here, Hartwood." He took the jacket, the needle, and the spool of black thread.

She watched him work for a while. He had elegant and long fingered hands, but his knuckles were uneven, as if he had broken them, and he had calluses and scars that testified to long training sessions with the sword. "You have a good dexterity."

"Does this amaze you in a swordsman?"

"No. What amazes me is that a swanky noble is able to hem a sleeve."

"And what amazes me is conceiving of you and Gladio Amicitia together. Who's the man in the relationship?"

"I see you're interested in this dynamics," she answered in kind, smirking. "If you must know, I let him be the man in bed."

Darius looked up. "I wasn't serious. I thought it was just gossip and you would deny until death. Do you really fuck with the upright Prince's Shield, Hartwood?"

Cool, I just screwed myself. She neither confirmed nor denied.

"At the Crownsguards' HQ everybody'd bullshit him for this, but he kept on replying that Prince Noctis was his only girlfriend since he already required all his energies."

"He wasn't lying."

"Are you his lover, then?"

Silia frowned. "No. I suppose I'd fuck more than this."

"The camp is full of men, if you have those needs."
"I see you've pulled out."

"You're not my type."

"Yeah, who knows why I had supposed it."

Darius threw her jacket on her; while they were talking, he had finished arranging her left sleeve, much better than what she had done with the right one. She got up to try it on. The shoulders were wide, of course, and it was a bit too long, but until she would put together tailor-made gear it'd be fine.

"Now I understand that Verman's tattoo on your back," he commented, lighting a cigarette now that he had his hands free.

"You all understand more than me, then," she let herself slip, sitting down next to him. In Insomnia, in fact, everybody had understood the story before her and Gladio. Her comrades – Caesar, above all – Gladio's acquaintances, probably his father, perhaps even Cor Leonis. They were just wrong about the timing.

"Who would have thought it," Darius said again. He shook his head. "I've never met a more abnegated person than Gladio Amicitia. He was like a huge guardian mastiff. All day training to be ready for any eventuality, he'd run away as soon as the Prince called him, he took care of Iris and tried in every way to please his demanding father. A life devoted to service. I didn't envy him at all."

Silia hugged her knees. Speaking of Gladio with someone else – someone who had shared a part of his life with which she had never had anything to do – had a strange effect on her. "Thought that 'a life devoted to service' applied to all of you Crownsguards."

Darius didn't answer right away. "You've been shamelessly frank with me, Hartwood, so I'll be too. Since the Wall has been withdrawn around Insomnia, the Crownsguard has become almost a noble title. Did you see them, Alexandra, Devan, Marvin, Adrian? They are born with a sword in their hands, and they practice it as if it were a sport. We've been trained to fight starting very young, but since Tenebrae became a protectorate of the Empire, we don't know why: the King didn't move from Insomnia anymore and none of his subjects would have harmed a hair on him. Or so we believed." He broke off to take another puff of smoke. He opened his mouth, closed it, then spat out, resentful, what he had tried to hold back: "The first day when we could really do something, the King and the Council allocated the Guards to the city service and sent the Marshal out from the walls. And to protect the Citadel, they posted the Kingsglaives. The most unhappy decision in the history of Insomnia; after agreeing to sign that treaty, of course."

Silia kept looking at her knees in silence. She had been so bent on her anxieties that she realized only now, for the first time, that other people had been betrayed, other people had lost their birthplace, and they were like her, adrift, tormented by the regret of not having been able to do more. The resentment of the Crownsguards didn't surprise her; she could repeat all she liked that she had repudiated the Kingsglaives, but her presence would always remind everyone of what they had done.

When she looked up again, she saw that Darius had thrown his head back and was staring silently at the sky.

"That Behemoth, today..."

"Yeah?"

"My legs trembled for quite a while. If you tell someone, Hartwood, I'll smash your teeth."
She smiled. "I hadn't noticed. You did brilliantly. Not bad for a swanky noble who had never been outside of the Crown City."

"You did well too," he conceded. "You can see you're used to taming big beasts."

Silia got up, dusting off the back of her pants with her good hand. "How banal. I'd have expected at least a joke about long and thick horns."

**III**

Silia remembered Darius' words about the Crownguard when, the next day, she was leaning on a fence watching the young man named Claudio who was training against a wooden dummy, trying feints and schemes with a stick. She studied his movements carefully. She had already noticed during the handball match that he was very agile. He was the son of two Crownguards, the Marshal had said; maybe, like Gladio, he had already started his training so that one day he would follow in their footsteps.

Only when he stopped to catch his breath, bent over his knees, the boy noticed her. He ran his hand through his sweaty hair, got up, and nodded to her.

"Go on, don't mind me," she greeted him.

He resumed, but now was slower and uncoordinated, as if her presence had caused him to lose concentration. Silia turned to leave and let him train in peace, when Claudio spoke.

"Where's their weak point?"

"What?" she asked.

"The magiteks. Where's their weak point?"

Silia sighed. She took another stick from the pile on the ground and reached the boy, standing by his side in front of the mannequin. He was a few inches taller than her. She aimed first to the right, then to the left of the dummy's head. "All the magiteks have a helmet that protects their throats, but also creates two blind spots. If you run into a MT, try to attack it from the sides before he sees you. Be careful, because they are resistant to firearms, and if you don't take them out right away they can self-destruct."

She realized that six other people, who were training in the field, had come up to look and listen. A boy with blond curls and a goatee that, for sure, he was desperately trying to grow raised his hand to speak. "What weapons do they usually bring?" he asked.

"The same ones that you bring. Swords. Rifles and miters. Watch out for Snipers and Riflemen, they have an almost perfect aim. And the Imperial Spearmen can smash you with just one lunge. But..." she went around the dummy and pointed at the back of his neck with her stick, "The magiteks have a weak point: their nape. If you can get around and hit them behind the neck with a piercing weapon, it's done. They are weak to frost, too, so if you are dealing with a battalion, it's a good idea to throw an ice flask before attacking them individually. Blinding them also works very well."

Everyone was staring at her, not the dummy.

"Captain," a squat man ventured to say. "You've fought many of them, haven't you?"

"I'm not a captain," she corrected him. She dropped the stick and rubbed her hand to shake off the dust. "Yeah, I fought many of them, but it's not a big deal. Magiteks are simple infantry. Daemons
"I saw some of them at night," a red-haired woman said. "Burning balls."

"Pyros," Silia nodded. She motioned for them to approach, picked up her stick again, and leaned down on her knees to draw one in the soil. "They can be a pain in the ass. Easy to take down if you have an ice flask, otherwise it's better to run: they self-destruct and are deadly. But they aren't the worst daemons you can encounter." Silia thought of the Diamond Weapon that had defeated the last defenses of the Kingsglaives before they retreated to Insomnia. She drew a Flan. "This is a Flan. Another common daemon. It's not very strong, but absorbs physical attacks. If you meet one and you don't have bombs at hand, just run away." She licked her lips, then, next to the Flan, tried to do her best to draw an Iron Giant. "The Giant is massive and has no weakness. You can only work hard to slaughter it. And there are worse things, much worse. The Ronins. They look like ghost swordsmen. They split you in two like an apple. The Jormungands." She patted her prosthesis. "Huge snakes with huge teeth. I advise you to pay attention to your extremities."

"How many types of monsters exist?"

"Known monsters? Between forty or fifty, perhaps. But new ones keep on springing up constantly. And they aren't monsters," she pointed out, "but living organisms that once were the same as me and you, infested with parasites that have changed their body." She blinked, because everyone, she noticed, was giving her an uncomfortable attention. "We're not in school," she said abruptly.

"Hartwood," the blond said, "We've gathered here at Marshal Leonis' camp because we want to do something for the kingdom, but in order to do that we need to know clearly what's out there. You are a Glaive, you've been at war, you've fought magiteks and daemons."

Silia put her hand in her pockets looking for the lighter and the pack of cigarettes, and lit one. "So what? Ask the Crownguards. I've no title; here, I'm exactly like you, at the Marshal's orders."

The red-haired woman pursed her mouth. "The Crownguards train among themselves, without bothering to look after us volunteers."

Silia frowned. "Insomnia only fell a few days ago. Marshal Leonis is doing the best he can to reorganize a minimum resistance to the Empire, and you should thank him for having found a guide, not complain."

"We don't criticize Marshal Leonis' actions," the stocky man justified himself. "We are more than a hundred, at the camp, and he can't babysit everyone."

"Listen," she said, in a softer voice. She looked at them one by one: five men between thirty and sixty, a woman in her thirties, two boys under twenty. Hunters, City Guards, laborers, farmers with swords in their hands that they didn't know how to use. "What are you asking me?"

"A hand with our training," the stocky man answered. He could have been her father. He looked over his shoulder, looking for the approval of the others. "Hartwood, I'll be honest. I've never liked Kingsglaives, but having one of them on our side now is the best that could happen to us. You have the Immortal's trust, so you have ours. Just a little time a day will be enough. Not every day. Teach us what's out there, and how to deal with it."

Silia didn't yet have a clear idea of what her role in Cor Leonis' camp would be, but she couldn't, a few days after her arrival, appear before him and propose herself to train his men. "I'll talk to Magnus. Don't expect too much. But I can already tell you something without commitment, kid." She snapped her fingers in the direction of the blond, who had pulled out a nodachi. She joined him,
stood behind him and correctly placed both his hands on the handle. "This is a two-handed sword. You're left-handed, so your left hand has to grip the hilt immediately under the tsuba; your right hand goes here, further down." She put her hands over his, guiding him, and swinging his sword. "You're tall, so the nodachi is fine for you, but remember it's not a parry weapon. Very elegant, but not easy to use properly. If you like it, keep it for later, but now I suggest you get something sturdier."

"Yessir!" the boy exclaimed, stiffening. "I'll find another weapon, ma'am!"

"Oh, for Odin's cock, don't," she snorted. "No 'yessir', no 'madam', or I'm gonna kick your ass, kid."

IV

She found Darius on the eastern edge of the camp, sitting on the trunk of a cut-down tree with a hunter named Dave Auburnbrie, who had been introduced to her two days earlier.

"Good afternoon, Hartwood" Auburnbrie greeted her. The big brown dog that followed him everywhere barked joyfully in her direction. "Magnus was telling me about the Rogue Behemoth. A quick and clean action, he told me. If you happen to drop by Vesperpool, have a word with my mother Ezma. After that Behemoth, she will admit you to the Meldacio with a high rank. I suggested it to Magnus, too, but he refused."

Silia leaned down on her knees to roughly caress the dog's head. Speaking with the hunters at the camp, she had discovered she envied those men who lived wandering days, free from oaths of loyalty and obedience and – therefore – free to choose how to use their time and skills. No constraints, no roots. "I'd be lying if I said that this proposal doesn't appeal to me, Auburnbrie," she replied sincerely, "but I can't. There's still a war going on, and there's still a king of Lucis."

The man looked at her thoughtfully, then turned to Darius. He shook his head slightly. "Magnus answered in the same way," he sighed. "Oaths. If you don't swear your loyalty to this king or that uniform, you Crown Citizens don't know how to live."

Silia didn't take offense and she noticed, exchanging an amused glance with Darius, he didn't either.

"Were you looking for me, Hartwood?"

"Yeah, but it's not a matter of urgency. I don't want to interrupt you and Auburnbrie."

"You are more than welcome," the hunter answered, getting up. "We were just chatting. I'll let you chat. I'll stay here at the camp for a few days more. See you around."

He moved away, followed by his dog. Silia took his place on the trunk, lit a cigarette, and looked for a way to undertake her thorny speech.

"I was chatting with some men. Here at the camp we're a hundred, more or less, they told me."

Darius nodded. "More or less. Hunters come and go like stray dogs."

"How many of these people have fought before? And I'm not talking about bar fights."

"Not many," Darius admitted dryly. "We've already talked about the Crownsguards yesterday. There are a few City Guards who have escaped from Insomnia's fall trained on close combat and firearms, but nothing more. The hunter's level is uneven; some of them only get away with the beasts, others manage to keep the daemons at bay."

Silia folded her arms, thinking. "Excluding the hunters, and not everyone, then, maybe we're talking
about a fifth of useful elements. The others are arms full of goodwill that don't know how a magitek is made and what a daemon is."

Darius neither confirmed nor denied. "I tend to forget you're a soldier, until you come out with such remarks. What do you propose? To expel the volunteers who don't know how to fight because they are of no use?"

"Darius, don't insult your and my intelligences," she replied. "It's obvious I didn't mean that. On the contrary, I was saying that if those people knew how to handle a sword decently, instead of keeping them in the camp splitting wood, you could send them out too."

"I'm still waiting for you to get to the point."

So she did. "These people should be trained, Darius. A few days – a few weeks – won't perform miracles but could save lives. And they could be yours or the Immortal's, in a time of need."

"Are you volunteering?" he grinned.

"I'm just telling you what I think it's necessary. Don't keep these men here dangling, or the only thing you can do when the time comes will be using them as human shields."

Darius blinked. "Why don't you tell the Marshal yourself?"

"I have no title to do it."

"The Marshal listens to everyone's opinions, not just those of titled people. But since you don't want to expose, Hartwood, I'll mention it to him," he finally concluded. "Incidentally, I agree with you. When we settled here at the hunter camp, a week ago, our only target was to keep an eye on the movements of the Imperials. The hunters gave us a hand. We haven't put up posters to look for volunteers. When the city fell, people joined us, just like you did. Many were Leide's civilians who suffered Imperial raids for years, and who are looking for revenge. As for this, we all sleep with one eye open; I don't have to remind you what the Kingsglaives did."

Silia didn't answer.

"The Marshal didn't turn down anyone, we can't afford to be picky, as I told you. But this isn't a military academy."

"I know," she tried to reassure him. "But it's useless to have a camp with more than a hundred mouths to feed if seventy are not useful to the cause. And they could get it with some training. Not everybody, but several could. Tell the Marshal. I don't want to be a drama queen, but if I was out with those men I'd like to trust them and not have to worry about getting killed by a stray bullet or some half-assed magic flask."

Darius snorted something very similar to a giggle, getting up. "Be careful with those magic flasks, by the way. You are turning this camp into a powder keg."

Silia hugged her knees. Since she could no longer use the magic of the King, she felt naked, more mutilated than when she had lost her leg, and the only support she could count on was elemancy. The surroundings of the camp, fortunately, were rich in energy sources. "Yesterday you didn't despise them, against that Behemoth."

Darius was of his word, because not even three hours later the Marshal called for her. Silia entered
his pavilion without knowing what awaited her, and the indecipherable expression of the man didn't help.

Cor Leonis didn't lose time with preambles. "I had a word with Darius. Do you have experience in training tactics, Hartwood?"

"It depends on what you mean," she replied. "I've never trained men, but I've survived the five-year training of the Kingsglaives."

"Magellano, huh?"

Silia shuddered, like she did every time she thought of him. "Magellano. Did you know him?"

"I knew him. I saw a few men as hard as him in my life."

More than hard, Magellano had been brutal, on the verge of sadism. However, nobody could have said of him that he wasn't impartial: woman or man, boy or girl, Magellano had no regard for anyone. She had hated him fiercely – she and everyone else – during the years of training, but if he hadn't been so inflexible the Glaives wouldn't have been able to use the sword like that. At her final sword test, before swearing as a Kingsglaive, Silia had almost kicked the bucket, although truth was that Magellano had tried to stop the fight twice and she had persisted to show him that she had learned his most important lesson: as long as you don't collapse to the ground, you can still fight. "Well, sure we learned a lot from him. In any case, Marshal, I don't know what Darius told you, but I don't want to impose myself. I just expressed my opinion."

"Hartwood, there's no one else here with a complete military training like yours. If you want to teach something to these men, they're all yours. But let's be clear: if you accept, they become your responsibility."

"Clear, Marshal."

"At the same time, since you have referred to my directives, if I decide that you are more useful elsewhere, you go where I tell you. Is this clear too?"

"Crystal-clear."

"One more thing: we don't have blunt or training weapons. If they get hurt, you'll be responsible for that too."

Silia smiled. "Roger. We'll use sticks for the time being, as some of them can't even hold a sword and could hurt themselves. Is there anything else, Marshal?"

Cor Leonis looked at her. "I entrust you with my men, Hartwood. Since it was your idea, try to do your best."

Chapter End Notes

Patria est ubicumque est bene > "you country is wherever you feel comfortable"
Chapter Summary

After some days at the Wiz Chocobo Post, Gladio and his friends continue along their path, but an enemy in the Fociaugh Cave prompts serious questions. Meanwhile, at Cor's camp, Silia is entrusted with a new mission.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nec mortale sonans

I

"I didn't think I would say it, but even I got bored of riding chocobos around." Prompto yawned, leaning his chair on its hind legs.

"I didn't think I would say it when I rested my head on the pillow the night after the fight with Titan, but my muscles are starting to atrophy from inactivity."

"I wouldn't complain too much," Ignis scolded them. "After all, we needed to get our strength back after what happened in the Disc of Cauthess. And, on the pretext of the rebel terrorists who attacked Insomnia, the Empire has reinforced the checkpoints everywhere."

"I can't believe we haven't traced the Regalia yet. What if they brought her to Gralea?"

Noctis moaned. "Don't even say that."

"Cindy is doing her utmost. She's inquiring at all the garages. Iris and Talcott are gathering information in Lestallum, and hunters in Leide are looking everywhere. If they don't learn anything within few days, Noctis, we should start to consider all eventualities and find another means of transport. We certainly can't stay here forever."

Gladio yawned. They had taken advantage of the forced stop to rest and restore their funds by accepting hunting quests in the Duscae region, but he was starting to feel like a coeurl in a cage and, to be honest, unlike Prompto, he didn't feel a visceral love for chocobos, a disaffection definitely reciprocated by those beasts that, even if unsuspectingly strong, couldn't endure his weight. In those days of inactivity, the desire to talk with Silia, to know how she was doing, was stronger than ever but he didn't want to involve Cor the Immortal in something like that. He had even considered contacting Dustin, Monica, or maybe Darius, or Alexandra, or someone else from the Crownsguard and ask to talk to her, but he had no idea what the relationship was between them.

He scratched his hairline, sighing. He missed so many things from his previous life – although it had been just two weeks since they had left Insomnia he had gotten used to seeing it like that – but the distance from Silia, whose company had been a constant routine in recent months, was among the things that he suffered the most. In the evening, before falling asleep, he'd allow himself to fantasize
about an indefinite future of peace in Insomnia. With the favor of the Gods, certainly the Crystal would return to its place, but they wouldn't need the Wall anymore: no longer threatened by the Empire, the Crown City would open its doors to anyone who wished to settle down or leave to travel. Noctis would be King – that was hard to imagine – and Princess Lunafreya his wife. There would once again be a Council of which Ignis probably would be a member. As for him and Prompto, who weren't at all versed in diplomacy and politics, they would remain in the Crowsnguard, again commanded by Cor Leonis. And, this time seriously, Silia would be in the Guard as well. He didn't know what would happen in the weeks and months to come, but of one thing he was certain: he would fight to build that future.

"Look!" Prompto exclaimed, rising abruptly. "It's Umbra!"

"Umbra!?" Noctis approached the dog – certainly he hoped for a message from the Princess – but the animal didn't let him touch it; he barked twice, turned a couple of times on itself and moved further away, only to sit and bark again in their direction. Noctis tried to reach him again, but the dog took a few steps away and wailed.

"Are you telling us to follow you?"

"Let's go with him!"

Noctis and Prompto ran behind Umbra regardless of anything else. Gladio shrugged, looking at Ignis, then they followed them.

The dog was fucking fast, and soon they left the path to enter the Mistwood. Gladio almost believed he was hallucinating when, in a clearing, Noctis stopped in front of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was tall, noble, with long jet-black hair that framed her oval face, and radiated serenity.

"Gentiana!" Noctis exclaimed.

The High Messenger. Noctis had told them that she had appeared in Fenestala immediately after the birth of Princess Lunafreya; a supernatural omen that no one could interpret as positive.

"Hear me, O King of the Stone," she whispered. Her voice was soothing, like celestial music. "By the Stormsender's blessing will the path to the Stone be opened. The Oracle goes hence in the King's name."

"Luna... where is she now?" Noctis tried to ask her.

"The eye of the storm. When the covenant is forged, the Oracle and the Ring shall await their King at the Walls of Water. Stray not from the path."

Gladio looked towards Noctis. Just for a moment, he was ready to swear it, and yet when he turned back the Messenger was gone. Umbra was still there, seated.

"Well..." Prompto started hesitantly. "She could have been a little less cryptic."

"She was very clear," Ignis contradicted him. "Just as Noctis made a deal with the Archaean, the Fulgurian is waiting for us. We will meet Her Grace Lunafreya in Altissia, where – I suppose – she will intercede with Leviathan."

Noctis had bent over Umbra. He took out the notebook through which, for years, he got in touch with the Princess, and began to leaf through it quickly. He lowered his head, barely holding back a smile, but none of them approached to read the message. Noctis scribbled something in response,
hesitated, then added another sentence.

"Let Luna know," he murmured, stroking the head of Umbra, "That I'm okay and she won't have to wait much longer... we'll be together soon." He jammed the diary under the dog's bandana, then got up, absorbed, looking up at the sky.

Gladio did the same. Although it had been a clear day so far, some clouds were gathering, announcing a storm.

"It looks like it will rain," Prompto said.

He hadn't yet finished his thought when a violent vertical thunderbolt hit the horizon.

"I suppose," Noctis uttered, "that that's the Fulgurian's call."

"Another day, another deity!"

"Aren't you happy, Gladio?" Ignis asked. "You said you were bored."

Gladio shuddered. He still had nightmares about what they had suffered in the Disc of Cauthess. "...yeah. Let's hope to come out alive again."

II

Mistwood wasn't called that way by chance: going north, the fog thickened more and more, until it was almost impossible to see a few steps away. His father, Gladio recalled, had told him that the Crownsguards of his generation had trained there for months; the poor visibility and the slippery ground had accustomed them to fight in unfavorable environmental conditions. *Nothing to do with the simulations at the Citadel Training Hall to which the current Guards are subjected*, his father had added with a derisive grimace that had irritated him extremely.

Well, you would be satisfied, father, he found himself thinking as they followed Noctis, chilled by the heavy rain that had finally reached them, looking for the three Runestones that would awaken Ramuh's power. His friend claimed to be guided by Gentiana's voice, but no one else could hear her. At least this time they had the sensation of moving on a pre-established path, in the footsteps of Her Grace Lunafreya, and not of wandering at random inside a crumbling crevasse as the Archaean tried to kill them.

Trying to communicate with the Fulgurian was decidedly less dramatic. Three patrols of Imperial infantry bothered them along the way, but they quickly got rid of them. In the late afternoon they reached the Fociaugh Cave, where – or so it seemed – they would find the last Stone. Mindful of his past experience at Greyshire, this time Gladio took care to put on the jacket of the Crownsguard's uniform, to great fun of Prompto.

In addition to having become addicted to magiteks, they had now begun to get used to daemons too. They had discovered how to deal with their attacks and exploit their weaknesses the hard way; besides the normal wounds that had finally reached them, looking for the three Runestones that would awaken Ramuh's power. His friend claimed to be guided by Gentiana's voice, but no one else could hear her. At least this time they had the sensation of moving on a pre-established path, in the footsteps of Her Grace Lunafreya, and not of wandering at random inside a crumbling crevasse as the Archaean tried to kill them.

They then entered the Fociaugh Cave without suffering too much from the presence of imps, kobolds, noetikos and electric pyros, even though he often lacked the physical space to swing his broadsword. Gladio was about to express aloud with his friends how much everything seemed too
easy after the Disc of Cauthess when Noctis stopped abruptly.

"Did you hear it?"

"Nope. What?" Prompto asked.

"A voice. I think. But maybe it was an echo."

Gladio stretched out his ears, but heard nothing. "Are you hallucinating, Noct?"

"My baby..."

This time he heard it too. A woman's voice, or maybe a boy's voice. He shivered.

"Prompto, it's not funny!" Noctis complained, shrill. He wasn't wrong to suspect because already in the Keycatrich Trench Prompto had fun behind them with stupid jokes.

"Are ya crazy? 'Twasn't me!"

"Just stop it!"

"'Twasn't me, I told you!"

"Please stop, the both of you," Ignis snapped. "We are in a cave; your shouts rumble far, and we could lure something unpleasant."

Prompto snorted theatrically, irritated like a child who was unjustly reprimanded; he gave them his back and preceded them with a quick step, disappearing in the darkness of a narrow tunnel. They moved to follow him but, a few seconds later, they heard his cry of alarm.

"Prompto!" Noctis cried, snapping forward.

"What's going on?" Gladio shouted too, alarmed. In the narrow space he couldn't even summon his broadsword.

"He disappeared!"

"Prompto, if it's another of your jokes, I swear to you that..."

Ignis didn't seem at all convinced that it was a joke. "Prompto! Are you fine?"

No reply. For what the small size of the tunnel allowed it, they ran forward. A few seconds later, they distinctly heard a shot and an outraged line.

"Prompto! Reply! Are you OK?"

"I'm not OK at all!" the voice of his friend resounded in reply, from a distance. "I was dragged down by a kind of snake!"

"Down where?"

They discovered it when they came out into a wide cavern that extended downwards. From there they couldn't see the bottom, and the light from the torches couldn't illuminate it, but it couldn't be too deep if Prompto had emerged unscathed from the fall. They re-descended the rocks with difficulty, in a hurry, freeing themselves from the daemons that kept attacking them.
"Prompto! Are you still there?"

"Yep!" His voice, at least, didn't seem to be too troubled. "That... thing has gone! I'll try to meet you!"

They laboriously managed to rejoin. Prompto was shaken, but unharmed.

"For the Six, what a fear!" he complained, gesturing. "She grabbed my ankle with her tail... or maybe her tongue, I don't know, it was slimy anyway, and I tried to hold on to something, but nothing, I slipped down to here. At last I shot her and she let me go."

"Her?" Noctis asked. "What was it?"

Gladio had no intention of finding out. "Let's do it quickly, before she finds us here. Did you hurt her severely?"

"I don't think so. It was dark, and I couldn't aim well."

"Let's go on," Ignis said. "Carefully."

Their auspices and cautions didn't help much, because a few minutes later out of nowhere, as if the ground itself had thrown her up, the most disgusting daemon that they had ever seen emerged.

"Here she is! It's her!" Prompto exclaimed, pointing at the creature, and they hurried to jump back because the daemon had lunged herself at them, immediately swallowed up again by the ground as if it was a stretch of water.

"A Naga!" he heard Ignis say.

The creature surfaced again, standing on her tail; it was a huge woman head on a snake body, frightening, as indescribably human. It was the first time they came across a daemon that retained something of its previous nature, and the hairs of Gladio's arms and neck stood up with disgust and restlessness.

"My baby..." the creature said in a plaintive voice. "Where... where is my baby?"

"I don't know where he is, I'm sorry," Noct replied, as if addressing himself to a creature who was mentally fit.

"If you don't know where my baby is, then you must take his place," the daemon replied, and smiled.

She attacked head down, as if she wanted to crush them to the ground. Gladio and the others separated, avoiding her lunge, and summoned their weapons. He tried to foretell the spot where she would reemerge by concentrating on the vibrations, but it didn't work. The daemon reappeared without warning under Noctis' feet, who was quick to dodge and even took advantage of it to attack behind her nape with a horizontal stroke. Gladio distinctly heard the liquid noise of her flesh ripping open and the creature's squeak of pain, and unlike every time they had clashed with daemons he felt disgusted.

The Naga was quick to withdraw, letting herself be absorbed by the ground, but they were quicker; without agreeing aloud, they adopted the simple tactic of staying still until the daemon chose his target and attacked it. At that point the other three slipped behind him and aimed at her tail or nape. When the Naga was too weak to slip away again, Gladio cut off her head. Both halves of her body began to dissolve.
"like rotten flesh," Gladio couldn't help but thinking, resting a hand to his mouth so as not to vomit, and the creature's voice, her fucking lips still moving on her decapitated head, didn't improve the situation.

"Give me back... my baby."

*Oh, sweet Six.* Gladio rubbed his eyes, shivering, and had to lean back against the wall and breathe deeply. He couldn't stop but staring at the spot where the creature had dissolved.

The others weren't less shocked than him. "Is this what happens to those infected by the Starscourge, then?" Noctis was looking at Ignis as if he could give him answers.

"It is certainly not the first one we eliminated, Noctis. Although, I must admit, this daemon was particularly disturbing. But do not forget that even if they look like goblins or fireballs, even those creatures once were human."

"We too, then, are risking...?"

Ignis shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't answer you. No one has ever been able to study the Starscourge in Lucis. The Empire has managed to find ways to control daemons to use them in war, but all information is secret. As for us, are we somehow immune? After all, since we left, we breathed a great deal of miasma, especially in the dungeons. Maybe we haven't breathed enough of it to get infected. Unfortunately no one can know."

"If this ever happened to me," Noctis whispered, "you know what you must do."

Gladio shuddered, and for a moment he felt he was out of breath. He stood up, his legs shaking a little. "Noct, cut the crap. If this would happen to you, we would do everything to get to Princess Lunafreya, wherever she is, before the plague could turn you into that. None of us will end this way."

"Is there really no way to cure it?" Prompto was pale as well. Gladio still couldn't believe that, before meeting that talking anthropomorphic daemon, none of them had fully realized the danger they ran.

"No," Ignis answered impatiently. "There is still no cure, except for the magic of the Oracle. The miasma is more concentrated inside closed places like this, it is true, but it is also in the air, carried by the wind. So far, Her Grace Lunafreya, by traveling tirelessly, has managed to avoid it spreading and to circumscribe the cases of infection, but no one is really safe."

"Try not to think about it. We can't do anything to prevent the infection if not by hiding somewhere and, I don't know about you, but I'm not going to do it." Gladio preceded them inside the tunnel. He wanted to leave that cursed place behind. He couldn't help but continue to wonder what had pushed the woman who that creature once had been in the Fociaugh Cave. The more he tried to get rid of the thoughts – were the daemons aware of their condition? Did they suffer? – the more he kept hearing the desperate voice of the Naga asking about her baby.

The temperature increased considerably and as they went on they found out why: the tunnel led into a partially exposed cave and the sunlight penetrating from above had allowed the vegetation to thrive there. The Stone, like a fossilized arrow, seemed to have grown out of the rock itself.

Gladio summoned his weapon – Ignis and Prompto, he saw, had done the same – as Noctis approached. They had expected to fight again to prove to the Fulgurian they were worthy of his alliance, but as soon as Noctis touched the rock, an electric shock hit the Stone and seemed to be absorbed by his body. When Noctis turned to them, his eyes had turned purple. It lasted only a
moment, then his friend winked, parted his lips, and took a deep breath.

"For a moment I thought I was dead," he whispered hoarsely. "But the Fulgurian gave me his blessing. I saw Luna. She has been here too. She interceded for me."

"What?" Prompto exclaimed. "Do you mean we don't have to fight? No lightning bolts?"

"Are you sorry about it?" Gladio pricked, patting him on his back. "Evidently some gods are friendlier than others." He felt unspeakably relieved. *Oh, for the Six, it's over. I still can't believe it.*

When they came out of the cave, the sky – now evening – had returned cleared. The wood was deserted, silent, the temperature mild. Their joy was short-lived because the most massive Imperial airship they had ever seen flew over them and, despite it being dark and the trees dense, they hurried to find shelter among the rocks to prevent Imperials from seeing them.

It had just moved away and Noctis' phone rang. "Hello?"

Gladio couldn't hear the answer, but his friend activated the speakerphone. "Hi, Cindy. You can speak. Everyone can hear you."

"Hi there, Your Majesty! I called for your car. I've got good news and bad."

"Cindy?" Prompto shouted happily. "How are you?"

She ignored him. "The good news is that I found the Regalia. The bad is that it's inside an Imperial base."

"We imagined that," Noctis sighed.

"Cheating shop owners is easy, but with the Empire it's all a different matter."

"Don't worry," Ignis replied. "You were precious, Cindy. From here on we take care of it. Could you send us the coordinates of the base?"

"Sure, just gimme a minute. Good luck. And be careful!" She hung up.

Prompto sighed deeply. "How cool she is, huh?"

"Prompto, you saw this isn't going to work," Gladio teased him. "Change your target."

"Never!" he retorted. "I'm serious. It was love at first sight."

"An *unrequited* love at first sight."

"Don't flatter yourself just because women like you."

"If only. That's Ignis. Women are scared of me."

"What about Silia, then?"

Gladio scratched his hairline, smiling. Joking around with Prompto and talking about Silia was pushing away his terrible thoughts about daemons' human nature and the possibility of becoming themselves one of them. He touched her plate in his pocket, a superstitious gesture he used to make very often by then. "She doesn't count, I told you. She cuts daemons into slices."

"If you have finished to amiably talking about trivialities..." Ignis intervened, but he was smiling. He
and Noctis were examining the map sent by Cindy on the phone. "It seems that the Regalia was on that mobile base that just flew over. Let's go back to the Wiz Chocobo Station and rent four birds. It's not heading to Gralea, so I guess it's going to have to stop somewhere."

III

"Oh, for Odin's cock!"

Silia couldn't believe her eyes. She reached Tina with quick steps, almost running, and pulled her up by yanking her shirt. "Five times. I told you five fucking times: don't close your eyes when you're parrying! Are you deaf as well as blind?"

The woman's face was a mask of shame and blood. "I apologize, Hartwood. Won't happen ever again."

"That's what you said the other four times!" Her hands were almost itching. She took a deep breath with her lips tight so as not to start screaming. Zen, she told herself, for the twentieth time that day. Magellano would have smacked Tina behind her knees with his cane. But she wasn't Magellano, she had never liked his brutal methods, and she couldn't smack Cor Leonis' men or Ezma Auburnbrie's hunters behind their knees, although perhaps some of them would deserve it. "Go and wash your face and get some ice. Good thing it was a stick and not a sword."

Tina retreated. She was sturdy, and though she had never handled a sword in her whole life, she had the physical structure for drubbing the hell out of a man, yet she kept on fearing the blows, so – inevitably – she ended up taking them. Silia watched her leave with a discomforted sigh. Dr. Derren would again complain to Cor Leonis about the extra work her classes involved, as if she was responsible for all that incapacity.

She heard a laugh behind her that made her brow furrow from spite. She lowered herself to grab Tina's stick and threw it with a twisting movement between the boy's ankles, causing him to fall. "Torvald, don't you dare to laugh if you're not even able to avoid a fucking stick in your feet."

He opened his mouth to argue – Torvald was unbearably argumentative and braggart – but Silia stuck a killer look in his face. "Yessir!" he shouted, getting to his feet and straightening his arms at his sides. "I'll do better next time, ma'am!"

"As if." Silia leaned her hands on her hips. They were all looking at her, waiting to know what her next victim would be, as the Glaive recruits did during Magellano's lessons.

"Hartwood, the Marshal is looking for you."

The palpable relief in the volunteers' expressions pissed her off. They had asked her to train them. What did they expect, a fitness circuit with abs and weight lifting? Running laps? Foam swords? Without turning around, Silia raised her arm in Darius' direction to let him know that she had heard him.

"Don't think you get away with it like this. Repeat a hundred times the flanking-dodging-lunge scheme that I have taught you to counter the magiteks. If I'm off to a hunt and I am not back same-day, tomorrow repeat it two hundred times. If you take advantage of my absence to slack off, remember that you aren't smart, but assholes, and that shit's on you."

Darius was leaning against the fence that bounded the training camp, and was smoking a cigarette with his usual relaxed and ironic air.

"Don't say a word," she prevented him from speaking, lighting a cigarette as well. Cor Leonis didn't
like to wait, but at that moment she needed to smoke so as not to kill anyone.

"I'm not going to say a word."

"Those from Insomnia are the worst ones. Even the City Guards aren't as good as the hunters."

"Any doubts about it?"

"No," she admitted. She dropped the ashes. "Do you know what the Marshal wants to tell me? An urgent hunt?"

"I don't think so," he replied, putting his cigarette out under the heel of his boot. He added no more, though Silia was rather convinced that the Marshal consulted with Darius about almost every matter.

"Did any of the volunteers complain to him about me? If so, just tell me and I'll smash his or her face. I don't force anyone to come to my sessions and what I'm doing here with them is a watered-down training."

"Yeah, I figured as much, judging by the bloody faces and broken bones they get every day in the infirmary," Darius said. "Go to the Marshal, Hartwood. I think your guys will take a breath for a couple of days."

When she entered the Marshal's pavilion Silia found him together with Dustin Ackers. She was incredulous not to see Monica Elshett as well: the two were practically inseparable.

"Good afternoon, Hartwood," Ackers greeted her, rising from the chair he was occupying and bowing his head formally. Ackers was at least twenty years older than her and was an officer of the Crownsguard, so even if they still were in a civil society – and not in a ramshackled and noisy camp where hunters, Guards and civilians either from the Crown City and the outlands lived cheek-by-jowl – he had no duty to address her so solemnly, but who knows why the man loved conventionality.

"Good afternoon, Ackers. Please don't stand up for me. Marshal, good afternoon. Did you want to see me?" She stood, her arms folded, waiting for instructions.

Cor Leonis nodded. "Hi, Hartwood. They told me that the wound in your shoulder is almost healed."

Silia held back an amused smile. She knew that everyone in the camp continued to keep an eye on her and to report her movements to the Marshal; it didn't bother her, especially since Cor Leonis was giving carte blanche to her about everything. "I confirm that, Marshal." She moved her left elbow up and down to show him that she had no problems. Her shoulder joint was still a bit stiff, actually, but that she didn't tell him.

"Then I hope you won't mind if I send you on a business trip about a delicate matter. Sit next to Ackers."

Silia obeyed and sat down on the wooden stool he had pointed out to her, in front of his desk cluttered with papers. She folded her hands in her lap and waited.

"I told you that at the moment the Prince has two objectives: to prove himself worthy of the Astrals' alliance, with Princess Lunafreya's intercession, and to retrieve the Royal Arms belonging to the Ancient Kings of Lucis. As you know, they have recovered four of them. Ezma Auburnbrie has promised rewards to any hunter who will report useful information about ruins and tombs, but so far nothing useful has come up." The Marshal paused, looked at Ackers, then returned to look at her. "Hartwood, you told me that you didn't receive an education, but that you've read the Cosmogony
and several biographies of the Old Kings. I know you're not just teaching volunteers how to fight, but explaining to them what's out there, answering their questions about the history of the war waged by the Empire, about the Imperial technology, about the daemons." Another pause, this time longer.

She understood that the Marshal wanted her to confirm or deny. "Everyone is telling you a lot about me, Marshal, and it flatters me, but I've only read some books for personal curiosity. Probably any graduated crown citizen born and raised in Insomnia knows as much as I do."

"Unfortunately," Cor Leonis went on, cracking his knuckles, "here at the camp we don't have many graduated crown citizens who are also able to fight. I need someone who can infiltrate Insomnia, stay there for a few days and get out of it unharmed. I want you and Ackers to get into the Citadel, to what's left of the Royal Library. Recover all the books in which you think there may be hints of where the Royal Arms might be. Ackers will lead the expedition: he knows more than all of us put together about such things. You will take with you a couple of people for support, no more, because it is a low-profile mission."

Ackers' appearance corresponded almost in a fun way to that of a person who, to use Cor Leonis' words, knows more than all of us put together: not young anymore, serious and troubled looking, short-sighted and with an incipient baldness. Probably under his white shirt and vest he also had muscles, or he wouldn't be in the Crownguard, but she could hardly figure him for combat. Silia smiled, thinking back to when Gladio had taken her to the Royal Library of Insomnia; she had felt so dazed that she didn't know which book to browse first. Gladio had told her that it contained at least a million and a half volumes.

"It will take three or four days," Silia mused aloud. "As long as there's something left of it. The Citadel was bombed. When I left Insomnia it was still standing, but they hadn't yet unleashed the Diamond Weapons. Even assuming that the Library still exists, we will have to get a van to transport the books outside the city. A little rowdy, for a low-profile mission, if I may say so. Moreover, we don't know what remains of the Imperial forces within the city."

Cor Leonis beckoned to cut her short. "These are all things I already know, Hartwood. Do you want to back out?"

It wasn't an offer, but an intimidation, and Silia felt herself blushing with spite. "Marshal, please don't accuse me of cowardice. I'm not backing out. I'm just putting all the calculable risks and eventualities on the plate, as ten years in war have taught me."

"And since I've fought a war for thirty years, either inside or outside of Insomnia, Hartwood," the Marshal replied without raising his voice, "do not believe I haven't put them on the plate before you. We are few, I need every one of you, and I don't want you to kill yourselves on a suicide mission. If you let me talk, Hartwood, we'll eviscerate all the problems one by one."

Silia blushed again, this time embarrassed. She would never have allowed herself such a lack of respect with Titus Drautos. "I apologize. I'm listening to you."

Cor Leonis retrieved a rolled up sheet from a box behind him. He spread it on the table above all the other papers, holding it propped up with a half-full cup of coffee in a corner and with his cell phone in another. "The map of Insomnia. I placed hunters, along with my Guards Irwin and August, to keep an eye on the gates of the city. The bulk of the troops seem to have retreated. The Crystal has already been stolen, the King is dead, the surviving population is evacuated, and there is nothing left in Insomnia that interests Aldercapt. However, he has no intention of letting the crown citizens return before they have officially proclaimed it Imperial territory."

"What is he waiting for?" Silia asked, taking advantage of his pause.
"Having the Ring in his possession. Aldercapt owns the Crystal, but without the Ring of the Lucii he can't convey its energy. He's waiting to have full powers to accommodate himself without too much effort in the throne left empty by the death of the King and the Prince, murdered by rebel terrorists who, with the help of the Kingsglaives, have placed bombs at the Citadel and stolen the Crystal from the Shrine. They left some garrisons to control the gates and certainly also inside the city, even if, as you have pointed out before, we don't know of what entity. Entering discretely won't be so easy, I have to acknowledge that."

Silia scratched her eyebrow. "A little while ago I said we need a van. What if it was an Imperial van?"

Cor Leonis' lips crinkled. "Incidentally, that's what I thought as well. The Imperials are building several bases in Leide, as you know. We will recover a van, uniforms and false insignia. You will show yourselves to the east gate declaring that you've been charged to stock up weapons from the Citadel Training Hall. This was Ackers' idea."

Ackers took off his glasses and began to clean them with a flaw of his shirt, embarrassed. "If we manage to pass," he shielded himself, "that's still the easiest part. Once inside, we don't know what we'll find."

The Marshal nodded once more. "Exactly. Once inside the city, first of all, I want you to evaluate the circumstances. How many magiteks have been left around? Any armored cuirasses? Be ready and discreet and, if this isn't worth the fight, just come back. You can't defeat an army, and we don't even have the mathematical certainty that recovering those books will help our cause." The Marshal paused again, tapping his fingers on the table top. "How many men would you take with you, Hartwood?"

Silia blinked, amazed that he was interested in her opinion. "No more than three or we would attract the attention of the Imperials. At least one of them should be from Insomnia. We'll need someone who can drive the van, drive it quickly and know the streets well." She thought a few seconds. "Jenkins. He was a security guard. He used to drive armored cars. He knows the streets of Insomnia, he shoots decently, he has balls. I beg your pardon, Marshal," she added with a sneer.

He motioned her to continue. "Who else?"

"A man very good at firing; fast and silent, possibly a hunter. Kamal. And perhaps Colby," she added. "He's good with his sword. They're both young but skilled. And they too have... backbone."

Ackers turned to openly probe the Marshal's reaction. "It's just a suggestion," Silia explained. "If you think there are more suitable men or women, Ackers, I'd be glad to listen to your opinion."

"Apart from Ackers, wouldn't you rather bring with you at least another Crownguard, Hartwood?"

"Marshall," Silia smiled. "Alexandra, Devan, Adrian, Marvin... they are skilled and well trained, but they don't trust me. You can order them to cooperate, or to obey Ackers, but I must know that they will be there where they have to be when it's needed, ready to listen to an instruction or a warning, for the sake of my life and their own. I'd like to have Darius, of course, but I know you often consult him, Marshal, so I think he'll be more useful here. Apart from that..." she winked, "you never know what could happen, and losing a Crownguard is better than losing two."

"If I may, Hartwood, I hope I won't miss a single one. Nor a Kingsglave."

"Marshall, please," she replied irritably. "I've already told you that..."
"That you are no longer a Kingsglaive. You can repeat it as much as you like," Cor Leonis simply said. "You can stop wearing your uniform, repudiate what your Captain and some of your comrades did, but you still remain a Kingsglaive, Hartwood, whether you like it or not."

Silia didn't reply, but when she had discovered Titus Drautos' true identity, the day she had gotten to the camp, she had disowned the Kingsglaives, and Cor Leonis could command what was left of Lucis' armed forces, but he couldn't command her heart.

"To get back to the plan," the Marshal went on, "I trust you, Hartwood. Go and summon the guys you've chosen. We will study the details of the plan together. Don't order them to come. They are volunteers, so they are free to refuse. Moreover, as you said, you need men you can trust, and you can't trust men who have been forced to join a task."

Silia got up from the stool, but Cor Leonis still held her back with a gesture. "I almost forgot. I've already said this to Ackers. We have no time, I told you, and I'll repeat it: once you get to Insomnia, go directly to the Library. No detours. No research for corpses or burials. No revenge. What is dead is dead, and we must think of the living. Is this clear to you?"

She nodded slowly and leaned her right hand to her chest. Cor Leonis stared at her for a few seconds more until she added, "It is clear to me, Marshal. We will follow your instructions to the letter."

IV

Gladio gave himself to what he hoped would be his last ride on a chocobo. He couldn't wait to again put his ass on the leather seats the Regalia.

Ignis, it looked like, was already beyond that point. More comfortable than him on the back of the chocobo, he turned to get close to him and Noctis. "It seems that, after all, we still have to find a way to reach Altissia. The port of Galdin Quay remains under Imperial control."

Noctis nodded. "I was thinking about that too. It occurred to me... when my father went to seek the alliance of Accordo, thirty years ago, he used a yacht. He, Clarus, Weskham, Cid and Cor set sail from a secret port near Cape Caem. If we're lucky, the yacht is still there."

"Of course, the secret port!" Gladio snapped his fingers, and in doing so he risked losing his balance. He hurried back to straighten. "We can ask Cor. And Iris can reach us there."

"Let's stop at the Sothmocke haven," Ignis approved. "But only for a couple of hours – just long enough to rest properly, call Cor Leonis and think about how to infiltrate into the Aracheole fortress. I believe it would be wise to operate beneath the cover of night."

After setting up the camp, while Ignis was cooking their dinner, they called Cor to inform him about the Trial of Ramuh and the position of the Regalia, and to ask him about the royal yacht at Cape Caem. Cor confirmed that the yacht was probably still there, as the vehicle needed many repairs and doubted that anyone had bothered to steal it in the unlikely event that the hidden harbor had been discovered, and offered to send Monica to escort Iris, Talcott and Jared the next day. Even if the yacht hadn't been there, Cor said, Cape Caem would be a safe place for his sister; certainly much safer than Lestallum where, he had known, the Imperials had started asking questions around for a few days. Gladio bit his tongue to not suggest that he entrusted Silia with such a task. A part of him hoped that they could meet at Cape Caem, even for a couple of hours.

Disappointed, he texted Iris to warn her to get ready and stay away from the imperials until Monica arrived. His sister answered with five smiley faces and the reassurance that they would be careful.
It was ten o'clock and they allowed themselves a couple of hours to eat calmly and rest before facing the infiltration. While they still had the plates in their hands Ignis, as if he had waited all his life for that moment, stood up, adjusted the glasses on his nose, and crossed his arms behind, walking back and forth with the serious and intimidating behavior of a commander who was revising his men.

"Any brilliant idea, Specs?" Noctis asked with a cheeky smile, resting his elbows on his knees.

"We would be vulnerable in a frontal assault. That's why I suggested to act by nighttime. We have a few more possibilities to sneak in without attracting attention."

"No breakthrough action, then?" Gladio joked, crossing his arms behind his head and sinking even more into the folding deck chair.

"No," Ignis replied, challenging him with his gaze to interrupt him again with stupid questions. "This time it is not a blitz, but a mission of infiltration and extraction."

For Odin, now he talks like Silia. He raised his arms in an apologetic gesture. They would have liked each other, Ignis and Silia, when they met. They probably would have coalesced against him.

Satisfied with his lack of reply, Ignis continued. "We know nothing, unfortunately, of the planimetry of the base. We will have to move cautiously, trying to eliminate as few enemies as possible so as not to alarm others. The base is gigantic, as you have seen, and even though we're used to colliding with the magiteks now, we cannot afford to engage a fight with five hundred of them."

"Good," Prompto applauded. "Thanks, Ignis. Since we don't know anything else, I guess we can end the briefing here and play King’s Knight until it's late night."

Ignis opened his mouth, ready to warn him with his index finger, but closed it without saying anything, evidently because Prompto, for once, was right.

Chapter End Notes

"Nec mortale sonans" > "(a voice that) resounds like no mortal one"
Vae victis!

Chapter Summary

The Royal Retinue retrieves the Regalia, but Gladio's pride suffers a serious wound. Moreover, Iris call them with a really bad news. Silia enters the devastated and empty Crown City.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

25

Vae victis!

I

"Remember, our target is the Regalia. We can't face a whole garrison, so we must avoid it by all means to be uncovered. I'm talking about you, Noctis, and your nasty habit of running forward without thinking and without looking over your shoulder."

Noctis snorted. "I'll be careful. But remember that if the sun rises we lose all our advantage."

"You're right as well. But we still have several hours of darkness so, no rash actions. Is that clear to you, too?" Ignis added, turning to him and Prompto.

Gladio raised his thumb in a gesture of assent. Bent behind a box at the edge of the base, he kept looking around cautiously. As they had already assumed when it had flown over them, the Aracheole stronghold was huge – at least two thousand square feet. Who knew what hell of technology was employed to carry such weight. The Empire was truly avant-garde, he had to recognize, bitterly, once again.

They followed Ignis, crawling between pallets, tanks and caissons, but had to stop when they saw two magitek sentinels on patrol. They couldn't pass without being seen.

Ignis also noticed it. "It's all yours, Noctis. On my mark," he whispered, waving to Noct. "Three, two, one…"

The nearest sentry gave them its back.

"Now!"

Noctis warped onto the magitek, dropping it to the ground and killing it with a single – perfect – blow to the back of its head. He was so fast that the second sentry didn't notice anything, and met the same end as the first. Gladio couldn't help but smile admiringly.

"That was cool, Noct," he complimented with a pat. "Let's keep this rhythm."

Proceeding on the road, moving carefully among the big inactive tanks, they entered the heart of the base. The cone of a searchlight moved without a regular pattern over an open space with no cover.
Before he could do it himself, Ignis snapped, grabbed Noctis by his shoulder and pulled him out of reach.

"Pay attention, Noctis," he warned him. "A mistake here and we'll have an army on us."

Gladio understood the danger of their situation when he saw photoelectric sensors everywhere, patrols of at least twelve magitek units each one and, above all, huge armored vehicles similar to the one driven by Loqi Tummelt. The base they had sabotaged with Cor's help, in comparison, was a nursery school. And Gladio couldn't be of much help; he was quick and agile – he had to be, or he wouldn't be able to fight – but he didn't have the proper physique for a stealth mission, nor the proper weapons. His broadsword, unlike Prompto's silenced handgun, the daggers that Ignis hurled as precise as a knife thrower, and Noctis' lethal warping, was perhaps the least suitable weapon for a stealth mission, so he resigned himself to remain in the rear, ready to intervene in case they were discovered and forced to a more incisive action.

"I'd rather not deal with those armored magiteks," he whispered.

"It won't happen if we proceed cautiously and remain undetected."

"What's that?" Prompto asked, pointing to the beam of energy radiating from what Gladio imagined to be the center of the base, somewhere beyond the containers that obstructed their sight.

"I suppose it could be a magitek generator. I've read about it before. It powers up the base and probably the magitek units as well."

"What if we destroy it?" Gladio suggested.

"Too dangerous. Finding the Regalia is our primary target."

Gladio took one last look at the energy beam, but didn't insist.

They scoured all the reachable areas of the base, and had to go forward more than they expected. They had hoped that, since it wasn't a military vehicle useful to the cause of the Empire, the Regalia had been left unattended in an unprotected area, but evidently that wasn't the case or, in the worst scenario, Niffs were waiting, expecting that the Prince of Insomnia would return to claim his father's car.

At last they found it in a huge area that looked like a parking lot, cluttered with MTs, containers, tanks, cars, cranes, trailers and platforms.

"There's the old girl," Noctis whispered affectionately.

Prompto nodded. "She's a real sight for sore eyes!"

"And none the worse for her time in Imperial hands, it seems."

They ran to the car, but at that moment an unexpected cone of light illuminated them, and one of the inactive MTs turned on and moved towards them.

"Holy crap. After all our effort, we got ourselves uncovered at the very end!"

"Change of plans. Our new objective is to clear a path for the Regalia."

Gladio, pleased to be able to contribute to the success of the mission, summoned his broadsword. "Let's get movin'."
The MT was less advanced than Loqi Tummelt's; nevertheless, they had a great deal of trouble escaping the fire and the electric shocks that it hurled at them. They lured it far from the Regalia – it would have been quite comical if, after all their trouble, it had blown up because of an Imperial armor they had set in motion – and, as they had learned to do, they aimed at its legs until he unbalanced.

They beat him down, but their fight had alerted the whole base, as Ignis had warmly hoped wouldn't happen. Gladio waited for him to give the order of retreat, since – or so it seemed – he had taken charge of that operation, but it didn't happen. Obviously, even his friend couldn't decide to pull back when the Regalia was in front of their eyes.

"Gladio," Ignis said, when they could take a little breath. Other magiteks were running to attack them. "After all, I think we should destroy that generator."

"Sorry if I jinxed it, pal" he smiled. "Next time, take it from me before."

"Please, Gladio. Noctis, leave the magiteks to us and focus on the generator. Destroying it, in addition to removing energy from the base, should weaken the units and the MTs."

The magitek generator turned out to be a bizarre, cauldron-like device surrounded by panels similar to those that absorb solar energy, though, Gladio suspected it wasn't sun that powered them. A ring of light rotated clockwise, connected to a totem from which a towering column of reddish light rose; it seemed to create a dome – if he narrowed his eyes, Gladio could see the reddish reflections – all around the base. Even without needing to tighten his eyes, however, he could see the impressive array of forces heading toward them.

"What if this time we're really finished?" he heard Prompto say.

Ignis adjusted his glasses on his nose. "No room for retreat anymore."

Noctis, next to him, suddenly collapsed on his knee. Gladio reached out to get him up, fearing he'd been hurt during one of their previous fights, but out of nowhere, as if it was a mirage, a giant shadow loomed over them. He raised his head, ready to resign himself to the idea of another Imperial airship over them, but he saw a hand falling on Noctis, and, attached to that hand, the huge body of an old man holding a scepter from which energy discharges radiated. Gladio almost fell to the ground in surprise when Ramuh grabbed Noctis, lifted him up and summoned a flash of lightning that rained all around.

"I'm dead," Gladio thought, again another time since they had left Insomnia, and gritted his teeth, ready for the worst, but the electric storm unleashed by the Astral annihilated magiteks and MTs without scratching him. When the reddish light generated by the attack faded, and he could clearly see again, his hair still standing up from tension, Gladio realized that Noctis was right there next to him, unharmed as well. Prompto was on his knees in a prostrate position, his hands covering his eyes, Ignis in a guard stance with the spear in his hands, as if he had somehow tried to defend himself. He couldn't see a living soul, neither human nor bio-mechanical, still standing.

"Everyone's ok?" Noctis asked. He seemed as hallucinated as they were.

"It seems so," Ignis leaned against a stack of crates behind him. "So this is the power of the Gods?"

Prompto seemed to struggle to find the gift of the word. He stood up unsteadily. "Scary shit. I thought I would end up roasted."

"The lightning struck only our enemies. The Fulgurian knew what he was doing," Noctis replied.
"He wanted to give me a sign of his benevolence. Don't ask me how, but I know it. When everything seems lost, he will appear by our side to help us, as long as we fight to claim the Crystal."

"Even Titan, then?"

"I assume so."

Gladio shook himself, looking around. "The Fulgurian scorched the earth all around. Indeed, electrified. He also destroyed the magitek generator."

"Today," Ignis said gravely, "we slapped the Empire right in its face. This will have repercussions. Aracheole Stronghold is too big and powerful not to be held in the highest regard. Let's not push our luck anymore and retrieve the Regalia, before some airships in the area decide to come and see what happened."

"I won't ask for more," Prompto agreed.

The sun was starting to rise when, devastated by the twenty-four hours of almost relentless fighting, they reached King Regis' car.

As Ignis was opening the door on the driver's side, Prompto called their attention. "Uh, guys?"

"What else is happenin', now?" Gladio snorted, turning around.

The High Commander Ravus.

Gladio shuddered; it was inconceivable, but they had neither seen nor heard him. Where had he been while they were shooting up the stronghold? He was holding a saber, but he approached with a relaxed air – derisory, almost – not hostile. Gladio moved a few steps to his left anyway, ready to stand between him and Noctis.

Ravus ignored him. It was clear that he considered the Prince of Insomnia, betrothed to his sister, the only one of them worthy of his notice. "Long has it been, Noctis. You received the Storm blessing, I see, yet you know nothing of the consequences." He aimed his saber at Noctis, moving forward. Gladio moved to react, but he found Ravus' blade against his throat in a movement so sudden that he could hardly see it. Until then, the only people skilled with such a speed he had measured against had been Ignis, Silia, and Cor.

"Be still. All of you," Ravus said slowly, in a dry voice, looking into his eyes. "I'm here to talk, not to fight."

"I couldn't tell," Gladio retorted, humiliated, but remained motionless. A false movement and he knew that his head would roll away.

Ravus returned his attention to Noctis. "Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum..." he spat bitterly. "Heir to a crown befitting no other... Witness his splendor and glory... All hail the Chosen King."

Noctis wasn't impressed by the sour sarcasm with which Lady Lunafreya's brother had addressed him. "Awful high and mighty for an Imperial rat. You sold yourself to the enemy who invaded your homeland and killed your mother. And now you're chasing your own sister."

Noctis' words did hit the mark. In a fit of rage, the High Commander grabbed him by his throat. "I don't serve, I command!" he shouted. Gladio took advantage of his moment of distraction to escape the saber's range. He shoved him away from Noctis and set himself back between them.
"I suppose you're the king's Sworn Shield."

"You better believe it. Try again to touch him, and I'll break your arms."

"A weak shield protects naught."

Ravus brandished his saber. This time Gladio saw the blow coming and promptly summoned the broadsword to block it. If he really wanted to die, he would have served him right away. He put his feet down well to the ground and tried to drive back the blade and attack in turn, but the opponent, with only one arm, kept the block.

No way.

Incredulous, Gladio grabbed the broadsword with both his hands. He had countered Titan's fist. The Archaean. One of the Six. Still, Ravus Nox Fleuret fought off his huge sword and hit him in the stomach with such speed and power that he couldn't resist or avoid the attack, and he was thrown back against the side of the Regalia. Breathless, he fell back to the ground, sure he had been gutted, but he didn't see any blood; at the last moment, Ravus must had tilted the blade and hit with the flat edge.

"Gladio!" Prompto was next to him, ready to hurl him back on his feet, but over the pain and the nausea and the inability to breathe, the anger prevailed. He shoved his friend violently, coughing.

"Ravus!" he tried to scream, but only a ridiculous whistle came out from his lips.

"Wanna go?" Noctis was advancing towards the enemy. "Deal with me."

"As you wish. Show me what you can do, Noctis. Should the Chosen fail, that too is fate."

Gladio leaped to his feet, ready to jump on him, pain or not, humiliated or not, but a familiar voice immobilized them all, including Ravus.

"I'd say that's far enough." Ardyn Izunia, shambling with his usual facetious tone, stepped between the two of them. Again, they hadn't heard him coming. It was as if he had just materialized there. "A hand, Your Highness?"

"Not from you," Noctis hissed.

Izunia approached again, looking around with regret, as if so much distrust offended him. "Oh, but I'm here to help. I have already shown myself as worthy of your trust twice, or not?"

"What are you up to?" Noctis asked again.

"Taking the army away."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"You'll see with your own eyes. You are loose as a goose. Take your pretty car away, no Imperial block will bother you. When next we meet, it'll be across the sea. Just so happens we have business of our own with the tutelary deity, don't we, High Commander?"

If they still doubted that Izunia was who he claimed to be, it was dispelled by the expression of impotent hatred that Ravus addressed him with. The High Commander lowered his sword. Only then Gladio realized that Izunia knew perfectly well that they would go to Accordo to get the alliance of Leviathan, which they had decided only that morning.
"Goodbye, Your Majesty," the Chancellor dismissed them. "And have a good journey."

He walked away to the entrance to the base. Without looking at them anymore, Ravus followed him like a dog. Gladio had to resist the temptation to hurl himself behind him and attack again.

"Who the hell was that guy?" Prompto asked.

"Ravus Nox Fleuret. Firstborn of Tenebrae and elder brother of Her Grace Lunafreya." Ignis turned to him. "Gladio, are you fine? Do you still have potions?"

"No use. I'm fine" he spat. He wasn't fine at all. He believed he had at least one cracked rib, but for the Six, he would have preferred to drag his bloody guts all over the parking lot rather than raise his head and look at his friends. Ravus Nox Fleuret had kept and then broken his block with one arm. And he had hit him. If he would have attacked and killed Noctis, he could do little to prevent it. So much for a shield.

A weak shield protects naught.

"Gladio, no time to be proud. Since we're allowed to, let's pack it up." Prompto took a potion from his pocket and broke it on him. A little pain disappeared, but not much, and especially not the morale.

"I'm not acting proud," he brayed. Finally, he managed to recognize the sound of his own voice. He wasn't acting proud because he no longer had any pride. He had been beaten, humiliated, literally put on his knees. He had felt mighty because he had clashed with Titan and had brought Noctis unscathed out of Disc of Cauthess – even there, after all, if Ardyn Izunia hadn't shown up they would have died buried by scorching rocks – and a few days after he discovered that Ravus Nox Fleuret, the High Commander of the Imperial Army, was able to kick his ass without even deigning to use his left arm.

He found himself inside the Regalia without realizing he had climbed in it. They were back on the main road and the radio was announcing in a monotonous voice that the Imperial checkpoints in Duscae had been withdrawn. His friends, apparently unaware of his state of mind, were talking quietly.

"Izunia was of his word," Ignis commented, "I still can't understand why he stopped Ravus."

"We can't trust him."

"What if he wants to put Noctis back on the throne of Lucis?"

"And why should he? It was he who proposed the truce that marked the fate of Insomnia."

"So the blond guy is Luna's brother?"

"And the High Commander of the Imperial Army. Despite being the heir to the throne of Tenebrae, a protectorate of the Empire."

"I do believe it. He's strong as hell."

Gladio gave a violent fist to the seat, frustrated. He heard Noctis ask what the hell was wrong with him. He ignored him, also because his phone was vibrating in his pocket. He didn't feel like talking to anyone, and pulled it out just to distract himself from the discomfort he felt.

Gladdy, I know you're very busy, but I have to talk to you. Can I?
The tone of Iris’ message worried him. He called her immediately. "Iris, are you all right?"

His sister spoke in a humid voice, as if she had been crying or was about to do so. "Gladdy, I'm sorry."

_Oh, sweet Six, please let her be safe._ "What are you sorry about? Are you okay, Iris?"

"I am, but Jared..."

"What happened to Jared?"

"We couldn't leave for Cape Caem." Her voice broke. "Imperial troops in Lestallum... not just those magiteks. I mean, soldiers in the flesh. They were asking about Noctis and... and then Jared..."

"Iris, I need you to calm down." It was he who needed to calm down. "If you don't explain, I can't figure out how to help you."

"I couldn't do anything!" This time Iris was clearly crying. "They came to the Leveille. Talcott has let slip around that we are from Insomnia. They wanted to know about Noctis. Jared confronted them... he said that even if we had known where he was, he would never have told them. And they killed him!"

Jared. Killed. Gladio bent his torso on his knees in a helpless gesture. The pain in his chest increased, as did his anger. An unarmed elder, killed like that. He opened his mouth to say something, but for a moment no sound came out. "Iris, please calm down. Is Talcott okay?"

"Yes! They left immediately after! But, Gladio..." she sobbed. "It's my fault. I should have done something! Jared was old... I should have tried to defend him!"

"Don't be silly, Iris. It's not your fault. It's not Talcott's fault. The fault is of those damn Imperials." He tried to put his thoughts in order. "Iris, listen to me. We are a couple of hours from Lestallum. Monica must be on her way. You and Talcott don't move from the Leveille. Do you have something to defend yourselves with, Iris? Anything?"

Her sister sniffled. "Jared's gun."

"Load it and be careful. We'll go as quickly as we can."

II

Silia leaned against the headrest. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she thought herself again going on a mission with her squad – the rolling and jolting of the vehicle, the weight of the weapons resting on her knees, the casual chatter of her companions in the cabin – and felt a comforting sense of warmth before realizing that that routine was now lost forever. Sarah, Legato, Caesar and Samuel were dead, just as Thomas and many other comrades had died before them.

The mission that had been entrusted to her was much easier than many actions she had undertaken in war, but she was concerned by two substantial differences: the first, she wasn't familiar with the men who were with her. Ackers had been personally chosen by the Marshal, who wouldn't have involved him if he hadn't been more than certain of his skills, but she had known the other three just for a few days; she believed she had well judged them and was right to bet on their nerve and obedience, but they were inexperienced, and she felt responsible for their safety. The other substantial difference, not a trifle, was that she could no longer count on magic – she would have to rely on her twin swords. Without magic she had knocked out a Behemoth and several other beasts, but this time it wasn't a matter of eliminating a single target or a herd, but – if it would come to that – surviving
continuous clashes in environmental conditions where warping could have made the difference.

"Are you feeling nervous, Hartwood?" Kamal Rohan's raspy voice asked. It contained no trace of irony or derision – the young man was just probing her to understand how nervous he must be in turn. It was a common dynamics that Silia had witnessed on the front: rookies tend to identify a sort of 'shitmus test', that is, a self-confident comrade to keep an eye on to determine when they should start worrying. She and Legato had been those of Squad 6.

Silia opened her eyes. "I'm always nervous on a mission, Kamal. Nervousness is that thing that makes you keep your senses alert even when you think that everything is fine, and that as a result saves your ass when you find out that it's not. If you're nervous, Kamal, fine. As long as you're not scared."

"No, ma'am," he reassured her, rearranging the rifle in the crook of his elbow. If he was frightened, he was hiding it well: his face was quiet, his jaw relaxed, his lips arched in a grimace that was all too bold. "It's Colby who's soiling himself, Hartwood," he added, mockingly, tilting his head towards him.

"Kamal, stop it or I'll break your face," Colby Vasil growled, on her right; he had slightly blushed. "I'm perfectly fine, Hartwood, word of honor," he hastened to justify himself. He was lying, but at an acceptable level, and after all Silia preferred Colby's discreet nervousness to the arrogant boldness of Kamal.

"Easy, kids."

The most peaceful of all was Jenkins Galeor. He was driving silently, tapping his fingers from time to time on the steering wheel, smoking one cigarette after another as if he was in the traffic of Insomnia. He had barely uttered a hundred words since they had left Orior – that's how by then everybody used to call Cor Leonis' camp – and not for a matter of nervousness: even when she was training him, Jenkins, who was between forty and forty-five, kept a reserved and subdued attitude, and looked like he was convinced that the worst in his life was now behind him. A dangerous approach, but if she hadn't been in war for ten years, Silia herself would have chosen him as a shitmus test.

Ackers, who didn't look as comfortable as Jenkins and Kamal were, despite being an officer of the Crownsguard, leaned forward from the front seat. "Ms. Hartwood, would you mind showing us Niflheim's military salute again?" he asked for the third time, as if that slightest aspect of their cover was substantial.

Silia nodded anyway, and showed it to them once again: she bent her left arm at a right angle with her fist closed and slightly inclined her wrist towards her shoulder, then girded her left forearm at half height with her right hand.

Their truck was now covering the bridge that led to the East Gate of the Crown City. Soon they would be able to clearly see the garrison. Irwin and August had been on watch for two days, the Marshal had said, and they had reported seven magiteks, a MT-K, and an Imperial officer who'd switch with another officer every eight hours.

Ackers sighed. "Be ready. Here is the block. The composition of the garrison is as expected."

"Good," Silia approved. "Not too many. We will try to enter peacefully, as planned, but if it proves impossible, we can kill them without too much trouble. If so, leave the MT-K to me."

"Let's hope we won't need it." Ackers rearranged his Imperial uniform's beret.
Silia, Colby and Kamal straightened up into a composed position as the magiteks of the garrison lined in a cordon deployment along the road. Jenkins slowed down, pulling the van near the officer who, rifle in hand, had signaled them to stop.

"Good morning, Sergeant," Ackers said firmly, producing an impeccable Imperial salute, immediately imitated by Jenkins. "Lieutenant Sid Juliusz, Division 15, from Stronghold Domen. We have a pass signed by Commander Alexander Albin to restock weapons. Sewerym, handle the documentation to the sergeant."

The Imperial sergeant took the dossier from Jenkins' hands, opened it distractedly, then bowed to look at her and the two young men in the back seats. All three hurried to salute.

"Restock weapons? You will find as many of them as you want at the Citadel, sir. There is an arsenal there. Do you need any other magitek support units?"

Ackers uttered a theatrical sigh, leaning an elbow against the dashboard. "Hm, may I be frank with you, Sergeant...?"

"Eliezer, Sir," the Imperial replied respectfully.

"Sergeant Eliezer. I have not brought any, and I thank you for your kind offer but I would rather decline. I'm an old-fashioned type. I paid my dues in the army, long time ago, by doing all the dirty jobs that now these undoubtedly useful devices do, but even if they are convenient they disgust me. When I can, I prefer to move with my team." He gestured to them. "Therefore when Commander Albin observed that, with all the weapons in Insomnia, it was a pity to leave them there to rust without anyone using them, I said we would go to retrieve them. I've never seen Insomnia you know, Sergeant, and even my comrades here were curious. We will do some exercise and enjoy the view of the center of the Crown City finally reduced to rubble by our troops."

Too many details, Silia disapproved, the best way to blow up a cover, but her esteem for Ackers increased by a good measure when the Imperial sergeant gave a dry laugh, returning the documents to Jenkins. "Enjoy the landscape then, Lieutenant, Sir. If you change your mind and need a mechanical hand to transport the weapons, ask Captain Radovan who's on guard at the Citadel. I am positive he will provide you with some units."

"Oh, I really appreciate it, but my men will cover that. I do not want them to soften."

Sergeant Eliezer motioned to someone beyond the cabin and the automatic gate opened. "Have a nice day, Sir. And good work, guys. I advise you not to divert: we have cleared the main roads from abandoned cars to move freely, but the others are still cluttered with debris and obstacles. If you go straight for six or seven miles you will easily reach the center. You can't go wrong."

Jenkins set off without a word. They passed the gate and a few seconds later they were darting on the main road of Insomnia. No one complimented Ackers for his excellent acting skills, no one rejoiced to have passed the first obstacle without any difficulty. Colby and Kamal had never been in the Crown City, and were ravished by what they saw beyond the window; as for Jenkins and Ackers, they were certainly experiencing what she felt: a sense of hallucinating unreality. The capital of the kingdom of Lucis, which at the time of the fall was inhabited by more than a hundred thousand people, had become a ghost town. As Silia stretched her ears, there was no sound other than the roar of their van's engine.

"Until now," Ackers said grimly, "I could not really believe Insomnia was empty."

"It's unbelievable, isn't it?" Jenkins echoed. "How could those damned Imperials evacuate more than..."
a hundred thousand people in a few days? I have heard of five thousand victims on the day of the fall of the city, but they are one-twentieth."

Kamal stretched on her left. "It seems that many have taken refuge in the archipelago northeast of Cavaugh, isn't it, Corporal Ackers?"

"Nyx and Libertus' homeland. "Oh, really?" Silia couldn't help but smiling. "Such an irony. The crown citizens went to seek asylum to the lands of the immigrants who they despised."

Ackers turned to look at her with a surprised and hard expression, and from this she realized that she had leaked a vein of disdain decidedly out of place in a moment like that, as they crossed the devastated city. She bit her lower lip, but didn't retract. Ackers opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Colby's stifled exclamation.

"Damn, never seen anythin' like that!" Colby certainly was referring to the shape of the Citadel, now clearly visible over the horizon.

"You can say that again, buddy," Kamal sided him. "And look at how many other dizzying buildings there are around the Citadel. I traveled a lot, but I'd never seen houses taller than four or five floors, not even in Lestallum."

Silia perfectly understood their amazement. The first time she had come to Insomnia, seventeen years ago, she had wondered how the hell there could be such a place in the same world she had lived in up to that time. They had kept their heads tilted upward to look at the top of the skyscrapers so long that at the end of the day neither she nor Marius could move their necks anymore. Ironically, they had ended up fighting to the death by falling from the eighteenth floor of the Citadel.

"Well, guys, welcome to Insomnia," Jenkins said bitterly, without taking his eyes off the road. "Once upon a time... what the hell am I saying, only two weeks have passed... it was a little more lively than that. I would offer you a drink at my place, but who knows if my house is still standing."

Nobody answered his sad wit and, for some time, they returned to looking at the city in silence. Insomnia's plant was almost perfectly geometric: Silia had never seen it from above because when she came back on a helicopter after her injury she wasn't conscious, but she knew that the area protected magically by the Wall had the shape of four enormous parallel pentagons that intersected in the Citadel Square. Not all the territory was built; the extreme suburbs were green with meadows and woods, as if someone had remembered at the last moment that a man can't live surrounded by cement alone.

Once inside, the Marshal had said, evaluate the situation. Silia did that: the suburbs were deserted; they didn't see a living soul until they entered the real perimeter of the city, and even there – at least on the main road they were traveling – she counted less than fifty scattered units and eleven Imperial vehicles similar to theirs, plus two airships. But everyone's attention, more than by the Imperial troops left stationed, was attracted by the desolating conditions of the city center: most of the buildings were gutted and collapsed. The road had been cleared, as Eliezer had informed them, but only enough as to allow the passage of a large vehicle; the debris had been piled on the sides of the road and on the sidewalk. They didn't see any, but Silia was sure that they hadn't had trouble stacking up corpses in the same way.

"Not much," she commented. "I feared worse. If we estimate that there are as many others of them in the other main roads of the city, we get to two hundred magiteks. Certainly there are others inactive in the Imperial means and in the airships. Others in the Citadel, maybe four hundred in total?"

Colby shivered visibly. "Not much? We are five. If they come at us, it takes just forty of them to kill
us."

"Then let's make sure it doesn't happen."

Nobody obstructed them. Without needing to ask him, Jenkins slowed just before they reached the Citadel Square. Predictably, it was in disastrous conditions: the bombings, the Diamond Weapons, the crazy escape of the citizens who, at the time of the attack, were crowded to watch the treaty signing ceremony, had devastated the pavement. Even there, the Imperials had worked to clear the worst. The Citadel, in any case, was in better condition than she had feared. A magitek garrison slightly more nourished than the one at the East Gate, probably that of Captain Radovan, was stationed in front of the entrance.

"Jenkins, drive off in the underground parking lot of the Citadel," Ackers suggested. "If it's not congested with cars abandoned by fugitives, we can leave the van there. Maybe we can even go up from the inside without having to pass that block."

It turned out that part of the parking lot had collapsed. When Silia had requisitioned a car to be able to recover Iris and leave Insomnia, it hadn't happened yet. However, they parked the vehicle in a convenient place to reach the ramp they had entered, but the internal accesses to the Citadel – stairs and elevators, but the latter would have been useless because of the power failure - were impracticable.

"No use," Silia concluded. "We can't pass from here. We have to go back and show ourselves at the block. Nerve, please, guys."

They retrieved the empty crates from the back of the van and walked back.

"Entering Insomnia was shamefully easy," Kamal said.

"Yeah," Silia answered. "The sergeant at the gate was a naive, but that was what we expected - a relaxed and bored rearguard left here so that the citizens won't come back to Insomnia. Let's hope to have the same luck with the captain at the Citadel."

"Let's scrupulously stick to the plan." Ackers readjusted his beret once again. "We approach the entrance of the Citadel, we show the insignia recovered in Stronghold Domen and repeat the same story. Fortunately, the sergeant at the entrance had no news of our break-in yesterday. If for some reason the captain is aware of it and they attack us, wait for a signal from Hartwood to act."

Silia stopped, caught off guard. "You are leading this expedition, Ackers."

"I am," he conceded, walking past her. "But the war action expert is you, Hartwood. If you believe there are the conditions to break the block and still carry out the mission, we follow you. If you evaluate the situation as desperate, we will only defend ourselves and withdraw."

Silia wondered when he had discussed all this with the Marshal. She tightened her lips, crossed her arms, and went on. "Fine. Let's see how bad it is. Are you ready, guys?"

"Ready," Jenkins nodded.

"Ready, Hartwood," Colby said.

"More than ready, boss," Kamal winked.

"I hope so, because from here on no there's no way back. And, Kamal, the next time you call me 'boss' you get a punch."
At first it seemed simple. The floor of the Royal Library, looking more closely at the skyscraper, seemed to not have suffered too much damage. The Imperial guards at the entrance – Captain Radovan and two minor officers – raised their guns, but without much conviction; Ackers and Jenkins showed them their fake insignia and orders, which were examined with little interest. Apparently Sergeant Eliezer had already alerted them.

Everything seemed to spin all too smoothly, too much, and in fact Captain Radovan, almost casually, motioned for them to stop just as they were retrieving the empty crates to enter the hall.

"Kid," he said, looking at her, threatening.

Silia stood at attention, repeating the salute, but kept ready to act. She was the least credible of all, as an Imperial, because the very few women who in those years she had seen employed among their ranks had body standards quite different from her own, so she had considered more prudent to try to pass herself off as a young soldier. "Yessir," she answered, disguising her voice. "At your service, Sir."

"Who are you? You're a little too young for the army."

Ackers promptly came forward. "Our recruit, Seth Kalev; very smart and willing boy. We enlisted him in Leide and brought him here to make his bones and to show him what happens to those who oppose the Empire." He flanked himself to her and gave her a brusque and violent slap on the back of her head. Silia staggered forward and had an involuntary flutter of anger, but was quick to drive it back. Ackers was simply doing what he had to do, which was behave as a lieutenant.

The Imperial captain looked amused. "Si vis pacem para pacem," he exclaimed, performing the military salute too.

Before her comrades could betray themselves, Silia hurried to click her heels with a theatrical air and protested: "No, Sir. Si vis pacem para bellum!"

Radovan laughed. "Good, you've already learned it. I wanted to test you, kid." He glanced at Ackers. "Intelligent, even if impertinent. Obey the lieutenant, kid, or you'll get in trouble."

They went in. The huge hall of the Citadel once had been impeccably clean and functional: help desks, turnstiles, cabins, elevators – an elegant environment soberly pervaded by the sunlight that penetrated the huge transparent windows. Now the luxurious tiles were cracked, torn or bloody, the windows destroyed, cabins and desks were empty. No corpses around, as they had seen in the Citadel Square. In those two weeks, the Imperials had done a little cleaning, probably more for the smell than for an act of respect for the people killed during the attack on Insomnia.

They headed for the steps, struggling to walk loose and relaxed, in silence, carrying the empty crates. Only when they were sure they were alone, two floors higher, the men and Ackers gave themselves up to a noisy sigh.

"Sweet Six, Hartwood, I am terribly sorry," Ackers excused himself, even bowing. "Please forgive me for my disrespect."

At the thought, Silia threw her head back and laughed. "You were amazing, Ackers. I didn't expect it. When everything is back to normal, you should consider the theatrical profession."

Less amused than she was, Ackers was sweating behind his glasses. "It was something that came to my mind at the time. I should not have allowed myself."

Silia touched his arm sympathetically. "Don't think about it, Ackers. It was my lightness not to also
teach you the motto of the Imperials. That captain just wanted to mock a kid, but we took a chance. Let's hurry up. The Library is on the twelfth floor, isn't it?"

Colby poked his head over a chest to look at her. "How will we get out? It will take days. They will realize that we have entered but not gone out."

"We have already discussed it. They will look for us at the Training Hall, in the Council Room, in the Throne Hall, in the Shrine and in the Royal Apartments. No one would think we are in the Library," Silia cut short. "Let's go. And I recommend again," she repeated for the umpteenth time, climbing the stairs, "don't roam around unnecessarily. Leave everything as it is. I understand your disgust, I feel it too, and rather than leaving Insomnia in the hands of those beasts I would see it razed to the ground. But right now we can't do anything. We are only five, and we are here for a very specific reason: to recover some very important books."

Silia watched out from the corner of her eye the three men she had brought with her. Unlike Ackers, who was a little distressed, they climbed the twenty-four flights of stairs without a moment of subsidence. She had no way of further testing their abilities, fortunately, because they met no one, neither humans nor magiteks.

"Damn it," Ackers let out – it was the first time she heard him swear – when they arrived on the twelfth floor. The entrance windows to the library were in pieces. "They got here too."

Silia shook her head, doubtful, but went past him to be between him and a potential danger. She leaned over the empty frames of what had once been sliding doors. "I don't believe it. I can't see what could be of interest to the Imperials in here. It's likely that the Library was affected by external bombings. Come on," she encouraged them, gesturing for them to continue. "Sooner we start, the faster we'll finish."

They passed the acceptance – no corpses, no sign of struggle – and entered the library itself. Silia looked around in silence. Entire sections had collapsed and the shattered glass windows, the chipped parquet, the overturned chairs, the piles of books on the ground gave the idea of the end of the civilized world. However she was bewildered as the first time she had been there: there were more books than she could read in three lives.

Ackers stopped to collect two volumes on the ground. He examined the covers, cleaned them of the dust with his sleeve, and put them on a table.

"Ackers," she threatened him, with an amused tone of voice. "I know that here there's a heritage that will probably rot before we can secure it, but please don't daydream. Just think of the Royal Arms."

"Roger," he smiled, but sadly. He returned to brush the cover of one of the two books he had collected. "Ms. Hartwood, you know, it's weird. Since we entered Insomnia I have seen desolate scenes, but it's only since I entered here..." he made a gesture embracing the entire library, "that I feel a sensation of complete ruin."

Silia nodded. "I understand you, believe me. But the idea that maybe somewhere under us there are the remains of the King, and that we can't give him a proper burial, gives me even more anxiety." She didn't tell him that, somewhere, there could still be her friends' corpses. Of course Ackers as well, as a Crownsguard, had lost many comrades and friends on the day of the fall of Insomnia. "Let's focus on the mission."

Ackers nodded gravely and took a huge framed map of the library from the wall. He did it with a certain respect, a useless gesture given the conditions of the place, but appropriate. She realized only then that she herself, like Ackers, had been whispering since she had entered, and not to avoid
drawing the attention of the Imperials. The man placed the map on one of the library tables. He raised his head and peered over his glasses. "I got it for you, Ms. Hartwood, I'm home here." With his long tanned finger he pointed to some sections: "Ancient History, Room 16. Modern History, Room 17."

Silia nodded. "And Archaeology," she added, pointing to the other side of the map. "We are interested in burial sites. Room 21. Others?"

"Literature from the Ancient Era," he suggested, moving his finger to another point on the map. "Room 7. You never know."

"This will take a lifetime. Jenkins, Colby and Kamal will remain on guard. You and I should work on separate fronts, or we'll never finish."

Ackers leaned his head on the palm of his hand. "If only there was electricity... the computerized system has a search program for keywords. We could make a first skimming."

Silia blinked, rubbing her nose. "Maybe there's a still-uninterrupted backup power supply with which we can power one of the computers. I'll send the boys to look for it."

"Hartwood," he said. "While we wait, let's do some brainstorming. Let's start with the simpler keywords."

Chapter End Notes

"Vae victis!" > "Woe to the defeated"
Iris was sleeping soundly, leaning on his shoulder. That didn't surprise Gladio. Certainly that night neither she nor Talcott could sleep a wink to prepare for their departure. He gently brushed a lock of her hair out of her eyes then, realizing that Noctis was staring at him, turned, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry for what happened to Jared," Noctis whispered. "He was a good man, and he died bravely."

Gladio sighed. "He was family to us. He always took care of Iris and me as if we were his grandchildren, like Talcott. He didn't deserve to die like that."

"We should have been there with them," Noctis added, frustrated.

He didn't answer. That also tormented him, adding to the beating he had suffered in Aracheole not even twelve hours before by Ravus' hand.

"The Empire will also pay for Jared's death."

"Oh, you can bet on it," he spat, resentful.

Prompto turned from the front seat. "D'you think Talcott will be okay, Gladio?"

"He's with Monica. I'm sure they'll get to Cape Caem without a problem, shortly after us."

"That wasn't what I meant."

His lips tightened. "Talcott is smart. It was a heavy blow for him – his grandfather was the last relative he had left – but he's a strong kid. Iris will take care of him."

"Sorry if I interrupt you," Ignis' voice entered. "But I strongly suggest you to look at the view for a moment."

Gladio focused again on the road. They were crossing a bridge, and leaned to look over the parapet. He took his breath recognizing the Taelpar Crag. The molten rocks, then solidified into thin jagged filaments protruding from the precipice walls, similar to outstretched fingers, were characteristic of that cursed place.
Prompto hurried to take out his camera. "What a breathtaking landscape! Where are we, Ig?"

"Above the Taelpar Crag." Gladio answered for him.

Ignis nodded, continuing to drive. "Thousands of years ago Ifrit declared war to the other Astrals. The battle culminated in a clash between Ifrit, the Infernian, and Bahamut, the Draconian, that generated the fault. Bahamut prevailed and Ifrit was thrown in pieces atop the Ravatogh Volcano. The fault, which separates Duscae from Cleigne, symbolizes the Ifrit's detachment from the rest of the Astrals."

"Down there many brave men underwent the Gilgamesh Trial." Gladio continued to watch the crevasse until they left the bridge behind. The remnants of his grandfather Remus were still there – if credit was given to the rumors, his soul still haunted the place along with all the warriors who had tried and failed the Trial. The Gilgamesh Trial was a taboo subject for Cor Leonis, and Remus Amicitia was a taboo subject for his father, but Gladio knew enough about it from everyone else. Under the Fault there was the millennial Sworn Shield of King Somnus Lucis Caelum, ready to prove anyone who challenged him.

_Gladio, don't even think about it._

That idea clung behind his throat like a sharp hook but he had no time to get it off because a big airship – not as big as Aracheole, but enough – flew over them.

"Perfect," he complained. "Another aerial fortress. It's just what we needed."

"Look at the insignia on the sides," Prompto, who had the best eyesight of the four, noted. "C.U. If I'm not wrong..."

Gladio flickered with rage. His lips twitched in a grimace of hatred. "Caligo Ulldor. The Imperial commander who killed Jared."

Iris moved to his side and woke up. "Gladio? What's up?" Alarmed, she straightened her head to look at the airship.

"Don't worry," Noctis reassured her. "They aren't on us. But we'll be on them very soon."

"It could be dangerous," Iris warned them.

"It doesn't matter. If Ulldor is in there, we'll make him pay for Jared. If there's no Ulldor, we'll get rid of yet another annoying base." Noctis turned to him to seek his approval.

This time Gladio didn't feel like inviting him to prudence as Iris had done. Jared's killing had been too pointless and had hit him too hard. "I hope there's Ulldor. But before engaging in battle, let's stop at Old Lestallum. Iris can't come with us."

"Gladio!" his sister exclaimed. "It's not fair!"

"Iris, we don't know what we'll find inside." Noctis leaned forward to brush her arm, a delicate and unusual gesture on his part. "Wait for us at the motel. If you meet Monica and Talcott, get in the car with them and go on to Cape Caem."

"But I..."

"Enough discussion, Iris," Gladio said, but gently. "We all know very well that you can fight too, but it's not the time to put into practice what I have taught you."
Iris gave in, partly because a few minutes later, they entered Old Lestallum and Ignis parked the Regalia in front of the motel without letting her protest further. It was a small but welcoming outpost, and Gladio would have liked to stop and rest too – their idling in Wiz Chocobo Post was already a distant memory – but there was no time. He himself accompanied Iris to the motel door, he recommended to be careful one last time, and then they proceeded. The horrible concrete walls of the base where the air fortress had landed were perfectly reachable within a few minutes on foot, over the bridge.

They skirted the wall for a long stretch, then left the main road and entered the woods. Gladio distinguished the outline of another magitek generator. They weren't forced to climb the concrete walls because, on that side, the base was open, although guarded. By then they had become experts of infiltration: Noctis took care of the sentries and they entered without problems, making their way between huge unused tanks - war residuals that testified how that base had been abandoned for decades, probably until the period immediately before or after May 16th.

They climbed a lookout tower from which they could dominate the base from above. From there they saw the magitek generator they had already seen from afar and Caligo Ulldor's air fortress that had landed just before; they counted about fifty magiteks – not many, given the size of the base – and seven MT-Ks.

"No trace of Ulldor. What's the plan?" Prompto asked.

"Locate Caligo Ulldor and incapacitate him, of course," Ignis replied coldly.

His voice made Gladio shiver. Until then, he hadn't noticed how much his friend was upset. He tried to intercept his gaze, but he was giving him his back, his arms folded.

"We'll split into two groups," he went on. "Prompto and Gladio, diversionary action. Noctis and I will look for Ulldor."

"And once you have found him?" Gladio wanted to know.

Ignis turned. "We're not murderous cutthroats like him. And, moreover, from his death we would have undoubted satisfaction but no contribution to our cause."

"Apart from removing an Imperial commander," Noctis pointed out to him.

"I'd be satisfied just with that. But..." Gladio added, preventing Ignis and Prompto's indignant protests, "Specs is right. Ulldor could tell us a lot about the Empire's movements."

"What are you up to? Bringing him to Cape Caem hog-tied and then torture him?" Prompto replied.

"No. That's not our task. We'll send him to Cor Leonis." Ignis took the phone from his pocket and put it to his ear. A few seconds later, Gladio heard Cor's voice. "Good morning, Marshal. Sorry to disturb you, Sir. I suppose Monica has already told you what happened in Lestallum to Jared Hester."

Cor replied in a few words that Gladio couldn't hear.

"I'm aware you probably won't approve," Ignis resumed, "but we just started the Operation Capture the Commander." Even the sarcastic tone, especially because he was on the phone with the Marshal of the Crownsguard, was definitely unusual for him. "We infiltrated the base just outside Old Lestallum. We have seen an air fortress landing, probably Caligo Ulldor's. It is our intention to capture him and get him to your camp, Marshal. I think you can draw something useful from him."
Again, Gladio couldn't hear the Marshal's reply.

"I appreciate your concern, and I assure you that we will be careful. See you soon, and thank you."
Ignis closed the conversation. "He said he will try to contact some hunters in the area we can trust Ulldor with."

Noctis sighed. "Since it's decided, Ig, let's move. Something in mind for your diversion, Gladio?"

Gladio had already begun to descend the stairs of the turret. "What we did in all the bases: pull down everything that moves. Only we'll do it with a little mess. Wait five minutes, Ig, just long enough to hear the guns of those MT-Ks shooting at us. We'll try to destroy the magitek generator."

"Gladio, you're not funny at all!" Prompto complained, reaching him.

"Let's go, buddy," he smiled, wrapping his arm around Prompto's shoulders.

The simple combined actions devised by Ignis were successful; Gladio and Prompto knocked down three MT-Ks, incapacitated two dozen magiteks and blew up the generator in the center of the base, very careful to make as much confusion as possible and without suffering too much damage. They sat under the broken down generator for a few minutes, taking a breath, waiting for other enemies or their two companions to show up, when Ignis and Noctis came out from the space between two containers.

"It's all right," Noctis reassured them. "Ulldor was in the base. We have identified, stunned and packaged him. Cor's hunters have already taken over him."

"Great!" Prompto exclaimed, standing up. He rubbed at some blood on his left knee, a smear hit from one of the MT-Ks. "Let's go back to get Iris, and then to Cape Caem. How long since we had a good night's sleep?"

"I don't mean to minimize our efforts, but two nights ago we were bored and resting at Wiz Chocobo Station."

"Really?" Prompto said. "After everything we've gone through, between Fociaugh Hollow, Aracheole, Jared's death at Lestallum and now Vaullerey, it seems like a lifetime ago to me."

"I'm a little worried about Iris," Gladio admitted, checking his watch. The whole operation, actually, had not lasted more than an hour. "Maybe she has already met Monica, but we'd better hurry up."

They moved to leave the base when a figure armed with a huge spear fell over them from above. It was all that Gladio could record before the enemy threw on Noctis, who was quick to summon a sword and ward off his attack.

The enemy disengaged, whirled backwards and fell crouched down with his huge lance held tight in his hand. Gladio stood between him and Noctis and, to his surprise, he saw that it was a woman of average height with her face partially hidden by a helmet. On the other hand, she had a deep neckline that left little room for imagination.

"Let's see what you can do," she challenged them and hurled herself with impressive speed.

The woman turned out to be an enemy definitely not to be underestimated; she wasn't equal to Ravus Nox Fleuret, but she was very agile and, despite not being of solid build, had a surprising physical strength. The weapon she was handling had to weigh almost as much as his own, and was longer; a weapon for veteran fighters, which she used not only to attack, but also to propel herself and make vertiginous leaps. A weapon that, judging by the explosions it generated when she'd fall to the
ground, must have been upgraded by Imperial technicians.

Probably the four of them – though it wasn't exactly a chivalrous battle – would have ended up putting her in a corner, but suddenly, as if she got tired, the woman jumped easily on one of the walls of the base and remained there to look at them.

"Are you already leaving?" Ignis asked her, without letting his lance disappear.

The woman smiled. "Leaving? You misunderstood, Bright Eyes, I'm off work. Nobody asked me to fight against you, and I don't work overtime. My job was to keep an eye on that hotshot Caligo Ulldor, and since you did me the favor of getting rid of him, I'm going to report."

"If no one has ordered you to fight against us," Ignis insisted, "May I know why you attacked us?"

She smiled once more. "I wanted to see if you lived up to your reputation. I hope to have fun with you again, Sweetheart."

She jumped off the wall of the base. The four of them stood staring at each other until they heard the roar of a big motorbike moving away along the road.

"Okay, I got a question," Prompto said.

"Who was that girl?" Noctis asked.

"Nope. Who was she referring to when she said 'I hope to have fun with you again, Sweetheart'?"

"Ignis, of course."

"You think? In my opinion, her last sentence was for our gloomy prince," the interested party shielded himself.

"Why, Prompto, didn't you say you were serious about Cindy?"

"Hm. You're right, but... did you get a look at her?"

"While she was kicking our ass, you mean?"

"Exactly. With her long, perfect legs sheathed in leather pants."

Gladio laughed, and felt some of the accumulated tension dissipate. It wasn't the right moment for trivial thoughts, but this time he couldn't disagree with Prompto. "Well, buddy, when you're right, you're right. Not to mention her impressive boo..."

"Jeez, guys, listen to him!" Noctis mocked him, as they headed toward the exit of the base. "When I finally get to know her, this conversation will be the first thing I will tell Silia Hartwood."

"...boots. I meant, 'boots'."

II

For once, fortune had smiled on them. When they got to Cape Caem with Iris, they found out that the shelter seemed abandoned for years and King Regis' yacht was still moored under the lighthouse, just where Cor Leonis had told them. It wasn't in good condition, however, so they called Cindy and asked her to come and have a look. The blonde girl arrived late in the evening, and a quick glance at the boat was enough for her to decree that it would need many repairs, and especially mithril to replace the missing pieces.
After the others had gone to sleep – the house of Cape Caem was battered and in disarray, but had plenty of room for everyone – Gladio stayed with his sister for a long time, sitting on her bed, waiting for her to fall asleep which it hadn't happened for many years. Iris had survived their father's death and the fall of Insomnia unharmed, but Jared's death before her eyes had been too much, and Gladio felt powerless about it. Not to mention Talcott, who had arrived with Monica two hours after them.

Unable to fall asleep in turn, he went down to the beach and sat down on the shore to watch the Cygilla Sea. For hours he seethed with his hatred towards the Empire, reproaching himself for leaving Iris, Talcott and Jared at Lestallum without protection. For hours he seethed with his hatred towards Ravus Nox Fleuret, regretting he wasn't stronger, dreadfully stronger than he could be. Continuing to train when camping, accepting easy hunting missions, tearing down daemons at night wasn't enough. He couldn't progress fast enough to live up to that journey and the role he was required. For hours he seethed with the decision he had already made and the phone call he had pushed back until then.

Father, he thought, pulling at last the phone from his pocket. You wouldn't approve at all, but only one thing I can do comes to my mind.

He called Cor Leonis.

"Cor?" he said immediately, when he answered. His voice sounded in his own ears like a broken boy's one. "Sorry 'bout the time. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"No problem. Did something happen, Gladio?"

"We're all fine," he hastened to reassure him. "We got to Cape Caem safe and sound. Ulldor is packaged and is travelin' to your camp."

"I apologize for what happened, Gladio. I had assured you that your sister and the others would be safe. I should have had them escorted to Cape Caem well before you called me."

"You can't think of everyone, Cor. And Iris is my sister. My responsibility. Thanks for sending Monica, by the way."

"Don't even mention it. Is there anything else?"

Gladio closed his eyes. Here we are. Actually there is. Got a favor to ask you. While the others look for the mithril needed to repair the yacht, I'd like you to accompany me to the Taelpar Crag."

An icy silence followed. "Are you insane, Gladio? What the hell has happened?"

"I'll tell you as soon as we meet, if you accept. For now, just know that in Aracheole Fortress I crossed swords with Ravus Nox Fleuret, and he humiliated me. I can't think of any other way to improve quickly, Cor. I'm very well aware of what I'm asking you, but I'll go anyway, so feel free to refuse."

"Gladio, do you have any idea about what's down there? Gilgamesh is a deadly challenge, but even getting to Gilgamesh is a dangerous undertaking."

"I know it all too well. That's why I don't ask you to accompany me inside. Your role is fundamental and I don't want anything to happen to you for my personal quest. I only ask you to show me the way to the ruins and explain to me in detail what I'll face."

"Gladio, reconsider your decision."
"Too late. I've made up my mind. D'you accept to accompany me, Marshal?"

Cor was silent for so long that Gladio persuaded himself that his answer would be negative.

"When?"

He was so relieved that his voice trembled. "Tomorrow. Can you do that?"

"I can, if I leave at dawn from Orior."

"Orior?"

"That's how people started calling this camp. It seems to me a good omen. Gladio, tell me: what will the Prince do if you don't come back? Have you thought about that?"

He had thought about it ad nauseam. It was the only argument that still held him back. "Cor," he replied, using Ravus' words. "A weak shield protects naught. If I don't come back, it will mean that I wouldn't have lived up to my role anyway."

Another deep sigh. "See you tomorrow late morning at Crow's Nest in Old Lestallum."

"Thank you." Gladio rubbed his eyes. He was terrified and excited at the idea. "I am grateful to you, Cor. I'd like to ask you one last favor: is Silia Hartwood nearby? This could be my last chance to talk to her."

"She's on a mission with Dustin. You can contact her on his cell phone."

Gladio sighed, touching her plate in his pocket. "No. She'd kill me if I disturbed her on a mission. Another reason to come back in one piece," he forced himself to joke. He wondered how Silia would have reacted if he had told her he was going to challenge Gilgamesh. Would she reprimand him with her husky voice, bringing his duties back to his mind, or would she understand and support him? "See you tomorrow at Old Lestallum, then."

"Gladio..." Cor said again. "Only fools never change their mind. If it happens, call me anytime. Not the best idea, letting yourself be carried away by pride."

"It won't happen, because I don't have any more pride. See you tomorrow, Cor."

III

When he entered the Crow's Nest diner at Old Lestallum, Cor Leonis was already sitting at the counter, waiting for him. In his hands he had a cup of long coffee: since he had known him, Gladio had never seen him drink alcohol.

"Hi, Cor. Thanks again for coming." He sat on the stool next to his and when the man at the counter came to ask him what he was having, he ordered a glass of water. He would have willingly thrown back a bottle of whiskey, but it wasn't the right time. "News 'bout Ulldor?"

"He hadn't gotten to the camp yet, when I left this morning," Cor replied, shaking his head. "I gave orders for him to be welcomed with all the due honors in my absence. I must confess, however, that this wasn't a good time to walk away; Monica is in Cape Caem, Dustin and Hartwood in Insomnia. I had proposed to Hartwood to take some other Crownguard with her, but fortunately she refused, or by this time we would have the camp exposed."

"What do you mean, in Insomnia?"
"I sent her to the Royal Library with Dustin and a small team to look for information about the Royal Arms."

Gladio was speechless for a moment, then smiled. "You always had such a good eye for people, Marshal." He couldn't have suggested two better people than Silia and Dustin to scour a library, nor a better fighter than a Kingsglaive to penetrate an occupied city. Knowing that Silia was working for Noctis and for the Kingdom, and that the Immortal as well had recognized her worth, gave him courage for what he would have to face, but he still persisted in that long preamble before confessing to Cor what had happened with Ravus.

"Tell me about the Orior camp. How are you doing?"

Cor Leonis gave a half smile. "We're organizing. We monitor Imperials' movements, we hinder the construction of new bases in Leide, we give a hand to the Meldacio Association with dangerous beasts in exchange for their collaboration. Hartwood began training men to fight magiteks and daemons. Not everyone is enthusiastic about having in the camp a free-running Glaive who yells instructions and orders, mainly because they are performed to the letter at the rhythm of 'yessir', but sooner or later they'll get over it. I'll deny it until death, but she's a decent help."

Gladio was delighted at the idea. He scratched his hairline. "I'll say it again: you always had such a good eye for people, Cor. Silia is a tough nut. Stubborn, honest, reliable, intelligent. And lethal. You know, I had proposed her to join the Crownguard some days before the Glaives returned to Insomnia?"

"I'd have certainly put her damn right. Among all the skills you listed, you've forgotten her impudent insolence." Cor frowned. "Now, Gladio, did you call me in the middle of the night and made me come to Old Lestallum just to talk about your girlfriend or will you finally tell me what's gnawing at you?"

"She's not my girlfriend," he pointed out. "And you know perfectly well why we are here. I want to challenge Gilgamesh."

"The Blademaster could be the last thing you will see in your life. Before leading you to the Taelpar Crag, Gladio, I want to know why you're doing it."

Gladio moistened his lips, sighed, and told him in detail what had happened in the Aracheole Stronghold. "Ravus Nox Fleuret thrashed me," he concluded. "I can't protect the True King if I'm not even able to compete with the Imperial High Commander. And I can't demand Noctis to behave like a real king if I don't live up to being his Shield."

Cor nodded slowly. "Then I ask you again, Gladiolus: are you ready?"

"Never been more ready. Let's go."

IV

The Taelpar Crag was very impressive, seen from above, but from the bottom it was scary. The rock fingers loomed over them, as if they were about to break and pierce them at any moment, and their voices were the only sound that broke the silence of that place. Even the wind that crossed the crevasse, for some kind of physical phenomenon, didn't whistle.

"Did you explain to the others the reason for your leaving?" Cor asked, walking.

Gladio shook his head. "I didn't want them to worry. I just told them I had business to attend to." He scratched his hairline. "They've probably thought I wanted to reach Silia at your camp. Better this
Cor didn't comment in any way. "Where are they heading?"

"To the Steyliff Grove, near Vesperpool, to look for mithril to repair the royal yacht."

"They'll be fine. Think about yourself."

"I'll do it."

The entrance to the ruins was similar to that of many caves in which Gladio and his friends had advanced, apart from the macabre detail of the corpses pierced against the rocky walls. They should have been bones or dust by then, especially judging by the ancient shape of the armor they still wore.

"Mh. A nice place, huh?" he forced himself to joke, but he stopped smiling when he saw Cor Leonis' tense look, a few steps behind him. He had almost forgotten what it meant for him to return to that place.

"Focus, Gladio," he reprimanded him hard. "As I told you tonight, even getting to Gilgamesh is a dangerous undertaking."

Gladio noticed it when, once they had passed through the narrow tunnel, the corpses stood up – mummified limbs, rusty armor – and attacked them.

"What about them?" he asked, blocking the lunge of the nearest. The spirit was thrown back two feet away. Fortunately, they seemed rather frail.

Although he said he wouldn't physically help him, Cor put his hand to the handle of his katana and got rid of two others. "The souls of the warriors once loyal to Gilgamesh. They're here to test those who want to undergo the Trial."

"Why are you helping me, then?"

Cor pulped another. "Because, as you can see, they are very poor adversaries. I wasn't referring to them when I told you that it won't be easy to get to the Trial."

Rubbing the sweat from his forehead, Gladio turned to look at him, but Cor didn't say anything else. Once the opponents had been eliminated, they continued along the tunnel that narrowed more and more. He couldn't help but notice the torches lighting their way, and he wondered if they had always been lit or if the Blademaster knew that a new challenger had come.

The path stopped in front of an underground stream. Leaning over, Gladio saw that a few feet away, it turned into a small waterfall, but from there he couldn't see where it was flowing. He turned to Cor who, with an enigmatic gesture, shrugged and pointed to the stream.

Gladio slid into the cold water. The waterfall didn't run precipitously, because the ground was only slightly sloping, and he landed standing into a shallow pond. He turned to see where Cor was, but out of nowhere a huge snake emerged, five times bigger than a Naga.

Cor slipped behind him, the katana already in his hand. "Brunnsormr. The guard at the entrance to the Path of Challenges. It won't be a big trouble either. Come on, let's get rid of it."

It wasn't, in fact, even though the snake, like the Naga they had faced, seemed to have the power to dive into the shallow water as if it had been deep and to re-emerge beneath their feet, or behind them. Although he had a good understanding in battle with his other three friends, he had trained with Cor
since he was a kid and their fighting styles fit perfectly, not to mention that the Immortal was one of the best warriors in all of Eos. It took them a few minutes to get rid of Brunnrsormr.

Gladia bent down on his knees to catch his breath. When he raised his back, he had the impression that the light in the cave had diminished, and he no longer felt Cor's presence near him. He looked around, alarmed, especially as the light continued to fade until he found himself almost in the dark.

A violet light attracted his attention. The violet light seemed to acquire consistency until it condensed into the body of an extraordinarily tall warrior armed with a long katana. He began to walk slowly towards him, becoming more and more tangible with every step.

"You come to prove yourself worthy of your role?" he asked, with his millennial-old voice.

Gladia swallowed. He had to tilt his head up to face him, and that had never happened to him with a human adversary. "I do. I am here to undertake the Trial of Gilgamesh."

Gilgamesh was wearing a decorated silver mask. Instead of his eyes, Gladia saw two reddish lights burning. "And what is it you hope to glean?"

"Power," Gladia answered promptly, clenching his fist. "And you're gonna give it to me."

"Is that so?" the adversary replied with a mocking note in his voice. He made the katana disappear, and only then did Gladia notice that his left arm was missing.

The katana reappeared suddenly, and Gilgamesh attacked him.

Gladia managed to block his blow. Cor had told him it wasn't easy to get to the Trial, and he had talked about a Path of Challenges. He wasn't ready to confront the Blademaster so early, but so much the better.

Gilgamesh was fast and powerful, but not impossible to defeat. Gladia soon realized that that friendly match was a first test, a skirmish, certainly not the Trial.

"Brute force alone does little to impress," Gilgamesh said, pressing him. "Only he who possessed both muscle and mettle of equal caliber deserves the honor of fighting beside the Chosen King as his Sworn Shield."

A weak shield protects naught.

"You're saying I don't?" he shouted.

Gilgamesh pushed back his block, as Ravus Nox Fleuret had done, but didn't counterattack. However, Gladia was warded off in the water.

"A great evil threatens the people of your world. It is but the King of Kings and his Shield who can safeguard their lives."

A great evil... is he referring to the Starscourge or to Niflheim?

"All those unworthy or unwilling to rise to the task meet their end here, by my blade." He pointed it at him in a warning.

Gladia got up. "I ain't meeting mine any time soon. This Trial hasn't even begun."

"If you do not fear death, then go forth with reckless abandon and prove your worth." Gilgamesh lowered the katana, and his body dissolved into a cloud of purple light as it had appeared.
He found Cor further, beyond the pond. He was waiting for him, and judging by his look, he too, thirty years ago, must have talked to Gilgamesh in that very place.

"He accepted you as a challenger, huh?"

Gladio didn't answer. Although he had ended up knees down in the water, he felt galvanized. "Let the Trial begin."

The only viable path now, instead of going down, seemed to lead upwards. Gladio recognized even rudimentary stairs carved into the rock. Perhaps the Crag had really originated from the clash between Ifrit and Bahamut, but certainly men, in some historical moment, had built in that caves.

The revived corpses of Gilgamesh's warriors weren't the only form of life that lived in the crevasse: soon they were attacked by daemons – electric pyros, skeletons and reapers, the latter, with their huge sickles, quite difficult to kill – which they slashed one after the other. They continued to climb upward.

*Your skill is impressive.*

It was definitely not Cor's voice. Gladio stopped, looking around, but the Marshal motioned him to continue. "Those are the voices of the warrior souls. Don't be distracted. Let's go on."

*You may have the strength to defeat the darkness.*

"Are they talking about the daemons?"

"I guess so."

*But do you have the spirit to survive those trials?*

"Don't listen to them. The first trial is close."

"The first trial?"

Cor nodded, pointing to the stairs to their left. Looking up, Gladio saw a bluish glow. "Here your hand-holding stops, Gladio. Nergal, your first challenger, awaits you there. Before being considered worthy of Gilgamesh, three warrior souls, but don't expect the zombies we have faced so far, will judge you in their trial chambers."

"The path is closed. What do I have to do?"

"You will understand it by yourself. Go up the stairs. And good luck."

Gladio obeyed resolutely. A sort of rock cage blocked his way. In the center, the bluish glow he had seen from below turned out to be a sword tied by ropes from which fragments of cloth hung. He had never seen anything like it, but realized that it must be a sort of seal.

He touched the sword, and at that moment the blue light seemed to explode. The seals disappeared, and only the sword remained – a katana almost as tall as him – stuck in the rock. He pulled it out effortlessly, but it disappeared from his hands.

The rock wall shattered, revealing a hall. With his heart in his throat, but determined to show what he was able to do, Gladio entered. He found himself trapped, because the bars of the rock cage immediately reformed. Apparently, there was no way to withdraw. Fair enough, because he wouldn't
have done it anyway.

In front of him, immediately, a cloaked spectrum appeared.

_Please yourself, Young Warrior, for the trials that await. Prove your might, and our power shall be yours._

Nergal demonstrated to be a formidable adversary, endowed with three deadly techniques: an apparently poisonous breath, a powerful laser beam, and the ability to throw at him three burning skull-like creatures. After taking a couple of pretty bad blows, Gladio understood how to counter them; to avoid the poisonous breath it was enough to keep a safe distance – his broadsword was long enough to hit the enemy anyway, the laser beam was easily predictable because it originated from a luminous triangle that appeared in the air, and before hurling themselves at him, the blue skulls began to orbit quickly. Gladio pushed every superfluous thought out of his mind and concentrated on dodging and attacking like never before in his life. At last Nergal dissolved.

Once he was alone in the chamber, panting, soaked in sweat, and with his arm aching because of a burn, Gladio understood that he hadn't yet finished his trial; a small stone altar lit up, a blue flame burning on the inside. He bent down to touch it, and at that moment he felt himself pervaded by an energy he had never felt. When he withdrew his hand, his fist shone with the same bluish light.

_Our power goes with you now, Young Warrior._

The light went out and the altar dissolved. Without the voices telling him, Gladio knew that his arm now would be able to ward off Gilgamesh's attacks without wavering. The rock wall behind the altar opened, revealing a new path.

_S tand tall, for the Shield of the King must kneel in subjugation before no man._

"Thank you," Gladio whispered solemnly. He turned to retrace his steps and rejoin Cor before going on, but the Marshal showed himself inside the hall.

"Bravo," he approved with a stern expression. "You have passed the first trial."

Gladio didn't smile. He encircled his right wrist with his other hand, as if he was afraid that, with that new power, it could go off on its own. "I think my parry has improved."

"It's the power conferred by Nergal. Make good use of it."

A few feet ahead, the tunnel leded again into an open area. To their right Gladio saw a precipice of which he couldn't see the bottom, but what most interested him was a spot clearly equipped for a campfire, probably by a group of previous challengers.

"Let's stop and rest for a while," Cor said, looking at his clock. "It doesn't look like it, but we've been down here for three hours."

Gladio had lost the sense of time, and only then realized how exhausted he was. He sat heavily on the ground, his back against the rock, and hugged his legs, resting his forehead on his knees. He felt that Cor was sitting next to him. He closed his eyes. His intention was simply to relax and regain his strength, but he fell into a dreamless sleep.

When he raised his forehead, Cor was still in the same stance next to him, the grip of the katana on his knees. He must not have slept so much.

"Twenty minutes," the Marshal anticipated him. "Don't worry, Gladio. Rest as long as you want.
The road is still long."

Slowly, Gladio began to flex his fingers and limbs to reactivate the circulation. He stretched out his legs and spine, made his neck crackle. "Just a few minutes more."

"You should put something on that wound."

Gladio followed his advice. He retrieved the bottle of water and cleaned his wound, stoically enduring the pain, then bandaged his forearm. It wasn't a serious wound, but he was still drowsy, and he knew that if they remained silent, he would fall asleep again.

"Got a question for you, Cor. Get it right." Uneasily, Gladio scratched his hairline. He had known him for a lifetime, but finding himself alone with Cor Leonis the Immortal, feeling examined by his glacial eyes, continued to put him in awe. "Years haven't affected your mastery in the slightest. And now, compared to the last time you came down in these ruins, you've a lot more wisdom and experience in battle. Haven't you thought about trying the Trial again?"

"To survive the Trial," he answered, "brute force is not enough. You need a strong determination. And to have a strong determination, you need the right reasons. I won't challenge Gilgamesh again for a matter of pride, to heal a wound I suffered when I was an arrogant kid. I wouldn't come out alive, and I don't want to die unnecessarily."

Gladio blinked, resting his elbows on his knees. He could understand perfectly what Cor meant. He too would have preferred to die for Noctis, rather than in a duel against Gilgamesh, but he had no choice. "And what were your reasons, the first time?"

Cor Leonis narrowed his eyes, took a deep breath, and put himself into a more comfortable position. "Here's the short version: I was very young. The long version is *very* long. Thought your father had told you about it. Are you sure you want to hear it right now?"

"Start telling me a part of it while we're catching our breath."

Cor took his bottle and drank for a long time, slowly, taking all the time in the world, rubbed his lips with the back of his hand, then started talking. "When I was thirteen, I lied about my age and joined the army. I was born in the suburbs of Insomnia. I never met my father, and my mother died when I was a child. I lived on the street."

"My father mentioned something to me over the years, but always in flattering terms, to underline that it's not the blue blood that makes a Crownsguard."

Although it wasn't cold, Cor closed his jacket. They had never talked like that, so openly, and it filled him with pride and affection. "The necessities of war took away many resources, first of all economic, from the city. Forty years ago, many suburbs of Insomnia were in the same conditions as today's refugee neighborhoods: places of misery where the City Guard has no power and where the influence of the King himself struggles to arrive. Growing up in one of these ghettos was already life training. You worked hard, Gladio, for fifteen years, but believe me, there are things that you only learn when your survival is constantly endangered, as you're certainly discovering now."

Gladio blushed, and just nodded. Every day he clashed his forehead against the fact that, however perfectly trained – or so he believed – the daily dangers outside Insomnia concealed a large number of unpredictable variables that didn't allow mistakes. "Perhaps, then," he ventured to say, "my training should have provided at least one period outside of Insomnia. The others and I saw magiteks and daemons for the first time just two weeks ago."
"The matter was discussed, at the beginning. Clarus would have allowed it. But Regis pointed out
that, according to his personal opinion, to protect his son he preferred a less ready Shield than a dead
Shield."

"I can't say I agree with the King's personal opinion," Gladio smiled. "Since I'm here today because I
prefer to be a dead Shield than a weak Shield."

From the way he looked at him, Gladio realized that a part of Cor – the reckless 15-year-old kid who
had come out of the Taelpar Crag thirty years earlier – approved of him, but the practical Marshal
who he had become was still deciding. Gladio shrugged shortly. "So," he returned to the subject,
"you enlisted at thirteen. Just like a person I know who, by the way, shares a similar childhood with
you."

Cor didn't ask who he was referring to, and went on. "The Council of the time promoted a
convincing campaign of enlistment that, as you can imagine, took a good grip in the suburbs. They'd
offer a decent pay, even if not commensurate with the dangers, and above all the citizenship to the
refugees who would enlist and fight for at least two years. History repeating itself: the Kingsglaives
as well were almost all poor citizens of the Crown City or refugees from the outer provinces. Hunger
and despair make the soldier good, they say, and it's true. I wasn't particularly fond of King Mors at
the time, nor was I led by particular patriotism, but I had nothing to lose and everything to gain, so I
enlisted. I had no papers, like most people who showed up, and I was tall, hardened by street life, so
when I said I was sixteen, nobody questioned my age, or maybe those who selected me didn't care so
much. I put a signature, they gave me a uniform, a sword and a rifle, and they sent me out of the
walls of Insomnia after three months of training."

Gladio listened raptly. He knew several details of Cor's past, through his father's stories, but he had
never heard them told from his voice. "You fought on the western defensive line, didn't you?"

Cor nodded. "For six months. The magitek infantry had just been implemented, and the Kingdom
didn't quite know how to counter it. Thousands of soldiers died. During the same year – it was 724 –
King Mors' young scion, an 18-year-old swagger named Regis, got on the western front with his
retinue. He wanted to fight alongside his men to defend his country, and that was his baptism of
blood." He smirked. "He saw a lot of it, even his own. A few days later, in the confusion of a battle,
Clarus was engaged in a fight against a MT-K, far from Regis, and the heir to the throne risked being
cracked wide open by a Spearman. I prevented him to die."

Gladio knew that part of the story quite well, he and the whole Insomnia. "A thirteen-year-old of
obscure birth, a simple soldier enlisted a few months before, saved the life of the heir to the throne.
And so the Immortal's legend began."

"When King Mors found out that the soldier who had saved his son was thirteen, he withdrew me
from the front, appointed me Crownguard and assigned me to the Prince's retinue."

"From simple soldier to Crownguard in six months. A nice promotion."

"Your father wasn't so glad of it," the Marshal grimaced.

Gladio laughed and stood up. He had rested enough, and it was about time to go on. "He said that at
the time you were cheeky and arrogant; an annoying street brat, without filters, without diplomacy,
who didn't mince words."

Cor stood up as well. "Young Clarus' pride had suffered a pretty big blow. A street brat had saved
the life of the Prince of Insomnia in his place. But he wasn't wrong in thinking so of me, after all."
"He'd also say," Gladio added, "that you were a child prodigy. He had never seen anyone fight so ferociously and progress so fast. And indeed your abilities soon surpassed his own."

"Come on, Gladio," the Immortal urged him. "Today we'll see if those of his son will surpass mine."

*Orior:* it's a Latin verb that means "to rise", "to be born", "to start"

Chapter End Notes

"Numquam periculum sine periculo vincitur" > "No danger can ever be overcome without risk"
Chapter Summary

Gladio finally challenges the Blademaster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I

*Insomnia is an abandoned city. Crossing the Citadel Square in the dark, Silia shudders. It's cold, as if the sunlight hadn't heated up the paving for at least ten years. Rubbing her bare arms – she's wearing the half-sleeved shirt of the Kingsglaives' uniform, for the Six, she thought she had thrown it away – she raises her head towards the Citadel.*

*The windows are bright, as she has always seen them from the window of her apartment. But she knows very well that there's no one; there can't be anyone after what happened on May 16th.*

*Instinctively, she raises her head. The orientation lessons undertaken when she was a recruit have taught her that the sky is a map, a guide, a clock. But she can't see a single star – the sky is covered by disturbing clouds, so compact as to form a reddish curtain.*

*It's an unusually conscious dream. Silia knows that it's not reality, but tries to make sense of it, to place that Insomnia in the past, in the present or in the future. She can't do it particularly because, after all, it's not deserted; sitting on the steps of the square, not far from each other, she now sees a man and a woman who she knows well.*

*The woman is tiny, with long brown hair. She's looking downward, so Silia can't see her eyes, but she knows they are green, with brown streaks around the iris. She keeps her fingers intertwined, her hands resting in her lap. The man is in a relaxed position, a cigarette between his lips. He's of medium height, thin, his hair unkempt, his beard short and shabby, a thoughtful expression, or perhaps distracted. They both raise their heads toward her when she's close, but neither of them smiles.*

"The war is already over," her mother declares with the tone of someone who's noting an incontrovertible truth. "Can't you realize that?"

Silia opens her mouth to contradict her, but she can't. She hasn't seen her mother for fifteen years, and even if she can't feel the love one would expect from a daughter, she's no longer mad at her. She lets herself fall on the step beside her. "You were right, mother. It was already over fifteen years ago. But that wasn't a good reason to not fight anyway."

*She looks up at her father, looking for an alliance. "Tell her, dad. Even if it wasn't enough, I did my best. Always fight for your hearth and home. They told me that the Kingsglaives would do it." She*
rubs her eyes furiously, lowering her head. "Or did I do everything wrong? Mom died without us speaking for years. Marius, you do remember Marius, right; that nice curly kid, son of your best friend Gregor? He turned to the Empire to protect his son, he killed my friends: Legato, Sam, Cee, Sarah, the only family I've ever had in the last few years. He tried to kill me too, and I had to kill him. Did I do everything wrong, dad? I've been trying to do my best for fifteen years, but I feel like I'm running in circles without ever getting anywhere."

Karl Hartwood sits next to her. "Frida," he says softly, and Silia realizes he's not looking at her, but at her mother, just as her mother wasn't talking to her. "You know I must do it."

Her mother doesn't look at him. "It won't do any good except to get you killed."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't say you're sorry. It's not true that you're sorry."

"I wouldn't leave you. But I can't stay here and watch, Frida, as they invade us."

"What do you care? The Kingdom of Lucis has done little, so far, for us. The Empire will still occupy Ambrosia. The war is already over," she repeats.

Her father lowers his head. "Frida, please. Aldercapt is a tyrant. What will become of us?"

Silia remains helpless to watch that twenty-four-years-old scene. Is she recreating it with her imagination or memory? She doesn't remember having witnessed it, but maybe she was too young.

"And what will become of us if you die? Of me and your daughter? Have you thought about that?"

Karl lights another cigarette. "You will manage. Frida, try to understand me."

Frida gets up. "I understood too much about you. It's not a matter of necessity. It's a matter of pride." She moves a few steps, then turns back. "I just wish I understood earlier what kind of a man you are."

Silia looks away from her parents because, in the dark, she feels a threat hanging.

And suddenly, that linear dream becomes a montage of images that are moving too fast for her to be able to stop some of them in her consciousness. She sees a magic wall. A creature made of flames, a fire so intense that she almost feels the heat on her face. A tall, disturbing red-haired man with a face rotting from the Starscourge that she almost recognizes. Prince Noctis – the True King – with his face shaded by a black goatee that makes him look even more like his father Regis. She sees Nyx Ulric's bled corpse dangling from chains. She sees a mechanical shadow approaching on metal legs. That image, for some reason, is the only one that remains clear, it rasps on the chipped pavement, it creaks on millenary joints.

"Beware of the relics of Solheim, Kingsglaive."

Silia woke up, jerking. It took a couple of seconds for her to recognize the large reading desk where she had collapsed. The display of the mobile phone she had found in a drawer, and that she had managed to charge, read a quarter past nine. She had fallen asleep just for a few minutes.

She recognized Dustin Ackers' silhouette at the door, outside of the light cone of the lamp. She was feeling sore, slightly dazed, but she was already perfectly awake. "I am sorry, Ackers, did you say anything?" The dream was already drawing back from her memory, but two words kept buzzing: relics and Solheim. No wonder.
Ackers shook his head. "Not yet, Ms. Hartwood. Since you haven't moved from here all day long, I had come to invite you to eat something with us. You shouldn't overdo it. *Est modus in rebus*.*" 

"*Non omnibus dormio*," she replied with a grimace, even though she had actually dozed off. 

He smiled. "Have you read so much that you have started thinking in the ancient language as well?"

"In a while I'll be *dreaming* in the ancient language." Perhaps it had already happened, even if she didn't remember. She rubbed her neck.

"Are you able to translate?"

Silia shook her head, hinting at the dictionary she had retrieved. "Not everything, but I can grasp the meaning of the sentences. We will take a closer look on these books at Orior. Don't worry, when in doubt I keep a book, I don't discard it." She pointed at the pile of volumes she would bring back and the ones stacked in bulk that she had discarded.

Ackers joined her. In the dim light of the lamp, his wrinkles seemed even more pronounced. Silia wondered how old he really was. The man glanced at the open book in front of her – *About the Kings of Yore* – and smiled. "I've already read this, many years ago. Keep it. It's worth examining it more carefully."

Silia smiled too. "True, it looks promising. I confess I got over-involved while reading. Listen to this," she said, turning back thirty pages from the chapter on which she had dozed, "*The prodigious Mace of the Fierce was not buried alongside with his mortal coils, but, by his desire, in the Memorial he had erected in life.*"

Ackers narrowed his eyes. "*Tonitrus Lucis Caelum's Memorial.*"

"Do you know where it is? Please tell me you do. The book doesn't say."

"I'm afraid I don't, Ms. Hartwood. Can I?" Silia made a dejected gesture toward the book, and Ackers took it and the pocket lamp. He directed the light on the pages, leafed through a couple of them, then stopped. "There's a picture of his grave, the one where his body has been buried."

"I saw it. What…?"

"Can you read the inscriptions? The photo is not the best, I'm myopic and this light doesn't help me."

Silia retrieved the book and the lamp. She tried to distinguish the characters. "*Hic iacet Tonitrus Lucis Caelum, Ferox dictus.* Here Tonitrus Lucis Caelum, called the Fierce, lies. *Vis sua immortalis in ignifero moratur.* His immortal strength resides in the fire."

"Nearly correct, Ms. Hartwood. Not *in the fire*, but *in what burns*. That *Vis sua immortalis* tickles my instincts. When we go back to Orior, let's think about it."

"Ackers, if it's not a red herring, you're a genius."

"Please, don't," he replied, but he clearly looked pleased. "We will make a lot of hypotheses about this and other books, and many will be dead ends." He adjusted his glasses, embarrassed. "You're smart, Ms. Hartwood, if I may. It's a pity that you hadn't had the opportunity to study. When everything gets back to normal I could, hm, give you at least some lessons of the ancient language. Help you fill some gaps, if you like it. Maybe right here, in the Royal Library."

Silia closed the book and carefully placed it on the pile of those they would take with them to the
camp. "I would like that, Ackers," she replied gratefully, but she suspected she would never have the chance to leave the arms for books.

Ackers straightened up. "We will talk about it later. What about going to eat something now? The others are waiting for us."

II

Gladio dropped heavily two feet away from the stone circle of the bivouac, stretching the muscles of his right arm. He was starting to feel exhausted and he would have liked to take advantage of that stop to sleep again, if only for a few minutes, but he didn't mention it.

Go on, Young Warrior, along with our hopes and dreams.

Perhaps he had a too high opinion of himself, but he was feeling like that the warrior souls that infested the crag were now on his side. He no longer perceived them as a threat, nor did he feel judged and disapproved by their thousands-year-old eyes anymore.

"You completed the Path of Perdition as well," Cor approved, taking care of the campfire. "Enkidu wasn't exactly a walk in the park, huh?"

Gladio nodded, looking at the palm of his right hand. "Yeah. But he taught me the secret of the Maelstrom technique. It'll help me." If I get out of here, he thought, but he didn't say it.

"The techniques known to these souls have been bequeathed for centuries and cannot be taught by a human voice." Cor pulled the flintlock out of his pocket and lit the scrubs. "You had no other way to learn them than to come here."

Gladio hugged his knees, waiting for Cor to sit next to him. He stifled a yawn and rubbed his eyes. "As a child," he began, impatient for the Marshal to resume his story, also to distract himself from fatigue, "I'd never get tired of listening to the stories of your journey. I'd spend hours imagining the places you visited and thinking about how I would behave in your or my father's place on this or that occasion, wondering if I would be lucky enough to undertake such enterprises."

"And now that you've been lucky enough, Gladio, are you happy?"

It wasn't a provocation. Cor Leonis was genuinely curious. Gladio moistened his lips. "I'd be lying if I said yes. But I'd be lying even if I said no. I waited for years, Cor, to be able to leave Insomnia behind me. But I didn't want it at the price of the fall of the city, of the thousands lives cut short that day, that of my father, that of the King. Truth is, I wanted to leave with the possibility of returning. Never in my darkest nightmares would I've believed that as soon as I left, Insomnia would collapse behind me."

"...by the world," Cor completed for him. "There's nothing to be ashamed of. Some things happen anyway, Gladio, so you'd better take the best part of them."
"My elation faded when the Regalia left us stranded less than two hours later. We hadn't even reached Hammerhead."

It took a while for him to identify the sound that followed as Cor Leonis' dry laugh, because he had heard it only a handful of times in all his life. "Regis had us crashing into a pole an hour after leaving Insomnia. Cid's presence was providential."

Gladio smiled, amused. "My father used to say that Regis was a reckless driver. Noctis would be the same, if we let him do it, so Ignis prefers to drive for hours rather than give him the steering wheel. Did you follow our same route, then?"

"More or less," Cor replied. His grave expression had already reappeared. " Everywhere throughout Leide, Duscae and Cleigne there were battlefields similar to the one you saw in Keycatrich. The port of Galdin Quay was blocked, so we reached the south coast of Cleigne towards Cape Caem. There was a residence that the royal family had owned for generations, and that Regis used as a base for hunting and fishing, until the Wall still held the Imperials far from the eastern regions. We sailed from there to Accordo to try to reestablish the alliance with the Secretariat, but a few days after our arrival at Altissia we received words that the western front had fallen and that if King Mors had not reduced the size of the Wall, he would have died and, by consequence, all of Lucis would fall into Imperial control. Our mission had failed: under those conditions, Accordo wouldn't have provided us with its support. We hurried to come back."

Gladio shrugged. "A very controversial decision. My father told me that the crown citizens approved it, but those of the provinces remained at the mercy of the Imperials believed that King Mors could also abdicate and let his young son keep the Wall as it was."

Cor sighed. "Now that you know how things went Gladio, what do you think would have happened if Regis had to support the effort of keeping the Wall up to the size of the time?"

He didn't have to think about it too much before answering. "Four years ago... no... long before... King Regis would have died and the kingdom of Lucis would have fallen."

"Exactly. King Mors had to make a tough decision looking into the future. Nobody like me knows how much he suffered for having to withdraw the Wall around the Crown City alone. He's remembered as the most severe king of the last three hundred years, but he was simply forced to make drastic decisions determined by the difficult historical moment in which he found himself reigning. His immigration policies, the inability to face the new magitek infantry, the rationing... he couldn't have done anything else, just as Regis had no choice but to sign that damn treaty with Niflheim, even if he suspected a trap."

Gladio could hear in Cor's voice the deep affection he had felt toward King Mors. It couldn't be otherwise, since he had been his Sworn Shield, as well as the protector of his son. "How was King Mors, in private? My father told me about him, but you knew him better. He wasn't very loved, was he?"

Cor sighed with closed lips. "He was a good man, perennially worried by the future of his people. I couldn't know him as much as I would have liked because he died early, in 729, just as Regis would die – drained by the efforts to channel the magic of the Crystal into the Wall – but he did a lot for me. He had me trained, allowing me to perfect all the fighting arts, and forced me to study. A Crownsguard must read, write and count, and cannot remain unaware of the history of the Kingdom he serves, he'd say. He gave his life for his people, and he's not remembered with enough gratitude."

Sacrifice, Gladio thought for the first time. The Lucis dynasty is founded on sacrifice. King Somnus
Lucis Caelum was the first to eradicate the Starscourge by consecrating his existence to the Crystal. And so on until Mors, Regis, Noctis. And whomever is close to the Lucii is not spared: my father, Cor Leonis. Princess Lunafreya. Ignis, Prompto, and myself. We sacrifice ourselves so that the Lucii can do the same.

"When King Mors scaled back the Wall," Cor went on, "we all knew – the King, the Council, the Crownsguard – that from then on the regions outside Cavaugh – Leide, Cleigne, Duscae, all the territories that border Tenebrae, the archipelago of Galahd and all the lands east of Insomnia – were virtually lost. We didn't have the military forces to counter the advance of the Imperials. King Mors, and Regis after him, continued to use the regular army to try to free the cities that were being occupied, but it was like playing a long and frustrating game of *go*, with cities instead of pawns, a game we would have lost sooner or later. We didn't have their technology. But we had the magic. In Insomnia there was a refugee from Sovanna, a village in the archipelago of Galahd, very gifted with magic. He had earned the trust of Regis, of the Council, and mine as well. His name was Titus Drautos."

On hearing his name, Gladio gritted his teeth angrily. "That fucking bastard."

Cor rubbed the back of his neck, a sorrowful expression on his face. "This morning you said I've a good eye for people, Gladio. Well, Titus Drautos was the biggest error of judgment in my life. He had fought many battles on the front. He was extraordinary with the sword, shrewd, a great strategist, and he could use the magic of the King conveyed by the Ring; one of the strongest fighters in the kingdom. I had much esteem for his abilities. He suggested Regis form a group of selected fighters who would have opposed Lucis' magic to Niflheim's technology, and he himself took care of selecting the first group. And so, in 741, they founded the academy that, for five years, trained the boys and girls who in 746 would be sworn as Kingsglaives. From here on, correct me if I'm wrong, it's possible that you know even more than me," he added with a mocking look.

"I know less than I should and more than I'd like. If half of what Silia told me is true, and she always tends to minimize, the training has been inhumane and the front even worse."

"To train the Glaives, apart from Drautos, the excellent were chosen. I already had to lead the Crownsguard, but swordsmen, snipers, strategists, pilots, war veterans, all kind of specialists were employed; inflexible instructors who had to form inflexible soldiers. Not for nothing, though; from that academy came the military elite of the kingdom. The Glaives weren't able to change the fate of the war – Drautos, in hindsight, wouldn't in any case allow it – but they were deadly machines. Their captain did a dirty job for fifteen years, but he did it very well, in his own interest."

Gladio lowered his look. He couldn't even imagine what a blow that had been for Silia. She had been betrayed by the person she trusted most. "I still can't believe he was an infiltrator of the Empire."

"I suppose he didn't fight for the Empire any more. He aimed at the Crystal to increase his personal power, and to get to the Crystal he didn't hesitate to sacrifice even the Glaives who had followed him, and of which he certainly wanted to make his own army. I don't care about those traitors, but if I think of those who have died fighting on our side... a tremendous waste of lives, and above all, of skills. They would have helped us today."

"Well, we still have one." Gladio crossed his arms, proud, and stood up. For the first time since they had descended into the Crag, he took out Silia's plate, held it for a moment in his fist, and then tossed it to Cor Leonis, who took it off. "I leave you this, Cor. Today I don't need any good luck, and I'd also like you to return it to its owner if something happens to me."

Cor looked at the plate for a moment. Gladio thought that he would abruptly bring him back to
concentration, or that he would ridicule him, but the Marshal just made it disappear into his pocket. "I'll give it back to you when we come out. Are you ready to face Humbaba?"

III

Before reaching the third trial chamber, actually, they had to deal with one of the most bizarre daemons he had ever met: Inannaduru, a creature of all scales, claws and teeth that seemed to emerge from the wall that they had to break down in order to continue.

"When the ruins were discovered," Cor said as they continued, passing the other side of the crevasse, "many began to speculate on the information reported by the few survivors, looking in the ancient history books. A legend tells that, at the time of Somnus Lucis Caelum, a powerful warrior attempted to kill his Shield. Her name was Inanna. After having beaten her, Gilgamesh pierced her with his blades and left her to bleed to death, impaled against the wall. If credit is given to the assumptions, Inanna – as well as Nergal, Enkidu, Humbaba and Brunnsormr – was one of the first challengers that Gilgamesh considered worthy."

Gladio whistled. "I went down the Taelpar Crag with a guide of excellence."

Cor clicked his tongue without answering his joke. "Shut up and focus. We are almost at the third trial chamber."

They found it, in fact, two galleries further down. By then, Gladio had regained concentration. For the third time he pulled out the katana that sealed the Trial, and for the third time the voice of a warrior soul spoke to him.

*Be true, for the Shield of the King must deceive none – not even himself.*

Gladio believed that he had lied to himself only once in his life: when he had tried to deny the feelings he felt towards Silia Hartwood. His lips tightened and he continued on the only walkable path – a stairway carved into the stone that descended downward. When he stood before the altar, his third challenger emerged from the rock; first a huge arm, then a huge body, and finally a huge flaming sword.

*The Shield is bold, shrinking before none.*

Unlike the two previous trials, Humbaba didn't require any strategy. It was only Gladio's arms against those of the red giant. Everyone in the crag kept telling him that the brute force alone wouldn't be enough for him to reach and then beat Gilgamesh, but it was the brute force that helped him. Humbaba's sweepings were wide-ranging, deadly, but – Gladio found out – he now had the strength to parry them, thanks to the power that Nergal had transmitted to him, and his arms were now able to uproot and wield the stone pillars.

When Humbaba finally fell, and was reabsorbed from the ground as he had appeared, Gladio hurried to touch the altar. His heart was in his throat because nothing now would have been intermingled between him and the Blademaster.

*Now naught but the final trial awaits you.*

The altar disappeared like the previous ones, and this time it wasn't his fist to radiate a bluish light, but his broadsword.

*The aura that now pervades your blade will allow you to counter those of the Blademaster.*

"Nice work." Cor, his arms folded, stepped into the dim light towards him. "Let's go for a last break,
Gladio. You'll need it."

When they reached the nearest bivouac they remained in silence for a long time. Cor seemed immersed in his thoughts and Gladio was deeply focused, aware that those could have been his last moments. He regretted not being able to share them with Silia or his comrades, but he couldn't feel more honored than being with Cor Leonis. He had heard the story of the Immortal from his own lips. But one last part was still missing, the most important.

"Thirty years ago," Cor began to speak suddenly, this time without any need for encouragement, "a group of hunters made an unexpected discovery. Exploring the Crag, they came across these ruins. An abandoned place, according to those who made it out, dating back to the first era of the kingdom of Lucis. Precisely, to the Founder King, Somnus Lucis Caelum, as it was later discovered."

"In the recesses of the ruins, the hunters saw a man of superhuman height, masked and dressed in an armor that seemed to be as old as the ruins themselves. He wore a ragged red cape and carried an impressive number of swords to his belt. They tried to talk to him, but he didn't answer any of their questions and asked them if they intended to challenge him. Some understood the danger and pulled back. The unfortunates who accepted the challenge were defeated in a blink of an eye. He let others live because he said he didn't care for cowards and weak ones. He introduced himself as Gilgamesh, the Sworn Shield of King Somnus Lucis Caelum, and claimed to continue serving the Royal Family of Lucis."

"Or at least, it was what the three hunters told King Mors himself. I listened to their testimony with my own ears. They talked about that man as a supernatural being who handled four blades simultaneously with unprecedented speed. King Mors, a very pragmatic person, wanted to learn more about this murderer who pretended to be the Shield of his ancestor who lived two thousand years ago, and sent an expedition led by three Crownsguards to investigate. None of them returned."

"Without the King being able to stem it, rumor spread in the Kingdom that the soul of the legendary Gilgamesh, the Blademaster who had lived two thousand years before, remained undefeated, had returned to seek a worthy challenger. Several valiant men stopped thinking about the war and, almost in the grip of a fever of glory, left to compete with him. Once again, none of them returned."

"At that point," Cor's voice was reduced to an almost imperceptible whisper between the crackling of the fire, "I was infected by it as well. Your father, Regis and I had returned to Insomnia for more than a year, and I was quivering to fight again. I found unfair that my skills went wasted. I stood up strong-arms with King Mors. He could persist in not sending me back to war, if he preferred, but at least he had to allow me to investigate about what was happening in the Tempering Grounds. Actually, it was my intention to challenge the Blademaster, of course. I would have had my own way if your grandfather Remus hadn't been more eager than me to compete with Gilgamesh. He seized that opportunity and told King Mors that, with his permission, he would come with me. He thought it was time to clear the whole thing up once for all."

"Clarus clashed with his father in turn. He reminded him in front of King Mors, and half of the the Crownsguard, that the main duty of a Shield was to stand by the King who had sworn to protect. Remus retorted that he didn't accept advice and reproach from a twenty-five-year-old boy who hadn't yet seen almost anything in the world. Needless to say that your father had touched a nerve, even I knew it, but Remus' intercession could give me get what I wanted, so I sided with him."

"Clarus tried to talk some sense into me at least. He told me that I was throwing my young life away for nothing. But I felt invincible, and persisted in my purpose. In the end, caught between two fires, King Mors consented that Remus descended into the Taelpar Crag and that I went with him: I had won. We got ready to leave. Clarus didn't even come to bid farewell to his father. You know the rest,
Gladio," he said, making a wide gesture all around. "Our expedition faced what we came across so far. We lost many men in the trial chambers, and only your grandfather Remus and I got to the most recondite area. He wanted to be the first to enter. I saw him fall a few minutes later."

"Remus was one of the Kingdom's strongest warriors, but I wouldn't have pulled back for anything in the world. I couldn't defeat Gilgamesh, yet he spared my life because I showed enough worth to amputate his arm. But he deprived me of the sword Regis had given to me when I saved his life. The Genji Blade. It was a failure for me. I felt prostrated, humiliated. I would have preferred to die."

Gladio didn't answer. He understood it perfectly; he had felt the same way when he had been defeated by Ravus.

"In recognition of the skills demonstrated, King Mors made me Shield of the King in place of your grandfather Remus. When King Regis ascended the throne after his father's death, Clarus was naturally his Shield, but they appointed me Marshal of the Crownguard. The kid who took on that role was very different from the one who had come down in the Tempering Grounds. Although I had the Immortal's nickname glued to me, the defeat I suffered and Remus' death made me realize how little the earthly glory counted when the destiny of the Kingdom was at a stake. Cor stood up, took a few steps, then changed his mind and touched the handle of one of his katanas. "You've already achieved a lot getting here, Gladio. Few blows will now be able to scratch your parry. The Maelstrom technique is practically unbeatable. There's no mortal man who can stop your blade. I'll ask you again: are you going to get to the bottom?"

Gladio stood up, tense. "Are you going to stop me now that we're here?"

"No," Cor replied after a long, icy silence. "You came in the Crag driven by a noble intent, unlike Remus and I. You have embraced the possibility of your sacrifice to better protect the True King. There's no higher motivation than this, for a Sworn Shield." He pulled out the katana from its sheath. "Take it. You might need this too."

"Cor, I can't..."

Cor forced the sword into his hands. "You'll give it back to me. If you're ready, go and hold your own, Gladiolus. Show your sword when you feel like you're lost. The Blademaster awaits you. And I'll wait for you here."

IV

When he faced a stalagmite wall, for a moment Gladio thought he had took a wrong turn. Then he saw the seals and understood.

*Show your sword when you feel like you're lost.*

He summoned his broadsword, held it horizontally in front of the seal, and the wall crumbled. He didn't look back a single moment and crossed the now accessible cave following the torches to an outdoor rock bridge. It was almost dawn and the Blademaster was waiting for him, giving his back. All around him, like macabre funeral stems, countless swords of all shapes and sizes were stuck in the rock.

Gladio took a deep breath and advanced. "I'm here."

"Brandishing your brute force?" Gilgamesh mocked him, turning around.

"That, as well," Gladio admitted. "Are you surprised?"
Gilgamesh waved his sword at him. This time he saw him move clearly, he saw his lunge coming, and he parried it. His arm didn't falter.

*Now I can beat him.*

They swords rang together once, twice, thrice. They sized one another up for a while, exchanging a dense succession of lunges, dodges and blocks. Gladio tried to slash, but Gilgamesh jerked back. He hurried to assume a guard stance, just in time to parry a tremendous blow that hurt his arms and shoulders. Intimidated, he focused on keeping his distance, taking advantage of the broader range of his broadsword compared to the two-handed sword held by his adversary, but Gilgamesh was able to warp. He had gotten used to opposing the warping by training with Noctis and Silia. Gilgamesh was certainly faster than them, but he had a weak point: without his left arm that Cor had amputated, his parry was weak on the right side. Gladio couldn't compete with him in terms of agility and strength, but he managed to score a few hits by going around his opponent and unleashing the Maelstrom technique.

Gilgamesh's weapon changed: his long two-handed sword turned into a katana. Gladio moved instinctively, holding his broadsword with one hand – now, compared to the stone pillars he had used to defeat Humbaba, its weight was practically nil – he summoned Cor's katana in the other.

"You only delay the inevitable, o unworthy one. Look how you tremble!"

Gladio realized that his hands were really trembling, but because of the adrenaline. "I ain't afraid of you. I won't die here."

"Just surrender. Why else should you have come here if not to join the other lost souls?"

This time it was Gladio who took the initiative, hurling himself at Gilgamesh. "I came here to prove to you I am worthy!"

The clash resumed with even more fury. For the first time in his life, Gladio experienced what older and more versed fighters had told him, and to which he had never fully believed: the frenzy of a fighting fury to its utmost level. He gradually descended into a state of feverish trance in which he felt like he was no longer master of his own body. Gilgamesh was little more than a shadow with flaming contours, and his own body moved lightly as a shadow. Gladio found himself wondering how, until a few minutes before, he could feel anger, frustration, fear, nervousness, excitement; at that moment, he could only feel the distant sound of the blood flowing in his veins, the labored but regular rhythm of his breath. He felt the vibrations of Gilgamesh's voice, but he didn't hear it, nor did he reply.

He came to his senses again only when the opponent's katana drew a descending diagonal motion and caused him a terrible pain in his forehead. Gladio missed the ground from under his feet. He put his hand down, rolled before his opponent could finish him, and stood up in front of Gilgamesh in a guard stance, with the broadsword horizontally leaning on his nape.

"I'm not afraid of you," he repeated, and this time it was completely true.

Gilgamesh returned to attack and Gladio dived again in his feverish state. And in that feverish state he realized, without it giving him any joy or satisfaction, that Gilgamesh had begun to retreat more and more. His blows were neither as powerful nor precise as before, his parry was now slightly uncertain.

When he finally saw the Blademaster collapse on his knee in front of him, Gladio was so exhausted that he thought he was dead or fainted. *Finish him*, a clot of rationality in his brain told him, *You*
can't, something else told him, he's already dead, and you won.

"I kneel before no man," he heard. He took a few moments to recognize his own voice, but when it happened the world returned to acquire consistency and color, and he felt his body as his own again – his body and, consequently, all the pains that belonged to it.

He laid a hand on the wound on his forehead that hurt as if it were burning. When he looked at his bloodied fingers, he felt his lips bending into a smile. From now on, he would have a physical memory on his face of what he had managed to do with his strength alone. *This is not the souvenir I was thinking of bringing back.*

"It took me a while," he told Gilgamesh, still kneeling, "but I've understood you're right: it's not true that I'm not afraid of anything. Since I was born, I've been scared of not being up to the role everyone expects me to play. If Noctis Lucis Caelum is indeed the Chosen King, I can't let him die." He took a deep breath. "But if I let fear take over me while fighting, I'm dead. I've to go back to my king now. I may be all muscle and no mettle, as you told me, but I'm gonna keep protecting Noct the only way I know how."

He turned to leave. His head was spinning with exhaustion, but he held it high, his shoulders straight. They would have to keep carrying a lot of weights in the coming months.

"Spoken like a true Shield of the King," Gilgamesh said. He no longer spoke with the guttural voice – almost *choral* – he had addressed him with up to that moment, but with a human voice. "Fear and doubt beget death alone, but he who averts his gaze from them cannot call himself a true Shield. You have proven to be worthy of your role. The Chosen King should be so fortunate as to have a man like yourself serving at his side."

Gladio listened to those words in shock. His throat was dry, and he couldn't say anything.

"With this blade," Gilgamesh went on, holding out one of his swords, "I entrust my power to you."

It was a glaive. Even before recognizing the golden insignia of the Crownsguard on its handle, he knew it was Cor Leonis' Genji Blade.

"It belonged to a young man who impressed me with his strength of will. It was with this very blade that he stole from me my arm."

"I can't accept this," he tried to shield himself, withdrawing his hands from the sword.

"If he still walks among the living, a man of his mettle will have doubtless transcended attachment to mere material possessions."

Gladio grabbed it with both his hands. He looked at it, honored, without daring to handle it.

"Now, hasten forth with mind unclouded by doubt and will unmoved by fear. The last King of Lucis is ill fit to fight without his Shield."

*The Last King of Lucis.* Gladio couldn't grasp the meaning of those words, and was too confused to ask for explanations. He nodded, staring for the last time in the reddish glow that glinted where the Blademaster's eyes should have been. Who knows what power had held him there for two thousand years, while for so long time the bones of his protégé had turned into ashes.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you very much."

V
When he went out, Gladio felt like a new man. Cor's gaze, when he met his, was strained, incredulous. He tightened his lips as if to keep a smile.

"You made it," he said simply, stopping in front of him, as if he had no doubt about it. Not a pat on his back, not a handshake. Typical of Cor Leonis. "And so quickly. I'm impressed."

Gladio touched the Genji Blade, his trophy, the precious weapon that Regis had given to an arrogant thirteen-year-old who had saved his life, and without thinking a moment longer, held it out to him, together with the katana Cor had lent him. "Along with your sword, I brought you another one."

"I wondered where I put that thing." Cor Leonis took his katana, but he didn't touch the Genji Blade. Gladio looked at him without understanding. "Keep it. Makes for a better souvenir than that scar."

Cor turned his back, moving away, before he could offer it to him again. Gladio stared at the glaive for a moment, then put it back in his holster with a wave of pride that he hadn't felt even when he had received Gilgamesh's praises; for him, the Immortal's esteem counted much more.

They crossed the Crag again, this time without encountering obstacles, silently. Nobody bothered them. Only when they were a few steps from the entrance to the Tempering Grounds, a warrior soul barred their way. He wore the uniform of the Crownguard. Gladio was about to summon his broadsword, but Cor laid a hand on his arm.

"You made it, Young Warrior."

Gladio recognized one of the voices that had persecuted him as they advanced into the fault, now mocking him, now encouraging him. And, lightning and piercing like a Gilgamesh's lunge, a flash of understanding made its way into him. He lowered his hand and bowed his head in a respectful gesture.

"I made it, grandpa. Thanks for everything."

The soul nodded. He advanced towards him, losing consistency, and crossed him, disappearing into thin air. Gladio turned to Cor.

"Did you know it was him?"

Cor shrugged, starting to walk again. "I wasn't sure until this moment."

"D'you think he felt humiliated by knowing that his grandson succeeded where he failed?" Gladio wished to eat his tongue after giving voice to that doubt. After all, the same could be said of Cor, who had trained him.

"No," Cor answered simply. "I'm sure he's feeling proud."

Gladio leaned a hand over his eyes. "The light," he justified himself, because they had come out of the crevasse and now it was day. "You know, Marshal, Gilgamesh mentioned he lost his arm in battle with a real hot-headed young guy back in the day."

"Did he say that?" Cor commented casually.

Gladio kept on walking without looking at him. "Yep. Whoever he was, he left a lasting impression on him. Gilgamesh said he had the strongest will he'd ever seen."

"Takes more than will to complete the Trial. Gladio, I hope you feel more confident in light of your success today. Few men can lay claim to such an accomplishment. Not even Cor the Immortal."
Remember that, when you meet Ravus again."

Gladio gestured boldly with his arm. "Yeah, but I didn't earn myself a badass nickname like yours. I am jealous. Even Silia has one."

"Does she? What's it?"

"Even without looking at her back, can't you picture it?"

Cor crossed his arms. He curled his lips in the half smile of someone who knows a lot. "Come to Orior, Gladio. I know that when you reach the others you can count on a healing potion, but you should get that wound checked. And maybe Hartwood reported useful information from Insomnia."

Gladio closed his eyes. He touched his cut, still aching, and for a moment he imagined Silia's small, cool hand on his forehead. The desire to see her again, to tell her what had happened, how he had prevailed over the Blademaster, was so strong that it almost hurt.

"No," he decided. "Gotta go back to Noctis. The Shield has been too long away from his King."

Cor's half smile became a complete smile. He put his hand in his pocket, pulled out Silia's plate and handed it back to him. "Take this back, then. And take care. Do you want me to say something to Hartwood from you?"

Gladio nodded, recovering the plate. "Tell her what happened. Tell her I'm doing my duty to the best of my ability."

"I'm sure she knows that. Would you like a ride, at least?"

"No, Cor, I don't want to keep you away from your duties anymore."

Without insisting, Cor raised his hand, bidding goodbye. Their paths went separate ways, at least for the moment. Gladio looked at him again: a solid man with a hard and icy gaze, who outlived two of the kings he had sworn to protect.

He punched his chest in a salute. He would defend the third at the cost of his own life.

*Est modus in rebus= There's a right measure in things

**Non omnibus dormio= I don't sleep to the benefit of everyone

Chapter End Notes

Ignis aurum probat > Fire tests gold
Chapter Summary

Things get messy when it's time to leave Insomnia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

28

Virtute duce, comite fortuna

I

"How are you doing, Hartwood?"

Silia rubbed her eyes. She was more than tired - they had been scouring the library for three days and two nights. With a grateful smile, she accepted the cup of coffee Colby had brought her.

"Thought we'd run out of it yesterday."

"We powered a coffee machine with a generator. But it's kinda disgustin', Boss, I doubt anyone came to clean the filters in the last few weeks."

"Don't call me 'boss'." She lifted the cup to her lips and almost spat it out. "Fuck, Colby, what did you put in it?"

"Brandy," he replied with a conspiratorial tone. "Found it in a locker while we were lookin' for the backup power supply. Looks like one of the employees used to wet his whistle at work. Thought you could use a cordial."

Silia swallowed it in a sip, even more grateful. "You thought well. Let's not tell Ackers, or he'll spy on us with the Marshal."

They giggled. Colby sat next to her, looking at the book on her lap.

"How much longer more do we have?"

She pointed to the stack of volumes that she still had to examine. "Not much, fortunately. We can't do a first-rate work, or Aldercapt will die of old age before the Prince can claim his throne. As far as I'm concerned, I still have seventy books to go, more or less. I don't know about Ackers, 'cause I haven't seen him since last night."

"Good," Colby said. "I'm sorry I can't help you; although I can read I don't know anythin' about this stuff. Didn't have much time to go to school."

Silia gave him a friendly pat on his shoulder. "Neither did I. Don't worry, I think we'll finish within a couple of hours. In the meantime, you can take these," she hinted at the twelve books she had set aside in the last few hours, "and start stacking them with the other books. Once we are finished, we'll
have to leave quickly. Perhaps the Imperials have forgotten us, but when we show ourselves again we'll have to fight."

"What's the plan?"

She had been thinking about it for two days. They couldn't simply go back and say hello to the garrison; it had been too long for their excuse of supplying weapons to be still credible.

"We'll manage somehow. Let me finish with these books and then we'll catch up with Ackers."

There was a way, but it was risky for everyone.

They talked for half an hour, when Ackers also declared that he had finished with his researches. Too much time, Silia believed, because after five minutes she had already understood that there weren't many alternatives.

"Surprise attack on two fronts," she announced, interrupting Kamal who was offering himself to stay to act as a sniper.

"What?" Jenkins asked.

"It's useless to discuss it any longer," she cut short, getting up to open one of the windows. "If we go down with our boxes after three days, Radovan won't give us a pat on our back asking how the party went. Moreover, it's very likely that in the meantime the news of our assault to Stronghold Domen has spread. That block must be broken down."

She looked down. Twelve floors weren't a joke, but she had run worse risks. She had fallen even higher while she was fighting against Marius, whose body, by the way, must have been a few floors down.

"We know that three days ago there was a garrison of eighteen magiteks and three MT-Ks presiding over the entrance to the Citadel, plus three Imperials in the flesh," she summarized quietly. "A perfectly manageable challenge, since we are five, but we've seen several patrols in the streets. If we don't put them out quickly, we'll find on us who knows how many others. And to put them out quickly, a two-pronged attack is more effective. So I'll get down from here and get the van. It's a heavy and massive vehicle. I'll brake down the garrison and you'll attack from inside taking advantage of the surprise effect."

"But we're on the twelfth floor," Kamal pointed out.

"I can count," she smiled. "There are many handholds. I've already done such things on the front." She didn't inform them of the detail that she could warp at the time, which made a substantial difference. She opened her knapsack and pulled out a sturdy rope with a grappling hook: she had never needed such a tool, since – drawing on the magic of the King – she could teleport following a weapon, but now that thing could make the difference between life and death. She returned to the window.

Ackers joined her, looking out. He was pale, and a thin veil of sweat beaded on his forehead. "Ms. Hartwood, it's dangerous. There are too many 'could' and 'may' in this plan."

"In all the plans there are 'could' and 'may'. What we can do is reducing them to a minimum, and that's what we're doing. In any case, if anything happens to me..."
"Hartwood, don't do it."

"If anything happens to me," she repeated, without answering Colby, "just risk it, and if the crates hinder you too much, leave them. If nothing happens to me, as soon as I step on the ground I call Ackers, and you come down. You'll have ten minutes, then I brake down the block. All very simple to say. Is that clear?"

Ackers shook his head. "All crystal-clear, but we won't leave the crates. These books must be brought to the camp. We've come this far, and I'm not going back empty-handed, especially if something happens to you, Ms. Hartwood."

Without another word of farewell, Silia hooked the grappling to the window frame, made sure she wasn't in the field of view of the Imperial block and that no aircraft was flying over the area, and slid down hanging from the rope. *I could lose my grip and fall. A Rifleman could see me and shoot me. I could find out that the van is gone. They could take me out while I'm going to retrieve it. The van may not hold up.* She took a deep breath as she was dangling in the air. *Calm and nerve,* she told herself, *One hassle at a time.*

When she raised her head, she saw her four comrades' faces leaning worriedly. "Don't stand here looking at me," she said, tilting her head jerkily to get rid of a lock of hair that had fallen on her face. "Collect the books and get ready." She took another deep breath and began her descent. The length of the rope would be enough for a couple of floors, then she would have to break through a window, unhook the grappling and start over again.

She managed to do it. Once the grappling hook fell off and she was certain that her time had come, but she kept her nerve and succeeded in finding a grip and didn't let the rope go. When she stepped to the ground at the back of the building – no one in sight – she allowed herself to stay a moment with her head leaned against the wall, soaked in sweat, her heart pounding in her chest and ears.

*Safe,* she told herself. *And anyway, there are worse ways of dying than splattering on the pavement of the Citadel Square.* Her hands slightly shaking for the effort and the adrenaline, she pulled the phone out of her pocket and called Ackers. "I'm on the ground, Ackers," she said. "Ten minutes."

When she was sure she was again in control of her nerves, she got up and slipped stealthily towards the entrance of the parking lot. Keeping herself in the shadows on the sides of the ramp, she went down to pick up the van.

*Shit.*

Four Swordsmen and three Riflemen, plus one of the human officers, were on guard at the vehicle. The young sergeant Eliezer, naive or not, must have written down their license plate or at least the model of the van. Certainly he had lost a couple of ranks when Captain Radovan had understood that something stank about those five so-called Imperials from Stronghold Domen that he had admitted through the East Gate, but nothing more, because Radovan himself had let them in into the Citadel. Against the wall, Silia checked her watch: it had been three and a half minutes since she had called Ackers. She would have taken two more to go back to the entrance of the Citadel, so she had four minutes to get rid of that nuisance.

The officer had a radio in his hand. She would have liked to take him to Orior to question him, but she couldn't risk him raising the alarm. She snapped to him first. She had enough time to see the surprise in his face as she cut off his arm that was holding the radio, but it lasted only a few moments because Silia pierced his throat.

*Seven more to go.*
She got around the nearest Rifleman before he could shoot and stuck her right blade in the back of his neck, then grabbed the killed magitek's waist and used it as a shield to parry the thrust of one of the Swordsmen; she slashed his head with her left sword and threw the Rifleman's body against the other three Swordsmen who were approaching to hinder them. She threw herself at the remaining two Riflemen, went past them and killed them with two lunges at the same time.

*Three more to go.*

Silia darted right in time to avoid one of the Swordsmen's knurled sabers. She blocked the second one, kicking it with her prosthesis, which made it fly away from the enemy's hands. Silia crouched, jumped, and beheaded the disarmed Swordsman with a blow. She calculated the distance and extended the prosthesis in such a powerful kick that blew off the head of the Swordsman who was approaching.

There was one left. She rolled to the ground up to him, avoided his saber, and stuck her right blade under his chin with a strut. Before he could self-destruct, she finished it.

No one in sight. Silia hurried into the van, praying to the Six that the Imperials hadn't sabotaged it. The tires seemed fine. She climbed into the cabin, inserted the keys into the ignition, and waited, eyes closed, to hear the healthy sound of the engine.

At the first attempt it didn't happen.

*Let's go, damn it.*

The second turn of the key started the engine. Silia checked her watch: her battle lasted just over a minute. She turned off the engine, and waited another minute before driving down the ramp to the back entrance from which they had entered.

When she got to the Citadel Square, she saw a squad of magiteks in position. Four were Riflemen and aimed their guns at her without hesitation.

*Let's start dancing.* She pushed her foot on the accelerator and hit them, pointing straight at the entrance to the Citadel. Other magiteks threw themselves onto the truck in a suicide attack, but bounced off the reinforced windshield. She heard the thuds of their bionic bodies bumping against the glass and the side of the vehicle, but she didn't slow down. She looked again at her watch: ten seconds to the agreed time. She hoped that Ackers and the others would be exactly where they were supposed to be.

The windows of the entrance had already been demolished by the bombings on the day Insomnia fell, so she met no resistance. Silia ran over all the magiteks she could, swerved, and braked in the hall.

Within the Citadel there was no longer a dozen magiteks, but at least thirty units. Radovan had strengthened the garrison and certainly sent patrols to look for them throughout the Citadel. If they hadn't found them, it was only because, as they imagined, they hadn't thought of searching the Library.

She peered anxiously in the dim light towards the stairs, but no trace of the others. They must have stumbled upon a patrol. Several bursts of machine-gun crashed against the windshield and the side, and Silia lowered her head, but the glass held up. The magiteks were swarming against the van. If a Spearman was among them, he would take little to destroy the door and pull her out like a sardine from a tin.
"Ms. Hartwood!"

Ackers' voice. Relieved, Silia slapped the horn to let him know that she was okay and to suggest he move his ass. She flung open the door with a kick to lend them a hand, leaving the van on. The four of them were there – Colby, Kamal and Jenkins each one with a crate in his arms. She made her way through the magiteks, knocking them down with quick and precise slashes at the back of their head. She aimed mainly at the Riflemen.

"Hurry up!" she shouted, as if it were needed. She reached Jenkins, the closest, and shoved him away from the trajectory of a bullet. "Away! Open the back door!" she urged him. They moved back to the van, and Jenkins opened the doors wide. He hurled himself into the cargo and walked around the vehicle, taking over the driver's seat.

Colby came forward, his head bleeding. A smear projectile over his ear, she considered, as he went past her. He too threw himself with the box on the load compartment. The last one was Kamal. He disappeared into the van like the others.

Ackers was covering their back. A glance at him was enough for Silia to understand that she had underestimated him. He was precise and fluid in his movements, and he was able to employ at the same time a large caliber gun and a short sword.

"Ackers!" she shouted, flanking him. "They're all inside. The books, too. Let's get away quickly."

They retreated to the van. They hadn't even closed the rear hatch when Jenkins started the engine and went full speed in reverse. Silia firmly grabbed the inside handle of the tailgate and, with Acker's help, managed to close it.

"Are you hurt, Ms. Hartwood?" he asked, panting.

"Not my blood. I found an officer and seven magiteks guarding the van. What about you? Any trouble running downstairs?"

"I apologize for being late. We came across a patrol led by the other officer who was with Captain Radovan. They were twelve. We managed to overcome them, but we lost some time. Colby suffered a smear blow."

"Nothing serious, Hartwood, ma'am," he interjected, rubbing the blood from his head. "I didn't think we were able to get rid of so many of 'em by ourselves. When the first one came to me, my body moved on its own and repeated that pattern you taught us."

"Did it?" Silia smiled, despite the situation, "You were listening to me then, after all?"

In the Citadel Square an armored military vehicle cut them off. Jenkins managed to steer just in time. From the window near Colby, Silia saw that Captain Radovan himself was at the wheel. It was only a moment, because Jenkins straightened the van and accelerated, but their pursuers were gaining ground, continuing to fire intermittent blows. She could feel the reinforced sheet of the rear door bending more and more with each new discharge, a few inches from her. If they'd hit a hire, they were fucked. If some airships came, they were more than fucked. "Kamal, it's time to show us what you are capable of."

Kamal reached her, raising his rifle. "Ready, Captain!" His arrogant smirk had appeared again on his handsome face. Without waiting for instructions on her part, he opened the door and set the rifle barrel on his folded knee. Silia kept an eye on him and one on the rearview mirror on Jenkins' side; the first shot pierced a tire of the vehicle that pursued them. The vehicle lurched. Kamal reloaded and
fired again, ripping a second tire. The van flipped over. They left it behind.

She whistled. "Nice shot." The streets echoed with an indistinct symphony that Silia knew too well: automated noises, sirens and engine rumbles. Without anyone instructing him, Jenkins drove through smaller streets cluttered with debris, moving away from the center of Insomnia. Silia allowed herself to sit down and breathe.

"They're certainly waiting for us at the gates," Ackers noted.

Silia was calm, tense enough so that her senses were ready for anything, but perfectly rational and alert. "I know. Keep driving to the South Gate, Jenkins."

"What's the plan?"

"Break through the roadblock, of course. Do you have better ideas?"

"To get us killed? A couple." She was definitely starting to like Kamal.

An explosion a few feet away from the van almost turned it over. A shower of debris hit the roof of the vehicle.

"Damn it," Colby hissed. "They pulled out the heavy artillery."

"What's it now?" Silia leaned forward next to him. "Oh, damn it," she repeated, looking at their new pursuers.

"How much damn is it?" Kamal asked.

Silia realized that everybody, including Ackers, was staring at her. Shitmus test on. She licked her lips, trying to show herself calmer than she was. "Two MT-Ks are after us."

"Not a big deal," Ackers sighed, apparently relieved. "I've been informed that they're strong, but usually slow and clumsy. At this rate, we will leave them after us soon."

"Not these ones. They're MA-Xs Patria. Let's say we had a fucking luck that we stole a very good Imperial van, that we brought a very good driver and that this street is very cleared. How much to the South Gate, Jenkins?"

Jenkins wasn't so peaceful now. After all, the worst in his life was now literally behind him and he had their lives in his hands. "Seven miles. Captain, what do I do? In the open we're an easy target. In the minor streets we risk finding an obstacle too big to overcome, or that a buildin' collapses in front of us blockin' our way. Or worse, on us."

"Keep on driving. Everybody shut up for a second."

Seven miles to the South Gate. Too far. She had to put those MA-Xs out. Not impossible – she had brought a fire flask – but the ground was unfavorable and who knows how many units she would attract in the meantime. Silia tried to visualize the map of Insomnia, scanning her memories in search of useful hints. She looked up to the sky, hoping not to see magitek engines after them. Sky. Engines.

"Ackers," she whispered. "What time did you leave Insomnia?"

"Ms. Hartwood, what...?"

"Just answer, please. You weren't with Cor Leonis' contingent. What time did you leave Insomnia?"
Ackers looked at her puzzled. "It was late at night. Two o'clock or something like that. I had gone looking for Iris Amicitia, but..."

"But you lost her because I had already taken her away," she cut short. "Anyway, you left Insomnia hours after me. Focus and think about it: did you see any Crown helicopter lifting up in the air?"

"Helicopters." She saw Ackers' eyes wander, concentrating for a moment, then the man shook his head. "No. The Imperials have done everything possible to evacuate the civilians peacefully. And I don't think anyone has been so careless as to try to get away by air. Too many Imperial airships."

Silia nodded. She thought, or rather hoped, it as well. "And the Diamond Weapons focused their destructive fury in the center of the city, didn't they?"

"I can confirm that." Ackers' gaze wandered for a second longer, then brightened. "Jenkins, turn right. The Prison Facility is two miles from here. If no one has taken them, there are at least four duty helicopters of the City Guard."

Jenkins obeyed. "Roger!"

Colby turned to them. "Are we leavin' by air then? Who will drive?"

"Oh," Ackers answered. "The Kingsglaives' training also includes the driving of military aircrafts. Am I right, ?"

Silia gave a half smile. "You're right, Ackers, but I don't get along with all that's more technological than a car, a van or a motorcycle. After a couple of test flights my comrades wisely decided that, unless it was a matter of life or death, I would never approach the controls of an aircraft again." She scratched the back of her neck, smiling at that memory. Sam had thrown up on the tapestry. "Jenkins, tell me it's not a matter of life or death and that you can fly a helicopter."

"More or less," he admitted.

"We'll settle for that." Another charge of the MA-Xs' cannons fell a few meters from them and made the van skid again, just as they took the driveway to the Prison Facility. "Jenkins, get ready to break through the gate. I'm sick of that junk. I was saving it for an emergency, but we need to get out of the van and transfer the crates to the helicopter and we can't do it with the Imperials stuck to our asses like a piece of shit." She ignored Ackers' disgusted look. "Kamal," she said, gesturing to him and struggling to slightly open the deformed hatch. "Can you see the white light just under the head of the MA?"

He leaned toward her to watch outside the tailgate. "Yessir. I mean, ma'am."

"Under the white light, there's the tank. Aim at the nearest MA. You won't have a second shot, Kamal. I will throw this fire flask simultaneously so the oil will burst into flames," she said calmly. "If you don't hit the tank, the explosion won't be powerful enough to blow up the both of them. Are we clear?"

He smiled nervously. "We are clear, Captain. I won't miss it."

She smiled in turn, nodding, then turned towards the others. "Hold tight. And keep your heads down. C'mon, Kamal." Silia pulled out the fire flask and gave the signal to him. As soon as he shot, she threw the flask, immediately closing the tailgate without making sure they had succeeded.

The explosion was bombastic. She was glad she hadn't prepared a more powerful flask, or they would have blown up too. The tailgate was stuck and she couldn't reopen it, but looking at the mirror
on Jenkins' side she saw that both the MA-Xs were now steel skeletons on fire.

"You did it!" Ackers exclaimed, but then they were all thrown forward again when Jenkins broke through the gate. The helicopters were there, she could see them in the distance on the landing field. For the time being, there were no other Imperials.

Five minutes later, they were lifting, rickety, up above Insomnia. Silia was soaked and exhausted, her ears still whistling for the roar of the explosion. The sky was clear, however; the few airships she saw were far from the city.

She collapsed against one of the crates. "If Jenkins doesn't make us crash somewhere, we did it, it seems. Are you all okay?"

"I still can't believe it, but I am," Jenkins replied.

"I'm unharmed too," Colby said. He brushed his bloody forehead.

"Me too."

Ackers struggled to find the power of speech. "We are out. I still can't believe it."

Silia sighed, patting the crate on which she was leaning. "Yeah, we're out, with one hundred and ninety-four books to examine. Let's hope all this effort will be repaid." She took a deep sigh. "Jeez, guys, good job. You kept your heads. You knocked down thirteen enemies in four. Kamal's aim was perfect. Jenkins, you saved our ass. The Marshal will be pleased to know that he can count on such good men."

"Ms. Hartwood." Ackers was smiling. He held out his hand, which she accepted. His grip was unexpectedly firm and virile. "I think the Marshal will also be pleased to know that he can count on you. By the way, hm..." He shrugged. "Maybe... hm... can you tell me how can I address you?"

"Ackers, is that so important? Among the Glaives, as you know, there were no titles. Moreover, I'm not a Glaive anymore. I'm out of the army now. I'm lending a hand to the Marshal and I address him using this title because he has fifteen years of experience more than me, as well as you do, Ackers. But the time for military formalities, when there's no longer a Guard or an army, is over, don't you think? Indeed, after we've risked our necks together, if you don't mind, I think I'll call you by your name, Dustin."

She saw his shoulders stiffen, but then the man relaxed. He smiled, embarrassed. "I think you're right. Your first name is Silia, isn't it?"

"Silia," she confirmed. "How odd it is hearing my name in someone's mouth. It seems that nobody likes it in Orior."

II

When they landed where the ground allowed it, in the clearing near the camp, Silia was the first to jump off the helicopter. She was sick, and again she swore to herself that she would never set foot on a flying vehicle any more. She'd rather ride a Chocobo.

They were greeted with good humor by the men at the camp and bombarded with questions of all kinds – what were the conditions of the city, whether they had found the corpse of the King, had the emperor Aldercapt himself put his fat ass on the throne in the Citadel, whether the house of one or the shop of the other had been spared from the explosions. Some turned their noses up learning that the only booty of their expedition was three crates of books when they could bring back crates of
whiskey or cigarettes, which were always in short supply at the camp. Silia sent the boys to rest and reserved for herself and Dustin the final task of reporting to the Marshal before going to sleep – or at least, trying to sleep – in the barracks.

It turned out that Cor Leonis wasn't in the camp and that no one knew where he went. It was Darius who told her when she finally found him in the armory.

"The Marshal went to the Taelpar Crag with Gladio Amicitia."

Silia blinked. "The Taelpar Crag," she repeated slowly. She tried to focus, but after three days wearing her eyes out on hundreds of books, almost without sleeping, a vertical descent from the Citadel and a breakneck getaway from Insomnia, it was hard. The Taelpar Crag meant only one thing: Gilgamesh. Certain death. Asking for certain death. "Oh, great. He will hold Gladio's hand while Gilgamesh tears him apart. Are you seriously telling me that the head of what remains of the resistance to the Empire has accompanied the Sworn Shield of Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum to undertake a mortal trial that he himself failed thirty years ago?" She looked for a cigarette in the pocket of her Imperial uniform – she couldn't wait to take off that shit – and lit it, taking a deep breath. She touched the cell phone, but immediately took her hand away. She couldn't call Gladio while he was still in the crevasse.

"Hartwood, the Marshal doesn't have to account for his action to me or you," Darius replied. By judging the degree of acidity in response to her sarcasm, she deduced that he had to be as strained as she was. "Or rather, since he asked me to take his place while he's away, you have to account to me. Report on your mission to Insomnia."

Silia counted up to five to not send him to fuck off. She produced a nervous and bad smile, and satisfied him. "Mission accomplished, Sir. We have brought back one hundred and ninety-four books from the Royal Library that seemed to us to be related to the Royal Arms."

"Hartwood, enough with that sarcastic tone. Have you had any troubles? Are you all unharmed?"

"We are unharmed, Sir, and we didn't come across anything that couldn't be resolved with a bit of healthy improvisation: mountaineering, breakthroughs, bombings and theft of helicopters."

Darius approached her with a hostile loon. Silia dropped her cigarette to the ground, straightening herself into a defensive attitude. They looked at each other for a moment, tense, then Darius laid a hand on her nape and pushed her gently forward. She wouldn't allow that for anyone else in that camp, and he knew it. "Well done, Hartwood. Go and sleep for a while, before we kick each other's ass. If the Marshal returns, I'll come and wake you up."

Silia was so nervous that she didn't think she would sleep; instead, she dropped five minutes after resting her head on the pillow, and Darius, in fact, had to wake her up. She looked at her watch and saw it was eleven at night.

"You took a good nap, didn't you, Hartwood?"

Silia rubbed her face, looking for the bottle of water on the cot. "Darius, is the Marshal back? Is he fine?"

"Unharmed. He waits for you in his pavilion."

"How long?"
Darius twisted his mouth in a little smile. "An hour."

Silia rolled off the cot and hurried to put on her pants. "Fuck you, Darius! Why didn't you wake me up before?"

"The Marshal said there was no rush."

She put on her shoes on as fast as she could. She had to know what had happened in the Crag – she had to know if Gladio had survived the Trial. She ran out of the tent, leaving Darius behind; just a few steps from the Marshal's pavilion, she slowed down, took a breath, and pulled herself together.

She entered, flaunting ease. "Marshal," she greeted him, probing his expression for good or bad news. She couldn't understand.

"Good evening, Hartwood. If I hadn't sent Magnus to wake you up, it would already be morning."

Embarrassed, Silia nodded. She didn't justify herself by telling him that in Insomnia she had hardly slept for three days. "Guess you want a report, Marshal."

"You guess well. Darius and Dustin have already told me that the mission was a success, but I wanted to talk to you."

Silia took a short breath to calm herself. "Mission accomplished. One hundred ninety-four books retrieved. We don't know if they will be of any use, but we hope so. No losses. Colby suffered a slight injury, but a couple of head stitches were enough."

"Very well, Hartwood. Details?"

"We overcame the first check at the East Gate without problems. We risked a little more to enter the Citadel: an Imperial captain in the mood for jokes was about to break our cover."

"How many Imperials around?"

"We tried to meet as little as possible. Apart from the seven magiteks and the Imperial officer whom Irwin and August had already referred to, we came across about fifty units on the main road. The suburbs, on what we have seen, are desert. However, I would dare to estimate between four hundred and five hundred units in total, Marshal. Not so many, for a city as big as Insomnia, but enough to represent a problem for the few strength we have here. And even if we succeeded in overwhelming them and taking the city back, it's indefensible."

Cor Leonis nodded. "You confirmed what I thought, Hartwood. After entering the Citadel?"

"We headed to the Library. No hindrances. Ackers and I left the men on guard and split the rooms. It took us almost three days. Once the promising volumes were collected, we had to start improvising. Too much time had passed for the excuse of restocking weapons to still held up. We consulted and decided that the safest plan was that I would come down from the outside to retrieve the van so as to face the ground-floor garrison on two fronts."

"You have decided." Cor Leonis frowned, but Silia couldn't tell if he was irritated and frankly she didn't even care.

"I clashed with seven magiteks in the Citadel parking lot and then I found out that they had strengthened the garrison inside and in front of the hall. The others, who had to reach me with the crates, came across a patrol, probably sent to our search. We managed to get rid of them, to load the crates in the van and escape from the Citadel. They chased us. Instead of leaving through the South
Gate, we came up with the idea of using a helicopter from the Prison Facility to leave the city. Jenkins piloted it. We left it just outside the camp. I know that air transports, with all the airships the Imperials can dispose of, are dangerous, but it could be useful.” She folded her arms. "Apart from Ackers, Marshal, Colby, Jenkins and Kamal have proved to be up to expectations. Keep that in mind."

"Very well. You can go now, Hartwood."

*Are you shitting me?* Silia hesitated, and opened her mouth to ask about Gladio. Cor Leonis stared at her, as if challenging her to do so, so she bit her tongue and gave him no satisfaction. She would call Gladio to find out if he was still alive. She bowed her head in a goodbye gesture and turned to leave the pavilion. "Goodbye, Marshal."

"Hartwood, wait," he called her back inside. She could hear an amused note in his voice. After all, even Cor the Immortal was endowed with some questionable sense of humor. "Gladio Amiticia prevailed over Gilgamesh. He asked me to tell you that he's doing his duty to the fullest."

Silia blinked, relieved. She allowed herself to smile. "Is he alive, then?"

Cor Leonis nodded solemnly. "He is the only swordsman for centuries to have defeated the Blademaster. Neither can I boast of such an undertaking, nor have I tried it again. I've only accompanied Gladio to advise him and show him the way."

Marshal's praises weren't empty; Gladio had really succeeded in the impossible. She had been a fool, when she was in Insomnia, to believe she could compete with him, and she felt proud to have been able to cross swords, even if only in training, with him.

"You were fifteen," she heard herself reply, and Cor Leonis blinked. Only then Silia realized that she had moved to a more confidential tone. "The Immortal was certainly not at the top of his skills." She hesitated, then asked him. "Why didn't you try the Trial again, Marshal?"

She was expecting a dry order to go away, certainly not an answer. "Because I already had my chance, Hartwood, and I burned it. I was a fool kid, then, and what happened made me become the prudent man I am. I no longer wanted to go down into the Crag, but when Gladio asked me to accompany him there, I accepted. He had strong reasons."

"What reasons?"

"He'll tell you, if he wants."

"Could you tell me if he's fine, at least?"

"Just a cut on his forehead."

"Another?"

"Nothing serious. His face is almost intact."

"I don't care about his face. I care about his ass." She bit the inside of her mouth. "I mean, life. Yours, as well. Life." She bowed her head again. "Thank you for informing me, Marshal. I really appreciate it."

Cor Leonis' expression softened, but perhaps it was only her impression. "Hartwood, while you were asleep I talked to Dustin Ackers. He officially apologized to me for leaving the crucial choices to you without my authorization. He told me that he did it because you showed yourself to be quicker than
him in making decisions fast and well."

Silia shrugged uneasily. "Dustin exaggerates. I only suggested what it seemed to me more prudent to do for the party."

"Getting down from the twelfth floor of the Citadel without equipment falls into your definition of 'prudent'?"

"I was risking personally, in that case. Anyway, I had a rope with a hook."

They looked at each other in silence. The Marshal gave a snort, his maximum expression, she thought, of a laughter. He scratched his eyebrow. "Go and browse through those books, Hartwood. Dustin has already started."

Silia smiled again. That camp was becoming as close to home as she had ever known in the last ten years. "Marshal," she ventured to ask. "I can continue to train my guys, right?"

Cor Leonis nodded. "I don't expect any less, Hartwood. Regulate yourself."

"Thanks, Marshal."

"Hartwood, I have one last thing to tell you, and unfortunately it's not good news. Since you've escorted Iris Amicitia, Jared and Talcott Hester out of Insomnia, it's your right to know it." He gave a short sigh. "Jared Hester was killed in Lestallum."

Silia held her breath. "Jared? How is it possible? Who did it?"

"Caligo Ulldor."

She clenched her fists. "Ulldor," she shouted, incredulous. "That ugly cutthroat. That's so like him, taking a defenseless old man out." She tried to regularize her breathing. "Damn it. How did it happen? Are Iris and Talcott okay?"

"They are fine. While you were at Insomnia, Hartwood, the Imperials entered Lestallum and started swarming around the city asking about the Prince. Talcott, unfortunately, told someone they came from Insomnia. Ulldor and his squad went to the Leveille to interrogate them, but Jared refused to cooperate. They killed him, and in order not to antagonize the authorities of Lestallum and the mayor, Cassandra Gavril, they said that it was a case of self-defense."

"Yeah, I bet he assaulted them with his cane." Silia held a movement of rage. Obviously the mayor of Lestallum as well didn't want to antagonize the Empire. "I didn't expect less from that coward."

"The Prince and his retinue have infiltrated the Vaullerey airbase to avenge him," he said in a harsh voice. It was obvious that he didn't approve. "They packed Ulldor and entrusted him to some hunters to bring him here. He never arrived, unfortunately."

"Too bad," she hissed. "I would have interrogated him with extreme pleasure."

"Indeed he would give us useful information about the Empire, but it's over. He also killed the three hunters who had taken him into custody from Ignis Scientia. The Meldacio is on the warpath now. Ezma Auburnbrie even put a bounty on him."

Silia felt eager to lay her hands on him. "If I know him at all, that bastard will be back in Gralea by now."
"Don't think about it." The Marshal leaned against the desk, and for the first time Silia noted that he was exhausted. Even Cor Leonis certainly hadn't slept for days.

"His time will come when we'll make the Empire pay." Silia moved to leave. She shifted the curtain of the pavilion, but she paused a moment longer. "Try to rest tonight Marshal, you need it. Orior hasn't imploded while you were away, and can do without you for a few hours more."

She hurried out before the Immortal intimated her to mind her own fucking business. Heading towards the container where they had left the books to take one – she had already slept four hours that afternoon, and was impatient to start the research work – Silia finally pulled out her new phone. She looked at it for a long moment before dialing Gladio's number.

III

"Again, Ardyn Izunia?" Gladio exclaimed, placing his mug of beer on the table. After what had happened to him in the last thirty-six hours, he thought he could allow himself to drink one. They had stopped to eat and tell their respective misadventures by the same elderly street-food seller who had given them information the first time they had been in Lestallum.

Noctis nodded. "We met him in Steyliff Grove. He knew exactly that we would go there to look for mithril, so much so that he had also arranged a retinue for us."

"A retinue?"

Prompto made a blissful smile. "Aranea Highwind. The mercenary we met in Vaullerey. She's stunning. In fact, we all agreed to leave you and go on with her, since we thought you'd left to do your business with Silia Hartwood." Gladio showed him his finger.

"You thought it," Ignis exposed him, cutting the fillet in his plate meticulously. "Anyway, Prompto, in the light of what Gladio told us, I dare to say that after defeating Gilgamesh in the Taelpar Crag he deserves full title to rejoin the group, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," Prompto conceded with his mouth full, gaining a second finger in the space of a minute. He swallowed, ignoring him. "Too bad for you, Ig, my nose smelled flirtin' and it's hardly wrong."

Ignis' hands froze on his knife and fork. "I beg your pardon?"

"You. And Aranea. You were so in tune that you almost completed each other's sentences."

Gladio risked to choking on the beer, more for Ignis' embarrassed expression, almost as rare as Cor Leonis' laughter, than by Prompto's allusion.

"I kindly ask you not to project your inclinations on me."

"What's the story, Ig?" Gladio pricked him.

"The same is true for you, Gladio."

"Don't be embarrassed with me, bro."

"Gladio, do you want to know what happened in the ruins of Steyliff or are you more interested in Prompto's baseless gossips?"

Gladio surrendered, raising his hands with a smile. Even though they had been separated for less than two days, it was nice to be with his friends again. "Steyliff."
"It was an ancient mausoleum dating back to Solheim," Noctis continued. "Underwater."

Prompto pushed his camera in front of him. "Yeah. Never seen such a place. I almost lacked the air."

Gladio scrolled the photos. There was one that showed Ignis and Aranea side by side, intent on a close conversation, but he held back the temptation to resume the subject. "True. Looks like a majestic place. Bothersome daemons?" He asked, seeing a picture of a Jotun.

"Enough," Noctis nodded. "Above all the one we fought in the last room. A huge bird, but very similar to a reptile. I think it wouldn't have attacked us if we hadn't invaded its territory. Hate to admit it, but Highwind served us well, since you were missing."

Gladio took his zinger. He had told them about the Trial and explained that he had put his life at stake to learn new techniques, but he hadn't been up to confess that he had done it for Noctis and the humiliation that Ravus had given him. "You would have managed anyway," he retorted.

"However, as soon as we left the ruins after recovering the mithril, Cindy called us. She told that Holly, her engineer friend from Exineris, was waiting for us at Lestallum to work on it. Aranea gave us a ride with her Imperial airship. Now, would you mind explaining to me the reason for your drama act at the Exineris power station? Why didn't you tell me immediately that it was you?"

Apparently Noctis was still pissed off for having been mocked. He put the cutlery on the empty plate and crossed his arms, waiting.

"I can't blame you," Ignis supported him, evidently more at ease now that they were no longer talking about Aranea Highwind. Noctis turned, irritated.

"How long will it take for Holly to finish working on the mithril?"

"A couple of days, she said."

"Not bad," Gladio commented. "Told you what Cor has said. He sent Silia and Dustin to Insomnia to look for information about the Royal Arms. If Noctis agrees, perhaps we should wait and see if anythin' useful comes out of those books." He spoke assuming they would return safely after they had managed to penetrate the Royal Library. It couldn't be otherwise.

Everyone looked at the person concerned, waiting for him to reply.

"I would like to reach Luna as soon as possible," Noctis murmured, after a long pause. "But we don't know how long we will stay in Accordo, and I don't want to neglect the mission that, in my interest, my father has entrusted to me. Back in Cape Caem, we'll wait for news from Cor."

Gladio got up. "Good." Apart from the short breaks in the crevasse, he hadn't slept for days. They had taken a room at the Leveille, although it was a bit depressing for him to sleep in the same place where Jared had been killed. "What about going to the hotel now? I'm dead on my feet."

The phone rang in his pocket. He didn't recognize the number on the display, so he leaned it, perplexed, to his ear. "Gladio Amicitia speaking."

"He who defeated the Blademaster. You should say that on your answering machine, Gladio."
This time Gladio's reaction was more controlled, and he managed to compute a better response than the succession of "shit" he had uttered when she first called him. "We haven't seen each other for three weeks, I know you're alive only because the Marshal has spoken of you in the present tense, and this is your greeting?"

"Hello, Gladio," Silia said, slightly amused.

"Hello, Silia." He scratched his hairline. He winked to the others and moved to precede them to the Leveille to talk to her alone. "I heard you were in Insomnia with Dustin Ackers."

"I heard you were in the Taelpar Crag with Cor Leonis."

"You first. How are you?"

"We have recovered almost two hundred books. Perhaps it wasn't all a useless effort. We'll find out in the coming days."

"Let's hope for the best. What phone are you calling me from?"

"A librarian's phone, I guess. Not anymore now. Save this number."

"You betcha," he smiled, pleased to finally have a way to talk to her directly.

"I also heard about Jared," she continued in a bitter voice. Gladio heard the friction of the sparkwheel of a lighter, then a puff of smoke. "Gladio, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left them in Lestallum without protection."

Gladio sighed. He had arrived at the square in front of the Leveille, but didn't enter. "Silia, there's already a queue of people who feel responsible for the death of Jared, not least me. Truth is, no place's really safe and after the fall of Insomnia things were too messy for someone to be their bodyguard. Now Iris and Talcott are in Cape Caem with Monica, and we're going there too."

"If I lay my hands on Ulldor, I'll make him wish he was never born. You have no idea 'bout the shit he made in the border towns. If he dared even touch Iris and Talcott, I'd have searched for him to the end of the world."

Gladio shuddered at the thought of Ulldor's hands on his sister. Silia's tone was so poisonous that he had no doubt that she would do it for real. He sat down on the steps in front of the hall.

"Care to tell me what the fuck you were thinking, now?" she continued, in an equally poisonous tone. "Were you trying to kill yourself?"

"No," he replied simply. "Only improving my skills to be able to better deal with this journey. And I did it. I'll tell you the next time we meet, this along with many other things. If we have time to talk because, I tell you sincerely, I have better ideas on how we could use that time."

She didn't answer right away, but he heard an amused snort. "Where's the embarrassed kid who was too ashamed to come with me in the common showers of the Training Hall?"

"He died, one piece at a time. In Insomnia, when a woman let him in to her home and then to her bed. In Galdin Quay, when he learned that his hometown had fallen. In the Disc of Cauthess, when Titan tried to smash him. In the Aracheole fortress, when the Imperial Commander Ravus Nox Fleuret kicked his ass. The rest in the Taelpar Crag."

Another pause. When Silia spoke again, he was sure she was smiling. "A brand new man has come
"Our next stop is Accordo, as surely Cor has told you. Cindy is repairing the royal yacht and, after what you did in Insomnia, we decided to take some time in Cape Caem waiting for news about the Royal Arms." He hesitated, then asked her. "Why don't you join us for a day or two?"

He heard her sigh. "No, Gladio. I'm training some guys, here. There are books taken from Insomnia to study. I can't."

Gladio understood. He rubbed between his eyes, then touched the plate in his pocket. "I understand. I was hoping you wouldn't, but I figured you'd answer like that. I asked you because I would like you to know..." He paused. Iris had pushed him to do it, but he couldn't tell her by phone. "...that even if that boy is dead, Silia, the brand new man hasn't forgotten."

"Neither has that woman forgotten. Try to stay in one piece until our next meeting, Gladio. I'll do the same."

"Can't promise anything. Since I had to challenge Gilgamesh to make you call me, I'm thinkin' about going again into the Taelpar Crag."

She hang up the call.

Chapter End Notes

"Virtute duce, comite fortuna" > "with virtue as lead, with fortune as a companion"
Chapter Summary

While the Royal Retinue decides to stay in Cape Caem for a while, Silia supports their journey from afar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

29

Gutta cavat lapidem

I

The Meldacio Hunter HQ was an anthill of activity. Hunters were busy dragging prey, traders unloaded goods from vans, men and women exchanged orders and instructions, cursing as if it was raining. The small outpost, like Orior, was built from an ancient military base protected on three sides by mountain ranges. The natural walls and the constant coming and going of hunters made it impossible to see a daemon or an Imperial for miles all around.

After parking Silia first spotted the mission shed. She delivered the five pink feathers of the Regaltrices as a symbolic proof of the killing, even though she had also kept their feet as a precaution, then she took the opportunity to visit the shop – Parvinath General Store, the sign read. She stocked antidotes, golden needles, and smelling salts to replenish Orior's supplies, since those kinds of goods hardly reached Hammerhead and Longwhyte, loaded them in her Volvo, and then stopped to examine the weapons displayed in a hunter's van.

"New one, huh?" the man asked her. He had shaved hair and pecs of respect that seemed to explode under the black shirt he was wearing. "Never seen you before. I always give discounts to the newbies, sometimes one of these," he pointed with his head to a shield, "can save their lives. Do you want a shield, miss?"

Silia had never used an actual shield in her life – a waste of hands, since she wouldn't have had the strength to parry an attack made with considerable physical force, and she needed both her hands to handle the twin swords – and she wouldn't start at that moment. "No thanks. However, this bracelet..." She picked it up. It was studded with yellow-green gems. "Heliodor, right?"

"Good eye, huh?" He winked. "It enhances physical strength. No offense, girl, but it wouldn't hurt you. I sell it for two thousand, but it's a thousand and eight hundred for you."

"Sixteen hundred and fifty and I'll take it."

"Seventeen."

"Sixteen hundred and fifty. Do I look like someone who swims in gold?"

He banged a punch on the counter. "For the Six, I really don't want you on my conscience. Take it."
Silia laughed and handed him the credit card of the Meldacio. She had done the first hunting missions on behalf of Cor Leonis, free of charge, but Darius, who had started to accompany her more and more often, had pointed out to her that, although no one would have spared her a bowl of soup in Orior and anyway if she was hungry she could always go and hunt any beast and roast it, she couldn't hang around with equipment that was ramshackle at the least; moreover, Cid had promised her to re-enforce her swords if she had brought him the appropriate materials, so she had begun to accept Meldacio's rewards.

"Name's Culless," the man introduced himself while passing her credit card on a reader. "Apprentice? Or are you already a Trapper?"

"Hartwood. I'm not affiliated with Meldacio," she replied.

"Yet you go around paying with a Meldacio card." Culless winked again and handed it back to her as if he was doing her a favor accepting her payment.

"I didn't steal it," she insisted. "I help the Association from time to time. Ask Dave Auburnbrie if you do not trust me. By the way, can you tell me where I can find Madame Ezma? Since I'm here, I'd like to meet her."

"You won't have to go far. There she is, on her porch," he replied, pointing to a spot behind her.

Silia turned around. A woman with a mustard colored shawl draped around her shoulders and on her head was seated next to a small table with a radio on a pretty porch adorned with flower pots. She thanked Culless and crossed the street to join her.

"Auburnbrie? Madame Ezma Auburnbrie?" she announced herself, climbing the porch stairs.

The woman looked up at her, pushing aside a strip of the heavy veil that covered her head to better look at her. Silia knew that Auburnbrie was an elderly woman, since Dave was forty-five or fifty, but she didn't expect so much: her skin was thin as tissue paper, pale and veined with blue, and rippled with a thousand wrinkles.

"Yes?" she asked kindly. "How can I help you?" Despite her age, her blue eyes behind the simple lenses shone with intelligence and cunning. As a young woman, Dave had told her with a hint of pride, she had been one of the best hunters out there, if not the best. It wasn't a coincidence if no one from the Meldacio Hunter dared to challenge her leadership.

Without waiting for an invitation, Silia sat cross-legged next to her chair. "My name is Silia Hartwood, Madame Auburnbrie. I come from Orior, Marshal Leonis' camp. I'm not a hunter, but sometimes I take care of some of the beasts. I helped with the Regaltrices so, since I was here, I thought I'd come to meet you."

"So kind of you, Hartwood. I heard about you and I was curious." Ezma Auburnbrie's eyes narrowed for a moment. "The Coeurl, right? Or am I mistaken?"

"No," Silia smiled. "It's always me. I signed hunting requests with my old nickname."

"Very wise," she replied, "since my son told me you're a Kingsglaive."

Silia stiffened uncomfortably. "The past has gone, Ma'am. I'm no longer a Kingsglaive."

Madame Auburnbrie didn't comment, but she smiled too. "People tell me that in addition to the beasts, you are also taking good care of several members of Meldacio."
Hugging her knees, Silia shook her head. "Not really, Madame. I give some advice and some basic training to those who ask for it."

"Dave says your basic training will save many hunters' lives. What news do you bring me from Orior, Hartwood?"

"I thought you were in touch with the Marshal."

"Indeed I am, but I'd like to hear it from you."

Silia arched an eyebrow and smiled. Although the Meldacio cooperated with Cor Leonis, Madame Auburnbrie wasn't obligated to blindly trust his word. Of course, as well as her son, who often stopped in Orior, she gathered information from many other sources. No reason why she shouldn't give it to her. "Orior is expanding, Madame. The position of the old outpost that you offered to the Crownsguard makes it a sheltered and easy-to-defend camp, if an Imperial contingent should attack, something that hasn't happened so far. If an army were to arrive honestly, I don't assure anything. At the moment there aren't more than a hundred people. Nine are Crownsguards from Insomnia. About fifty crown citizens, including civilians and City Guards. The rest are hunters or volunteers from Leide, Duscae and Cleigne. I'm sorry if I can't be more precise about the number; there's always a constant coming and going."

Madame Auburnbrie nodded slowly, weighing every word or pause between words. "And what about Marshal Leonis?"

"Cor Leonis is a natural leader," she answered without hesitation. "People feel safe and motivated. He doesn't force anyone to fight, but has assigned a task to everyone who wants to stop there so that no one remains inactive. I was very surprised to see how much he's obeyed and respected even by those who don't come from Insomnia. Even those who have no obligation towards Prince Noctis are increasingly beginning to spend themselves not against Niflheim, but for the King."

"I had this feeling as well, talking to people who stop here."

"And do you approve of it, Madame?" she asked openly.

Ezma Auburnbrie gave her a sympathetic look that made her feel damn young. "What do you know about the Meldacio, Hartwood?"

"It's a paramilitary association born about a hundred and fifty years ago. The Imperials hadn't yet invaded the East, but the lands were infested with daemons and dangerous beasts, so a band of hunters thought to join forces with the common objective of ensuring greater security outside the perimeters of the city and founded a first base here."

"Do you also know that among those hunters there were some Crownsguards from Insomnia?"

Silia remained with her mouth ajar. "No, Ma'am. Seriously?"

The old lady nodded, smiling. "Many people don't know it, but the Hunting Association and the Crownsguard have more in common than it appears. Once, the Association was in close collaboration with the Crown City. Unfortunately, relations have crumbled for obvious reasons during King Mors' reign. I believe, however, that things may change in the future and I intend to help make that happen." She put the shawl back on her shoulders. "Did you meet His Majesty? The young prince and his companions passed from here a short time ago. He made quite an impression on me. He reminds me a lot of his father, Regis. I also met him when he was young."

"I couldn't meet him, unfortunately," she admitted, without adding that it was her fault, without
Gladio doing anything to remedy it. She was sorry that the worries and the modesty of those months in Insomnia had prevented her from meeting the Prince. "We talked on the phone, though, and I know his Shield. I have the impression that he's still immature and a bit reckless, but promising. Marshal Leonis greatly believes in him as well."

"I know it," she replied. "It was Cor Leonis who convinced me of the possibility of a future in which Leide, Cleigne and Duscae are reunited, and not only formally, under the aegis of the Kingdom of Lucis."

Silia nodded, trying once again to imagine that future. She couldn't do that. She only saw obstacles more insurmountable than the Wall. Even earlier, on the front, she had fought a war without having seen the beginning and without being able to see the end. *Toothpicks to stem a dam,* she had told Gladio once, and she still felt like that, yet she believed that a toothpick was better than nothing. "The Marshal," she let slip, "sees very far. That's what makes the difference between a leader and a mere fighter."

"No, Hartwood," Madame Auburnbrie corrected her. "What makes a leader is the skill to conquer the absolute loyalty of the best ones."

Silia felt herself blush. It wasn't that circumstantial reference to her abilities that embarrassed her, but to recognize for the first time what Ezma Auburnbrie had so easily grasped: her esteem for Cor Leonis had grown exceedingly, and the more she knew the man who hid behind the legend, the more it increased. She stood up, uneasy. "Madame Auburnbrie, please don't ascribe me merit that I don't own."

Ezma Auburnbrie also began to get up from her chair with difficulty. Instinctively, Silia held out her arm and the old woman accepted it. She seemed fragile like a tangle of dry twigs, but her grip was unsuspectingly firm. "My son Dave isn't yet ready to take my place at the lead of the Hunting Association, but if there's a quality that he's not lacking, that's the ability to judge people. He told me a lot about you, Silia Hartwood, and even if he didn't, I just needed to see the completed hunting missions signed by the Coeurl. Let's go inside, would you mind? It's starting to get chilly."

"I'll come with you, Ma'am, but I can't stay."

"Too bad. I've some good toasted coffee. Ebony. Do you like coffee, Hartwood?"

Ebony. Silia smiled: Ignis Scientia's passion, Gladio had told her. "I don't dislike it, Ma'am. But I really have to go. The night doesn't bother me, but I'd like to get to Orior before evening."

They went into the house. The atmosphere was rustic, but very welcoming; a kitchen smelling of wood and soup, with walls cluttered with old photographs. While helping the elderly Auburnbrie to sit down, Silia saw that almost all of them portrayed hunting scenes. In many – not all – of them, there was a beautiful red-haired woman with a resolute look, whose features she could still recognize in the old woman's face in front of her; in others, a tall, muscular man with an unkempt beard, who she imagined to be Dave's father. One picture portrayed them all together – Dave was just a child – with a fourth person, another redhead who looked like the younger version of Ezma. Silia wondered who she was.

"My husband, Sander," Madame Auburnbrie explained, following her gaze. "And my sister Kimya. You already know Dave."

"I didn't want to be indiscreet, Madame," Silia shielded herself.

"You weren't. The past has gone, you said so yourself, but as painful it may be, after a certain age it
becomes a pleasant companion, even if melancholic. You'll understand it when you are old. Even if, I bet, you're thinking that you'll never reach my age. I thought that, too."

Silia gave a smile of circumstance. It was exactly like that. "I was pleased to meet you, Madame. The Meldacio's collaboration is precious to us."

Madame Auburnbrie smiled as well. "Me too, Silia Hartwood. Come back to see me when you want. And remember that in Meldacio's highest ranks there'll always be room for a member like you. I can admit you as Guardian, but in a short time..."

"You do me great honor," Silia interrupted her, sincerely. "I will tell you what I didn't tell your son David when he proposed me to join the Association: when I look at the hunters, I see a freedom to which I aspire, but which unfortunately I can't allow. Not yet. There's a war going on, Madame, a war I enlisted in many years ago, and I keep my oaths."

Ezma took off her shawl, revealing a mass of long, thick white hair. "I knew you'd answer like that. Be careful, young lady. I'm afraid that hard times are coming, and you've chosen to stay on the side most exposed to the storm."

She had no doubts. "Madame Auburnbrie, not to be rude, but since I was born I've seen hard times," she minimized.

"I don't doubt it, but I have the feeling that not even I am old enough to have seen anything like what's approaching. Perhaps what you've already overcome will help you to deal with it better than many others. And who knows, maybe in the darkness you'll find the peace you are looking for."

II

She had certainly found something very similar to peace in Orior in the month following her return from Insomnia. After slapping her so much, fate ironically allowed her to divide all her time among the three activities she loved most: exploring, fighting and reading.

They had flipped the recovered books over like socks. Despite the many assumptions up in the air and the mines and faults and ruins unsuccessfully explored by the hunters of all Lucis, stories, myths and legends had enabled them to track down six Royal Arms: the Sword of the Tall, the Bow of the Clever, the Star of the Rogue, the Shield of the Just, the Scepter of the Pious and the Mace of the Fierce.

She herself had explored two ruins – the Tomb of the Clever inside the Balouve Mines and the Rogue's in Costlemark – to clear the area from daemons and dangerous beasts in view of the Prince's and his retinue's subsequent expedition. Five hunters had managed to get to the bottom of the Balouve Mines before being swept away on a bridge by a tremendous swordsman daemon, the reason why she had offered to go personally to the mines to eliminate the obstacle and make sure that the entrance to the Tomb was really there; Darius had insisted on going too, and on their way back – him with a limping leg and her with a frost burn to her arm – they had stopped to get drunk at Hammerhead, where she had again met the old Cid and Cindy. As for the Costlemark Tower, finding it was easy, since King Ductor Lucis Caelum had met his end there, sacrificing himself to seal the ancient daemon he himself had unleashed in the ruins, but the hunters couldn't figure out how to get in. Cor Leonis had decided to get in front of that and, to her great surprise, asked her to accompany him. At seven in the evening, after having tried everything except a fire flask - the Marshal had threatened to make her eat it if she hadn't put it away – they understood what the catch was: the area was swarming with daemons, and the hunters hadn't remained until night, when the entrance to the Tower opened on its own.
However, she had spent most of her time with the volunteers; when she wasn't hunting – funny enough, she was making a name for herself as a hunter, even though, despite Dave's insistence and Ezma Auburnbie's offer, she had refused to join the Hunting Association – or politely dissuading the Imperials from building new bases in Leide, she trained people ranging from fifteen to fifty-five to use the sword and other weapons, instructed them about the weak spots of the daemons and other beasts, and taught those most sensitive to elemancy to build magical flasks. For the first time she realized that what she knew and had learned in fifteen years of training and field battles could be used in another way than just active fighting: it could be passed on to others, like a beneficial plague, to save their lives and to make them able to save other people's lives in turn.

She had sincerely got attached to many of them. She watched them, monitored their progress, tried to help them make up for their failings. She didn't force anyone to train but, from those who showed themselves at a training session, she demanded the utmost seriousness. Sometimes she heard them talking at night when they thought she wasn't listening. Some didn't like her – because she was a Kingsglaive, because she was too hard, because they didn't want to take orders from her – but everyone recognized her skills. Others, like Jenkins, Kamal, Colby, sometimes Claudio, reached her in the evening, sat beside her in front of the fire, and while remaining at a respectful distance sought her company for hours, listening to her stories, talking about families, friends and comrades who they had lost or left somewhere. However, the company that she appreciated the most was Darius'. Between a zinger and an insult, she had developed a complicity in his regard similar to that she had felt for her teammates. Darius was very discreet and rarely spoke of his life in Insomnia, but by some implicit comment she learned that his father had sat in the King's Council with Clarus. Not only his father, by hearing some of his companions of the Crownsguard who, behind him, alluded to a supposed relationship with another member of the Council, twenty years older than him. If so, the day of the fall of Insomnia, Darius had lost not only his father, but also his lover. She never asked him if it was true, nor did he let her in on that.

If teaching others to fight somehow made her feel old, even though she wasn't even thirty, going out on a mission with Cor Leonis had made her feel like a rookie again, despite being a war veteran. She had never seen anyone handle two katanas – which in theory required two hands each – at the same time like him. He was quick, precise, powerful, deadly. Silia had met very few people able to intimidate her as he did. For his part, the Marshal treated her with grim and subtly mocking ways, but left her with all the autonomy she wanted; he inquired about the training of the men, passed her hunting missions, leaving her to decide which ones to take and whom suggest for the others, he kept her up to date on the movements of the Imperials.

In the evening, Silia laid down on her cot exhausted but satisfied. She still sometimes had extremely vivid nightmares about the war or the fall of Insomnia, Marius, Drautos or her teammates, and woke up sweating with a strangled cry in her throat, convinced she was on the front or at the Citadel during the attack, but it happened more and more rarely. The routine at the camp was driving away the memories of the war, as if they belonged to someone else – a process already started in the months of rehabilitation – and anesthetizing everything had happened on May 16th and the days immediately after.

She had retrieved a cell phone in Insomnia, but something of her old reticence prevented her from contacting Gladio to let go of confidential conversations. She had called him only seven or eight times, and six of them to communicate to all of the Prince's retinue the position of a Royal Arm. She had been harsh and professional, especially since she was on speaker, but in this way she had been able to talk for the first time with Prompto, Ignis and Prince Noctis. Those brief conversations had confirmed what Gladio had told her about them: Ignis was the one she liked most by instinct – calm and formal, he'd ask right and punctual questions; Prompto was loud and interrupted her constantly with jokes, exclamations and personal questions; Prince Noctis was impenetrable, or perhaps it was her who was influenced by Cor Leonis' words, who saw in him the Chosen King; she tried,
unsuccessfully, to recognize him as so, but every time she'd talk to him he just seemed to be a twenty-year-old kid who had too many expectations and responsibilities at once on his shoulders. Having to claim the throne lost by his father after a war that lasted almost five hundred years seemed to her a heavy enough burden, even without adding a prophecy thousands of years old.

Although their conversations were rare, she and Gladio often exchanged texts. Short, humorous and complicit communications to stay informed about their respective movements and misadventures, and that kept alive their bond, whatever the hell it was by that time. They never wrote anything they wouldn't have said to their face in Insomnia while drinking a beer at Samuel's, but now everything had changed. The idea of reaching them, as Gladio had proposed to her after coming out alive from the Taelpar Crag, had touched her several times, but she had abandoned it immediately afterwards. It wasn't the right time for such distractions, and moreover every hour she dedicated to her guys, as she called them regardless of their sex and age, could save their lives.

In the evening, after closing her eyes, Silia dared from time to time to imagine a life of peace; true peace, for everyone. In one of those texts, Gladio had confessed to her that, after everything settled down, he would have liked to spend some time in Cape Caem.

"Guess what? Found out I like the sea," he had written to her. The smell of salt and seaweed and sand, the rustling of when it's calm and the scream of when it's in a storm. Here we'll be fine.

Silia had lingered for a long time with her fingers on the screen, tempted by asking him who that we included. In the end she had put down the phone. No matter how hard she tried, the future in her imagination had the clean shape of a desolate and dark Insomnia.

III

"So," Darius concluded while carefully passing the sharpening stone on the blade of his sword, "you were behind the regaining of Bors. I should have imagined it. How many Glaives could have the build of a child of thirteen?"

"Fuck you." Silia was polishing one of hers. She paused to take a sip of gin straight from the bottle.

"For some reason, there's always at least one such story for every war. One of those apparently too bizarre and picturesque to be true. An unassailable city. Impregnable fortifications with cannons on the walls. Population practically hostage of the enemy. The Kingsglaives were about to retreat, then one of them infiltrated a sewer pipe. A member of the military elite who crawls in the sewers and frees a city."

"In all the horrors there's something bizarre and picturesque," she pronounced. "Especially if they last so long as to turn into a farce." She noticed Cor's presence behind her back only when she saw Darius jerk his head up. They exchanged a camaraderie look: caught with a bottle in their hands. "Good evening, Marshal," she turned, greeting him, friendly, though now, in private, she called him by his first name. "Would you like some gin?" she asked brazenly, holding out the bottle.

He grimaced. "A Crownsguard and a former Kingsglaive, both veterans, who quit for secret drinking like two unruly recruits. Are you sober enough to hold a civil conversation?"

"We were just holding one, Marshal," Darius replied respectfully, though with a mocking tip in his voice. "We were talking about Bors."

Cor went around her to sit on the ground next to Darius, on the other side of the fire. He never joined them, or any of the other men, either at dinner or to have a chat in company before going to sleep, and for a moment Silia feared something serious had happened, perhaps to the Prince's retinue. But
Cor Leonis leaned his elbows on his knees, apparently peaceful. "Bors. The most unlikely battle in the history of Kingsglaives. A city declared lost regained by a single man thanks to a sewer pipe. Had I not heard the official report from the King's lips, I would have thought of a frat anecdote." He blinked. "Hartwood, don't tell me you were that man?"

"It was me," she admitted. She put the sword down and unsheathed its twin. She took a little more Arba grease from the jar and rubbed it on the cloth.

"Such a stupid and dangerous idea that it worked."

"Not how it was supposed to work. The original idea was that I would sabotage the cannons on the walls by myself, or rather, that I would evaluate the situation and decide if it was the case to risk or not. Instead, as usual, I was forced to improvise. There were more magiteks than we had imagined to guard the cannons, so I... asked for a hand from the civilians."

"You involved civilians in a military operation without your Captain's authorization?" Cor asked in a sinister tone that reminded her too much of Titus Drautos.

"The civilians were already involved, Marshal," she replied dryly. "The Imperialists kept the children captive to make sure that the adults didn't pull tricks. When I freed and brought them to safety, almost all the men and several women turned against the garrison and followed me in the attack on the walls. The cannons were destroyed, the other Glaives could intervene and the city was taken back."

Darius had an admiring smile on his lips. "And then? The girls from Bors offered you their virginity? The children brought you wreaths of flowers?"

"No. They prepared a bath and gave me clean clothes. I had to throw out the umpteenth uniform."

"What a heroic undertaking, Hartwood," he mocked her.

"Yeah, worthy of the court martial," Cor said, turning to Darius. "Hartwood must thank that the Kingsglaives' training had cost too much to the Kingdom and they were too few and selected to be dismissed lightly."

"I had never seen that bastard Drautos so pissed off with me, until then. There were losses among the civilians, and he said their blood fell on my hands." Silia grimaced bitterly. "Can you believe it, in light of what we discovered later about him? However, since I thought he would have thrown me out of the Glaives, I responded properly. I told him that I hadn't forced anyone and that it was their right to fight against the Empire for their city and their families, if they so desired. He gave me four weeks of corvée duties for contravening his directives and for my insolence. Guess it would be problematic for him to report to the King that he had thrown out the Glaive who had infiltrated Bors."

"You got off lightly." Cor took the sharpening stone from Darius' hands, unsheathed one of his katanas, and began to sharpen it. "It was 749, am I wrong?"

Silia nodded. The second sword couldn't have been shinier than that, but she kept rubbing it with obsessive gestures. At first she had enjoyed remembering Bors, but now the thought of Drautos, which made her blood flow in reverse from anger, and that of Hans, which rarely surfaced but still with its ancient load of pain, disheartened her. "It was my third year on the front," she went on, even though only the Six knew how much she wanted to get up and leave without another word. She forced herself to leave her sword and took a cigarette from the pack on the ground next to her to keep her hands occupied. She lit it. "The war was going bad for Lucis, but not as bad as in recent times. Bors was a small victory, but it made us feel useful to the kingdom. There were other victories later, but that night I finally fully understood why I had joined the Kingsglaives and what it really meant.
Or what I thought it meant. She didn't mention that her teammate Hans Castor who, while the others got drunk with the citizens of Bors, had dragged her into a secluded alley and, after five years of training and three years on the front looking at each other's shoulders more and more closely, kissed and undressed and fucked - it was her first time. She had loved him; she was still as sure as then, even if Hans had died a few months later, at the end of that same 749. She had loved him, and she shouldn't have, as Sarah had recriminated, punching her face after she had risked her life to recover his body from the battlefield; what the fuck were you thinkin', fallin' in love with a comrade, she had shouted, he died, dead men don't fall in love and we're all dead, yesterday or today or tomorrow.

"The regaining of Bors." Darius was smoking as well now, looking at the sky. Silia hadn't even heard the flint wheel. "They spoke enthusiastically about it in Insomnia, I remember, but the name of the brave soldier who had crawled through the sewers never circulated. Drautos modestly accepted the King's compliments, and when they asked him who Bors had to thank for its freedom, he replied that it didn't matter because his men acted as one."

"Darius, stop it," she snapped with a sharp note in her voice that she didn't like herself and that made both Darius and Cor Leonis look up. "These are old stories that no longer matter. Bors fell again a short time later, the Glaives who participated in that battle are all dead, and I no longer want to hear that bastard Drautos' name." She threw the cigarette on the ground then, regardless of the presence of Cor, stretched to take the bottle and drink another generous sip. "Marshal, I guess you came to talk to us about something. Sorry if we've wasted your time."

Cor put back the stone, a sign that he meant to focus exclusively on the conversation. "I just wanted to update you on some news. Thanks to the books of the Royal Library – and to the research of the hunters, of course – Prince Noctis and the others have recovered six Royal Arms. Others certainly are to the west, in Tenebrae or in the Imperial territories. The Prince has remained still for too long and moreover, Her Grace Lunafreya has already been in Altissia for a few days. So they decided that they will leave for Accordo."

Silia blinked. Gladio hadn't told her. "Well, Cor, it was about time."

"The Princess intends to call upon Leviathan to persuade her to forge a covenant with the Prince. But it won't be as simple as with the Fulgurian. No one has ever seen the Hydraean, but she's not remembered precisely for her affection towards the human race. Her Grace couldn't yet convince the First Secretary of Altissia to grant her permission to perform the ritual. The Secretary, Camelia Clastra, fears damage to the city and its citizens."

"And Niflheim's most concrete retaliation, I bet," Silia said. "I wonder how they could have agreed to shelter the Princess."

"I suppose," Darius intervened, "that after all Accordo fears ending up like Insomnia if the Empire keeps up this path."

"You suppose well. Officially, the Princess is in custody, not under protection. A couple of hours ago, after talking to the Prince, I called Weskham Armaugh, my old comrade who stayed in Altissia after our journey. He said that Camelia Clastra received Chancellor Ardyn Izunia and High Commander Nox Fleuret. The Chancellor himself, in Aracheole, had informed the Prince that they would meet again at Accordo."

"They asked for the Princess' repatriation, didn't they?"

"Weskham himself doesn't know what was discussed during that meeting. He's very close to Camelia Clastra, but she's first and foremost a politician. She was perfectly aware that I would get in touch with Weskham for information and to ask him to give all the support he could to the Prince,
therefore she hasn't opened up that much."

"If the Chancellor and the High Commander know that the Prince and his retinue will reach Altissia," Darius remarked, "the Empire will be there as well during the ceremony and will try to stop it."

Silia lit another cigarette. "As long as they convince Camelia Clastra to give her permission."

Cor allowed himself a restrained sigh. "There is no alternative. The Chosen King must obtain the Covenant of the Six. This is what the Prophecy claims."

"Will you return to Altissia as well?" Darius asked.

The Marshal stood up, sheathing the katanas. "No," he said simply.

"No?" Silia blinked in disbelief. "But Marshal, Darius is right, the Empire will be there as well. The Prince will need all the help he can get."

"He already has it," he replied, frowning. "His back is well covered by his comrades. He has the support of Weskham Armaugh and Her Grace Lunafreya. If all goes well, he will also have the Tidemother's."

Silia shrugged, biting her tongue to keep herself from saying anything. For a moment she had deluded herself into thinking that Cor would take her to Accordo in view of a possible battle against the Empire. She couldn't understand the Immortal's obstinacy in wanting to cover the Prince's back from a distance. She opened her mouth again to tell him it was madness, but then she remembered the words she herself had said to Madame Aubumbrie: The Marshal sees very far. She hoped with all her heart that she had laid her loyalty on the right man, at least this time. "When is the departure scheduled?" she asked instead.

"The day after tomorrow at dawn. Tomorrow I'll leave for Cape Caem. There are many things I want to discuss with the Prince face to face, first of all the line of conduct to be held with the First Secretary."

"Fortunately Ignis is with them," Darius smiled sardonically, breaking the tension. "If we leave it to the Prince or Gladio, Accordo will go to war against what remains of the Kingdom of Lucis."

Cor ignored his joke. "I will stay a couple of days in Cape Caem. If anything happens in Altissia, I prefer to be where boats and news will arrive. Dustin will come with me. Darius, I entrust the camp to you in my absence."

"Yessir."

"Hartwood, I know you're busy with your guys, but I'd like you to come too."

Silia opened and closed her mouth twice before answering. "At your service, Marshal, if you believe I can help."

"I believe you can help. Gather a complete equipment inventory. We don't go out with the intention to fight, but we will probably be forced to do so. See you in the morning at six o'clock to recap before we leave. Goodnight."

Still disconcerted, Silia took back the bottle of gin, but Darius leaned over and stopped her hand before she could lift it to her lips. "Hartwood," he hissed. "The Marshal is too decent to tell you, so I'll do it. If you get pregnant, I'll kill you."
Silia blinked, unable to decide if laughing or get offended or breaking the bottle on his pretty face. At last she smiled, freeing the bottle with a tug. "As for this, you can relax. Not even the Astrals could do anything about it. I'm sterile."

For the very first time since she knew him, with a hint of satisfaction, she saw Darius' noble demeanor crumpling into an expression of guilty embarrassment. "Are you taking the piss?"

She drank, then handed him the bottle. "Nah, perhaps it's you who likes those stuff."

Chapter End Notes

"Gutta cavat lapidem" > "the costant dripping wears the rock away"
Chapter Summary

After over a month in Cape Caem retrieving Royal Arms, the Prince's Retinue decides to sail for Altissia. Gladio despairs to see Silia again before leaving, but...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

30

Hic manebrimus optime

Insomnia had fallen on May 16, a date carved with blood letters in the huge monolith of the history of Lucis, an event so epochal that it seemed impossible it had occurred so recently. Only a few weeks had passed since then; weeks that, in Insomnia, would have fled in a blink – seconds, minutes, hours and days lost somewhere between the folds of the routine – while now Gladio had the feeling of toiling every moment as if time didn't belong rightfully to him anymore and he had to earn it.

The worst feeling, however, that he had never contemplated in his fantasies as a child who wished to be a hunter and as an adult who wanted to leave for a long and indefinite journey, was lacking a base, a safe haven to have his back covered; not necessarily a home, but a shelter where friendly faces were waiting for him, a noun to add, after a tiring mission, at the end of the phrase "Let's go back to...". Cape Caem, even for a little over a month, had become that noun. The old abandoned building belonging to the royal family of Lucis that they were restoring, restored them in turn after the difficult trials they had faced and made the harbinger of those they still had to face less burdensome.

In the days when Noctis had been looking for mithril with Ignis and Prompto, and he was in the Taelpar Crag with Cor, Iris had kept herself and Talcott busy with the garden; she didn't believe, she had confided to him, that she would be able to see its fruits, but she liked being in touch with the soil, something that she never had the chance to discover in Insomnia. In that little house, Gladio found with his sister the intimacy they had almost lost for years. They spent hours together rummaging through the things that once belonged to King Regis and his companions, leafing through photographs, exchanging memories and anecdotes with Cindy, who of course knew the same stories in the old Cid's version. Even Noctis joined those jumps back in their parents' past. One afternoon, while they were fishing, his friend had told him that in the house, where he could feel his father's presence in every corner, he had finally managed to forgive him.

He and Noctis spent much of their free time fishing or training at the back of the house; that journey had brought them closer, but had also dug a new – almost impalpable – gap between them, the same his father must have felt when King Mors had died and "Reggie" had become, at least in public, "His Majesty". They weren't yet at that point, not when Insomnia remained under Imperial control and Gladio had to snatch the phone from His Majesty's hands after two hours playing King's Knight reminding him it was time to train, but it wasn't so far away.
Ignis helped Iris and Talcott with the garden and enjoyed experimenting with new culinary recipes with the help of Monica who, following Cor's directives, had stayed in Cape Caem to look after the kids as they swarmed for Leide, Cleigne and Duscae in search of the Royal Arms. Prompto continued his skulking around Cindy, assisting her in the repairs of the yacht every day the girl remained in Cape Caem – an unexpectedly non-annoying skulking, it had to be said, above all for someone with his noisy nature and exaggerated reactions; Gladio was pretty convinced that Cindy, who must have not been completely clueless, and who certainly, in the hangar in the middle of nowhere, had been used to other men and their approaches, basically let him continue without discouraging him too much.

Their stay at Cape Caem, however, wasn't exactly a holiday. People in Orior were working so hard that, in just over a month, Silia and the Marshal called five times to tell them the coordinates of a Royal Arm. Every communication, Gladio and the others discovered with amazement and admiration, was the result of research from books, long speculations, dead ends, and expeditions unfortunately culminating, in some cases, with the death of the hunters who had undertaken them. Getting to the bottom of the Costlemark Tower, in particular, turned out to be a troublesome and dangerous toil, although Silia and Cor, during their phone call, had delineated the path and the daemons inside the ruins so clearly they had almost felt like spoon-fed children. Noctis had dared to say, during one of these calls, that perhaps they could leave a part of the preliminary explorations to them but Silia, in a voice that Gladio had often experimented on his own head and that he was grateful, for once, it wasn't addressed to him, had replied to His Majesty that in some of those ruins there were daemons sealed for two thousand years which, with all due respect, not even she had ever seen; so it was necessary indeed to have a first sortie to reduce the chances that they would find themselves magically imprisoned in a ravine with three Yojimbos while they were exploring, in vain, empty ruins. Noctis had opened and closed his mouth several times as he always did when Gladio called him out in training and he didn't know how to reply; then he had frowned irritably in his direction, as if holding him responsible for Silia's sour sarcasm and not, if anything, the one who usually paid that price.

Noctis' magical arsenal had been enriched with five new Royal Arms by then, when in Cape Caem appeared Umbra with Princess Lunafreya' journal, which informed them that she had arrived in Altissia from Tenebrae and was safe in the First Secretary's – Camelia Claustra – villa. Noctis would have liked to leave immediately, but a couple of days before, Silia had written to Gladio that perhaps they had tracked the Scepter of the Pious in the Malmalam Grove, and they were waiting for news from a hunter team. The next day Silia called to confirm and it took them two more days to go, find the weapon and return to Cape Caem. When it was clear that Noctis was quivering to leave and their departure couldn't be postponed, they called Cid Sophiar, who had given his full willingness to pilot the yacht to Altissia, and his father's old friend arrived with Cindy. Together they prepared the last checks on the boat, refueled it, and Noctis decided that two days later, after making all the necessary supplies and preparations, they would leave.

Until that moment Gladio had been basking in the hope that, before their departure for Altissia, he would see Silia at least once, but it hadn't happened. Whenever he saw her name on the screen, whether it was a – rare – call or a text message, he had to restrain himself from asking her to join him. Cor, informed by Noctis of their decision, told them that he wanted to speak with him face to face before they left and that he would reach Cape Caem the next day, and Gladio had to bite his tongue in order not to suggest the Marshal to take her with him. He postponed his call to Silia for three hours and that evening, when he finally called to tell her that they would leave, she replied coldly that the Marshal had already informed her and she wished them good luck. Her curt ways irritated him, and he couldn't ask her to come nor, when Iris announced excitedly that with the help of Monica she would organize a farewell party for the evening after, could he take part of her enthusiasm.
"Looks like one of us will really have a good time tonight."

Gladio, who was lifting his first mug of beer to his lips – Cor Leonis wouldn't approve, but that day he was rather inclined not to care about it – lazily reached Ignis and Prompto at the window, without understanding. The beer went sideways and he coughed violently, unable to breathe, while the two laughed loudly.

Together with the Marshal, Silia was getting off the bike.

"Pull yourself together, Gladio," Ignis said with fake sternness.

She hadn't seen him yet. Gladio noticed only at that moment, with dismay, that in those two short months since their last meeting he had forgotten some of her features. Silia raised her eyes up to the lighthouse, then down to the house and to him. She put down the bag she was carrying and said something to Cor, pointing in their direction. He nodded.

"Whatcha waiting for, Gladio?" Prompto asked. "Run to her. We want to see a movie scene."

"Enough, Prompto," he said, his throat dry. Feeling that his body was barely answering him, Gladio put his mug down on the sill, opened the door and went out. Few feet of path separated them.

Silia came towards him, relaxed, taking all the time in the world. If she was excited to see him, it didn't seem that way at all. When she stopped in front of him, smiling, he felt the impulse to embrace her, but his arms seemed thick and heavy like pine trunks and he couldn't move them.

"Hey," he said simply.

"Hey!" Silia was more at ease. She brushed her hair out of her eyes – it was longer now and she had tied it in a small braid – and gave him a violent slap on his shoulder. "For Odin, I'm so happy to see you're still in one piece, Gladio. Your new scar looks good on you."

She was behaving as if two days had passed since their last meeting, and as if the last time they had met they had simply drunk a beer. Gladio managed to smile, even if his mouth was stiff like concrete.

"You're always the same. Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

She shrugged without justifying herself. The thought that she had planned a surprise delighted him, and he felt like shit for having resented her the night before, when she had flaunted coldness on the phone. "Why didn't you ask me to come? Anyway, it was Marshal's idea."

"Hartwood," Cor said harshly, joining them, "stop talking as if I had taken you on a school trip. Hi, Gladio."

Gladio grimaced, grateful, and embarrassed. "Hi, Cor. You look good."

"I've had worse days," he replied.

"Well, this is... unexpected. I didn't believe that..." he gasped. Cor looked at him impassively, but he knew him enough to notice the mocking hint in his mouth. The Marshal was having fun. "...you would have found the time to come, Silia."

"Ubi maior..." she declaimed, and Gladio didn't understand. "The Marshal commands, I obey. My guys will manage for a couple of days."
"Hartwood, I'm going to talk to Prince Noctis."

"Yessir."

When Cor entered the house, Gladio finally found the courage to touch her. He raised a hand to stroke her face, then changed his mind and just laid it on her shoulder. "Thanks again for my sis and Talcott. Dunno how you came up with something like that with all the shit was happenin', but really, thank you. She often asks me about you. She will be so happy to see you again."

She shook her head, and her expression darkened. "I did almost nothing. I wish I could have done something for the King. For Insomnia."

Again he wanted to hug her, but he felt everyone's eyes on them. There would be time later. "Silia, we've been through a lot in the last two months and certainly it's not over yet, but today, for a few hours, just relax. Let's go in. I've bought beer, but I couldn't find the stout one. And finally I'll introduce you to the others."

Silia didn't seem to hear him. She was looking toward the house, behind him, and as he turned he noticed she was staring at Noctis who, next to Cor just outside the door of the house, was looking back at her. Silia put her hand on his, squeezed it for a moment and then slipped it off her. She went past him, advancing along the path.

A few steps from Noctis, Silia slowly unsheathed the swords on her back and knelt down, leaning the weapons on the ground in front of him. It was the first time he had seen her make such a formal and solemn gesture. Although a part of him knew it perfectly, he felt a lump in his throat realizing that the woman he loved would have given her life for the friend he loved.

"Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum," she said, raising her head. "My name is Silia Hartwood. I swore an oath to your father ten years ago. With your permission, now devoid of a uniform and a title, I swear to serve you and keep on serving the Kingdom of Lucis."

"Please, don't," he said, uneasy. "Stand up, Silia. I haven't yet thanked you properly for what you are doing in Orior. We have recovered six Royal Arms thanks to your mission to Insomnia."

Silia shook her head. She didn't get up. "I do not know how to make amends for the betrayal of the Kingsglaives and for what Titus Drautos did. I feel so responsible for..."

Noctis gently took her arm and lifted her up, then lowered to retrieve her swords and put them back in her hands. "It's not your fault. If anything, it's everyone's fault. None of us noticed anything. And none of us could do anything about it."

"I was in it," she protested, recovering her swords. "I had noticed something. And I could..."

"Hartwood," Cor folded his arms. "There had been and there will still be a moment for had to and could, but this is definitely not it. Enough with these drama queen scenes and go in for a drink – I've no doubt that Gladio, against all common sense, has taken care of it – before I send you back to Orior on foot."

Introducing her to Ignis and Prompto, as well as to Noctis, made him feel like he was finally bringing together two compartments of his life that, so far, had been separate. It gave him a sense of bewildered happiness mixed with embarrassment, and at the same time a sense of loss.

"Hm, guys," he croaked, scratching his hairline. He made a clumsy gesture towards her. "Silia
Gladio was expecting an explosive reaction from Prompto, a cascade of awkward jokes, certainly not that his friend, with an unusual flush on his cheeks, lined his arms at his sides and made a bow. Silia's formal oath to Noctis shortly before must have produced a certain effect on him as well.

"Hm," he cleared his throat. "Prompto Argentum, ma'am. It's an honor for me to make your..."

Silia frowned in a perplexed expression, and hurried to abruptly straighten Prompto, taking him by his shoulders. "What's gotten into you, Prompto? We talked on the phone for a month. You interrupted me constantly with your bloody questions. Call me by my name and don't ever lower your head in front of me."

"Huh... yessir! I mean, Hartwood. Silia!"

Ignis let out an amused snort. "I think Prompto has suddenly realized you are a Kingsglaive. It's an honor as well for me to finally meet you, Hartwood."

"Oh, for Odin, Ignis, not you too. I'm no longer a Kingsglaive." Silia clicked her tongue, exasperated.

"It was you, kneelin' that way before Noctis, who encouraged such a formality," Gladio couldn't help but provoke her.

"What was I supposed to do, squeeze the hand of the heir to the throne and say 'hello'?"

"Why do you care? In five minutes you'll call him by his name and target him with sarcastic zingers, as you usually do with everyone."

"Mr. Etiquette has spoken."

"At least I didn't call you girl with a paternalistic tone when we first met."

"So, let me get this right, you two bickered like that for months and hoped that no one noticed you hit it off?" Prompto, after all, seemed to have quickly found his usual spirit again.

"Silia!"

Iris came down the stairs, ecstatic, saving his friend at the last second. Although she was sorry for their departure, since she had begun the preparations for the farewell party his sister was in a festive mood, to say the least, and for the occasion she had worn a new dress she had sewn herself. "I didn't know you would come too! Did you have a safe journey? Does the Marshal treat you well? How's your shoulder? I heard you came back to Insomnia!"

"Grandpa!" Cindy shouted from the stairs. "Look who's arrived with the Marshal!"

For some time Gladio hadn't felt so much carefree confusion. I wish it was always like this, he thought, and again the desire to embrace Silia became irresistible. He merely brushed her arm. Now it was her who was dazed by so much attention.

"I'll get you a beer. This time it's on my account."

Gladio couldn't take his eyes off her all evening. Silia chatted for a long time with everyone else, answering their questions, indulging in some anecdotes about the war, telling something of her
months in Insomnia, but never mentioned the attack on the city or the betrayal of her captain. Iris followed her everywhere as she used to do with him when she was a child, but what surprised him most was noticing that Cor Leonis exercised on her that sort of rough discipline he had always reserved for the men he most counted on.

Talcott, instead, avoided her carefully. He had always been a quiet child, but since Jared had died he’d spent a lot of time alone reading his grandfather's notebooks. When Silia approached him during the evening and Talcott stood up with his head bowed down without answering her, she grabbed him abruptly by the collar of his shirt, pissed off, and kicked him out of the house. Gladio imagined that, in Orior, she had to train her guys with the same attitude. He approached his sister and asked her if something had happened between the two while she was escorting them to Lestallum.

"No, on the contrary," Iris answered with a sad smile. "Before leaving, Silia told Talcott to look after me and his grandfather. Things you say to children, you know. But then the Imperials killed Jared. It's certainly not Talcott's fault, but he feels responsible and was afraid to face Silia. When he saw her coming, he became grey."

They returned a few minutes later. Talcott's eyes were red, but he held his head high. Silia sat again at the table as if nothing happened and filled another glass with beer.

After their initial greeting, Silia almost ignored him for the whole evening, talking to him only if he was the one to do it first, and directing at him a few seemingly casual glances. She was curtly kind to everyone, but behaved so absently towards him that the dance, the sex in her apartment, all the unspoken words that had been hanging in the air for months, seemed never to have happened. Gladio's hands were almost itching from wanting to touch her, now that he could do it without scruples and reticence, but he couldn't find the excuse or the way.

When everyone gradually began to retreat for the night, Silia took the lighter and the cigarettes, hooked the swords to her holster, and headed for the door. As she passed by, she gave him an unequivocal nod with her head – useless, because he would have followed her without any invitation. Gladio in turn made a discreet nod to Ignis who, when Silia went out, made a mischievous smile, to which he replied with his middle. He left discreetly.

He saw her walking away toward the beach and followed her in silence. The temperature was mild but humid, and he shuddered with cold and excitement. Silia's silhouette, tiny, feline, reached the beach and kept on moving forward. Gladio accelerated and joined her. They were still too close to the house, but the more they strayed, the more they risked running into a daemon, although they had taken care to keep the area clear.

He ventured to hug her shoulders and she, to his surprise, let him do it, but she was stiff. He himself felt clumsy and inappropriate because they were two fighters who escaped an incalculable number of dangers on the eve of crucial events for the kingdom, not two fiancés taking an evening stroll on the beach. However, for a moment, he wondered how it would really be, being a normal man and woman, free to hang out, relieved of duties and worries, and in peacetime. He smiled at the thought.

"What are you smiling so much about?"

"Can't I? It was a nice evening," he replied. "The others were also euphoric. All of them. I don't think I've ever seen Cor Leonis so talkative." *Except when he told me about his life in the Taelpar's Crag.*

Silia slowed down her pace, turning to the house, and then resumed walking. She sighed, pensive. Something had changed in her, Gladio reflected, he could read it in the hard lines of her face, but he couldn't tell what. And it was obvious that something had changed. He had lost so much, the day of
the fall of Insomnia, but Silia had lost everything. When he had learned she had settled in Cor's camp, becoming friendly with Dustin and above all - to his great surprise - with Darius Magnus, gaining the respect of Cor's men, he had felt relieved. But now she looked concerned, grieving, and although she had smiled all evening, they were clearly forced smiles.

"Are you okay, Silia?" he asked again.

She nodded. "Yeah. So I thought." She buried her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket. "I have to tell you something. I have to apologize."

Gladio blinked. "Again? Silia, you don't have to. It's not your responsibility what the Kingsglaives have done. And as for the King..."

She shook her head. "No, Gladio. I knew about the signing. When we met the night before your departure, I knew the date of the signing of the treaty, and I didn't tell you."

A part of him had always imagined it. The Kingsglaives, his father had told him, had been assigned to the protection of the Citadel. They certainly hadn't been alerted with a few hours notice. Anyway, he couldn't hold a grudge against her for that. "Why?" he simply asked.

Silia didn't look at him. "Two days before you left, your father came looking for me. We talked in his car. He knew about us. I mean, he had guessed that maybe... in any case, he asked me not to tell you anything about the treaty. If the Prince had knew, he could have refused to leave the city. And the Prince shouldn't have been in Insomnia during the signing. Now we know why."

Gladio stopped. The idea of his father talking to Silia was unimaginable, but for the rest she wasn't telling him anything new. The King and the Council knew perfectly what, in all probability, would have happened, and they didn't want them in Insomnia. They wanted them far away, safe. Would anything have changed if Silia had told him? "Silia, I..."

"You had the right to know what was going to happen, or so I thought. But the General asked me if I would endanger the Crown Prince's life so as not to lie to you; if I had sworn loyalty to the King and to Gladio Amicitia."

Typical low blow from his father. "Nothing would have changed," he whispered. "If you had told me, I would have kept it hidden from Noctis, as you kept it from me. I would have acted exactly as you did. Don't apologize, Silia. You did your duty. I felt angry when I realized that my father, the King, Ignis' uncle, let us leave, keeping us in the dark about everything, like a bunch of stupid kids. But I would have done the same you did. You acted for the best."

Silia didn't answer. She lit another cigarette and started walking again. "I acted for the best?" she repeated in a creeping voice, almost carried away by the wind and the sound of the sea. "I didn't do a single fuckin' thing. Since the Imperials attacked, I haven't been able to do a single fuckin' thing. I saw the Shrine blow up, the Crystal floating away. The King is dead, Nyx Ulric tells me to join him at Galdin Quay because there's nothing left to do, and after leaving the city, what do I find out? That he remained and faced General Glaucat wearing the Ring of the Lucii." She took off her jacket with an angry gesture and threw it on the sand, where it slumped with a plop. She also removed her swords and threw them on her jacket. She was wearing a sleeveless shirt, and Gladio saw the recent scar on her shoulder. "I didn't do a single fuckin' thing," she repeated.

"And I?" Gladio heard himself say. Now he was heating up. "What did I do? Who could?"

"You were protecting the Prince. And don't talk as if you knew what happened."
"Then you tell me what happened, because while the city was falling and the king and my father were dying, I was in Galdin Quay fishing!" he shouted.

"You couldn't know what was happening in Insomnia!"

"Yeah, thanks to you and my father and the King!" he reproached her, contradicting himself. He ran his hands through his hair, exasperated. "Always the same. Since you were a child you go around pickin' up responsibilities and minimizin' others' ones. Betcha there wasn't a single fuckin' day when you didn't think about Titus Drautos, as if you could have known what your Captain was plotting on the front while you were at Insomnia with your leg eaten."

"He's not my Captain anymore!" Silia came forward and shoved him. She did so with such strength that Gladio, despite his size, had to move back a step so as not to fall. "He never was. It was always General Glaucan, even when he came to take me in that fucking hut at Insomnia where I lived with my mother!"

Gladio grabbed her wrists. Silia was panting, her hair disheveled by the wind, her face petrified in a mask of hatred. Everyone had been betrayed on May 16, but perhaps none more than the Kingsglaives who hadn't taken part in the plot. "And he's dead," he whispered, calmer. "Take it up with Niflheim. Keep fighting, just how you are doing. If you had gotten yourself killed on the day of the attack, what would you have achieved? You can't win a war just with martyrs and heroes, Silia."

Silia stopped resisting. "Cor also said that to me."

"It was him who taught it to me."

She freed her wrists, rubbed her eyes and turned to the sea. Without any warning, she bent to remove her shoes and socks and went into the water. She stood looking towards the dark horizon, the sea lapping at her calves.

"I thought I was fine," she said, her face slightly turned to him, so soft that Gladio risked not hearing her words. "Everything was starting to become as if it had happened to someone else, as if I was looking at it through an upturned spyglass. And instead, when I got here to Cape Caem, and I saw you, the Prince, Iris, everything came back close, excruciating." She touched her shoulder. "Even Marius' wound is hurting again."

He had no idea what she was talking about, but it wasn't the time to ask her. He turned. The house was a dark mass, barely distinguishable, but even if they hadn't been far enough, at that moment he wouldn't give a shit anyway. He got into the water with his shoes, grabbed Silia by her shoulders and kissed her.

"Perhaps we should go back," she said, on his lips. "I don't know if this is a good idea, Gladio."

"Oh, shut the hell up," he whispered, and he was out of breath because, good idea or not, Silia's hands were already inside his pants, and for the Six, it took too long to undress, to return to the shore, and they had already lost so much time, so it was with salt water in his mouth, in his eyes, in his ears, his clothes heavy and wet on him, that for the second time in his life he lost his head for a few minutes sinking into her.

"Shit, it's fuckin' cold," Silia complained.

Gladio fumbled around for her leather jacket – the only garment of both still dry – and leaned it on her. "Says the one who pushed me into the water. Good thing it wasn't a good idea. Even the second
time on the beach wasn't a good idea?" Under the rough fabric of the jacket he continued to caress her, relaxed. In Insomnia everything had been so desperate and frantic that this was the first time they had laid together, naked, intimately. They were dirty with sand – practically rolled – cold and salty, but he wouldn't have changed a single detail of that moment. "Even in Insomnia, after we had sex, you said it hadn't been a good idea," he reminded her, biting her earlobe. "You enjoyed them a lot, for them bein' bad ideas."

"Fuck it," she said, frowning, but without anger. "It really was a bad idea, in Insomnia. When you got to my house, at the last moment like in a fuckin' movie, I thought: he's a bloody asshole."

"You pulled me in, though." That memory gave him a shiver of excitement. All the girls he had dated, put in awe by his size, had always left him the initiative. And he had had sex with them without having to pray them too much. He had never had to hold back his physical desire – for months. He had never been grabbed with such impetuosity and physical force and slammed against the wall.

Silia slightly arched her back, also reacting to the memory, or perhaps to his hand that continued to brush her groin. "I thought we wouldn't see each other again, Gladio."

"I thought for days that you were dead."

"It'll take a lot more..."

"...to kill you. Yeah. I know it." He leaned over to kiss the hollow of her neck, salted like everything else, then the scar on her shoulder. "I should have remembered that."

Silia climbed up on him, seizing his jaw and kissing him. Gladio felt the warmth of her thighs, her numb breasts on his chest, and grabbed her buttocks in a hungry gesture. Somehow, in a moment like that, it occurred to him that Jin Ronan, one of his Crownsguard friends, had once told him with a keen eye that Silia had such a hard ass that he bet she could break walnuts with her butt cheeks. He was right. Gladio laughed against her lips.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothin'. Did I ever tell you I find you terribly sexy?"

"Then it's not just about food that you've such a shitty taste."

Gladio remarked on the concept grabbing her hips to guide her on him. Silia had a slender and limber body, unsuspectingly endowed with a well-developed musculature so harmonized with her bone structure that it didn't appear immediately evident. It drove him crazy. "It's likely so, since not only do I find you terribly sexy, but I also fell in love with you."

She froze in his arms. "Oh, for Odin, was it really necessary to say?"

"Absolutely, yes. I should have told you already in Insomnia, instead of risking never being able to do it. I really was a bloody asshole."

"Things haven't changed, Gladio."

"Everything changed."

"Not this one."

"Where Noctis goes I will go, this doesn't change. But the Kingsglaives no longer exist. Later..."
"Gladio, don't be such a child," she said. She tried to free herself, but he held her back. "It's not the right time."

"And when will the right time be?"

"Perhaps never. We managed to meet again. It's a small miracle. Don't waste these few hours doing projects for a future that you can't foresee."

"Silia, did you hear me when I said I love you? I want to be with you."

"But you have to be with Prince Noctis."

"One thing must not necessarily exclude the other."

"Indeed it does, for now."

"And later?"

"You don't know if that later will come. So let's not talk about it."

"Silia, I don't want to fight tonight."

She relaxed her thighs again, placing a finger on his lips. "Then shut up. We had months to talk, Gladio. What do you think I want to do in these few hours?"

They also talked, actually, and a lot. In almost two months they had been through a lot, enough for a lifetime, and they told it all to each other, touching, kissing, and interrupting when the urge to have sex became imperative. That night seemed to Gladio to be a gift from the Six, a dream he would remember with his eyes open in the coming months, and to which he would cling every time he would feel discouraged, defeated; an advance on that future he liked to fantasize about before falling asleep.

Finally, an hour or two before dawn, they had shaken off the sand, put their wet clothes back on, and tacitly decided to return to the house. They walked slowly, side by side, but no longer touching each other.

"I'm so happy you're here, Silia," he told her. He didn't believe that in his life he would ever say the words which slipped out of him: "I can't even imagine what will happen tomorrow, but when everything is settled, I don't know where and it doesn't matter, I want us to stay together. I'll ask you to marry me. And I will continue to do so until you say yes."

She stopped. He thought she would be surprised, embarrassed, but Silia frowned. "Are you crazy, Gladio? We had sex a couple of times and you're asking me to marry you? What's that, a legacy of your blue-blood ancestors' habits?"

He laughed. "Four times, not counting the rest," he corrected her with a hint of satisfaction. "And as long as in the meantime you won't be married to Cor Leonis. I've known him since I was born and few times I've heard him praise someone."

Silia laughed too, starting to walk again. It seemed to him that centuries had passed since the last time he had heard her laughter. "You are even playing the jealous boyfriend now? Cor is very hard on me. He's always got something to say about everything I do. The two times we came out of Orior together, he treated me like a newbie and did nothing but bawl instructions and call me stupid."
Gladio folded his arms behind his head. "Cor goes on a mission only with his best men. He always says that it's better to die at the hands of a brave enemy than for the mistake of a stupid comrade."

Silia didn't answer. She looked away, embarrassed. It happened so rarely that Gladio almost felt aroused again. "It wasn't meant to be a compliment. Cor Leonis is very strict and demanding with everyone, but particularly with the people whose value he recognizes and whose maximum he expects. Anyway, I'm kinda jealous indeed. We have trained a lot together, but we have never fought shoulder to shoulder." He indulged for a few moments, with pleasure, in his usual reverie. Now, in that future of peace, he saw Silia not only as a Crowsguard, but as his wife. They would live together in his family villa, or maybe in an apartment at the Citadel, who knows. Silia would wear masculine clothes even then – he couldn't imagine her with a dress. And perhaps there would be a child, or maybe two, to whom he would have teach to use the sword in the Training Hall. That thought hooked in his chest.

"Silia..." he whispered. "Don't get angry. Usually I'm careful with such things, but with you... it occurred to me just now. What if...?"

She looked at him with genuine surprise. She hadn't understood. Even more embarrassed, Gladio touched his stomach.

"Oh." Silia shook her head. "I can't have children, Gladio. I feel sorry for you if you counted on it," she added, with a sour tinge in her voice that wounded him. Gladio stopped, dazed. He couldn't hide his disappointment. It wasn't the right time, of course, but learning that the possibility was categorically excluded in the future hit him like a slap in his face. "Why?"

In response, Silia lifted the lower flap of her wet tank top. "Thought you had seen it," she said, more gently, running a finger over the huge scar that marked her lower abdomen. He had seen it, of course, but he still couldn't understand. "It happened during my second year on the front. It was the blade of a fuckin' mesmerize."

"A mesmerize?" Gladio repeated, incredulous.

Silia lowered her shirt, looking away. "A newbie mistake. Heal spells stabilize bleeding, restore strength, but internal organs don't heal easily, you know? Human bodies can't be repaired perfectly like a machine, or no one would ever die where there were people able to use the magic of the King." She made an indecipherable smile. "I'm sorry, Gladio. But it's better this way. Everything is too unsteady and dangerous in my life, in everyone's life. Niflheim. The Starscourge. I'm fine with it."

"It won't be this way forever," Gladio whispered. He felt distraught, because he had always believed that he would never be married, and in the exact moment when he discovered that he was attracted to the idea that one day he could have children, Silia told him it wasn't possible. He also felt guilty for his dismay. He turned to look at the sea, mortified. "Things will change. Lucis. Eos. One day people will be able to live in peace. Oh, there will still be things to fight against, but not a long and exhausting war like this. Do not you think so, Silia? If not, why would you have fought on the front for years? Why would you keep on fighting to support Noctis?"

Silia no longer had a cigarette between her lips. She must have thrown it on the sand while he was looking at the sea. They were close to the house now, but everyone had to be asleep, because all the lights except one were out. Cor? Cid? As he was asking himself, Silia approached him. Her eyes were red. She laid her hands on his chest, then raised her arms to stroke his hair, stood on tiptoes and kissed him.

He wrapped her back and neck with his arms. The next day he would leave for Accordo and it
would be weeks, maybe months, before seeing her again. He replied to her affectionate kiss with enthusiasm.

"Easy, Gladio, calm down," she laughed against his lips, feeling his arousal, but didn't retreat.

It was dark, they were near the garden and there was nobody. He grabbed her hips and lifted her up. "Do I have to?"

"It's very late," she said, but she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Just ten minutes, Mom."

"Call me 'mom' again and you can forget about fucking with me forever."

Gladio laughed.

Chapter End Notes

* "Hic Manebimus Optime" > "Here we'll be fine". Actually the meaning of the sentence is more complex than the literal one: according to Titus Livius, it is said that, when Gaulish tribes led by Brennus sacked Rome in 390 a.C., the Roman Senate had to decide whether they had to leave Rome and move to Veii or rebuild the city. While debating, they heard the voice of a centurion ordering to the flag-bearer to plant the insignia. This was interpreted as a good omen and the Senate remained in Rome. The sentence became famous as an expression of resolution.
Dubium sapientiae initium

Chapter Summary

Gladio and his friends leave for Accordo and meet Weskham Armaugh. Meanwhile, Silia finds herself alone in Cape Caem with Marshal Leonis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

31

Dubium sapientiae initium

I

Once the promontory of Cape Caem was barely distinguishable on the horizon, Gladio collapsed on the seats of the yacht, enjoying the sun. He closed his eyes, his head tilted back. It would take at least five hours to reach Accordo, Cid had said, it was daytime so no daemon would appear and no Imperial ships were in sight. After all, perhaps, he could allow himself a good sleep. He yawned loudly, relaxing.

"Look at him, how exhausted he is. Lucky guy," Prompto teased him.

Ignis giggled. "Come on guys, let him rest. He returned at dawn in such pitiful conditions that he was certainly attacked by a herd of Rubyshears."

"Yeah, of course," Cid said unexpectedly, from his seat at the controls. "Rubyshears with cat-like claws."

The laughter increased. Gladio straightened up, pissed off. When he had returned home Ignis was already awake, busy finishing the preparations for their departure. They hadn't exchanged a single word about it, but he was in an indecent condition, his clothes still wet, encrusted with salt and sand, twisted. It didn't take much effort for Ignis to imagine that he hadn't slept for a minute.

"I didn't expect that," Noctis observed out of nowhere.

"What?"

"Silia. On the phone, she sounded ice-cold."

"You can say that," Prompto noted. "Actually she's very affable, even if abrupt. Last night it was fun and also interesting. She's got lots of stuff to tell."

Gladio smiled, not offended at all. "That's the way she is. She drove me crazy in Insomnia with her mood swings. But besides that, she takes her responsibilities very seriously. For her, those phone calls were real briefings you've disrespected with your lack of seriousness."

"She's cut from the same cloth as the Marshal," Ignis blurted out with half a smile.
"Oh, you noticed it too, lad," Cid said again. "When she got to Hammerhead after the fall of Insomnia with her fierce attitude, despite the fact she could hardly stand up and her petulant tongue, she reminded me of Cor when he was a naughty brat. The Gilgamesh Trial, the age and the responsibilities of the Crowns guard have blunted his edges, but his core remains adamantine."

A shiver ran through Gladio's spine as he saw himself married to a female version of Cor Leonis. Fortunately, despite her years on the front, or perhaps just thanks to her years on the front and the consequent life between fellow soldiers, Silia had been able to nurture an elasticity, a sense of humor *sui generis* and an innate sociability that he couldn't see in Cor. That didn't prevent her from being an intractable bitch on her bad days, as Gladio had largely had the chance to experience in Insomnia. "Lucky me," he let slip. "Even Cindy, however, has a temper, huh?" he pointed out, to prod both Cid and Prompto.

"Luckily," Cid replied. "She grew up in a workshop in the middle of nowhere with an old man. She didn't have an easy life. Under these circumstances, you either grow a strong armor or you don't survive."

Prompto, who was taking photographs and moving from side to side of the yacht in search of the best angle, stopped and lowered his camera. "Oh. Cor once told us that she was born in Keycatrich, but I didn't know that her parents...

"My son Mid and his wife, Melba, died in Keycatrich during the early stages of the war. One of the reasons why I never went back to Insomnia," he said slyly, without giving them any further explanation. Even his father had always overshadowed why Cid and King Regis had ended up colliding. "After takin' her with me, Cindy and I moved here and there for a few months, until I decided to open a workshop. At the time, there was absolutely nothin' in the area, but when people started to stop at the workshop someone opened the diner – it wasn't yet a Crow's Nest, of course – the shop and so on. Cindy grew up playing with wrenches instead of dolls. Don't make me say it too loudly, but already at her age she's a better mechanic than me." For someone who didn't want to say it too loudly, he seemed very proud of it.

"You and my father haven't spoken since then, have you?" Noctis asked.

Cid grimaced. "Actually," he said bitterly, "Reggie called me on May 12, the day before you left. I hadn't heard his voice for nearly thirty years. He told me about the treaty, without going into details despite my insistence, and talked mostly about the ol' days. When we had departed, I had sworn I wouldn't set my foot again in Insomnia, but at the end of our phone call I told him I'd meet him in the Crown City and that I would be by his side the day of the signing of the treaty. He firmly replied that he already had Clarus by his side and that I could do more for him at Hammerhead, helping his son in case of need, than at Insomnia and that this was the same thing he had ordered to Cor."

No one followed up on his words. Once more, Gladio realized how, even though after the fall of Insomnia they had felt uprooted, alone, at the mercy of events, they could actually count on the support of friends and comrades they had no idea of. Everywhere there were people who were risking their lives to put the legitimate king back on Lucis' throne.

"Prince," Cid said, turning away from the controls. He leaned on it, slightly bent, rearranging his hat over his bushy hair. "Take care of your friends and never doubt their loyalty. You'll find them covering your back even after thirty years, whatever corner of the world they've ended up in. Look at the old Wes: he has been livin' in Accordo longer than in Lucis by now, yet he has assured Cor that he will support Reggie's son with all means at his disposal."

"I will," Noctis solemnly promised, after a moment of silence.
Gladio hugged his knee, letting the splashes of water raised by the yacht tickle his face. The day was starting to get hot. "I'm curious to meet him. My father told me a lot about ol' Wes."

"He was the dark-skinned man in the photos at the workshop and the lighthouse, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. Great guy, old Wes. He was young but shrewd, responsible and mature. When Reggie had to make a difficult decision, the last word was Wes'." He looked at Ignis. "Thinking about it, you're a lot like him, lad. He came to Accordo with the official assignment of Royal Diplomatic Advisor. When he got hurt and realized that he could no longer fight, he decided to stay there and get back on his feet. We haven't met for a lifetime, but we talk on the phone from time to time. Now he runs a restaurant or somethin' like that, another thing you two have in common. His place is called Mago, I think. Or Maga. No. Maagho."

Ignis seemed genuinely pleased. "I cannot wait to meet him."

"Will he help us convince the First Secretary?" Noctis shrugged.

"Wes has a big influence on Camelia Claustra," Cid winked, and Gladio wondered again if there was something between the two. His father wasn't the type to indulge in details of that kind, but instead of returning to Insomnia, Weskham had decided to settle in Altissia and had remained there the last thirty years; it had to mean something. "But it won't be enough. You'll have to convince her, Little Prince. She too has a temper. You shouldn't be impudent."

"Oh, then we can rest reassured," Ignis commented peacefully.

Noctis didn't reply. He was looking at the sea. Instead of being nervous – he, more than anyone else, had the right to be – he seemed absorbed, the shadow of a smile on his lips usually so sulky. Of course, for him, Altissia meant being reunited again with Her Grace Lunafreya after so many years, not facing a diplomatic meeting that, at best, would lead to a clash with an Astral of an unfriendly nature and probably also with the Imperial forces. Gladio felt rather inclined towards indulgence, in this sense. He no longer had sand and salt on his skin, but he could still feel Silia's smell on him.

"Noct..." he called him, but without an answer. He had to rest his hand on his knee to get his attention.

"What, Gladio?"

"Your wedding had been a condition demanded by the Empire and it fell through. But nothing prevents you from doing it for your wish when it's all over."

"Cut it out," Noctis blushed violently, annoyed, and looked away.

Gladio clenched his teeth not to laugh. "I'm serious. Think, Tenebrae and Lucis together. I believe your father always had it in mind, before Niflheim invaded Tenebrae. And I can't see why you shouldn't want to be happy, as soon as you do what is necessary."

Noctis didn't answer, looking at the sea again, but he hid his mouth behind his entwined fingers; a clumsy attempt to hide a smile, or perhaps a bitter grimace.

"The Princess' wedding dress is still exhibited in Altissia, isn't it? I'm curious to see it," he added.

His friend stifled a puff of amusement. "Lookin' for inspiration for your own wedding?"

He didn't tell him that he had really proposed the idea to Silia. "Are ya kiddin' me? Silia'll get married wearing a uniform, even if I don't know yet which one."
When the yacht came out of the underground port, Cor moved away for a few minutes with Monica without requesting her presence, and at the end of that consultation he communicated to Iris and Talcott that he considered it more prudent for them to leave Cape Caem. He didn't mention her, so Silia imagined she would stay.

"When?" Iris asked.

"Now," the Marshal replied resolutely. "We don't know what will happen with Leviathan, and this place is too close to the sea."

"But we..." the girl tried faintly to protest, addressing with her eyes a request for help to Silia.

"Iris," Cor interrupted her, with a firm sweetness she had never heard in his voice. "Your brother has entrusted you to me, and I don't want to find myself in the uncomfortable position of having to communicate more bad news to him."

"But Lestallum is no longer safe," Iris tried again. "That's why we came here."

Cor blinked. "I'm not sending you to Lestallum. You're preceding us to our camp, Orior."

The kids' mouths puckered in a comic 'o'.

"To Orior, Marshal?" Talcott exclaimed. "With the hunters and the Crownsguards?"

"You've heard me, Talcott. Hartwood and I will meet you in a couple of days, when we're sure that everything went well in Accordo."

The two of them rushed to the house without another word, presumably to gather their things together. Silia let out an amused snort. With a little luck, the two kids would no longer be tossed around Eos like postal packages. Cor had once told her that, albeit reasonably certain, Orior was still a sensitive target, the reason why he previously hadn't wanted to keep them there. Evidently the danger that something would be unleashed on the shores after Leviathan's awakening was more real than he would say.

Once they entered the house they were reached by the excited voices of the kids who were moving all the way upstairs. Iris, or so it sounded, couldn't wait to meet Dustin and some of the Crownsguards for news of mutual acquaintances. Monica took a few minutes to pack while Silia was leafing through one of the books from the Royal Library sitting on the couch. When she had placed her only bag on the ground, she reached the Marshal at the kitchen table.

"Hm, Cor, Marshal..." she began, uncertain.

"What's the matter? Is there a problem, Monica?"

"No problem, Sir. I just wondered..." she shrugged. "Nothing, Sir, please, never mind."

"Monica?"

"I wondered, Sir, if I can bring the cat."

"What cat?"

"The black cat wandering around here, Sir. I fed him for the whole month. The Prince says he has followed them since Galdin Quay. A very intelligent pet."
Silia covered her face with the book to stifle a laugh, not only for Monica's request – all they needed in Orior was a cat – but for Cor Leonis' countenance.

"Monica..."

"Sir?"

"Do as you please."

"Thank you, Sir," Monica said gratefully, slightly bowing her torso. She and Dustin shared several things, including love for formalities. "I will meet you at the camp in a few days."

When Monica turned to her, Silia had to work hard to reassemble her face in a concentrated expression. "Silia? I apologize for disturbing you while you're reading. I wanted to bid you farewell."

Silia lowered the book and got up from the sofa. She hadn't had the time to get familiar with Monica – who had spent the last month in Cape Caem – but the woman had welcomed her to the camp with great kindness when she had arrived shortly after the fall of Insomnia. "Good luck, Monica," she smiled. "See you soon."

Iris and Talcott descended a few minutes later with their backpacks, excited, while Monica was supposedly looking for the cat. Silia went to meet them.

Talcott was holding his head up now, a determined expression. "Again, Silia, I'm sorry. I promise I'll be strong. See you soon."

"Talcott, listen to me." She laid her hands on his shoulders, leaning slightly forward. She had the feeling he would grow up very quickly in the months to come, and for a moment on his face she could glimpse the features of the handsome boy he would become. "Remember what I told you last night: it's no use crying over spilled milk. There will be time, in the future, to learn how to fight. We'll take care of it as soon as the dust settles."

"Roger, Captain Hartwood!"

"I'm not a captain." Silia let him go, only to find Iris' arms around her neck, her face close. She stood stiff for a moment, with her arms at her sides, embarrassed by that physical contact and by Cor Leonis' presence, then she gently pushed Iris aside. "Come on, Iris. See you soon," she smiled.

"I'm glad that you and my brother could meet again, Silia," the girl whispered very low. "He's stubborn, and he's very demanding with himself and all those around him, but sooner or later he too will need to lean on someone, and I can't think of anyone better than you."

"Beat it, Iris," she said brusquely.

"If you're both done with your pleasantries, hurry up, Iris," Cor said impatiently.

Iris made a military salute. "At your command, Marshal!" She put a hand on Talcott's back and moved to leave. "Please be careful. And give us news."

"We'll stay in touch with Monica and Dustin. They will inform you of everything," Cor reassured her. "Come on, go. Orior is far away." With a last goodbye, the two kids went out. Silia stood leaning against the door watching them get in the car and leave.

"Iris grew up without female figures for reference," she heard Cor Leonis say. "Don't let her get too
close to you. You'll have more important things to do in the next period than taking care of her."

Cor Leonis' lapidary judgments were always heavy as boulders, but he was right. She had grown fond of Iris and Talcott and wanted to keep them safe personally, but she didn't even know where she would be next day. "If Iris is looking for a female figure to lean on, wrong guy," she tried to lighten up the mood. "I wear pants."

"Did you wear pants even last night with Gladio Amicitia, Hartwood?"

Silia opened her mouth to answer him properly, but then remembered that Cor Leonis was her commander and that unlike Darius he wouldn't appreciate the barrack humor. So she closed it, put her hands in her pockets and changed the subject. "What do we do now?"

He took a deep breath. "We wait until tomorrow. Take the opportunity to catch your breath, while you can."

**III**

He had never seen anything like it. None of them had, actually. Leaning against the parapets of the yacht, their mouths ajar as the boat took a raised canal similar to an aqueduct, they watched in awe-inspiring silence the breathtaking landscape. Gladio had already seen it in pictures, and on television, but entering Altissia was a mystical experience very close to what the visitors of the borderlands had to experience when crossing the gates of Insomnia. The city – if you could call 'city' a scattering of rocks and islets of variable size on which stood magnificent constructions built following an artistic style that he had never seen in Lucis, not even in the ruins of Solheim – seemed to literally rise from the water. The seabed was on several levels of depth, but instead of submerging everything, who knows for what physical phenomenon, the sea just flowed quietly, throwing itself from one level to another in natural waterfalls.

"Oh, sweet Six," Prompto croaked, shaking them all from their enchantment. "Did we ended up in another world? I don't want to leave here, ever again."

Cid laughed. "The first time we were too stoned. The other cities of the League are beautiful as well, but Altissia is something that can't be described in words. No wonder Wes remained, even though Accordo can't compete with Insomnia in technological beauty"

"No cars here, right?" Prompto asked.

"And where the hell would they drive, lad? Here people travel on gondolas."

"Gondolas?"

"They are small, slim boats built so that they can be moved using a single oar. Some of the city's canals are so narrow that no other boat could go in them."

"That massive building down there, the one with the two wings of colonnades, that's the headquarters of the Secretariat, isn't it?" Ignis asked. Even he seemed enraptured by the sight.

"Exactly," Cid replied. "But don't wear your eyes out lads, you'll have time to visit the city between diplomatic engagements."

The yacht advanced toward a high portal with two huge statues of angels on either side. Beyond, a few hundred feet away, they could see two geometric colonnades similar to the larger building indicated by Ignis shortly before. The port, Gladio imagined. To confirm his hypothesis, as soon as they had approached the portal, Cid slowed near a checkpoint and a City Guard – wearing a navy
uniform and a cap of the same color – got on board without asking permission.

He just deigned them a look and turned to Cid. "Does this vessel have an entry permit?"

Noctis stiffened and Gladio stifled a curse. They had been naive to believe they could enter Accordo incognito. "Hm, an entry permit?" Noctis asked, looking hopefully at their pilot.

"Relax, I got one," Cid replied patiently, and slightly derisively. He pulled out an old cardboard piece and handed it to the Guard.

"That's as old as they get," the Guard commented. "Seems in order. You may pass. Enjoy your stay in Altissia."

Waving at them with a formal gesture, the man got out of the boat. Gladio gave himself up to an exasperated sigh of relief.

"How lucky, huh?"

"It's not luck," Cid said, starting the engine. Slowly, the yacht began to advance again along the canal. "I haven't come here for a lifetime but we changed country so it was obvious there would be a customs or a checkpoint. You've been around for months, but for some things you're still like chicks fresh out of the egg, huh?"

None of them answered, cut to the quick, also because the yacht was crossing the portal – which turned out to be another deep colonnade – and they found themselves in a huge body of water. Cid crossed it with confidence, as if he had navigated those waters hundreds of times, and zigzagging among much smaller boats, some of them with sails, he aimed straight at the port.

They got out on the dock, excited, after Cid had landed the yacht. Although aged thirty, the improvements of Cid and Cindy had brought the Royal Vessel to its former glory and, as Cid had pointed out earlier, Accordo couldn't boast the technology of Insomnia, where it had been built, so it still was impressive. Gladio hoped it wasn't too much.

Their excitement was short-lived because before leaving the port they had to go through another checkpoint, this time a real customs. They stood in line, nervous, waiting for their turn.

"Good morning, sirs. What is the purpose of your visit?" the man in the cabin asked them.

"Er..." Noctis scratched the back of his head. "Ig?"

"We are scholars of the culinary arts," Specs replied promptly, putting on his most serious and formal look. "We've came to study the renowned cuisine of your fair nation."

"Is that so?" the Guard asked with a smile. "You have come to the right place. I wish you an enlightening stay."

Gladio leaned a hand over his mouth to keep himself from giggling as they passed. The uniform was different, but the well-known shrewdness of the City Guard, evidently, was the same everywhere.

They walked for a couple of hours, after briefly stopping for a cup of coffee – the Ebony was there too, but sipping it at a table under a parasol with the quiet rustling of the water in their ears was another story. Cid had given them the keys to the yacht, but before sailing around the city they decided to visit it from the inside. They let themselves be transported by gondolas, climbed up steep
narrow stairways, crossed picturesque bridges and snooped in tiny shops with exotic goods they had never seen. Altissia was clean and charming; he had liked Lestallum, but compared with Altissia it was rustic, to put it mildly. They listened carefully to the chatter of the people who all did nothing but talk about Lady Lunafreya Nox Fleuret, of her wedding dress designed by the famous fashion designer Vivienne Westwood for the occasion, and above all of the public speech that, it seemed, she would have hold the next day from the Palace of the Secretariat.

Maagho bar was one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen. Weskham had taken it over, or perhaps built it, under the arches of a huge bridge, on a wooden platform. The gondola left them directly on a flight of wooden stairs and they were immediately greeted by a dark-skinned man behind the counter who was wearing a white shirt with a brown velvet waistcoat – old Wes himself.

"Even if Cid hadn't informed me of your arrival," he winked, pulling off his monocle, "I'd have recognized you anyway. You two are the spitting images of Reggie and Clarus, as they were thirty years ago. A little more handsome, perhaps. Have a seat, lads, and welcome to Maagho."

Encouraged by the welcome, they warmly returned the greeting and sat down at the counter. The collection of bottles and the tavern atmosphere brought to Gladio's mind In birra veritas, the place where he and Silia had met for months, but the clean and bourgeois atmosphere – touristic, he corrected himself – and above all, the price board, were definitely on another level.

"Has Cid dropped by?" Noctis asked.

"An hour ago. We had a glass in the name of the old times. I know all about you lads; Cor and I had a long and intense phone call two days ago." He looked straight into his eyes first, then Noctis'. "I was shocked when I heard about Insomnia. My condolences for Regis and Clarus. When we were young we believed ourselves immortal, invincible. I was the first to recover from this illusion. But I was right about one thing: I knew they would pass away side by side." He scratched his nose, lowering his head slightly, and suddenly Gladio could see every year concealed by his juvenile appearance and joviality. "I'm sorry for this sentimental old-man talk, but please understand me. Although I've kept in touch with the others for all these years, within a few days I get a call from Cor Leonis, a visit from Cid Sophiar, and I find myself in front of the ghosts of Clarus and Reggie. This is your first trip to Accordo, isn't it? Are you enjoying it so far?"

If Weskham really resembled Ignis, as Cid claimed, certainly it wasn't for his talkativeness. Yet even his father had always spoken of old Wes as a brilliant mind, a skilled fabler, so he had no doubt that every word of his was carefully weighed to get a certain effect. However, his cordiality made him feel at ease. He felt like he had found an old friend, even if it had been his father's. "A doozy," he replied honestly.

"Never seen anything so beautiful," Prompto added. "It's not as technological as Insomnia is... as it was, but it's spectacular."

"It is, huh? They say that the city was born around the Altar of the Tidemother and that it has evolved ever more in harmony with its environment."

"What can you tell us about the recent history instead?" Ignis asked.

Weskham gave him a knowing smile. "You must be Ignis. I remember you from the last time I visited Insomnia. You were seven years old and you followed the little prince like a shadow. What would you like to know, lads?"

Noctis intertwined his fingers and spread his arms on the counter. "There's something I've not figured out yet. Accordo is part of the Empire, right?"
"That's right, but it has maintained its own government. The conditions of its independence, however, entail among other things free access for the Empire within its territories at all times."

"We'll keep it in mind," Ignis commented. "What about the other things?"

Again Weskham's lips twisted into a knowing smile, which soon turned into a grimace. "The other things are many things and I don't want to bore you with political details. Suffice it to say that almost everything in Accordo requires the approval of Niflheim."

"It sounds like a very one-sided agreement," Noctis observed.

"It is. Yet they approved Lady Lunafreya's public speech. I have no idea how the First Secretary managed to get it."

"What?" Prompto exclaimed.

"It's as you've heard, lad. They declare the Princess dead, who reappears alive in Lestallum and then in Altissia – the only witness, or so Cor told me, that the King was killed by the High Imperial Commander Glaucu – then allow her to hold a public speech in the only nation that, even with difficulty, can still prevent her from being taken into custody?"

"As for this," Ignis remarked, "we wondered why the Secretariat agreed to give her shelter. We know that the Chancellor and Ravus Nox Fleuret have come to request her extradition. Wouldn't it pose as an act of rebellion?"

"It would seem so, you say well. The air and naval fleets of the Empire are powerful enough to raze all the cities of the League and take back the Princess – and, with her, the Ring of the Lucii. But, after Insomnia, I assume that Aldercapt prefers to avoid another bloodbath, or continuing this way, once he has obtained the power of the Crystal he will find himself ruling over a pile of rubble."

Gladio leaned his chin on the back of his hand. "Then the Empire must have its own advantage. Could the First Secretary have promised to hand the Princess to the Empire in exchange for something we don't know yet?"

Weskham shook his head. "No. If the Ring falls to Niflheim, it will be the end of the League's scarce autonomy. With the Ring in his hand, Aldercapt..." The man turned his head to their left suddenly. "Speak of the devil..." he whispered, pointing behind them with a nod of his head.

Gladio and the others turned. A gondola was sailing the channel towards the landing of the Maagho. Besides the gondolier, a woman in aquamarine dresses and two guards in dark uniform sat on board. Camelia Claustra, he bet. The gondola pulled up to the steps and one of the guards came down, then the First Secretary, and lastly the second guard. Instead of continuing, the gondola remained there, blocking the passage.

The trio approached the counter, the woman tapping on the platform boards with her low heels. When they were close enough, Weskham made an old pirate smile. "I don't know why, but I had the feeling you would show yourself, First Secretary."

The woman answered him in turn. She didn't smile. "I heard you had distinguished guests and I thought I couldn't exempt myself from meeting them."

"You have long ears," he replied. "And unless you want a glass of my aged whiskey, you bothered for nothing. They would have come to your mansion in any case," the man said, even though they hadn't had time yet to talk about it.
"Another reason to exchange two words privately with them. But you can stay, Weskham."

"I had every intention, First Secretary. It's my place, if you hadn't noticed it."

The two looked at each other with a riotous air that Gladio recognized too well: it was a clash of authority between old friends. Gladio imagined that Camelia Clastra would have had every power to ward Weskham away from his own restaurant, if she wanted to, but she did not.

"Gentlemen, I don't want to waste your time," she said to them, even less friendly. "I am the First Secretary of Accordo, Camelia Clastra."

The four of them sketched a courtesy bow. It wasn't necessary to introduce themselves.

Without sitting down, the woman folded her arms across her chest. "I inform you that we have in custody Her Grace Lunafreya and that the Empire has formally requested her surrender. I am not inclined to accept their request without a benefit, and I would like to discuss this with the King of Lucis. When you want to negotiate, come to my residence."

Gladio wasn't a lover of etiquette, but the lack of respect towards Noctis openly declared the position of superiority where the First Secretary perfectly knew to be. She had Princess Lunafreya in her hands and the power to hand her to the Empire, she had shown she could track down the King of Lucis just a couple of hours after his arrival incognito to Accordo, and they needed her approval for the Princess to perform the rite. He sucked it up, hoping Noctis would do the same.

Fortunately, Noctis did the same. "We are glad to meet you, First Secretary. Please, leave us a couple of hours to think and discuss it," he replied.

"Oh, I'm sure you've already had time to eviscerate the question worthily." She turned to Weskham then looked back at them. "I'll wait for you at eight o'clock tonight at my estate. If you want to deal, of course."

"We'll be there," Noctis answered.

"I will wait for you."

The woman nodded to the two guards who had escorted her and climbed back onto the gondola. The gondolier pushed it away from the steps using the oar and left.

"She's not as cold as she seems." Weskham seemed to want to justify her actions. He began to fill five glasses with an unlabeled bottle, then he stopped. "You're all of age, aren't you? I don't want to get into any trouble. Anyway, as I was saying, she's not as bad as she seems. Sometimes she's even worse, I must admit it, but she's just trying to not burn herself with the hot potato that fell into her hands. She was a member of an independentist coalition, and as such we met her thirty years ago to seek their support in the war against Niflheim. She's still an independentist, but since she has been in power she has to manage balances that are anything but easy. You will learn it too, Prince, when you will be king. Even Reggie had to learn it." He pushed the glasses forward. "Come on, lads."

Gladio hurriedly put an arm between the glasses and Noctis. "Weskham, no offense, but if we want to have a slight chance that this negotiation will be successful, Noctis must be sober, and he can't even hold a half pint of beer."

"In this he definitely doesn't resemble Reggie."

IV
Silia spent the afternoon nervously wandering around the house, the lighthouse and the surrounding area, feeling like an intruder penetrating into someone else's past. It was evident that no one had lived there for a long time before Gladio and the guys, but the house had remained furnished, and she found personal items laying around that must have belonged to the King and his companions: photographs, old clothes, combat equipment. When she first had met King Regis in 739, he was more than thirty years old and he had been reigning for ten, so the Crystal had already begun to wear him out, but in those photographs, which dated back to 725 or a few years earlier, he was little more than a kid. She spent a long time leafing through the albums, recognizing the not-so-old Cid Sophiar, a dark-skinned young man who had to be Weskham Armaugh, a very young Cor Leonis – already tall and muscular despite being only thirteen years old – and a handsome brawny guy who she recognized as Clarus Amicitia only for his astonishing resemblance to Gladio.

When she returned downstairs, she found Cor still asleep on the couch. In his sleep, he had wrapped in the blanket she had laid on him. *I'm resting my eyes for a moment*, he had said five hours before, *Call me if anything happens.*

She hadn't seen him rest since she had arrived to the camp and, according to what Gladio had said, he had rushed off like a madman all over Leide from the fall of Insomnia on. She had the idea that Marshal Cor Leonis hadn't rested for weeks. And, no matter how youthful his appearance was, he was no longer a kid. She turned to leave silently, but this time the Marshal woke up. He jerked, straightened on the couch, then ran a hand over his eyes. "Hartwood," he croaked, hoarse. "How long did I sleep?"

"Five hours. It's almost evening."

"Damn it," he swore, pushing aside the blanket, then paused to look at it. He was no doubt wondering how the hell she'd come close furtively enough not to wake him up. "What about this, Hartwood? I'm not your husband."

_Fortunately_, she thought, but she didn't say it aloud. "Don't worry. I've kept an eye on your phone. Nobody called. I have two text messages, however: the guys have reached Altissia, the place is beautiful, nothing to report, Gladio writes. Iris, Monica, Talcott and Kurochan have reached Orior safely, nothing to report, Iris writes."

"Kurochan?"

"The cat," Silia answered with all the seriousness she was able to appeal.

Cor got up from the sofa with a sigh. "Did you take a look at the surroundings in the afternoon?"

Silia nodded. "I saw some big ships in the distance on the horizon. I imagine it's the Imperial fleet that reaches Accordo. But we supposed it. The guys should be safe until the awakening of the Tidemother."

"Good."

"Good."

They looked at each other in silence. It was the first time they found themselves alone in an enclosed space with no swords in their hands and enemies around. Silia nodded and went back to the book she had brought.

They stayed away from each other for two hours. She took the opportunity to catch her breath, as Cor had told her that morning, but with her thought continually going over the sea, she couldn't
concentrate on reading and soon she gave up on the book. She had already explored the house, already walked on the beach, already taken care of her weapons. In the end, nervous and annoyed, she had reached Cor who was listening to the radio, and had proposed to him eating something for dinner. A day, she realized, could also be very long.

The others had left the pantry well stocked and Silia looked at the open cabinets for a long time, without knowing how to convert those vegetables and those cuts of meat into something edible. On the front, when they were not stationed in some town or village, the chef of the group had always been Sam; the reason why, they'd always say, they hadn't yet cut his tongue.

"Hartwood," the Marshal called her attention. "Don't waste too much time with dinner. Take those slices of meat and just slap them on a pan. I've eaten worse in my life, and, I'm sure, you did as well."

She did. The meat was tasty, fortunately, and her contribution to the preparation was minimal. They ate in silence, almost without looking at each other, and it didn't take long. Fortunately, while she was putting away the dishes, the Marshal's phone rang. She hastened to join him.

Cor, to her surprise, activated the speaker so that she could hear too. "Cor Leonis speaking."

"Good evening, Marshal." The voice of the Prince. "We've just left Camelia Clastra's mansion. She accepted to allow Luna to perform the rite. We have promised her that we will do everything possible to keep the citizens safe."

"I wasn't expecting anything less from you," it was Cor's scant recognition. "When?"

"Tomorrow morning. The Empire presses for the ritual to be carried out."

What? Silia probed the Marshal's expression. She too, after all, had her own "shitmus" test.

"The Empire," Cor said slowly, "intends to kill the Tidemother after the Princess has summoned her. Only in this way will it be able to prevent you from obtaining the covenant, Prince. When Leviathan awakens, hell will be unleashed."

"We thought so as well," the Prince replied. "And we'll be ready for that. Gladio, Ignis and Prompto will protect the citizens and deal with the Empire. As for me, I will face Leviathan. If I gain her allegiance, the Imperial fleet will be washed away."

"Did you manage to talk to the Princess?" Silia asked him. Cor turned to her with a stern look, as if implying that it wasn't the right time for such trivial questions, so she added: "I mean, she's a resourceful woman. Certainly Her Grace has something in mind."

"I can't tell," the Prince answered gloomy. "Camelia Clastra didn't allow me to meet with her."

"Before you retire for the night, make sure you return to the Maagho and consult Weskham."

"We'll do it," Gladio replied. "As long as he doesn't try again to serve booze to His Majesty."

Silia smiled. "Go and rest, guys," she said. "Tomorrow will be a field day."

"We willingly obey this directive," Prompto stifled a yawn.

"Goodnight, Your Majesty. Good night everyone. We'll listen to the Princess' speech from here, waiting for you to get in touch. Good luck."
Cor closed the call and remained silent. Silia wasn't sleepy at all and after resting all afternoon, she imagined that not even the Marshal would go to bed. She had three possibilities in front of her: cutting her veins, getting drunk with the beer left over from the party – and it wasn't enough – or finding something to do with Cor Leonis.

She chose the last option. "Marshal, since I suppose an all-nighter awaits us, I have a proposal."

"Hartwood, just because we had dinner together doesn't mean we're that close."

That was as close to an innuendo as she had never heard from him. A good start, she evaluated, and smiled. "I didn't have in mind a proposal of that kind. I found some fishing rods in the pier, at the lighthouse. Once, in Insomnia, Gladio told me that he would take me to fish at the pond in the suburbs, but then there was no opportunity. Would you like to teach me, Marshal?"

He frowned. "I haven't been fishing for at least twenty-five years."

"That's something. I've never fished."

"The lights aren't strong enough. Sea daemons could attack us down at the dock."

"It didn't happen on the beach last night," she replied. "I mean, the area seems safe enough. I think the guys cleaned the area up."

Cor thought about it for another moment, then sighed. "Alright then. Let's see if I still remember how to do it. Who knows, maybe my old fishing rod is there also."

They spent the night at the pier, mostly in silence – a more relaxed silence now, not nervous – fishing in the light of a small lamp, the weapons within reach should any enemy show itself. It didn't happen.

At three o'clock in the morning, Cor asked her about Bors again and she found herself talking about the training and the war, keeping out, as far as possible, the name of Titus Drautos who kept burning her as if it were caustic soda on her tongue.

"So, Hartwood, in your life you've done nothing but fight."

Silia nodded. There had to be something spinning out of her because, from time to time, Cor pulled up a fish and put a new bait or a new hook at the bottom of the line, while she couldn't catch a single fish. "Once, Gladio caught me off guard asking me if I ever thought about how it would be a different life, far from the war. I couldn't answer him. The war reached Ambrosia when I was four and I spent the next seven years under garrison. Two years after taking shelter in Insomnia, I joined the Kingsglaives. And six months in the Crown City, during my disability, were not enough to return to civilian life. My thoughts always went to the ongoing war and to my comrades."

"It's an age of fighters, this one." Cor Leonis rewound his line, checked that the bait was still in place and then threw the hook in the water with a sure gesture. "We should thank the Six for being so, and not finding ourselves on the other side, that of the unarmed civilians. We have sacrificed a lot, but we are masters of our lives, as far as they belong to us."

"And if not to us, to whom, then?"

"Hartwood, I don't have to tell you. Do you know what happens to most fighters?"

"They die in battle?"
Cor shook his head. "Not necessarily. The point is that they almost never die in a glorious battle against a stronger opponent. Most die for a distraction, a trivial enemy, an explosion, or even an accident or illness. Truth is, life is regulated by chance more than we are willing to admit, and chance doesn't look at anyone, child, woman, old man or powerful warrior. That's the way I see it."

"It's not a very comforting vision, is it?"

"No. But it makes no sense, shielding ourselves with comforting visions."

"Did I ever tell you how much I appreciate your rosy vision of life, Marshal?"

"Did I ever tell you how much I don't appreciate your cheeky irony?"

Silia smiled. "Don't you? Yet today I found some photographs of a kid with an impossible expression. I heard he had a sharp tongue, as well as a terrible character. Where's that kid?"

The Marshal didn't answer, and Silia allowed herself to go a step further. "Once," she continued, cautious as if she was walking on barbed wire, "I told Gladio that the Crownsguards were a bunch of swanky nobles. He retorted that the Marshal came from the suburbs of Insomnia and had made his own way."

Cor clicked his tongue, but didn't give her an inch. "Who cares where we are born, Hartwood? What really matter is where we die."

"No," she contradicted him, disappointed by the lack of any comment. "What really matter is what we do before we die."

He lowered the barrel. It was too dark to be sure, but she had the impression that he was staring at her now.

"When I joined the Kingsglaives, I had nothing to lose, Cor, perhaps just a future in smuggling. They told me I could help fighting Niflheim, and I didn't think twice. I feel like I haven't done enough. If I died tomorrow, I would do it with the regret of having fought a war already lost for almost ten years, of never having realized that my Captain was a traitor from the very beginning, and of not being able to prevent my King being killed by that same Captain. So I hope I won't die tomorrow."

Cor Leonis remained silent for a long time. "Hartwood," he said softly, "I blamed Regis with all my strength when he assigned me to the outer patrol on the day the treaty was signed. I tried in every way to convince him to let me stay in Insomnia. I also tried to convince Clarus Amicitia to intercede, but they were both adamant. So, every time I hear you complaining that you haven't been able to prevent what's happened, I just want to kick your ass, because if there was someone who could have done something more, that was me."

Silia lowered her head without answering.

"Two kings died while the Guard was at my command. I can't protect the third one closely, nor serve him as I would, because the Astrals will never grant their favor to a beardless boy with his back covered. When Gentiana, the High Messenger, came to report to me from the Princess after the fall of Insomnia, she was very clear on this: the Six would have granted their alliance to the True King, but only if he had proved himself worthy."

Silia nodded. "His Shield is with him. You are doing a lot on other sides. What did you tell me when I got to Orior? Gladio repeated it to me last night: you can't win a war just with heroes and martyrs. I've made my peace with it, or I would have infiltrated Gralea by now, and I would have died trying to undermine the throne where Aldercap's fat ass sits."
Cor didn't answer. They both fell silent again, looking at the sea.

"Hartwood," the Marshal resumed. "A little while ago did you say 'smuggling' or did I hear wrong?"

More relaxed, Silia smiled, even though he couldn't see it. "You heard right."

"Smuggling what, exactly?"

"Magic flasks."

"I should have known. And you say it so proudly?"

"I was pretty good. Try and arrest me if you can. The City Guard never managed to get me."

Chapter End Notes

"Dubium sapientiae initium" > "the doubt is the beginning of the wisdom"
Chapter Summary

While Gladio, Ignis and Prompto take care of the evacuation of the Altissian civilians, Noctis listens to Princess Lunafreya's speech and then tries to reach her - and the Hydraen she has awoken. Things get out of control when, in addition to the Empire, Titan appears and goes on a rampage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

32

Nolente deo, effundentur inaniter preces

I

"O Altissia, city on the sea, glistening like a gem among the waves. And even if the wickedness of men should wipe you from this earth, you shall glisten in my heart forevermore," Ignis crooned in a low voice.

Gladio gave him a brotherly elbow. "Melancholy, huh?"

Ignis smiled, his eyes fixed on the scenery. From time to time they would see a gondola slipping through the canals, or small groups of people – mostly couples – strolling along the bridges. The hotel where they had rented a room was very similar to the Leveille in Lestallum, but much taller, and from the refined balcony where they stood they could overlook the whole tourist district. There was a smell of fresh water, a little mottled, of oiled wood and wet stones. A pleasant smell, not stagnant, as one might expect from a city of canals. "It's this city in the evening. Doesn't it have the same effect on you too?"

"A little bit," Gladio admitted. Somewhere someone, perhaps a gondolier, as if wanting to act as a counterpoint to Ignis, had started to sing a sad ballad whose words he couldn't catch. Whoever he was, he had a beautiful voice. "Perhaps, up until a year ago, I wouldn't have appreciated its beauty."

"Love can refine even the most barbarous hearts."

Gladio scratched his hairline without answering. They sat in silence for a while, listening to the distant song.

"I hope the city won't be damaged tomorrow."

"You are aware this is an impossible hope, aren't you?"

"I know."

"The Marshal is right: hell will be unleashed tomorrow."

"I know."
They already had to consider themselves lucky to have gotten that far: Camelia Claustra had only received Noctis. The King of Lucis, she had noted, will certainly be able to hold a diplomatic conversation by himself. Ignis wanted to insist on entering too, Gladio could read it on his face, but at last he had preferred not to antagonize the First Secretary, and Camelia Claustra had led Noctis to her office, leaving them in the waiting room as if they were unwelcome guests. The diplomatic conversation lasted only a quarter of an hour, one of the longest of their lives. Noctis was little inclined to the etiquette, easily provoked, reckless, and had entered the den of an old hand, a politician with more than forty years of experience. Every minute Noctis stayed inside, however, it was a minute when Camelia Claustra didn't kick him out, and after a while they managed to relax and break the nervous silence they had fallen into.

"After all," Gladio let out, "The First Secretary has truly delivered the Princess to the Empire, as I said earlier to Weskham."

"It was an inevitable condition to get to the ritual. Tomorrow it will be like a game of 'capture the flag'; all motionless until the whistle, that is the awakening of the Hydraean, then everyone will act to their full strength. The Empire will try to kill Leviathan and us; we'll try to protect her, to obtain her blessing and to destroy the Empire."

"You're forgetting the civilians to be safeguarded. Jeez, I hope everythin' will go smoothly with the evacuation."

"And the civilians," Ignis conceded. "A disadvantage for us: the Empire won't care about them."

"And the Princess," he reminded him.

"The Princess will be safe until Emperor Aldercapt gets his hands on the Ring."

"What a mess."

"You could say that. But one thing at a time. First and foremost, let's focus on the evacuation. Then we will reach Noctis and we'll try to keep the Empire at bay until Leviathan will bestow her power on him. With a little luck, the Hydraean herself will wipe away the Imperial airfleet."

"And if possible us, too. So," Gladio summarized stretching out his fingers and lowering them one by one, "we just have to fight against the Empire, preventing them from damaging the Hydraean and the citizens, to get the blessing of the Astral, preventing her from destroying Altissia, and in all of this, try to get our asses home safely. A walk in the park. In addition, I feel like all our luck was exhausted when Noctis managed to convince Camelia Clastra."

They giggled nervously.

"As for this," Ignis whispered, "without taking anything away from Noctis, I wonder if Camelia Clastra, after all, hadn't already made up her mind. If we succeed in our aim, this could be an excellent opportunity for Altissia to get rid of the Empire's yoke, or at least to weaken it."

"The Marshal had to come and talk to her," Gladio let out, scratching his hairline. "In comparison, we're really a brood of chicks just coming out of the egg, as Cid said."

"We can't always rely on someone else," Ignis replied with a palpable note of reproach in his voice. "We must risk, be mistaken, learn. Especially Noctis. Inside that office, alone, without us covering his back and talking in his place, he behaved like a king."

Gladio had to repress a surge of pride. He smiled. "I wish I was there. Perhaps we keep underestimating him. The Archaean and the Fulgurian gave him their blessing, after all. Why
shouldn't the Hydraean also do it?"

"If everything is fine tomorrow," Ignis said, turning to him. "I was thinking that... maybe we could go on with Princess Lunafreya, don't you think? It could be safer for her to awaken the Glacean and the Draconian with us."

"Really I dunno if I'm ready to..." He couldn't find the words. "Oh, for the Six, I can't even say that."

"Say what?" Ignis didn't understand, or pretended not to understand.


Ignis laughed. "By now they should already be married, Gladio."

"I know," he admitted. "But if what you say is gonna happen, we'll have to share the car with them; the tent, for the Six' sake. Have you thought about it?"

"You're right," Ignis said seriously. "I got chills. I can't even imagine such an eventuality."

"Anyway," Gladio grinned, "if they wanna get married before we leave, her wedding dress is already here."

"I think it's not the right time anymore."

"Not now, you're right. But later, when it's all over..."

"Gladio, I really wanted to tell you," Ignis smiled. "Lately I hear you say very often when it's all over and later. That amazes me. In Insomnia you lived for the present day."

"In Insomnia," he replied, "I lived for the present day because I knew that the next one would be the same, or almost. I don't know about you, Ig, but now that we've lost practically everything and risk our life all the time, I desperately need to believe that there will be a later and a time when it's all over."

Ignis didn't answer. He looked again at the water, but his lips also bent into a tired smile. "I think exactly like you, Gladio."

Again, Gladio patted him affectionately on his shoulder. "Let's try to stay in one piece, then. I'm gonna sleep. I've been awake for more than thirty-six hours and if a herd of Rubyshears had actually attacked me last night, it wouldn't have been so exhausting."

Ignis took his hand and pulled it off his shoulder as if it was a huge and disgusting insect. "What are you expecting from me, exactly? Compassion or envy? You won't have either one."

**II**

The day was sunny and it was starting to get hot. For Gladio and the others it had begun very early, at the Altissian City Guard's HQ, at the back of the Palace of the Secretariat, where they had discussed, or rather received, the details of the evacuation. Everything had already been set up in such a short time that Gladio believed Ignis' supposition that the evacuation had already been planned for some time. Or perhaps, regardless of the rite, the First Secretary feared the retaliation of the Empire after the Princess' speech.

Gladio was responsible for the eastern districts of the city. He had no experience in evacuations – the City Guard would usually handle such emergencies in Insomnia – but he knew that the panicking
mob could be more dangerous than any threat to its safety, so he carefully listened to all the
necessary instructions from Nolwen Clay, the captain of the City Guard whom he would have
referred to during the operations. Captain Clay hadn't been particularly keen to know him, and even
if respectful and formal, he had made sure to clarify their respective positions: Sword Shield of the
King of Lucis or not, for that day Gladio would take orders from him and listen to the directives of
the City Guard. Gladio had nodded, his teeth clenched, but for a moment he had almost smirked,
thinking about how Silia, months before, must have found herself exactly in the same circumstance.

The evacuation had begun a couple of hours before. For the moment, apart from the inevitable
discontent of the citizens, no incidents worthy of the name had occurred.

"Sir, Madams, I need your utmost attention!" Captain Clay kept shouting in every neighborhood, his
pasty voice amplified by the megaphone. "I'm Captain Nolwen Clay of the City Guard. For security
reasons, the evacuation of the Altissian citizens towards the other cities of the League has been
arranged. Several boats are already about to sail from the East Port. It's necessary that you leave
your homes quickly. Take with you just the bare minimum. Don't run. Hold your children's hand
and, if you have restricted mobility, address a Guard. Head to the port following the directives of
the City Guard. I repeat: don't run. There's absolutely no danger. Don't stop to ask for information
about friends and familiars living in other districts: the City Guard is searching house-to-house and
every citizen of Altissia will be evacuated."

The crowd murmured disapprovingly. "What?" A woman in an apron looked out from a bakery
shop a few feet away from him. "And why?"

"Captain!" A man to Gladio's left shouted. "What about the people assembling for Her Grace's
speech?"

"The Empire will attack?!"

"Why haven't we been warned in time?"

"Gotta go home and get..."

"Had I known that..."

"The evacuation must start immediately. Before boarding you will be registered, so that nobody is
left behind. If you have any doubts or questions, you can address them to the City Guard,
but after the boarding. Don't hinder their job."

As per Captain Clay's instructions, Gladio followed the procession of citizens, feeling unpleasantly
like a shepherd dog that spurs the herd. His main task was making sure that no one tried to break
away from the cord to go back and, if it came to it, protect the rear from the Imperials.

He looked at the worried faces of the elderly who had been forced to leave their homes, the angry
gazes that some turned toward the Guard, the scared children clutching a stuffed animal or a pet.
They didn't know that the odds that they wouldn't find their houses and their shops back were very
high, and he felt sorry for them. Breaking the strict instruction to not move away from the other City
Guards who formed the rearguard with him, Gladio bent to pick up a ragged Moguri – Iris used to
own one when she was a child – to return it to its owner, a few feet from him. She couldn't go back
to pick it up, and she was crying.

"This is yours, right, Missy?" he asked, handing it to her with a smile.

The child – five or six years old – didn't answer. She rubbed her eyes in the crook of her elbow, took
the puppet and smiled in turn.

"Say 'thanks' to the sir, Jodie," her father urged the child, holding her hand and continuing to walk.

"Thanks, sir."

Gladio folded his arms on his chest and smiled again. "Be careful," he murmured, before returning to his position. The other City Guards looked at him with a mixture of understanding and irritation, but they didn't tell him anything.

"Guys, is everything fine with the evacuation?" Noctis asked. "Luna is about to exit the Palace."

"All right here, Noct," Prompto's voice crackled. "We started two hours ago."

Noctis had taken a position in the front rows of the crowd gathered in the square before the Palace of the Secretariat. Gladio wondered if, after twelve years, the Princess would recognize him in the mass of people. "Here she is," Noctis said, his voice vibrant with emotion. "She's starting to talk."

"Dear friends." Gladio startled when Her Grace's passionate voice, amplified by dozens of speakers, resounded all around him. Many people held a radio in their hands. Witnessing with his own eyes at the devotion she aroused, at the emotion of the people of Altissia, who were listening to her words even when they were evacuated because of her, was impressive. Lady Lunafreya had such a fragile beauty and an aura as to awaken in a man the primal instinct to throw himself into the fire to hold her in his arms and protect her; however, she had proved herself to be endowed with unparalleled force of will and magical powers. She had come that far, escaping from the meshes of the Empire, to help Noctis. Was it friendship? Love? Or just an unshakable sense of justice? "I stand before you today with little hope the words I speak... shall reach beyond these walls. For slowly, but surely, the Light fades from our world. And as it does, the shadows shall loom ever longer until all succumbs to the darkness."

The prophecy, Gladio realized. Pronounced by anyone else, it would seem the delirium of a mad preacher. On the Princess' lips, it filled him with an inexplicable dismay, and, for some reason, Gilgamesh's words came back to him.

"Darkness that evokes terror, hatred and sorrow in the hearts of men. The ashes of Lucis... a dream of peace twisted into a nightmare of death and destruction, claiming innumerable lives and leaving myriad souls to suffer. Yet I beg you, do not surrender to despair. Have faith, for our gods watch over us. By their blessing, by the Stars that light the heavens above, our world will be delivered from the perils of the dark."

Crouched on the floor, Silia laid her forehead on her knees. She got chills. She had never heard a speech by Her Grace Lunafreya, and the clear voice of the Oracle that recalled the tragedy of Insomnia, her words of hope that nevertheless heralded terrible times for the world, terrified her. Prophecy or not, too many people seemed to be certain of the looming of a future of darkness, not just metaphorical. How much would the organisms infected by the Starscourge take to release enough spores to opaque the sunlight forever? Once she believed that it would take hundreds of years, and that in the meantime someone would be able to prevent it, but now she wasn't so sure anymore.

The Princess' words burned as if they were cutting furrows on her flesh. Silia believed. She believed everything: the prophecy, the Astrals, the Chosen King, the approaching of the darkness. She believed everything, because such a voice couldn't lie nor be mistaken. She believed everything, and
she felt fear, a consuming, distressing sensation that had nothing to do with the thought of death, but with horror itself.

"Cor," she said in a whisper. "You were right. I was blind."

"Shht," she silenced her without anger.

"I stand before you here, in Altissia, to call upon Leviathan, Goddess of the Seas, spirit of the deep. By the sacred rite, I will commune with the Hydraean. But first, I offer you my solemn vow... On my honor as Oracle, I will not rest until the darkness is banished from our world and the Light is restored. Bless you all."

For a few seconds there was no reaction from the people on the street. They all looked absorbed in a numb torpor. Then someone applauded. Someone else echoed him. In a few moments, a silent applause, composed, without shouts and whistles, shook the column.

As if they had waited for the end of Her Grace's speech, Gladio saw the shadows of Imperial airships looming over the city. An airfleet raid.

"Here they are," he told the transmitter.

"I've seen them," Ignis answered. "Let's be prepared for any eventuality. Noctis, they're heading in your direction. Look for a high position."

"Luna has came back to the Palace. If everything goes as Camelia Clastra assured us, a squad of Imperials along with some Altissian Guards will escort her to the Altar by boat. I'm going after her. You look after the citizens."

"We're on it."

III

The evacuation took him another hour. Despite the Empire continuing to swarm over their heads, fortunately no one opened fire on the defenseless citizens, and the crowd, not without some inevitable minor incident – two children lost in the mob, a man who turned back in a hurry to look for his lost wallet risking to trigger the panic, some idiots who tried to get away from the cord to go and retrieve something at home – finally reached the East Port. Gladio had remained to supervise the census, walking back and forth across the quay, stretching his ears at every tone over the top and keeping himself ready to intervene to quell any unrest. From time to time he communicated the progress of the evacuation to Ignis and Prompto and inquired about them.

While he was looking at a man who refused to board without being sure that the jackals wouldn't have devastated his store, the earth trembled under his feet and the sea, quiet until that moment, turned rough. There were multiple terrified screams as the boarded citizens poured over the parapets closer to the pier, waving and pointing behind his shoulders.

In the distance, beyond the Palace of the Secretariat, towards the Celluna Cascades, a gigantic sea snake at least three thousand feet high, if not more, arose. The Princess had awakened Leviathan.

"Here she is," Ignis' voice crackled. "I am done. I'm heading for the Palace. What about you?"

"City Guards are still embarkin' civilians from the southern districts," Prompto answered. "Two boats more and I'm there."
"Here I'm waiting for the last one," Gladio said, raising his head and continuing to scan the crowd still on the dock. The man who didn't want to embark now was running to the last boat, and he wasn't the only one. "Leviathan's appearance lit a fire under the civilians' asses."

"Prompto, tell the City Guard to hurry up. The waves worry me."

"Roger."

"Noct, do you copy?"

Noctis took a few seconds to answer. "Yeah."

"The Hydraean has awakened."

"I noticed. I'm worried about Luna. I'm trying to get to the Altar, but it's not easy. The civilians?"

"We're almost done," Gladio answered. "We'll reach you as soon as possible. Guys, see you at the Palace. Be careful, Noct."

"I'll be careful. See you later."

Gladio looked for Captain Clay. Immobile with his hands in his pockets, he was watching the last of the boarding operations from the dock. He slightly turned as Gladio reached him.

"We made it, it seems," he told him, by way of goodbye.

"Not yet," the Captain contradicted him. He had put somewhere, or perhaps lost, his bizarre uniform hat. "As long as the last boat hasn't landed safely, it's not over yet."

"Aren't you going, Captain?"

Captain Clay bent a corner of his mouth in a grimace. "Amicitia, the place of the Altissian City Guard is Altissia. We were forced to assign some men to the boats to prevent unrest, but we will all remain in the city to serve, although the orders are to not engage the Imperials except to protect the citizens. But you should reach your King. There's no longer need for you to stay here. Thank you for your job well done."

"I did almost nothing."

"You think so. A big man seven feet tall, covering the backs of the queue, gives security to worried people, and holds the madmen back."

Gladio had to restrain a pleased smile. He held out his hand to the man. "Good luck, Captain."

After a moment of hesitation, Captain Clay pulled one of his own out of his pocket and squeezed it. "Good luck to you. You will need it more than me." He wasn't looking at him, but north, towards the Altar.

"The Empire has surrounded Leviathan," Ignis informed them.

Prompto moaned. "One more boat to go. Coming!"

"No more time, Prompto," Gladio warned him. He gave a military salute to Captain Clay and hurried back to the maze of narrow streets. "The ritual has already begun."

Two minutes later, as he ran along the piers, the earth was shaken again. The water from the canals
began to overflow. He could hear a roar echoing in the sky like thunder before a storm. And then the storm began: the first wave that reached him was higher than a two-floor building; it unhinged shingles, defenestrated furniture, dragged away tables, benches, planters, street lamps, railings, bridges, gondolas and even docks. Gladio looked for shelter, crouching against the wall of a building and shielded himself with his broadsword, hoping that the structure would hold and that debris wouldn't bash his head. Pots and tiles fell on him, and a small spire bounced off the broadsword, but the wall held up. When the wave was gone, he understood that getting to the Palace to rejoin the others wouldn't be as easy as he had thought.

"You ok?" he asked the others, jumping from one platform to the other.

"Almost drowned," Prompto replied, coughing. "But I'm on my way."

"I'm unharmed too," Ignis answered. "Noct?"

Noctis didn't answer. If he had already reached Leviathan, he had better things to do.

"Ig, can you see somethin' from where you are?"

"I do. The Empire attacked Leviathan. The Hydraean is stirring up."

"Let's move then."

"Wait!"

"What, Prompto?"

"A little while ago I put down an Imperial with a kind of... flying bike, I guess. I'm gonna see if I can make it work."

"Prompto, sometimes you amaze me," Gladio couldn't help but smile. "Can you reach Noctis?"

A roar of an engine could be heard. "That's the idea. There are two seats. Wait... Whoah, shit!"

"What?"

"I had lost altitude. This stuff is more unstable than a bolting chocobo!"

"Try not to crash somewhere."

"No, gotcha. I'm going!" Despite everything, Prompto's voice seemed excited. "If I don't survive, it's been a good run, guys. If I survive, I want one of these for me."

"Are you sure? They probably fuel them with the daemons' miasma, like the magitek infantry."

"...I don't want it anymore."

Gladio laughed, continuing to run. A couple of minutes later, he came out into the square of the Palace where the crowd had been gathered to attend Princess Lunafreya's speech. Leviathan, from there, seemed even more gigantic. He couldn't see her head, as if she was bent over something. There were no more civilians in the square, but three Imperial airships had landed and had unloaded the infantry against Ignis. From the remains around him, Gladio realized that his friend had already gotten busy by himself. He hastened to join him. He swept away five Snipers with his broadsword, then he took up the Genji Sword and pierced a sixth. One of Ignis' daggers brushed his shoulder, sticking in the head of an Assassin behind him.
"You got distracted, 'O Destroyer of the Blademaster'," Ignis mocked him.

"I saw him," he deluded him, jumping to avoid an Axeman. He whirled backwards, taking him on his back, and beheaded him with a slash. Ignis freed himself from the last one.

"Are you o-?" he was about to ask, but they both heard Prompto's voice.

"I made it! I can see Noctis. He's near the Altar!"

"What?" the interested part asked. He probably hadn't listened to their previous talk.

Ignis' voice, next to him, resounded double, because he heard it live and in the transmitter. "Noct! Prompto's heading towards you!"

"What about you two?"

"We are about to reach you. There were only two seats."

"Noct, jump!"

"What!?"

"No time for questions. Just jump!"

"What the hell...?" Gladio began to say, but he heard a strangled cry and a few – very long – seconds after a dull thud. "Care to tell us what are you guys doing?"

The voices of Noctis and Prompto overlapped.

"Everything's ok! I recovered Noct. I'll bring him to the Altar."

"Prompto tried to kill me."

"Gladio, come on!" Ignis spurred him, and they rushed toward the bridge to the left of the square. Something must have gone wrong in Prompto's plans, because a few seconds later an airbike darted above their heads, and he clearly distinguished his two friends on board. They were heading in the opposite direction from the Altar and Leviathan.

"Ig, what...?"

He understood what when he saw five water dragons – literally – chasing after the airbike. The bike disappeared between the buildings to the south, out of their sight, its pursuers at its heels, knocking down chimneys, steeples, literally piercing the buildings without undoing. Gladio and Ignis could only stop, unarmed, unsure about what to do. The sun was obscured for a moment by the enormous bulk of Leviathan that snaked over them.

"This time it's really bad, man," he said to Ignis, well aware that, among the roars emitted by Leviathan, the breaking of the storms and the sounds of destruction, he would never be able to hear him.

"Gladio, run!" Ignis cried, more responsive, taking his arm and swerving to the right. The shadow of a tidal wave loomed over them. They rushed to the Palace in search of shelter, but Gladio realized that they would never make it in time. He jumped on Ignis and threw himself into the canal with him, hoping with all his heart that it was deep enough.

It was. The murky water around them stirred and shivered in an endless wave of bubbles as the wave...
passed over them with its load of debris. More debris, thrown into the canal by the force of the tsunami, hit them, wounding him on his arm, on his side, and something sharp impacted his forehead, but he held his eyes and lungs closed, until the water stopped flickering. He felt himself dragged by his arm and pulled in one direction. He opened his eyes and saw Ignis struggling next to him. They were swimming towards the light.

They emerged, taking gasps, coughing. Around them, the wave had broken roofs, devastated buildings like the wind, swept the branches of a tree with dry leaves. They didn't see Leviathan's head anymore – she had to have withdrawn into the Cascades again. They swam towards what remained of the quay and clung to the edge, but neither of them climbed it, for the moment. They both knew that another tidal wave could come.

"Thanks for earlier, Gladio," Ignis coughed again.

"Please, bro. You okay?" Half of his field of vision was stained with blood, and he rubbed it away. It was the wound on his forehead. It burned.

Ignis had somehow managed to pull off his glasses before falling in the canal. He had probably held them in his hand while they were underwater. "It could be worse," he said, putting them on. He had a scratch on his cheekbone and a bloody shoulder. He raised a hand to reactivate the transmitter. "Noct, Prompto? How's it going over there?"

Those transmitters were damn resistant because Gladio heard Ignis' voice. He was worried, however, by the lack of response from the other two. They dared to hoist themselves onto the platform. They sat to catch their breath for a moment.

"What do we do now?" he asked Ignis.

Ignis turned to the Celluna Cascades. He took a deep breath and stood up. "We proceed towards the Altar, of course. We reach Leviathan."

"Hey!"

Prompto's voice. "Prompto!" he shouted, relieved, his throat still aching from the murky water he had swallowed. "Prompto, are you all right?"

"I hope so. Noct's riding Leviathan."

"Noct, damn it, answer. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, but with this I'm over and out. No time to talk. Leviathan..."

Gladio felt a tremendous roar and the communication fell. He cursed.

"Prompto," Ignis said again. "Tell us where you are. Let's gather, and let's give Noctis as much support as we can."

"Dunno if he needs ours," he replied, "Titan has just popped up."

He didn't answer, because they had seen him as well.

IV

"Ladies and gentlemen, due to force majeure we must stop the broadcasting. We will update you as soon as..." The agitated voice of the announcer was interrupted by a strong watery sound, followed
by an electrostatic dissonance, which turned into a white noise. No more radio connection.

"Oh, for the Six," Silia whispered, not realizing she had done it aloud until Cor answered her.

"With all the variables that were against us, were you cradling in the hope that everything would run smoothly?" Without getting perturbed, the Marshal took the phone from his pocket, dialed a number and laid it to his ear. Silia waited, looking at Cor's face in the hope of distinguishing an encouraging nod.

"No line from Weskham. But it doesn't surprise me," he said, more to himself than to her, when he didn't get an answer. "As far as we know, the whole Altissian wire could be down." He put the phone on the table next to the radio, and crossed his arms over his chest again.

"What about now?" she asked, standing up nervously.

"Now nothing," he answered simply. "There's a moment, Hartwood, to act, and another to wait. We knew that Leviathan, instead of lending her power to the Prince, could have used it against him and against Altissia, or perhaps it's a trial, like that of the Archaean. We knew that the Imperials would try to kill the Hydraean. Well, one of the three things occurred, or maybe the three of them together, and at the moment we can't know which one, nor do anything about it. We can only wait, and trust the guys. Do you still have doubts about the Chosen King, Hartwood?"

She shook her head, slowly.

Cor allowed himself a smile. "Do you know why I didn't go with them?"

"You said you can't protect the Prince closely because the gods wouldn't grant their favor to a beardless boy with his back covered, and that the High Messenger had been very clear about this."

He nodded. "Tonight I didn't tell you everything. I talked to the High Messenger immediately after the fall of Insomnia, that's why, when you got to the camp, I already knew what had happened to the Crown City and by whose hand. The Princess wanted me to know that. But above all, she wanted me to know that she was trying to intercede with the Six to help the Prince." He rubbed a hand on the back of his head. "Before leaving, the High Messenger reported to me a heartfelt appeal from the Princess: 'I beg you to look out for him, Marshal Leonis, because the time will come when I will no longer be able to do it by myself.' The magic used by the Oracle, Hartwood, isn't so unlike that of the Crystal conveyed by the Ring: it's wearing her, like the Crystal wore Regis, and Mors before him."

"The Oracle has given up part of her life force for every infected she has healed so far," Silia deduced, appalled. The Princess knew perfectly her role and the price that it required, and had never refused to pay it, stoically enduring, moreover, the slaughter of her mother, the invasion of her homeland, and the imprisonment in her own home. She had put the lives of the others, of anyone else, in front of her own, she had done it with serenity and self-denial, and she had done it alone. "She has always been condemned, then?"

Cor shrugged. "Probably. And certainly the rites of covenant have accelerated this process. Once she has awakened the Glaceal and the Draconic, she will be at the end of her last strength."

Her heart sank for a moment. "Does the Prince know that?"

"Not from me."

"Oh, for the Six." Silia returned to look at the radio as if it could give her an answer. "He's in love with her, do you know that? It wasn't just some political marriage."
"I assumed it," he admitted, and pinned at her an extremely human and extremely hard look. "But I don't have to remind you, Hartwood, that some of us, whether for their own choice or not, can't afford the luxury of putting their feelings before their duty; the Chosen King and the Oracle above all."

Silia didn't answer.

"If you have understood," he resumed, more gently, "sit here and wait with me."

She had understood. She sat next to him. They listened for a long time, silently, to the electrostatic croak of the radio.

V

"Leviathan has disappeared!" Prompto shouted, stopping suddenly and pointing over the parapet of the covered bridge that they were running on.

Gladio and Ignis, too, abruptly broke their race, looking out. "Disappeared? What the hell does that mean?" Gladio asked aloud, well aware that none of his friends could give him an answer. "Noctis got the revelation or Titan do her in?"

He saw that Ignis continued to click obsessively on the transmitter. "Noct isn't answering."

"Maybe his transmitter broke. Or he lost it," Prompto ventured to say. "I'm sure he's fine."

"Who can say? We are too far away to see anything except Titan. We must reach the Altar."

Gladio kept looking at the column of light that radiated from the place of the rite. At least the Princess was fine, or so he imagined, and hoped that the same was true for Noctis. He had to lean against the balustrade when a violent earthquake shook the bridge.

"What's going on?"

"See for yourself. Now that Leviathan has disappeared, Titan is turning on the Empire."

"Good for us," Prompto observed.

"My ass. At this rate, he will destroy the city instead of the Empire or Leviathan. We hadn't foreseen this."

Almost wanting to substantiate his claim, the Archaean struck one of the Imperial airships with such a strong handful that the vehicle was thrown in their direction.

"Look out!"

Gladio jumped to his right, pushing Prompto with him, just in time to avoid the engine. Fortunately for them, it was a small vehicle and not an armored airship. A cloud of dust prevented him from seeing what had happened to Ignis, and when it cleared he didn't see him on the other side. A large section of the bridge, and the gallery with it, had been swept away. No trace of Ignis.

"Ig!" He shouted over the noise of struggle. "Iggy!"

He and Prompto leaned out to look into the water, but another piece of the bridge threatened to collapse beneath their feet. They pulled back.

"That's no good!"
"Ignis!" Gladio shouted again, hoping to see him emerge from the canal. No reply.

Prompto put his hand on the transmitter. "Answer, damn it..."

"I can hear you, guys."

"Ig, I saw you dead!"

"It will take more than just another bath. I'm more worried about Noctis. I will look for a way to reach the Altar, but I ask of you to help me distract the enemy."

Gladio looked over what remained of the parapet. He had no idea where Ignis had been dragged, but now there were Imperials scattered everywhere.

"It will be done!" Prompto replied. "Leave it to us! See you later, pal."

"C'mon, Prompto." Gladio tried to recall the map of Altissia they had studied the night before, but with all the collapsed buildings, the destroyed docks and the obstructed canals, it was of little use. "Let's try to make a bit of a mess, as we did in Fort Vaullerey."

Prompto uttered an impatient moan. "Now that I think about it, why do we always get the diversionary action?"

"Because I'm big and tough and you're a great sniper," he managed to smile, despite the tension.

"What do we do now? Are we also going to the Altar?"

"First, let's hear Wes. Try on his frequency as well." Continuing to watch Titan pull down magitek engines as if they had been a swarm of large flies, he touched the transmitter. "Wes! This is Gladio Amicitia."

"Are you fine, lads? You did a good job with the evacuation."

"I'm with Prompto. We got separated from Ignis. He's going to the Altar."

"Is he insane?" Camelia Claustra's voice croaked unexpectedly. She was on the line too. "Titan is going on a rampage. How does he expect to reach the Altar?"

"It doesn't matter. Noctis is there," Gladio replied, impatient, putting aside any formality. "My question is, Weskham: how can we help Ignis get there alive?"

"I ordered my City Guards to retreat to the port," Camelia Claustra replied again, out of turn. "As I told the Prince last night, I don't take any responsibility for his safety and the Oracle's. I don't have the count of my men killed by the destruction caused by Leviathan, and I don't want to lose others at the hands of Titan. And the Imperials are invading Altissia, district after district."

"Gladio, Prompto, listen to me carefully. I will drive Ignis through the city to the east bridge, hoping it's still standing. And I will guide you through the adjoining neighborhoods, in the hope that some of the Imperials will focus on you two. Take them out. Take as much as possible of them out. That should also satisfy the First Secretary, or am I wrong?"

Now that she had been asked, Camelia Claustra didn't answer, or perhaps she was no longer participating in that conversation.

"Roger," Prompto said.
"I'm diverting him to the Arcaleo District. I was informed that the docks, there, are quite intact. But the area has been invaded by the Imperials."

"Gotcha. Let's go, Prompto."

VI

"This'll do."

"This'll do if they shoot us. If they call in the big guns, we're dead."

Sheltering into a loggia of a terrace, Gladio laid his hand on Prompto's shoulder. "We must draw the attention of the armored engines so that Ignis can disengage." Their friend below was facing an impressive amount of magiteks. He was completely exposed.

"My bullets on those engines will be like insect bites. Maybe not even."

"That's why we'll use a magic flask."

"Noctis gave you one?"

Gladio smiled. "No. Special production of Silia Hartwood, vintage 756. I have a few of them. A going-away present before leaving Cape Caem." He pulled a fire flask out of his pocket and put it in Prompto's hand.

"So romantic. Why are you giving it to me?"

"Because your aim is way better than mine. Be careful, I think it will make a bang. It won't pull down the engine, but it will damage it." He activated the transmitter. "Ig, do you copy?"

"I do, but I haven't t..."

"Just listen. There will soon be an explosion. Try to disengage yourself from the magiteks taking advantage of the confusion and go away. We'll take care of them."

"An explosion?"

Gladio jerked Prompto's shoulder, because soon the airships would be out of reach. "Prompto, now!"

Prompto flung the grenade. He had always been a good pitcher when they played baseball. He hit the armored engine closest to them. The bomb exploded on the right side of the vehicle, which tilted and lost altitude, but, as expected, didn't fall.

"C'mon!" Gladio climbed over the parapet and jumped onto the marble platform below, then launched himself down. Prompto was covering his back, shooting. He landed on the dock, straightened up to his full height and made a deep whistle that was heard over everything.

Now he had Imperial attention. He saw Ignis walking along the docks, stopping to get rid of two pursuers quickly, then proceeding. Gladio summoned his broadsword.

"Let's get them away, Prompto."

The Empire had gone big for his business trip to Altissia: Gladio had never seen such a variety of magitek soldiers all together in the same place. Riflemen, Assassins, Spearmen, Swordsmen,
Axemen, MA as advanced as those against whom they had clashed in Vaullerey and Aracheole, even if not as cutting-edge as Tummelt's. Just by coincidence, the Imperials had also dropped Coeurls on them. Beautiful and elegant beasts as long as they didn't throw at you an electric shock or tried to rip your throat out.

Camelia Clastra had ordered the definitive evacuation of the City Guard from Altissia. Captain Clay wouldn't be happy, Gladio thought. Certainly Ignis hadn't been happy because, losing his usual phlegm, had shouted to the First Secretary that he needed a boat to reach the Altar and that he would pilot it by himself. She had ended up accepting. After informing them that he had boarded the speedboat that the First Secretary had made available to him, Ignis had become disconnected. Gladio hoped with all his heart that his transmitter had failed, because the last wave of clashes engaged him and Prompto for another hour and they couldn't reach him. Whenever they believed they had freed a district from the Imperials, a new swarm of airships would drop another platoon of enemies. It had also begun to rain, a dense, annoying downpour.

And then, suddenly, the Empire began to withdraw. The airships left that still swarmed through the skies of Altissia moved away. Those landed, against which they were fighting, took off without bothering to re-embark the magiteks on the ground. Gladio tried for the umpteenth time to contact Ignis, but he had no answer.

"Wes, can you hear me?" Gladio saw that Prompto had collapsed on the ground, exhausted, but didn't urge him to get his ass up and go on. He hadn't his physical resistance, and was dead tired. At that rate, he would get himself killed. He sat next to him and patted his shoulder.

"I do, Gladio."

"Do you see what I see?"

"The Imperials are retreating."

"Any idea why?"

"Not a clue. I wish I could tell you that you have weakened them enough, but..."

"We put down a good deal of them, in fact, not to mention those shot down by Titan. That was a good blow to the Empire."

"Don't exult. They will build other engines and churn out other magiteks."

"You are right. But for the moment they are gone. Have you heard from Ignis recently, Wes?"

"Not since he took the boat."

"Where can we find another one?"

Gladio heard a female sigh. "This is the last help you get from me today. I will send a couple of the last City Guards left to accompany you to the Altar and see what happened to the King and the Princess."

One of the last City Guards left in Altissia turned out to be Captain Clay. Gladio felt unexpectedly happy to see him. The Captain and another guard picked them up near the East Bridge on a motorboat and led them among the wrecks to the Altar.

"I'm sorry," Gladio let out, bowing his head. "We feared damage to the city, but we couldn't imagine such a..."
The Captain stopped him with a sharp gesture. "Forget it, Amicitia. You broke a balance that couldn't last long. Better it happened without civilians among the victims. All of them have landed safely in the ports of the other cities of the League."

"Even so, the city's gone."

"A city is its citizens, and they're safe. I hope the same is true for your King and Her Grace."

They would find it out soon, for they were to approach the Altar of the Tidemother. Between the rain and the smoke, Gladio saw Ravus Nox Fleuret's silhouette. No one else was standing. He jumped on the platform and ran; ran like he had never run in his life. He hesitated a moment just when he came across Ravus, who kept on walking in the opposite direction, ignoring him. Gladio was about to attack him, but then Prompto called his name and he kept on running towards his friends.

Noctis and Ignis were lying on the ground. No trace of the Princess, and since she wasn't with Ravus, the Empire must have already taken her away. They could do nothing for her anymore.

Prompto was kneeling by Noctis, so Gladio lowered himself to Ignis. His face was badly burnt by a source he couldn't identify.

"He's fine!" Prompto shouted. Gladio couldn't hold back a moan of relief. "Gladio, Noct is fine. He seems only to have fainted. How about Iggy?"


"Ig?" Gladio whispered, trying to stabilize the tone of his own voice. "Easy, man. Everything is alright."

"Please..." Ignis gasped, turning his head to Noctis. "Please. Forgive me."

What was he apologizing to Noct for? For not being able to protect him? For not having protected the Princess? What the hell had happened on that Altar? "Ig, now you have to calm down." Distressed, Gladio gently brushed his hair from his eyes. His pupils and irises had become so clear as to be almost white. His right eye looked unharmed, but his left one was scarred by a horrible lesion similar to a burn, which instead of showing the red of the dermis looked almost silvery. He resembled nothing he had ever seen in his life.

"Gladio, look!"

Gladio looked up. A few inches from the hand of Ignis, stretched as to try to touch Noctis', there was the Ring of the Lucii.

Chapter End Notes

"Nolente deo, effundentur inaniter preces" > "if the god doesn't want, the prayers are useless"
I

"Camelia Claustra wants us out of Accordo as soon as possible."

"Can you blame her?"

Gladio turned to look at Ignis. He hadn't yet gotten used to – and he didn't believe he ever would – his disfigured was horribly pale, his lips almost gray, and the bandage that couldn't hide his horrible scars in their entirety was stained with blood. The doctor of the City Guard brought by Weskham had been at a loss about his wounds and couldn't do anything but treat them as normal burns, without hiding his doubts that he would regain sight in his left Ignis had recovered enough to be able to communicate clearly, they had discovered with horror that he had remained blind even from the right.

He couldn't hold that view any longer and turned again to look outside. From the window of the hotel, that had barely survived the fury of two Astrals and the Empire, there was an apocalyptic landscape. Of the beautiful city they had visited just a few days before, there were only precarious buildings and ramshackle docks left. What most bothered him, because in another context he would have found it ridiculous, were the gondolas brought on the roofs by the storms and left there as bugs' carapaces. "No, I can't blame her. But there was no choice."

"Indeed."

Two days had passed since he and Prompto had found Ignis in agony on the Altar of the Tidemother; two horrendous days when Ignis had struggled between consciousness and unconsciousness, delirious with fever and such a pain the normal drugs – with Noctis out of the picture, the potions had the same effect as fresh water – couldn't quell. Or perhaps, at least judging by the choked words that had come out of his lips, it wasn't the physical pain that afflicted him.

Gladio heard the rustle of the sheets and the creak of the mattress springs, and realized that he was trying to stand up.

"Don't get up yet, Iggy." Prompto anticipated him, reaching his friend and holding his hand on his shoulder to prevent him from getting up. Ignis had insisted on talking to both of them, claiming he was perfectly capable, but clearly that wasn't the case. They hadn't insisted too much, anyway,
because after days they still didn't have the damnest idea of what had happened in that damn Altar of the Tidemother. Ignis had only managed to tell them that the Princess was dead. She wasn't taken into custody by the Empire: Ardyn Izunia had killed her. Yet he hadn't taken the Ring.

"I can't stand this bed anymore," he replied, but as soon as he had arched his back he became, if possible, even paler, and had to rest his shoulders on the cushions. Prompto helped him raise his legs, but Ignis couldn't resign to lie again. He sighed deeply. "Any improvement in Noctis' conditions?"

"The doctor has come by again today. He's stable, but still in a coma." Suddenly, Gladio felt tired, emptied. He had spent the last few days wandering through the destroyed canals, offering to help with the reconstruction, but very few of the citizens who had come back to remedy the damage had spoken a friendly word to him. They considered them the only ones responsible for the deaths and the destruction unleashed on their city. People loved the Oracle too much to blame her, even though Princess Lunafreya had invoked Leviathan, and the Imperials had spared Accordo for too long, so they believed that their reaction had been provoked solely by the Prince's claims.

He looked at his two friends in silence for a long time. They were broken, disheartened. And when Noctis woke up, Ignis would have to make a very difficult decision, if his physical condition hadn't improved. Gladio was the oldest of the group, even if only slightly, and at that moment he felt towards them a surge of fraternal and protective affection. He wouldn't allow them to be demoralized. Princess Lunafreya had sacrificed her life to assure Noctis a chance for success: Leviathan had granted the Prince her blessing and they had the Ring of the Lucii. Her sacrifice didn't have to go to waste.

He forced a smile that Ignis of course couldn't see and reached them on the bed, showing off a sudden good humor that he was far from feeling. "I didn't speak just with Wes and Camelia Clastra. Before comin' here, I got in touch with Cor," he announced, sitting down heavily beside them and crossing his legs on the mattress. "Lines are off since the attack, as you know, but Cid finally managed to find the pieces to work the yacht's radio again and we contacted Cor in Cape Caem to tell him all the hell has happened and overall that we're alive. He said that in the meantime Dustin is sure he has found another Royal Arm. This is the good news."

"And what's the bad one? There's always a bad one," Prompto commented, but his voice seemed more animated now that a new goal was on its way.

"That the ruins are in Imperial territory. Cartanica."

"That means..."

"Yeah. We'll be near the Crystal. If we're going to do something, that'll be the right moment."

Ignis was still, tense. Gladio knew that he was trying to decide if, in those conditions, he would still be an extra arm or simply a dead weight. He continued to speak with that incredibly garrulous and false tone even to his own ears: "When Noctis recovers, we will travel to Fodina Caestino. It's an abandoned mine. Cid will accompany us with the yacht to Cape Esther, on the east coast of Niflheim, and from there Cor suggests moving by land, by train, mingling with ordinary citizens. I just hope the sleeping beauty wakes up before the winter season. But not all evil comes to harm: Ignis will have more time to recover."

"Gladio..." Ignis cleared his throat.

"Are you okay, Ig?"

Ignis nodded gravely. "I am. But there's something you need to know. I won't recover my eyesight."
"You can't be sure yet," Prompto said. "It's only been two days and the doctor said..."

"I don't care what the doctor said. That's it, and I know it for sure."

When Ignis had regained consciousness, he had hastily said he had been injured trying to reach Noctis. It was evident that there was something else and that he didn't feel strong enough to tell them. "C'mon, man." Gladio put his hand on his knee. "Just get it out."

Ignis did. "After taking the motorboat, I tried to reach Noctis on the Altar of the Tidemother, but I was forced to fight with Caligo Ullidor's MA. I managed to teach him a lesson. And then I ran into Ravus. He too was trying to get to the Altar to reach his sister, and for a while we fought shoulder to shoulder. That man hates the Empire as much as we do."

"This didn't stop him from becoming its High Commander," Gladio remarked harshly. The humiliation that Ravus had inflicted on him still burned, and he regretted not having had the chance to measure himself with him again after he had descended into the Taelpar Crag.

"He did it to protect Her Grace, Gladio. I'm not justifying his actions, just..."

"It didn't help much," he spat again, even more resentful.

"Gladio." Ignis pronounced his name with a tone of prayer that made him feel extremely mean.

"Sorry," he whispered. "Go ahead."

But Ignis didn't go ahead. He lowered his head, covering his face with his hands, pulling his knees to his chest like a child.

"Please excuse me," he justified himself in a broken voice. "Just a little pain in my eyes."

No physical pain had ever bent Ignis like that, even as a child. Gladio refrained from pressing him, and waited patiently for him to resume speaking. After swallowing noisily two or three times – he's crying, Gladio realized with horror, Ignis is crying – he spoke again in a quieter voice. "The Princess was bent over Noct. Apparently she had dragged herself on him with the last of her strength, and her body still shone, as if she was infusing into him what was left of her vital spirit, but it was only for a few moments. When Ravus understood what had just happened, he went mad with pain and rage. He blamed King Regis for what happened to Tenebrae and his mother. And Noctis, not only for his sister's death, but also for the sacrificed life she had led up to that moment. He would have killed him if I had not stopped him."

Gladio had to overcome a gasp of rage. Ignis had succeeded where he had failed. For the first time since he had defeated Gilgamesh, he returned to feeling weak, unfit for his role.

"I stopped him," Ignis repeated, apparently not noticing his distress, "and Ravus went to get his sister's body in his arms. I know he's our enemy, but it was heartbreaking. He said that it's the destiny of the Oracle, not to find rest even in death, not as long as the darkness threatens this world." His hands were trembling slightly. "It was heartbreaking," he repeated. "We can't let this sacrifice be in vain."

Prompto shook his head. He too seemed about to cry. "It won't be. I swear I'll be at Noct's side for the rest of my life. We'll manage to get back at that damn Empire."

"Iggy." Gladio was no less embittered than Ignis from the fate of Princess Lunafreya, especially since the time was approaching when they would have to tell Noctis, but there was still something that was missing. "It wasn't Ravus who hurt you, then?"
Ignis shook his head. "No. I haven't finished yet, Gladio. The Princess' body disappeared from Ravus' arms, and then reappeared on the water, ethereal, like a marvelous apparition. And again it disappeared, leaving Ravus prostrate on the ground with pain. I feared that he could lash out on Noctis again, so I hurried to join him. And at that point, Gladio, you arrived. It's just that it wasn't really you. Ravus immediately understood. He was the Chancellor. Ardyn Izunia."

"That filthy bastard!" Gladio gave a violent fist on the mattress, giving vent for the first time to all his anger. "We shouldn't have trusted him, I told you from the very beginnin'. I didn't like him. What's his true goal? He even dared to use my face?" Unable to stay, he stood up.

"Really I don't know what his purpose is. It's like he's... playing some sort of game whose rules only he knows. He's allied with the Empire, yet he helped us awaken Titan, he prevented Ravus from killing Noctis and he supported us in retrieving a Royal Arm. I suppose he also arranged and predicted the whole succession of events in Altissia. Except for one." He swallowed. "Ravus and I were surrounded by magiteks. We were weakened by our fight. They landed me, and I couldn't react. Izunia approached and hit me in my head. I fainted, but for a short time, because when I regained consciousness he was still there, bent over me with a dagger in his hand. For the first time I realized that he is not human. Please believe me."

He's not human, Gladio repeated to himself shivering. He had thought it for a moment when they had met him for the first time. His eyes were devilish.

"He approached Noctis with the dagger. He had waited for me to come to my senses so that I could assist. If Ravus hadn't freed himself, at this time perhaps..." Ignis clenched his fists. "When Izunia left Noct's unconscious body to confront Ravus, the Ring slipped off Noct's fingers. The Princess had passed it to Noctis before she died. It took Izunia very little to push Ravus back. He's not human, I told you. Whatever enemy we have met so far, any enemy we can even imagine to meet, he's not up to Ardyn Izunia. No mortal man is up to Ardyn Izunia. And that... that bastard dared to propose for me to follow him instead of dying."

Gladio's anger had exceeded the limit beyond which it could be vented. He didn't talk. The consequences of Ignis' choice were before his eyes, but he could never have doubted him anyway.

"I had no escape," he continued. "I did the only thing I could do at the time. I wore the Ring."

"What in the hell?!" Prompto also snapped to his feet, as if Ignis had suddenly turned into a dangerous apparition. "Are ya kiddin' me? Are ya crazy?"

"I am not," Ignis said sharply, raising his head. "If a Kingsglaive succeeded, I thought, I could do it too."

"Ulric died for this," Gladio reminded him mercilessly.

"And I would have gladly died as well. It was about to happen. I experienced unimaginable pain; the mother and father of all pains. Like an explosion inside my head. I thought it would have driven me mad. I wished to be dead. But if that happened, Izunia would have killed Noctis, so I resisted that pain and begged the Kings of Lucis to lend me their strength. It was then that everything became black."

"The Ring, then," Gladio whispered. "It was the Ring."

"I fought," Ignis went on, "but without seeing with my own eyes. All around me had different colors, nuances, as if I was looking at the world through the Old Kings' eyes. But I had acquired an inconceivable power. I had never felt so euphoric, so full of energy, of strength. I used it to oppose
Ardyn Izunia. I didn't kill him, I don't think I could have ever done that, but he retreated without hurting Noct. When I took the Ring off I was sure I would die as happened to Ulric, I was ready to die, but it was not. It spared my life, but the power it gave me nevertheless had its cost." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I have nothing more to tell you that you don't know already. I heard Ravus' voice and asked him about Noctis. He said he was alive. And then I heard your voices."

I was about to attack him, Gladio recalled, but he didn't confess that. On the platform, when Ravus had passed by, for a moment he had forgotten Ignis, Noctis, the Princess, the Ring and all the rest, and had been about to attack him. But it had only been a moment. Prompto had shouted his name, and he had stopped.

"That's why I'm sure my eyesight won't come back," Ignis said. "It's not a wound. It's a pledge, but I paid it willingly because it allowed me to save Noct's life. The only thing that I'm sorry about is being a burden."

Sacrifice, Gladio thought, approaching the bed again. The Lucis dynasty is founded on sacrifice, and those closest to the Lucii are not spared. He leaned over Ignis, his face at his height. He regretted that he couldn't see his gaze, and tried to infuse all his feelings into his voice and the tightness with which he clenched his shoulders.

"You're not a burden, Ig, and you'll never be. Thank you for what you did, brother. I'm sorry I couldn't have been there with you. We'll manage somehow."

Ignis' lips, for the first time since he had regained consciousness, hinted the shadow of a smile. "Let's be steadfast," he said. "Noct will need all our support."

II

"By Odin, Cestia, next time we go out hunting, remind me to watch my back from you too."

Marc laughed rudely, banging his glass on the table. He rubbed his wet eyes in the crook of his elbow. Maybe she shouldn't have allowed him to drink whiskey, but after all the kid was almost twenty and she wasn't a babysitter. Cestia slapped his shoulder so abruptly that she almost turned him upside down along with his chair. "Marc, once ya'll manage to wet your whistle without endin' up like this, then ya can allow yousself laughin' at me. Anyway, it's not my fault, Hartwood," she excused herself, "that fuckin' rifle got jammed."

"When a rifle gets jammed, you get rid of it, you asshole," Silia whipped her sourly. "Certainly you don't shake it riskin' it exploding in your face or that it unlocks while there's a companion on the trajectory."

Her guys had welcomed her with good humor, when she had returned to Orior from Cape Caem, and she had reciprocated with annoyance, trained them with rudeness, and chewed them up for slight mistakes. She had spent three horrendous days in Cape Caem with Cor Leonis waiting for news from Altissia, and when they got them they were even more horrendous: the Prince in a coma, Ignis blind after using the Ring as Nyx had done, Princess Lunafreya dead. They had obtained the blessing of the Hydraean and retrieved the Ring of the Lucii, but at a very high cost. She had felt immensely relieved that Gladio and the others were alive, but the sense of impotence had soon prevailed. After having even raged against Iris, who had just asked her for news for the second time in two days, and having argued with Darius who had defended the girl and called her an hysterical bitch, she had besought Cor for hunting quests so that she could be by herself, but instead of being supportive he had told her to stop acting like a drama queen and to take a couple of rookies with her. The Marshal had been in a mood as bad as hers since they had returned, so she had preferred to not contradict him.
Cestia had the decency to look away. "I'm sorry, Hartwood."

"I don't give a shit if you're sorry. This is newbie stuff," she told her before remembering that Cestia was a newbie. She snorted, looking away to not shout at her. Her eyes met those of a young man in his twenties with bleached hair, who in his gray waistcoat, his mint green tie and his dark blazer appeared at least out of place in a hunter outpost. "Listen, let's not talk about it anymore. The crazy Arba was shot down and no one was hurt except it. Let's have another drop." Iris had devoted herself to sewing in Orior. She would have brought her some fur from the beast for her creations to make amends. Definitely not a shit for that jerk, Darius.

Marc had evidently gotten a taste for alcohol, because he leaned forward to get the bottle, but Silia took it before him. "Not you, kid. All I need is the Marshal tearing my ass open for bringing a drunken man back to the camp."

"I'm not drunk, Hartwood," he protested.

"Oh, you'll be if you wet again your tongue." She poured herself another glass, and poured Cestia's too. Putting the bottle down, she again saw that the preppy man was staring at them. This time she looked at him more carefully: he was apparently disarmed – that was even more unusual than his clothing – and sitting alone. Perhaps he was a rich traveler that the hunters were escorting somewhere and the group had decided to stop to rest or stock.

She brought her glass to her lips. She had to contain herself. The Marshal would have tore her ass open even if she had returned drunk. But for Odin's cock, that fucking Chancellor had killed the Princess. There was at least one Royal Arm in the Imperial territory and the Prince's retinue couldn't count on Ignis. There was no longer anyone to heal the infected from the Starscourge or even to act as a conduit with the Glaceal and the Draconian. Silia couldn't get out of that cloak of anxiety and worry, but forced herself to focus. "Since we're here, do you need anything? Before we go, let's see what JM has in store."

"A new rifle for Cestia," Marc laughed. This time Cestia seized his nape and lowered his head to the table. Their good humor annoyed her, and she looked away. For the third time she saw the stranger's gaze pinned on them, and this time she got pissed off. If he was an informer of the Imperials – an idiot informer, since he hadn't cared at all to hide that he was listening to them – she would have sent him back to Gralea with his tongue cut off and stuffed up his ass. "You two, wait for me here and don't intervene for any reason," she hissed to Marc and Cestia. She stood up and, keeping her hands visibly stretched at the handle of the swords, approached the stranger's table.

"Do we know each other?" she began in an unaccustomed tone.

The young man looked at her from head to toe, pausing on her swords, but his expression wasn't at all intimidated. He smiled at her. "Nope. But we fix it now; name's Dino Ghiranze."

"Dino Ghiranze," she repeated without introducing herself in turn. That name wasn't new to her. "What brings you to Prairie, lad?"

He made a vague gesture. Silia carefully observed that his hands didn't stop on a hidden weapon. "Can't I? Last time I was here, it wasn't Meldacio's exclusive outpost."

"It's not, but those who keep their ears too out could find them cut off."

"Are you threatening me, mate?" he provoked her, winking.

Silia unsheathed one of her two swords lightning-quick and pointed it to his throat. The young man's
expression froze as he looked at the blade with the air of one who couldn't understand how it ended up there.

"Easy," he stammered, much less sure of himself than he had been a few seconds before. He kept staring at the blade. "Meldacio's hunter camps are free zones. No fights and battles, it's well known, you risk the expulsion from the Hunting Association."

"So it's fortunate that I'm not a member of the Association." She glanced overly at Marc, as he had stood up from his chair. "And in any case, I can always kick your ass off the camp and resume our stimulating talk there. Care to tell me who you are and why you have been eavesdropping since we got here?"

Ghiranze's clear forehead was veiled with sweat. "Easy," he repeated. "I already told you my name. I'm not with the Empire, if that's what you think."

"Well, that's a start." Silia lowered the blade, deciding – for the moment – to take that affirmation for it. She wanted to find out where that was going. "A simple snoop then?"

"I would rather call myself a curious. I'm a journalist. Professional deformation." He raised his hands very slowly. "I work for Vyv Dorden."

"I have no idea who the fuck he is."

"The director of Meteor Publishing," he replied with an obvious tone.

One of the most influential newspapers spread outside Insomnia. That, she knew. "Well, Dino Ghiranze from Meteor Publishing. What the fuck do you want with us?"

"Nothing, I swear. I was just listening."

"I realize that. What did you hear?"

"That you work with Marshal Leonis. So you come from Orior."

"Do you know what Orior is?"

"I've been hearing about it for weeks. It seems to be where the Immortal made camp."

"Bravo. Do you know the position of the camp?"

"Of course I know it," he boasted, winking again. "Why, is it a secret? Maybe we could make a deal and I won't divulge the position if..."

That slick coxcomb had chosen the wrong day to mess with her. She seized his throat with her free hand and lifted him off the ground. She heard a chair overturning – as for the free zone, that idiot was right, and soon someone would intervene to divide them – but she didn't care. She kept on staring at Ghiranze's eyes, tightening her grip slightly. "I see you're missing the point, Ghiranze. You're on thin ice. D'you think we are playing?"

"...auossaffin!"

"What?" A tall hunter was approaching them; she saw him from the corner of her eye. Silia threw Ghiranze back into his chair, ignoring the intruder. "I didn't hear you, lad."

"I was bluffing! I was bluffing!" Ghiranze coughed, rubbing his throat, and took refuge behind the wooden chair, putting it between them as if it could give him some kind of protection. "Holy shit.
You're not a hunter. A Crownguard?"

The big man joined them. "No fights in the Meldacio's camps! If ya've somethin' to discuss, go out!"

"Mind your own fuckin' business, whopper." Silia flashed the newcomer with her eyes before returning them to Ghiranze. "Who am I? You shouldn't care, lad. How much were you bluffing?"

"I have no idea where Orior is. And even if I knew it, I'd never dare to put myself against the Immortal. I was hoping to find out the position of the camp by listening to you."

"To report it to whom?"

"To nobody. I just wanted to come and have a look."

"Lads, last warning, then I'll kick ya both out and Madame Auburnbrie will be informed."

"To have a look," Silia repeated. She looked up at the heckler and sheathed her sword. "We're leaving. You can inform Madame Auburnbrie that the Coeurl was interrogating a suspect in complicity with the Empire. I'm sure she will understand."

"The Coeurl? You're supposed to be the Coeurl?" the man blinked, lowering his arms, then focused on Ghiranze. "An accomplice of the Empire, did you say?"

"No!" Ghiranze almost choked. "I swear! I'm a reporter! A reporter!"

"Why did you want to come and have a look at the camp?"

"I just wanted to see what's going on." He coughed again, looking at the hunter. "I'm not with the Empire. I swear. Can we speak in private, please?"

Silia looked up at the hunter. She forced a smile. "I'll take care of it. Free zone, I know it, mate, sorry 'bout the mess." She grabbed Ghiranze by his shoulder and pushed him forward. He took the chair with him. "C'mon. You wanted to talk privately, you said. What are you going to do with that?" she asked, trying to stay serious.

"I'm unarmed," he said, without leaving the chair.

"And d'you think you can kill me with a chair? I've two swords, lad, and I don't even need them to twist your neck."

"Boss!" Cestia joined them. "We come with you."

"No use. Have another drop while I exchange two words with this funny guy. Don't let Marc drink anymore."

As soon as they were out of Prairie's boundaries – about fifteen steps or so farther away – Silia let go of Ghiranze's shoulder. She crossed her arms, waiting. "So?"

"I'm not with the Empire," Ghiranze repeated again. Sweat stains darkened his blazer under his armpits. "I swear it. To be honest, I even like the Prince. I got him a ride to Altissia from Galdin Quay, but Insomnia fell the night before his departure and it didn't work out."

Oh, by Odin. Ghiranze. Dino Ghiranze. Silia scratched her eyebrow. Now she remembered; Gladio had named him, and not with soft tones. Ghiranze was lucky enough to walk around with his jaw still attached to the rest of his face. "The jeweler?" she asked.
"Amazed, the man's eyes widened. "How do you know that?"

"You're not the only one who knows important people. You have blackmailed the Prince of Insomnia, Ghiranze."

"Huh." The man returned to lift the chair. "I swear, I would never have done it. Sell him to the Imperials, I mean. I was bluffing, as before. Word of honor. It is said that he and his guys are good with the sword, so I just wanted to... push them to bring me a gem for one of my creations; a breeze, for the Prince and his retinue."

Silia had finished her short supply of patience. "Ghiranze, for the last time: what did you hope to get in Orior?"

"The scoop!" he confessed.

"From whom, from the Immortal?"

"Not from Marshal Leonis, let alone," he replied. "But I heard some hunters in Galdin Quay talking about a Kingsglaive."

_Oh, by the Six._ Silia massaged between her eyes. "A Kingsglaive? You're badly informed to be a journalist. All Kingsglaives died on May 16."

"C'mon!" Ghiranze exclaimed, only to return to wielding his chair, fearing a violent reaction from her. "There's a Glaive in Orior training hunters. I can understand that he doesn't want publicity, but I don't have bad intentions. I never reveal my sources. A troupe of Meteor Publishing was in Accordo to broadcast the speech of Her Grace Lunafreya. My colleagues managed to evacuate with the civilians when the Hydraean went crazy and they returned to Galdin Quay. They said the Empire attacked Leviathan. The Empire attacked an Astral. Can you believe it?"

Silia frowned. "I know it. Get to the point."

"The Empire is spreading false news since the fall of Insomnia. Lies about the Astrals. Lies about the Prince. Lies about the Princess. Both had been declared dead in Insomnia, yet the Prince is in Galdin Quay the day before the attack and the Princess in Altissia to give speeches. Not that we had many doubts. We want to prepare a service on what really happened. People deserve to know the truth and to continue to believe in the King. That's why I want to interview the Glaive. We want to start from what really happened in Insomnia on May 16th. They say the Kingsglaives have betrayed. Yet there's a Glaive who collaborates with the Immortal."

Silia gave herself to a long sigh. If he didn't lie Ghiranze, after all, was just an idiot who played with fire.

"Do you believe me?"

"Maybe."

"Will you take me to Orior?"

"I didn't say anything like that."

"Then you'll tell the Glaive I'm looking for him and why? If not in Orior, I'm available to meet him wherever he wants."

"There's no need. She already knows," she answered simply.
Ghiranze blinked. The knuckles of his fingers that still clenched the back of the chair became white. "Huh," he mumbled. "Oh." He looked at her as if she was a daemon. His face became purple. "By Shiva. By Bahamut. By Titan. By..."

"Spare me the pantheon, Ghiranze, I know it too."

"I am mortified, Sir. Ma'am. Captain."

"Just Hartwood."

"Hartwood. As you wish, ma'am. Huh... you must forgive me. I couldn't suppose that..."

"Just some advice, Ghiranze, pay attention to the strangers you provoke; even in the free zones of the Meldacio."

Ghiranze made a clumsy military salute. "Hartwood, you must forgive me. Can we start over again? Dino Ghiranze, reporter for Meteor Publishing. It is an honor for me to meet you."

Silia sighed again, running a hand through her hair. She turned to the outpost, where she saw not only Cestia and Marc, but also the tall hunter and half a dozen other people were watching them. Within two days, the Marshal in Orior and Madame Auburnbrie in the Meldacio HQ would know she had attacked a stranger. Oh well. "Silia Hartwood. And I'm not a Kingsglaive anymore. Now I'm simply a man of Marshal Leonis."

"A former Kingsglaive who now fights alongside Marshal Leonis," Ghiranze repeated. He seemed disconcerted, and she couldn't blame him. He was looking for a refugee war veteran where the last vestiges of Lucis had gathered, and he was standing in front of a nervous girl. "I... I'd like to talk to you, Hartwood."

"You already said that. But I can't now. If I even decide to answer any of your questions, there are things that can't be disclosed. Not yet." She folded her arms, trying to think. She had never had anything to do with the press, but at a time like this, after the letdown suffered by the Empire in Accordo, perhaps it wasn't a bad idea to stir up the people of Cleigne, Leide and Duscae and warn the expats that there was still a king of Lucis. But she wanted to discuss it with the Marshal first. "I have to think about it. Do you have a mobile number?"

"Yessir!" Ghiranze quickly slipped a hand into his gilet, and Silia, in a reflex movement, returned to draw her sword. The man stiffened, raised his other hand, and slowly withdrew the one he had put in his pocket holding a card between his fingers. "Just my business card. I'm not armed, I told you before."

Silia lowered her sword. Fuck, she really was a nervous wreck. She took the card from his hands. She recognized the head logo.

"Can I have yours?"

"No. I'll contact you, if I decide to accept. Just out of curiosity, what would you like to know, exactly?"

"Everything," he smiled. "I will write the best article of my life, so that people can keep hoping."

III

Noctis remained in a coma for two weeks. More than they had expected, more than they could tolerate. Gladio had never been so close to the breaking point. For the first time since they had left,
and they had passed through a lot – the fall of Insomnia, the clash with Titan in the Disc of Cauthess, Ravus, Jared's death and the attack of Leviathan – he was feeling on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He'd wake up at night, soaked in his sweat, from horrible dreams that invariably culminated with Noctis' or Ignis' death at the hands of Ardyn Izunia. Panting and experiencing tachycardia, he had to turn on the light to remember that he was in Altissia, and the relief of knowing Noctis still alive, even if in a coma, faded immediately as soon as he remembered what had happened to Ignis.

He had never realized, until that moment, how much he counted on him. Now his friend was almost totally incapacitated, and any simple routine activity, whether it was buttoning his shirt or going to the bathroom, became laborious and complicated. Ignis, of course, refused every little offer to help. They had succeeded in convincing him to use a walking stick, but it was the only concession he made on his conditions; for the rest, he stubbornly behaved as if he wasn't blind.

Gladio spent his days helping with the reconstruction of the city so as not to spend them sitting in a chair next to Noct's bed. The physical fatigue distracted him from the fatal thoughts, the worry for Ignis and Noctis, the frustration of having been away from them when it happened. He worked hard like a laborer, clearing the streets from debris larger three times he was, without replying to the insolence of the citizens of Altissia who continued to ill-bear their presence. The only friendly face there, apart from Cid, was Weskham Armaugh, who welcomed them every day to his restaurant that had barely escaped the storms, prepared them food, often with Ignis' help, and tried to distract them by telling of the difficult times he had lived through in his youth with Clarus, Cid, King Regis and Cor Leonis. The wound in his leg, he often repeated, certainly for the benefit of Ignis, had forced him to learn to live with the fact that in life you can do much else than fighting in the front line. If Camelia Claustra had abandoned them to themselves, Weskham was a precious support every day they stayed in Altissia.

Three nights before Noctis regained consciousness, Prompto had been helping Weskham in the restaurant since early afternoon. That evening, Ignis was more depressed than usual and had said he didn't feel like going to the Maagho. After leaving to reach Prompto, halfway Gladio changed his mind and decided he didn't want to leave Ignis alone. He returned to the hotel, entered Noctis' room to make sure that nothing had changed – so it was – and then knocked on Ignis' room door. His friend was sitting on his bed, in comfortable clothes, and his face was turned to the window as if he could see.

"Hey, Ig, guess what? They put in a teriyaki kiosk nearby. We haven't eaten them for a lifetime. D'you remember Endel's booth, near the North Park? I'd give anything to taste his. Maybe the ol' man made it, and at this moment he's roasting fish in Galahd."

Ignis turned his head slightly in his direction and smiled. "Thanks, Gladio. You didn't have to come back for me. I can manage by myself for a couple of hours."

*I wanted to be alone for a couple of hours,* Gladio translated. "No problem," he said, sitting next to him. He had tried to kindly shake him in every way, but neither the memories of the past nor the chatter about the future had been able to reach him. "I didn't feel like going to the restaurant tonight either; I'm tired. I cleared half the Arcaleo District practically by myself."

They ate in silence. Now that they were alone, without Prompto, Gladio felt uncomfortable. He was pleased that his friend couldn't see that he kept looking at him and looking down again because he couldn't bear the sight of the bandages that covered his eyes.

"Have you heard from Cor? From Silia?" Ignis asked, and Gladio appreciated his effort to engage in a pleasant conversation.
"Silia, yesterday. And then Cor, yesterday too, separately. Silia has offered to come here. She said that if I wanted to, she would try to convince the Marshal. The idea caught me so off guard and attracted me so much that I got pissed off."

"I am afraid I haven't understood."

Gladio scratched his hairline. "If Silia came, it would seem to me to... dunno, to hide my head in the sand until things get better. I told her that I appreciated her thought, but that she could do nothing for either Noctis or us. A little too abruptly, maybe."

Ignis didn't inquire further, fortunately. Silia hadn't insisted, but the rest of their conversation had turned in a game of darts with the both of them getting near to the hundred points more and more. "And the Marshal?"

"He offered to come too. I'm sorry I didn't consult you before answering him, but..."

"You did the right thing in saying no," Ignis completed for him. "It makes no sense to distract him from what he's doing in Lucis, and here he could do nothing for us. We can't do anything either."

"Cor, unlike Silia, didn't get offended. He just said to hold on and update him if there's anything new." He sighed. "Really, we couldn't have imagined this trip like this, could we?"

"You bet," Ignis replied, with a bitter smile. He touched his bandages. "Every morning, when I wake up, I expect to open my eyes and find out that I can see, even if I know it won't happen."

"As for this, Ig..." Gladio wanted to deal with the problem, even if Prompto wasn't there, or perhaps because Prompto wasn't there, but he didn't feel up to it. "Nothing, pal. Forget about it."

"No, Gladio, let's talk about it." Ignis pulled his legs out of bed. He leaned his elbows on his knees. Although Gladio was an early riser, Ignis always managed to get up before him and to be impeccably ready, so getting used to the new unkempt version of him was hard. He ran his hands over the tuft of hair that fell on the bandages, then raised his face to him. "I would like to go on with you. Wherever we go, now that there's no longer the Oracle to awaken the Astrals, I want to come too. But I am perfectly aware that the decision is not just about me. My presence will be a slowdown and a danger to your own safety."

"Ig, stop talking like that," Gladio said. "What you did..."

"What I did was my duty," he replied coldly. "And it has nothing to do with what I can do now. Be realistic, Gladio."

"Ignis..." He squeezed his shoulder. Gladio was being realistic. He knew perfectly well that he had to advise him to stop, to go back in Lucis with Cid, because, at the present state of things, he wasn't able to fight. But he couldn't tell him. "The decision is yours. You are more than a brother, for me, and for nothing in the world would I like to leave you behind, but even less would I like you to die."

Ignis' face softened. He managed to bend his lips in a hint of a smile. "Thank you," he said, resting a hand on his. "I would like... to try, Gladio. It will take time, but perhaps I will be able to adapt to this new condition. I want to try. For Noctis." He rubbed the bandages again, as if they were itching. "I will come to Fodina Caestino. Based on what happens, I will decide whether to continue or not."

And if you decide to not continue, Gladio thought before he could prevent it, what will you do, you will remain in Imperial territory alone? He bit his tongue to not say it. "As you wish, Ig. For now, we just have to wait for Noct to recover." He lowered his hand.
"Gladio?"

"What, Ig?"

"The night before the rite we talked about the later and the time when it's all over, do you remember?"

"Sure."

"You didn't tell me what you can see, when it's all over."

Gladio smiled, and, a little embarrassed, confessed his reverie to him. "Insomnia, rebuilt, in peace. Noctis on the throne, at the Citadel, governing his people with justice. You in the Council, to give him a hand so that the city doesn't implode because of his inexperience. Prompto and I, and you too, of course, to protect him as members of the Crownguard. And in the Crownguard there's also my wife, Silia Hartwood."

Ignis opened his mouth, closed it, smiled. "Do you want to propose to her, then?"

Gladio scratched his hairline. "When we get settled somewhere. I've already mentioned it to her in Cape Caem. Terrible idea, terrible timing, right?"

Ignis couldn't deny. "And she…?"

He preferred to skirt over her real answer. "She asked me if I was crazy. That's okay. I warned her that I will continue to ask her until she says yes."

Ignis hugged his knee. "I like your reverie. Very similar to mine."

"I hope you don't see yourself married to Silia Hartwood, Ig, or we have a problem here."

He giggled. "Not Silia Hartwood, but I want a nice wife to help me run the restaurant that I will open in the center of Insomnia. I don't want just a place in the Council or a diplomatic role."

"And how will you decide if she's beautiful or not, now?" he joked.

"You will tell me. I will trust you."

"You said you want her to help you manage your restaurant. I suppose you're automatically excluding Aranea Highwind, then? I can't see her in the kitchen."

He thought he would be angry, but Ignis threw his head back and laughed.

Chapter End Notes

"Cognosce te ipsum et disce pati" > "Know yourself and learn to suffer"
Chapter Summary

Gladio and his friends resume their journey in a state of mind far from being buoyant, but the tension explodes on the train that's carrying them to Gralea. Meanwhile, in Orior, Silia receives an alarming call from Dino Ghiranze.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

34

Amicus fidelis protectio fortis

I

At last Noctis had regained consciousness. It had been a moment of relief, but not of joy. Gladio and Prompto had agreed that, if he felt like it, it ought to be Ignis to give him the news since he had witnessed the Princess' last moments and fought Ardyn Izunia, and he had assumed that mournful responsibility. They waited outside until Ignis had finished talking to him.

At first it seemed that Noctis had taken it well, all things considered. There were no scenes of despair or anger nor, at least in front of him, tears. The two weeks of total immobility implied for him a third one to get his strength back. Those days, for all of them, were even more depressing than the previous ones. for the first time since they had left Insomnia, the troubles seemed to have divided rather than united the group, and each of them seemed to prefer to stay by himself. They spoke little, and reluctantly. They never quarreled, no one ever raised his voice, but Gladio could feel the tension rise by the minute.

Noctis spent long hours fiddling with the Ring he had found in his hand when he had woken up. Perhaps influenced by what Ignis had told him, he didn't wear it once. Almost every day Gladio would throw it out there, without insisting too much, that the Ring was their only hope of retrieving the Crystal and that Noctis would have to practice using its power. It wouldn't harm a member of Lucis' royal family – not immediately, at least – and he didn't have to be afraid of it. Gladio's words fell on deaf ears, however.

Although Ignis had told him that he would decide whether or not to continue with them after Fodina Caestino, he behaved as if it was obvious that he wouldn't back down. Gladio's heart sank every time he'd see him stumble or risk bumping into an inanimate obstacle. If until a few weeks ago he knew that in case of need he could count on him to protect Noctis, he now felt responsible for his safety as well. He tried to raise the issue again, in the hope that Ignis had changed his mind, but he refused to talk about it.

Prompto showed good humor. He would help Ignis in all, and try to cheer Noctis in every way, but he too seemed deeply troubled by something that Gladio couldn't identify and that, for some reason, he doubted was bound to the disastrous events that occurred in Altissia. Gladio tried to talk to him too, but Prompto decidedly denied being worried about anything other than the future dangers, now that the Oracle could no longer assure them of the blessings of Shiva and Bahamut and that Ignis was
so weakened. "Don't be worried about me too, Gladio," he had told him with a disheartened, adult smile, so unlike his natural behavior that it had made him shiver. "And don't overdo it. You're not alone."

When Noctis finally declared that he was feeling strong enough to leave, Gladio received the news with a sense of anguish and liberation; once they had gotten back on track, he was sure, things would go better. After Fodina Caestino, they would continue to Gralea, where they would infiltrate incognito to retrieve the Crystal. They had no plan, they had no hopes, but they had no more time to waste either, and by then it was clear that Izunia could do with them whatever he wanted, whenever he would decide it was time. The only option left was to act as little as expected from them.

A suicide mission, Silia had ruthlessly decreed when they had told her. Cor, instead, hadn't taken position. Perhaps he also understood that there was no other solution. Perhaps he knew that they had always been destined for this, and one moment, by then, was worth the other.

Cid declared himself willing to accompany them to Cape Esther, and they agreed that they would leave the next morning. They spent the evening at the Maagho to say goodbye to Weskham, in an atmosphere that was anything but relaxed, and went to bed without exchanging a single word.

II

Silia opened her eyes and snapped to her feet, already perfectly awake, at the exact moment she felt someone approaching her cot. It was still dark outside and she struggled to recognize his or her features.

"Ms. Hartwood?" Alisa, one of the radio technicians, timidly revealed herself. "I apologize for disturbing you so early, but..."

Silia looked alarmed at the cell phone screen. It was five o'clock in the morning. She had barely slept. "Don't worry, Alisa. Did something happen?"

"No ma'am, but there's a private radio call waiting for you. Lockhart asked me to come and inform you."

A private radio call. Ghiranze used his cell phone, so it had to be Gladio. Silia rubbed her eyes and followed Alisa out of the barrack. "Thank you. Don't trouble the Marshal, Alisa, there's no need. It's personal, or so I believe." She shivered when the fresh morning air, not spoiled like that of the shed, hit her. The dawn hour, by now, despite being almost August, had settled at seven o'clock in the morning; another sign, if ever needed, that the miasma was increasingly shortening the hours of daylight.

She greeted Irwin with a nod, passing by, amazed to see him already awake. Indeed the Crownsguards, in that last month, had gotten the wake-up call that Darius and the Marshal were hoping for: they had knocked down four new Imperial bases, completed a large number of hunting quests, and participated in the exploration missions of the ruins together with the hunters. Moreover, since Iris and Talcott were in Orior, she had sensed a marked change in the Guards' attitude towards her. She didn't believe that the girl had told them something of her relationship with Gladio, but it looked like they couldn't simply continue to treat her as an unwelcome guest in front of the younger sister of one of their mates, who showed her sympathy on every occasion.

She entered the radio barrack. She had hoped it would be a little warmer than outside, since she had left his jacket on the cot, but was disappointed. "G'morning, Lockhart."

Lockhart – a short, slim man from Insomnia – immediately got up from the post to make room for
her, handing his headphones to her. "Good morning, Ms. Hartwood. The Marshal had said to wake him up any radio transmission had come, but Mr. Amicitia told me it was personal so..."

"Don't worry," she assured him. No use in looking for an excuse, and Gladio must have had the same thought. "I'm sorry for involving you in something private, Lockart, and on your night shift. But it's nothing secret, I will tell the Marshal of this radio call."

Lockart was too a decent man even to smirk. "There's no need to apologize, ma'am. I'll leave you alone but I'm staying out here in case you need a hand with the radio."

"Thank you." Silia took his place, put on his headphones, and waited for him to come out to lean over and talk into the microphone. She couldn't help but smile. She hadn't expected that call. "Hi, Gladio."

"Hi."

"You okay? Good thing you called, I've something to tell you before you leave."

"I'm fine. Well, as fine as it was yesterday and the last week. We'll leave in an hour. Tell me, Silia."

Rather laconic, as he had been for a month, but he had called her. She tried to sound cheerful. "I couldn't tell you last time we talked. I met Dino Ghiranze in Prairie, you know? I was about to rip out his throat."

"Ghiranze? That asshole reporter?"

"Him. I caught him eavesdropping and thought he was a spy of the Empire. After a bit of mess, I realized he wanted to interview me."

"What?" Gladio's tone was now more animated, and it encouraged her.

"Meteor Publishing wants to openly stand against the Empire by telling the truth; all of the truth, from the fall of Insomnia onward. Cor and I have agreed on the answers to his questions and they will soon come out with an article. It's not the case that people know everything, but there are still many who believe that the Prince is dead. It's time for everyone to know what the Empire really has done to Insomnia, and after, and that there's a voice that stands against all the falsehoods that the radio and the newspapers say. So, when you come back with the Crystal..."

Gladio didn't answer immediately. She thought she would cheer him up a little, but probably with all that they had faced in Altissia and what they still had to face, he couldn't care less about Ghiranze and Meteor Publishing. "Who would have thought that even that idiot Ghiranze could have been useful? I don't know how much, at the present day, but... you're right, people must know, after so many months." Silia heard a deep sigh. "Listen to me. I don't know how things will turn out in the Imperial territory, and I wanted... shit, there's no easy way to say it. I know we're always on thin ice, but this time's bad, Silia, really bad. After recovering the arm in Cartanica, we'll continue towards Gralea and... we can't count on Ignis. Nor on Noctis, if he doesn't get a grip and start using that damn ring. When I look at him, I want to smash his face."

Silia had assumed that the Prince hadn't yet worn it. It hadn't happened with Nyx and Ignis, but she had the feeling that when the Ring returned to the finger of a member of the royal family, she would feel its power again. And she would have been able to use it, probably. "Princess Lunafreya is dead, Gladio," she reminded him.

"I know that!" he exclaimed, frustrated. "That's exactly why he must wake up! That girl sacrificed herself so that he could do what is right! And Ignis used the Ring knowing he would die like your
mate Nyx! Now he's blind, shit, and what's Noct doing? Cryin' over himself!" Silia heard the violent thud of a fist on something metallic. "Sorry. I'm so pissed off. Since we left, everything has gone wrong."

"Just give him time."

"We don't have time. And I could never have imagined to hear something so stupid and sentimental from you, a fuckin' soldier, a fuckin' Kingsglaive."

Silia felt herself blush. She counted until ten, then fifteen, then twenty. When she was sure she wouldn't smash the radio, she answered. "I'm no longer a Kingsglaive, but you're right, I'm a soldier. The Chosen King, whether we like it or not, is not. You can spur him on, you can scream in his face, you can punch him, but he must find his own strength to do what is right." She waited for a reply, but there wasn't any. She counted again until ten, bit her tongue, then said what she wanted to refrain herself from saying: "You try to not lose your head. The Prince is prostrated, Ignis has suffered a permanent physical trauma, Prompto has no experience. Stay focused and don't exacerbate an already tense situation."

"D'you think I don't know that everything is on my back?" he whispered angrily.

"Then try to be up to it," she hissed, already sorry before even pronouncing the last syllable.

Silence on the other side. This time it was Silia who gave an exasperated punch to the wooden shelf. In the last few weeks, she and Gladio hadn't been able to talk without bitterness, even when others were listening to them. Gladio was on edge, she was frustrated because she couldn't help him or the Prince, and she ended up making him even more nervous.

"Don't worry," he finally replied with sarcasm. "I was the Prince's Sworn Shield even before I met you. I don't need you to remind me of what it means."

Silia rubbed her face. She looked for an answer that didn't make the situation worse, but she found nothing. They both remained silent for so long that, hadn't there been the background noise on his side, she would have thought he was gone.

"Anyway, I called" Gladio went on, "to ask you to think about Iris' and Talcott's future if anything ever happens to me. I know that in Orior they will be safe, but the Marshal has a thousand other things to think about and we don't know what will be."

He had called, Silia translated, because he didn't know if he would come back from Niflheim and wanted to talk to her one last time, because he was worried and demoralized and couldn't share that burden with Ignis as usual since he was part of the problem, and because he wanted a word of comfort. And instead, she had been a bitch.

"You know I will," she replied, "but make sure I won't have to, Gladio. I'll wait for you." For a moment, she risked letting her lips escape what she really wanted to say.

"I don't like making promises I'm not sure I can keep." His tone was quieter, now, but still dry.

"I don't want any promise. Just, be careful."

"I'll be careful. I've got to go, Silia."

III

"That's it, look."
Holding her hands on Talcott's small ones – a few years more, she thought, and he would have surpassed her in height – they moved together, slowly, three steps sideways, getting around the wooden mannequin that represented the magitek, and they hit him with the stick. "Yeah, good," she said. "The movement is the one I showed you. Practice by yourself for a while."

"How much of a human is there in magiteks, Silia?"

She shook her head, returning to sit next to Darius to light a cigarette. "I have no idea, Talcott. We tried to bring some of them to Insomnia over the years, but they self-destruct. We only know that they are cybernetic infantry somewhat fed with the daemons' miasma, like all the Imperial technology. There are two types: those with bright eyes and those with their face covered. Those with the face covered are the older and more human models, but I can't tell you how much or how exactly they are produced."

Talcott blinked, impressed, lowering his stick. "Then we know so little about Imperial technology? I didn't think so!"

"It's one of the reasons we lost the war," Darius replied without beating around the bush. "We haven't lived up to their technology."

"So then," the child said, returning to bounce around the mannequin in a tremendous guard stance, "we should infiltrate Gralea and find out what they are doing."

Silia's hands began to itch and she got up to correct his posture. Clenching her cigarette between her lips, she adjusted his grip on the stick, tilted it and pushed her toe against his left heel to move it forward diagonally. "Yeah, we should. And you should learn how to stay in a guard stance."

"We tried," Darius answered. "We couldn't break into the Zegnautus Keep in Gralea, but twenty years ago we managed to infiltrate a spy in one of Verstael Besithia's magitek facilities. We owe all we know to our infiltrator, the only one who managed to go and return. The other moles didn't have the same luck."

"A Lucian spy?" Silia was still in Ambrosia at the time, and didn't know anything about the matter. "Never heard of it. Who was he?"

"Classified details," Darius simply answered, glancing at her sideways. His lips twitched for a moment in an expression that Silia couldn't decipher.

"Are you shitting me? Insomnia has fallen and you're still telling me about classified details?"

Darius didn't answer, taking his cigarette to his lips. When he wanted he could be as tight as a Cockatrice's ass. Silia didn't insist for further details or explanations because she already had enough thoughts on her mind and again, like when she had come back from Insomnia, her brief respite from nightmares had been dragged up by the recent events in Altissia and especially by the prospect that the guys would go to Gralea to retrieve the Crystal. The fact that they were going to Niflheim in mental conditions far from being limpid was even more troubling.

She looked at her phone. It was lunch time – she was using those two free hours to start training Talcott without taking time away from the adults. Cor had left that morning alone to take a look at a new Imperial base under construction one hundred and eighty miles southeast of the camp, which meant he would be back in the evening after taking care of it by himself. Since their return from Cape Caem, he seemed unable to stand still for more than a couple of days, and she could understand him perfectly.
"Silia! Darius!"

Iris ran up to them with three loaves of bread and a package under her arm. The flaps of a military jacket of a size far too large fluttered behind her. "I've brought you some food before they devoured everything!"

"I always said, Iris, that you're a pretty and kind girl. So far from Hartwood," Darius lashed at her, taking a loaf.

Iris blushed and smiled, sitting with them. Silia realized, for the first time, that in Insomnia Darius had to have a certain effect on women. "The two of you get along pretty well, don't you? Be careful, Darius, or I'll tell my brother."

"You'll tell your brother what, please?"

"That I always find you wandering around Silia."

He snorted a laugh. "Iris, believe me, I deeply doubt your brother will be jealous of me and Hartwood."

Iris blinked. "Why shouldn't he?"

"Because your brother has what I'm missing to make Darius a happy man," Silia couldn't help answering.

The girl looked at them both for a moment without understanding, then her face assumed all the shades of red perceptible to the human eye.

"Hartwood, don't be vulgar in front of Iris."

"Are you really calling me vulgar? You?"

"You can barely hold yourself even before the Marshal."

Silia preferred to cut off the subject and opened the container brought by Iris. "Talcott, take a break and eat. You'll have all afternoon to train alone while I'm with the others and you can't do it on an empty stomach."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Try not to make obscene jokes at least in front of Talcott. He's only eight."

"At eight, my friends and I..." ...would shit over the stocks of the Imperials stationed at Ambrosia, she began to say, but they were going to eat and there really was no reason to be so gross in front of the kids. Moreover, Ambrosia inevitably forced her to rethink Marius and all the painful questions related to him that would forever remain unanswered.

They ate. The stew was particularly tasty, as always when Monica did the cooking, but Silia wasn't hungry, so she ended up toppling half of her plate into Talcott's and lit another cigarette instead.

"By the way, Iris, where did you get that man's jacket?" Darius asked.

"A hunter named Colby gave it to me."

"You cleaned it, I hope."
Iris chuckled. "Sure."

"It suits you, but don't get too used to military clothes, or you'll end up being sloppy like Hartwood."

"Colby's a good lad, but if someone in the camp takes liberty that he should not, Iris, I recommend you tell me." Silia kept an eye on her as she could but, as Cor had well pointed out in Cape Caem, she had too much to do to look after Iris, who was a girl of fifteen – a normal girl – in a paramilitary camp. Fortunately, there was Monica as well.

"Without taking anything away from your authority, Hartwood, I doubt anyone here will take certain liberties with Gladiolus Amicitia's sister. Everybody cares about his neck."

"It's not such a good thing, you know?" Iris complained. "At school, in Insomnia, all my female friends had a crush on my brother, and all the boys kept away from me because they were afraid of him. Oh. But I've met a friend here at the camp. We were in the same school."

"Did you? And who is he?"

"Claudio Evander!" Talcott blurted out.

"I'll bet," Darius winked. "I saw you talking closely over the past few days. And giggling. Be careful, Iris, or I'll tell your brother."

Silia didn't hear Iris' answer, because her cell phone started ringing. It was Dino Ghiranze. She was waiting for news on the publication date of the article, so she answered immediately. "Hi, Ghiranze?"

"Hi, boss."

"Cut it out. News for me?"

"Yeah, but not what you're expectin'. Can you talk freely?"

She stood up, gesturing to Darius, Iris and Talcott to keep eating ahead, and walked away. "Now I can. Spit it out."

"Something's happening in Gralea."

"Oh, really?" she snorted amused.

"I'm serious. A group of Imperial civilians reached Cape Noah on a makeshift boat. They escaped a lynching, when people understood where they came from, and now they're under custody of the local authorities. They speak of hundreds daemons, of disappearances of entire villages. They say that military researchers in Gralea let themselves get carried away and they have unleashed a horde of monsters. I thought you and Marshal Leonis should know that."

"Shit." They hadn't told Ghiranze that the Prince and his retinue were heading for Gralea, just into the mouth of what those people were running from. "What the fuck has that wicked Aldercapt done?"

"I don't know anything else. The news came from a contact of mine in Cape Noah. As for me, I hope those Imperial assholes have managed to self-destruct."

"Civilians have nothing to do with war, Ghiranze."

"And what about the Lucian civilians?"
"We're not like the Imperials."

Ghiranze had the decency to not reply. "Anyway," he went on, "I'll let you know when I've got something else, Hartwood. Whatever the Empire is doing, it's good for the Prince to know it."

"Thanks, Ghiranze, I owe you one."

"You're welcome, boss. You already know how you can reward me: give me information too."

"I hope I'll have good ones soon. What about the article?"

"Wait a couple of days and you'll see. C'ya."

"C'ya." She closed the call and thought to immediately phone Cor, but then she realized he had to be busy with the Imperials and she preferred to not trouble him. Instead, she tried to contact Prompto, since Gladio's and Ignis' phones had been lost, then Prince Noctis'. No line. They had to still be in the open sea. From that distance, the radio of the yacht would be out as well. Fuck.

She clicked her tongue, nervous. Maybe she was just letting herself be conditioned by her own anxiety. She had to keep her head cool and stay calm until the Marshal's return.

IV

The tension that had been accumulating for a month at last exploded on the Magna Fortia, a train with Imperial civilians, on their way from Cape Esther to Gralea. Gladio continued to look around troubled, wondering how people apparently so normal could tolerate an emperor who was doing everything to butcher civilians identical to them in other nations.

It was a splendid day, as they hadn't seen for a long time. The sky was clear and the regions of eternal ice still far away. Before the clash with the Glacial, Niflheim was predominantly semi-deserted as the area they were going through: barren, yellowish lands, with scarce and poor vegetation. Gladio felt almost like they were in Leide again. The tracks ran half a mile from the sea, which was flat like a mill pond.

At Cape Esther, where they had bade farewell to Cid, who had also exchanged the license plate of the Regalia with another illegally retrieved by Prompto in a garage, no one had recognized them. No customs to pass through. They had simply bought four tickets for Gralea, connected through Cartanica, and had boarded the train after loading the car. It was a civilian convoy, very long and not crowded, and they hadn't had to work hard to find an empty wagon. They sat scattered, almost without speaking as it had been for days, each lost in his depressing thoughts.

"So... we're gonna roll through Tenebrae?" Prompto asked at some point, breaking the silence.

"Not before visiting the royal tomb in Cartanica."

"You're sure you're up to that?"

Ignis sighed and again answered that question. "The wounds have mended. There's nothing to be done about my eyesight."

Tenebrae? Gladio straightened up. When did they talk about that without him? They were in the fucking Imperial territory, not on a leisure trip, and already the royal tomb in Cartanica would have been a dangerous undertaking. What the fuck was wrong with them, the three of them, thinking to divert to Tenebrae? He turned to Noctis, who was focused on the landscape beyond the window. The idea that they had decided without him, who had been busting his ass for a month to keep them
on track, threw him out of line. He sank his fingertips into his thighs until it hurt, then, no longer able to stop, he got up and went to Noctis.

*That's enough now.*

"The hell is wrong with you?" he verbally attacked him.

Noctis shook himself, as if he had been half-awake. "What?" he asked, genuinely caught off-guard.

His dim attitude pissed him off even more. "We're not stopping in Tenebrae. We can't risk that much. You need to grow up and get over it."

Noctis stood up. "I am over it. I'm here, if you hadn't noticed."

Gladio grabbed him by his t-shirt neckline, as he had done in the Disc of Cauthess, but this time it wasn't a skirmish due to the heat and the bad mood. "And then maybe, when you're not too busy moping, you can look around and give a shit about someone worse off than you."

"Let go of me."

"How's that ring fit ya? You'd rather carry it around than wear it. The Princess gave her life so you could do your duty, not so you could sit around feelin' sorry for yourself."

"You don't think I know that?!!"

"You don't know! Ignis almost died for you, have you noticed? And for what?"

"Enough, Gladio!" Ignis cried from his seat.

"You think you're a king, but you're just a coward."

"Shut up!" Noctis seized his jacket in turn. Prompto rushed to divide them, but Gladio grabbed his head and shoved him away. He and Noctis continued to look at each other with resentment, clutching their shirts. "*I get it, all right? I get it!*" Noctis' voice was shrill, on the verge of tears.

Gladio let him go before smashing his face. "*Then get a grip! Pull your head outta your ass already!*"

Noctis looked at him as if he wanted to attack, but – fortunately for everyone – instead he turned and left the wagon.

"Noct!" Prompto tried to call him back, but Gladio ranted about him as well.

"Leave him!"

Noctis had just closed the wagon door behind him and Ignis got up of his seat. He stumbled, managed not to fall, straightened up, then stood in front of Gladio. "What are you doing? You aren't helping at all."

"And are you helping, just letting him be while he's whining about how unfortunate his life is?"

"Shouting in his face won't help him getting over the Princess' death. He's suffering. And don't ever dare involve me in making him feel guilty again."

"Oh, is that so?" he growled to Ignis. "His Majesty is suffering? And you, aren't you suffering? Prompto, me, aren't we suffering? Her Grace, hasn't she suffered? And the people of Altissia? And
those of Insomnia? Just curious, since I wasn't in the room when he woke up: did he waste a single word of thanks for you when he found out that you had lost your eyesight? I only ask because he didn't say a single 'thank you' to Camelia Clastra, and although she's an old bitch she has jeopardized the lives of her citizens to allow the Princess to summon Leviathan."

Ignis turned away. "I'm not interested in gratitude. Risking my life for him was my duty, and even if it hadn't been my duty, Noctis is like a brother to me. If at this moment the compartment door reopened and he came here to tell me he wants to go back to Lucis and forget all this, I would accept his choice and support him. This is the difference between you and me, Gladio."

Gladio rubbed a hand over his eyes. He almost felt like crying too. "Yeah. It seems to me I'm the only one here, after all, to keep in mind that 'Noct' is the King of Insomnia, more, the True King of the prophecies, and as such he has duties."

Prompto snapped to his feet. Gladio lowered his arms and hid his hands in the pockets, touching Silia's plate to calm himself down. If Prompto had jumped on him to give him back his shove or punch him, he wouldn't have reacted. Let him do it. By then, he didn't give a shit anymore.

But Prompto didn't jump on him. He merely took Ignis' arm gently to bring him back to his place, perhaps fearing a violent reaction on his part, but not before he had struck him with the most furious look Gladio had ever seen on that jovial face. "Sometimes," he said hoarsely, his voice scraping against his throat, "you're really an asshole. We're all suffering, Gladio, you said it yourself, but we're not all the same. You can't shove people and shout in their face to inculcate your way of seeing and dealing with things. We all have our ways and our times."

It was almost exactly what Silia had told him. Was it possible that no one else understood? He tightened his grip on the plate until he felt the metal sink into his flesh. "My father died in Insomnia," he reminded him angrily. "And so did my friends of the Crownsguard. People I knew. I thought Silia was dead too, but that didn't stop me from going on with you and doing what had to be done."

"He's doing it too," Ignis returned to say. They had quarreled many times since they knew each other, and always because of Noctis, but he had never used that cold, disappointed, passively violent tone with him. "He didn't stop. He didn't come back. We are moving forward, to Gralea, as it should be. But he's understandably devastated. He's scared. You have no idea what using that Ring truly means, Gladio."

To that, he couldn't reply. He gave them his back, and headed in the direction opposite of the one taken by Noctis. At that point, there were no words to smooth the gap between them, only words to dilate it, to keep on crushing and crumbling.

"Here, you leave," Prompto called after him. "And Noct is the coward?"

Gladio stopped. He didn't look at them. He just pulled his hand out of his pocket and looked at the blood on his palm and fingers. "If he doesn't wear the Ring of the Lucii, we won't come out alive from Gralea," he uttered. "And even if I would happily give my life a thousand times for Noct, I'm not going to give it away for nothing. So I warn you: if he won't do it, when the time comes, I'll use the Ring for him. And then I'll have the idea."

V

She waited a little after dinner – just to leave him the time to take a breath – to ambush Cor in his pavilion. She listened in silence for a few seconds once she was within earshot, because she wanted a private talk, and when she was sure that nobody else was with him, she called his name in a low voice to announce herself. Cor invited her to come in.
He must have just finished washing himself after the labors of the day, because he had wet hair and a damp towel around his neck. A dish that was still intact, which certainly Monica must have brought him, was on the table. Hadn't she seen him eating and sleeping in Cape Caem and Costlemark Tower, Silia would have remained of the idea that the Immortal wasn't subject to the bodily functions of ordinary men.

"I was about to send for you, but you anticipated me. Ezma Auburnbrie called me a couple of hours ago."

"I bet I know why. I received a call from Dino Ghiranze."

"About the Imperial refugees arrived in Cape Noah?"

Silia nodded. "What did Madame Auburnbrie tell you?"

Cor leaned against the desk, rubbing the towel over his head. "Twenty-six people taken into custody. Four were infected. They put the others in quarantine."

"What did they do to the infected ones?"

The Marshal frowned. "Do I really have to answer you? We can't risk a surge in the Starscourge cases, especially now that the Oracle is dead."

"Damn it," Silia let out. There was nothing else to do; she was the first to be aware of it. "And what can you tell me about the news from Gralea? Ghiranze told me that they talk about mass daemonifications. Entire villages disappeared. Something escaped the labs, perhaps?"

"Ezma couldn't tell me more, either. She had third-hand news, too. Perhaps something is happening, perhaps nothing is happening. Come on, Hartwood, just say it."

Silia blinked. "Say what?"

"You're about to suggest I send you to Cape Noah and then to allow you to join the Prince's retinue in Gralea."

Raising her hands in a gesture of complete surrender, Silia couldn't help smirking. "Am I so predictable?"

"You're clear as spring water. How did you survive ten years on the front?"

"Maybe I'm not so clear," she ventured to say. "Maybe, Marshal, you understand me a lot better than others because deep down we're alike."

She waited for a scramble, which she was ready to answer to point by point, and instead the Marshal put the towel on the desk and stared at her. Perhaps they really were alike, but what she had said to him wasn't valid on the contrary: she couldn't read him as if he was spring water.

"Then what?" she urged him. "You're right, I want to go to Cape Noah to talk face-to-face with those people. And then join the guys. After what happened in Altissia, they could use two extra hands, at least until Ignis has become accustomed to his new condition."

"I need you here, Hartwood, and we've already eviscerated the reason for a long time," he replied as expected. Silia opened her mouth to reply, but Cor interrupted her, raising a finger. "Or so I would have answered you this morning. Truth is, I don't like at all this story of refugees arriving from Gralea. It has never happened, as far as I know. Aldercapt has stuffed his subjects with so many lies
that no one has ever thought of landing at Cape Noah. I want to know more about it, and in the current state of things, maybe four arms to support the guys wouldn't be a bad idea."

Silia had expected to have to fight claws and teeth to convince the Marshal of her point of view, so she was almost disappointed. "Wait, four? Are you coming too, Cor?"

He shook his head gravely. "No. I would like and, off the record, I had proposed that to Gladio when they were in Altissia and the Prince was still in a coma, but someone must stay to hold the reins here, especially if things in Gralea won't go as we hope. But I was thinking of asking Darius to come with you. I gather that you've a good mutual understanding, am I wrong? As long as you don't get drunk in Imperial territory."

She didn't tell him that she had proposed the same thing to Gladio. "We'll try. I must confess, we will probably use a drink or two to not freeze in Niflheim."

"Just try not to blow off your own cover. Once in Niflheim, you have to move incognito. I don't need to tell you what Imperials would be happy to do to a Crownsguard and a former Kingsglaive. Avoid unnecessary clashes that could attract the attention on your combat skills."

"We'll be careful. I am glad to leave with Darius, Marshal, and not because we're friends. You trained him very well. The other Crownsguards get a pass too, but he's the best here. Don't tell him what I told you." She moistened her lips. "But we may come back after a long time. We may *not* come back. Are you sure you can manage without him?"

Cor grimaced what could be a smile of pride. "I will. His father was in the Council. Although he didn't care for the first seventeen years of his life, Darius grew up imbued with politics and war and, as I told you once, he has a brain that works nicely. If you ever find yourself in the position of leading a group of people, Hartwood, here's some advice: ask the opinion of a few, because if you ask the opinion of many you'll never make a decision; ask the opinion of those who have no qualms in contradicting you, because that's where you'll find your limits; and finally, after making a decision, take full responsibility for it."

"I will remember. Too bad you didn't train me instead of Titus Drautos, Marshal," she let slip.

Cor Leonis shook his head. "No, Hartwood, it's a fortune. You would be much more disciplined and less impulsive, definitely, but without the brutality of all the instructors who trained you, without all that you faced in war, you wouldn't be so ready to react to dangerous situations. There's an abyss between knowing how to fight perfectly and fighting for the sake of your and others' lives."

Silia could only nod, turning slightly so as not to show him that his meager compliment had flattered her. "I had in store a long list of arguments to convince you to let me go, Cor. Let me tell you at least one."

"What?"

"When the Prince decides to wear the Ring, it's very likely that I will be able again to use some Glaive tricks. And even if some of them didn't do it on May 16, the Kingsglaives must protect their King."

"Oh, is that so? I lost count of all the times I heard you say I'm no longer a Kingsglaive, Hartwood. I wondered when you would have realized that it was a colossal idiocy."

Silia felt herself blush. "Don't you ever get bored of being always right?"

Cor gave a snort of amusement. "Be careful with your *Glaive tricks* in Imperial territory. Now go
and call Darius. We will discuss together the details of your departure. I suspect that, even if he won't show it, he will be more than happy to come with you. And, Hartwood?

Silia, who was already leaving the pavilion, stopped. "What, Cor?"

The Marshal offered her one of his rare smiles. "Do you really believe I haven't trained you in these months?"

Chapter End Notes

"Amicus fidelis protectio fortis" > "A loyal friend is a strong protection"
Chapter Summary

Things between the members of the Royal Retinue are getting worse and worse as they descend into the Fodina Caestino quarry. Meanwhile, four arms are coming from Orior to reach them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

35

E pluribus unum

I

Silia left Orior behind the following morning, on a motorbike, with her swords well hooked to her holster, a backpack that contained all of her equipment – ten mixed magic flasks of fire, blizzard and thunder, a cote to sharpen her blades, a change of warmer clothes, a first aid kit and some medications – and Darius behind her.

Darius had insisted on going by car, but Silia had pointed out that they would dress up and behave like Meldacio hunters, and rarely did the hunters travel by car. Darius had replied that the cover wouldn't have done any good in the Imperial territory and that they would be less suspicious in a car because of the sub-zero temperature of the innermost regions of Niflheim. Silia had reminded him that the bike was faster. Cor Leonis had put an end to their diatribe by suggesting they'd take a motorbike up to Cape Noah and once they had reached Cape Esther, provided they found a way to cross the sea, get a car. That had been the first of a long series of discussions that had lasted until late at night.

Silia drove the bike and drove silently since neither one of them uttered a single word for the first few hours of travel as they sped through Leide’s semi-deserted motorways. She felt Darius’ pressure on her back, his arms gently girding her waist. She was glad to have him with her and she was even more glad that they had achieved such a complicity that they could afford not having to fill the silence so she could concentrate on her own thoughts; they kept bouncing between Cape Noah, where they would have to convince the authorities of the outpost to let them talk to the Imperial civilians in quarantine – and even further over the strait, to Niflheim, where they would have to move with extreme caution and intercept the Prince before he arrived in Gralea – and Orior, where she had quit the training of her guys. The Marshal, without assuming that sooner or later she would return, had reassured her that he would involve the other Crownsguards to take care of the volunteers. They were perfectly capable, he had said, and it was time they took some responsibility too. Iris, pretending to ignore that they were joining a suicide mission, had declared herself happy that they were going to give her brother and the others support, while Talcott had been disappointed by her sudden departure, just when she was starting to teach something to him too. No one, however, had been as unhappy as her guys, who had no idea where she and Darius were heading. Someone had gone so far as to say that, after all, Kingsglaives weren't reliable.

Leaving Orior, her new home, gave her a vague feeling of discomfort, but as soon as they had
entered the woods of Duscae she began to feel a tingling of excitement in her limbs. Something in her Glaive blood, at the prospect of unknown challenges, began to quiver. She was expecting at any moment to be able to feel the magic of the Crystal. Almost without realizing it, she began to hum.

"Battle-scarred down to the bone, falling, failing to believe... living in so much despair with no hope of release..."

"Hartwood..."

"Was I born to be betrayed? Was I born to simply die? Can I bear to seek the truth when it feels like a lie?"

"Hartwood!" Darius squeezed her hips.

"What's up?"

"Will you stop with this depressing song?"

Silia grinned, looking at him from the rear-view mirror. "A little nervous, are we?"

"Why should I be? We are only going to Gralea to infiltrate Emperor Aldercapt's fortress."

"And doesn't this excite you?"

"I'm excited by other kinds of things. Hartwood, tell me you're just happy with the idea of meeting your boyfriend again and that I'm not about to go into Imperial territory with a fanatic that can't wait to die sword-in-hand."

"I'm thrilled about getting back on the front line, but I don't want to die," she clarified. "But the odds are decidedly not in our favor. You knew that last night when the Marshal officially asked you if you accepted the mission."

He frowned. "Hartwood, are you calling me a coward?"

"Would you call a man who refuses to be tied up, bandaged and thrown into a pit full of Behemoths a coward? No. You would say he's a sane man. We are on the brink of that pit."

"I would call him a coward if the Prince of Insomnia was on the bottom of that pit."

"That's why I'm glad you came with me."

Darius didn't answer. They remained silent again for a while.

"When Cor told me days ago that the Prince would go to Imperial territory, I thought that if the Marshal had nothing to object, then everything was under control," he said again.

"Mh."

"But since we left Orior I'm not so convinced. I believe that we are all on the verge of a pit full of Behemoths since Princess Lunafreya died. I believe that Chancellor Ardyn Izunia is the scariest Behemoth who has ever walked on Eos and that he's somehow connected to the advance of the Starscourge. I believe that if we don't recover the Crystal we are all fucked and that Cor is fully aware of that."

"Did I already tell you that I'm glad you came with me?"
"Hartwood, stop. Since the attack on Altissia you've had a stick so far up your ass that the point comes out of your mouth, so we never talked about it. How do you see it?"

Silia was frank. "The way you see it. I told Gladio they were embarking on a suicide mission, but I think it's the only one that can really work. An army, which we don't have, wouldn't help the Prince to take Gralea, but the Astrals who are siding with him will."

"An army wouldn't help him, yet we're reaching them."

"Two people can what an army can't do: move discretely. Pave ways. Cover backs. Cor would have come too, I'm sure, but if the Prince dies..."

"...Lucis will be left without a guide," Darius completed for her.

"Exactly," Silia approved. "But before we get to Gralea, I want to be clear about this story of refugees from Niflheim."

"What do you think?"

"That Gralea might not be as impenetrable as it was until last month. For the first time in many years civilians have fled; perhaps at the Zegnautus Keep they have some hassle that will keep them busy as we enter."

Darius smiled. "You know, Hartwood? The first time I saw you, you were in the queue waiting for one of the Citadel lifts."

"Really? And did I see you?"

"I don't believe so. I was with Devan. You were wearing the Glaives' uniform and a really pissed off look on your face. A scrawny kitty with unsheathed claws, we told each other."

"Fuck you."

"When Cor told me you would come to our camp, after Gladio's and Cid Sophiar's calls, I lost my temper. I asked Cor how he could allow a damn Glaive to even get close, after what they had done. He replied that even if he didn't trust Gladio Amicitia's word too much, because of his personal involvement of which everyone, Hartwood, suspected something already back in Insomnia, he trusted that of Cid Sophiar. If Cor would have been convinced too after talking to you, he wanted me to keep an eye on you for a while."

Silia shrugged. Darius' words sounded like an apology, but why should she resent? "So? It seems more than reasonable to me. You did your duty well, Darius. You were glued to my ass the first few days. And it wasn't even a man's ass."

"Well, I think that not killing that scrawny kitty turned out to be one of the most appropriate decisions of Cor the Immortal."

Silia turned slightly towards him, pleased. "It took a lot out of the Marshal, letting you to come with me. He counts on you and trusts a lot of your judgment. But it was the right thing to do. He couldn't help me better comrade for this mission. If you had been sensitive to magic, Darius, you would have been a great Kingsglaive."

Darius' smile became a grin. Silia believed it was for the compliment until he spoke.

"I was."
That was quite a surprise. "What?"

"I was sensitive to magic as a child. But it's a faculty that, if not encouraged and nourished, fades until it disappears, as you must know. And the scions of noble families of Insomnia don't become Kingsglaives."

"Unless they run away from home to enlist, right?"

Darius leaned over to look at her reflection in the rear-view mirror. "Did you know Julius Clipeus?"

Silia nodded. "I talked about him with Gladio once. He died just because of a Behemoth."

"Would you like to talk about him with me too?"

"I didn't know him very well. Perhaps even his teammates didn't know him very well. He came from an environment that was too different from everyone else's. But he didn't give a damn about making friends. He was there to become a Glaive and to leave Insomnia. I liked his stubbornness. It allowed him to get to the end of the training. He fought two years in war before he died. I felt sorry for him."

"I was sorry, too. We were friends."

"Just friends?"

"Just friends. He was five years younger than me and enlisted at fifteen."

Silia winked. "Thought age wasn't such a problem for you."

"They told you about Alexander, then?"

"Was his name Alexander? Nobody told me about him, anyway. I heard some jokes. And jokes don't amuse me if they aren't addressed face-to-face to those directly involved so that they can respond with other jokes."

Darius sighed. "So, what do you want to know?"

"Nothing, if you don't want to tell me."

"I don't want to tell you anything."

"Then don't do it."

"Fuck," he let slip. "Really I don't want to, but I haven't talked about Alexander since it happened. Actually I wouldn't talk about Alexander even when I was seeing Alexander. It was one of those relationships you can't live out in the open. But by continuing to not talk about him, he's going away. The first days were a torment, but his death was a drop of shit in the rain of shit that had fallen on Insomnia and I told myself that a Crownsguard had no right to cry over a dead lover on the same day he had lost his king." He raised his arm and brushed his eyes. "Now, except for some nights when I wake up and I can't orient myself for a few seconds, and it seems to me that I could simply go back to sleep to wake up in my bed or in the hotel room where we met in secret, I've the feeling that years have passed. Alexander doesn't even come to my mind for whole days, as if he was a stranger with whom I shared something a long time ago and not the recently dead man I was in love with; fuck, Insomnia has fallen just few months ago. I feel like shit about this."

Silia let him vent in silence. "Hans Castor," she then uttered, when she was sure he wouldn't say anything else.
Darius raised his head. "What?"

"Hans Castor. He was my…” She looked for a suitable word, and she didn't find it. "How would you call a man you're in love with, whom you gave your virginity to and who fucked you as often as he could, but whom you can't see a later with because you know that one of the two of you could be in pieces in a box that very night?"

"I don't know if there's an adequate word."

"Neither do I. However, one evening, Hans Castor ended up as pieces in a box. In a box, and not in wild beasts' bellies, because I defied my Captain's orders to recover his corpse, in the hope that it wasn't a corpse. I thought I was prepared for the idea, but I cried and threw up and I thought I would go crazy. I was beaten and blasted with insults by Sarah, my teammate, and almost thrown out of the Kingsglaives by Titus Drautos, who prevented me from participating in the funeral of our fallen comrades that day by putting me on guard on the turrets."

Darius didn't tell her he was sorry, as she hadn't told him. "Why are you telling me?" he asked instead.

"Because the day after we started fighting again and I couldn't think about Hans Castor, because if you think about your Hans Castor instead of focusing on casting a magic wall, the magic wall doesn't materialize and you also end up in pieces in a box. A month later I had the impression that Hans Castor had died years before, like all our other Glaive comrades who had died in the war, and Simon Cregan would come at night onto my cot to fuck me as Hans had fucked me. Well, not exactly, Simon had a taste for asses."

"Hartwood..."

"What I mean is that I too felt like shit for a long time. Was it possible, I'd ask myself, that putting thoughts of Hans aside was so easy? I loved him, fuck, I was fond of all my comrades, but Hans was Hans; that wasn't just camaraderie, it was..." She tightened her grip on the handlebars. "I still dream of him, from time to time; he and my other dead friends. On the day of the fall of Insomnia, besides the King, I lost Sarah, Sam, Caesar, Legato, Glaives loyal to the kingdom, the last people in the world I cared about, except for Gladio Amicitia. And I killed Marius Gaunt, a traitor Glaive, with whom I had grown up in Ambrosia. They too seem to me memories of another life, but it happened just a few months ago. If tomorrow Gladio died, in a month or two it would be exactly the same, and that's how it must be. If you have time to despair for the dead, it means that you're not taking care of the living enough."

They rode in silence again for a long stretch of road.

"Hartwood, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"The more I know you, the more I wonder: why Gladio Amicitia? You're a messed-up war veteran. He looks like a huge grown man, but he's a greenhorn who until a few months ago had seen just the Crown City."

Nobody had ever asked her that question. Even she had never asked herself that question. She had found herself in up to her neck, as in many other circumstances of her life, and she had simply taken note of it. She smiled. "Once in Insomnia, while I was really drunk, Gladio pissed me off and I threw a beer in his face. Instead of punching me or tell me to fuck off, he went away without a word and waited for me to get out of the bar just to pick me up and drive me home without damaging my pride.
in front of all the patrons. At that moment I thought that, in another life, I could have married such a man of six and half feet and two hundred pounds of pure muscle, endowed with a chivalry that isn't even sexist."

II

"Damn it," Prompto tried to joke, without much conviction. "Dunno how you can like this stuff, Gladio."

Gladio didn't answer. He wasn't hungry, and had barely managed to finish his portion of Cup Noodle. They wouldn't have had anything else to eat anyway, because they had left all the superfluous equipment in Altissia and Ignis had thought that, in his condition, the precious ingredients and the spices he had laboriously put together along the way were indeed superfluous, and nobody was up to hunting the beasts that infested the quarry to cook them. They just wanted to find the royal tomb and get away from there.

"A royal tomb…" Noctis said, in a low voice, as if he was forcing himself to speak. After the furious quarrel on the train they had barely spoken or looked at each other. On the other hand, they had risked three times to fight over in the quarry because Noctis persisted in his incorrigible habit of distancing himself from them and going away alone, with the difference being that now, with Ignis struggling, they could no longer keep up with him. "Why a royal tomb in a place like this?"

"Nifleheim and Lucis have not always been at war," Ignis replied. If they were tired, he was exhausted, and the little support he could give them in combat – Gladio was ashamed of thinking it – was more of a hindrance than a help. "According to Dustin, this mausoleum was erected as a symbol of peace between the two countries after three years of violent hostility between Gunar Aldercapt and Nero Lucis Caelum. The war was caused by the murder of Nero Lucis Caelum's wife in Gralea, a murder that the king of Lucis attributed to one of Gunar Adercapt's sons because of some sexual intercourse and that he avenged by killing the man in turn. Legend has it that Gunar's and Nero's heirs, with no hope of seeing the end of the conflict between the two kingdoms, secretly agreed to dethrone their respective fathers. Gunar Aldercapt ended his days in the dungeons of his own castle. Nero Lucis Caelum, who was marching against Gralea with his army, was treacherously assassinated by his son Clitus. The two heirs hastened to wear their fathers' crowns and to establish a new peace between Niflheim and Lucis. At Fodina Caestino, not a quarry at the time, where Nero, who had triggered the war, had fallen, a mausoleum was built, and Clitus had his father buried there."

"What they say a filial love."

"Not all Lucis Caelums were examples of justice and righteousness."

"Why should someone like King Nero Lucis Caelum lend his strength to Noct?" was the unexpectedly appropriate question from Prompto.

"He assumes Noctis is going to stick his katana in some Niflheim Emperor's ass," Gladio said. He rubbed his hands on his knees to clean them from the soil and stood up. "Provided that he thinks he can do it."

Noctis jumped up as well, furious. "Gladio, if you think I'll allow you to keep on insulting me like this, you're dead wrong."

Gladio bowed his head. "And then, Your Majesty, order my tongue to be cut off."

"Enough!" Prompto intervened between the two. "I can't recognize you anymore. You look like two teenage brawlers!"
Gladio ignored him, starting to disassemble the improvised camp – they had left the bulk of their equipment in the Regalia, parked on the Magna Fortia, expecting that they wouldn't spend the night in the quarry. He thought he had vented with the row on the train, but truth was that a part of him hoped that, once in Fodina Caestino, chased by the first enemies they would meet after the clashes in Altissia, Noctis would have ended up wearing the Ring to test its power. It hadn't happened so far.

"If you have rested enough, let's go on. We've to recover that damn key, reanimate the generator and move that machinery that blocks the road."

To reach the shed where the key was stored, they had to go back to the other side of the quarry, on the northeast side. Even if there wouldn't be beasts lurking – and luckily it was day, so at least they didn't have to deal with daemons – the ground was damn slippery and walking had to be agony for Ignis, even with his stick and Prompto's arm stretched to give him support whenever he saw him hesitate. Once the key was recovered, they had to look for the emergency generators to restore power to the machinery that made it impossible for them to continue and which they couldn't destroy, bypass or climb over in any way. The easiest path led them close to the protruding roots of the enormous tree that grew in the middle of the quarry, which reminded him of the Citadel because of the way it stood out above all. Gladio stopped to look at it from below as Noctis and Prompto gave power to the first generator, located on a platform under the roots. The tree was in bloom, as he had heard from someone on Magna Fortia, and it was beautiful, a stunning vision in the midst of those marshes and the desolation of abandoned machinery on which vegetation had already begun to grow. He thought of telling Ignis, next to him, to break the nervous silence, but then he remembered that his friend couldn't see it.

The second generator was a little further. Once activated, they heard the noise of engines running.

"We have the power supply!" Prompto exclaimed, cheering.

"It doesn't mean that it will work for a long time," Gladio deluded him. "Let's hurry and move that device."


They came back, reaching the control panel of the machine. It gave off smoke, and for a moment Gladio believed that it would explode or not move, but Noctis managed to lift it. As they advanced more and more to the bottom of the quarry, Gladio distanced himself from Ignis and Prompto coming up beside to Noctis, who had once again separated from the group. He counted up to ten before talking to him.

"Hold up, Noct."

Noctis stopped and glared at him with a defiant look. Gladio counted to ten again. "What?"

"This time it's not a provocation, but a serious question. You sure you're ready for this? You got what it takes?"

"What do you mean?"

"We'll meet another of your ancestors in the tomb. You'll have to convince the Warrior to lend you his strength. I repeat, this is not intended as a provocation, but with the other kings, you were determined to challenge the Empire and take your destiny into your own hands. Do you still think you can see it through? To the end?"

For a moment, Noctis' gaze dropped from his, perhaps looking for help in Ignis or Prompto behind
his back. Gladio was well aware that he was pulling the rope to the breaking point: the question was whether, when it was broken, Noctis would be the Chosen King or a kid – his friend, almost a brother – in pieces. Gladio had officially sworn to protect the former and unofficially, to his father and the king, to stay close to the latter, but not at the cost of returning to Lucis with his tail between his legs, without the Crystal, waiting for the end.

The rope didn't break. Not yet. "I can, and I will," Noctis replied, his gaze now again firmly planted in his. "Whether I like it or not, I've got a duty to fulfill... As a King. I will claim the Warrior's weapon and proceed to Gralea. We will not stop at Tenebrae."

He hadn't said he would wear the Ring but at least, it seemed, he had not lost sight of their goal. Gladio sighed, deciding – for the moment – to be content with his decision to not divert to Tenebrae as the prince would have liked. "Don't forget it," he retorted, pointing his finger at him, but without animosity anymore. "You'd better take it seriously."

He turned to go back to Ignis and Prompto.

They went past the obstacle. He and Noctis didn't quarrel any more, probably because the swampy rotten stench that they could barely smell higher above, now was unsustainable and they had no breath to waste. It had to come from the quagmire at the end of the quarry to whose edges they were approaching.

"Oh, by the Six, don't tell me we have to walk inside," Prompto complained, as soon as it was clear that there was no chance to find a way around it.

"I really think so. Ig, be careful. Do you need another arm?"

"Prompto's is enough for me," he declined. "Where are we? I can hear the sound of water again. And smell an abominable stench."

"A marsh. We're advancing towards the roots of that enormous tree in the middle of the quarry."

Gladio kept forgetting that Ignis couldn't see and that, for him, it was all a long walk in the dark. "I think I see a passage down there."

"The entrance to the Mausoleum?"

"Possible."

They crossed the marsh. The filthy water was up to their calves. The swarms of insects that had tormented them more than the beasts since they had entered the quarry were now like fog banks. Gladio couldn't wait to get back to the station, burn his clothes, and have a shower so hot as to take his skin off.

"Hey, guys?" Noctis called their attention. He was already under the roots of the tree.

"What?"

"I can see the entrance door to the tomb, but it's covered by... cocoons? Eggs?"

They reached him. Indeed, the door seemed obstructed by eggs as big as basketballs. Ignis leaned over to touch one.

"Ugh, the stink here is even worse." Prompto covered his nose. "Let's hurry up and destroy them and
move on."

"If we had another fire bomb we could get rid of it quickly," Noctis said. As soon as he pierced his sword into one of the eggs, behind them, in a tumult of stinking water, a sort of Venus flytrap with tentacles, at least thirty feet tall, emerged. Gladio had rarely seen a more monstrous beast: it had no eyes – not visible eyes, at least – and its whole body seemed to be made of tentacles. Other smaller appendices, where "small" meant as big as his arm, snaked around its mouth, between a row of equally large teeth. It released the most nauseating reek he had ever smelled.

"Let's get out of here!" he shouted. "Or we'll get trapped under the roots!"

They scattered. Gladio was quick to grab Ignis' shoulder and drag him away. The Venus flytrap opened its enormous mouth, seemed to take a deep breath, then emitted a greenish vomiting cloud. Gladio covered his mouth and nose with his arm, but he felt woozy. Prompto, the closest of them, fainted. Gladio saw him sag into the water, unconscious.

"Prompto!" Noctis warped to his rescue. His blow drove the beast only three feet back, but it was enough for him to grab Prompto before the beast's tentacles could seize him and drag him into its mouth. Other tentacles rose, but Noctis was quick to dodge them.

"Gladio, what's that?"

"Ig, now you have to step aside. It's a thirty-feet-tall Venus flytrap, Prompto has fainted and you can't..." Gladio started to say, when Noctis practically threw Prompto at him.

"Gladio, if you hadn't noticed, we've a big problem."

"If you hadn't noticed, we've at least two!" he roared, pointing to Ignis.

"Will you stop?" Groping, Ignis leaned down on Prompto, rummaging in his equipment bag and touching the bottles. "It's a Malboro. We'll need antidotes, adrenaline, salts. Its fetid breath causes poisoning, confusion, sleep, and other annoying effects."

"Great. Ignis, stay here," Gladio ordered. Facing such a beast, able of launching multiple attacks at a distance, would be suicide for Ignis. "Take care of Prompto."

"I'm already taking care of him! But I'm not going to..."

They were reached by a storm of lashes. For such a big beast, it was fucking agile. Gladio and Noctis jumped in. If they had remained calm, it wouldn't have been a worrying opponent; he had defeated Gilgamesh, after all, and a shitty stinking plant couldn't trouble him.

Gilgamesh, however, didn't have a fetid breath that could make him lose consciousness. They attacked him on two sides, careful not to cross and not to crash their swords against each other. He had to keep a distance from the enemy, an arm covering his mouth to breathe the least amount effusion as possible, careful to watch that the Malboro didn't return to emit its toxic cloud. The tentacles, with a range of ten or twelve feet, didn't allow them to approach the monster's body anyway.

Three shots in quick succession exploded less than two feet away from him. A small Malboro – a little shorter than him – gave a shrill cry. Only then did Gladio realize that, in the heat of fighting, neither he nor Noctis had noticed that a dozen other beasts almost identical to the enormous plant had emerged from the marsh and were encircling them.

Still stumbling on his legs, panting, Prompto was already reloading. "There are others! Be careful!"
"Prompto, stay with Ignis!" he shouted, but Malboro Senior was behind him, and Gladio felt the unpleasant sensation of slimy, rotten tentacles that enveloped him around his waist, arms, legs and neck and lifted him up into the air. He panicked. He left his broadsword and clung desperately to the tentacle that clench his throat, pulling, scratching it, trying to loosen the grip on his throat. He wouldn't have died stifled or devoured: at that rate, the Malboro would have simply broken his neck.

But then Noctis pounced on the tentacles. Although boosted by the warping, his blow failed to shred the tentacle around his neck. The grip weakened, fortunately, just enough to allow him to catch some air. He summoned the broadsword again, but couldn't move his arms to wield it.

"That's enough. Gladio, watch out. I'll handle that!"

To Gladio's great horror, Ignis stood before the Malboro. He took from his pocket what looked like a fire flask – one of Silia's, because Noctis hadn't prepared one since they were in Lucis. Gladio couldn't even remember having given it to him. He opened his mouth to shout to him what the fuck he was about to do, since he couldn't move, but Ignis threw the bomb into Malboro's open mouth.

The explosion threw him far away, into a disgusting stink of putrescence and burnt grass. Ironically, the tentacles enveloped around his body protected him from the explosion, which fortunately was not as violent as he had feared. He stood up, in pain, incredulous and upset. Nobody spoke.

He reached Ignis and shoved him. "You're fuckin' crazy. Were you trying to get yourself killed? Were you trying to kill me?"

Ignis simply smiled. "It was a low intensity fire. You weren't the only one to receive a farewell present from Silia. But I am stunned, it was a perfectly stabilized flask. I'll have to call her to express my compliments. And we should order her an arsenal."

He couldn't answer him. He rubbed off a little grime from his face – he felt like throwing up – and turned around so as not to give him another shove.

"C'mon, before something else comes out of the water," Noctis urged them. The small Malboros were on the run and none of them – it seemed – wanted to chase the monsters to engage another battle.

A second fire flask – the very last one he had, low powered as well – blew up the eggs, revealing the entrance to the royal tomb. Noctis used the key received from the Marshal to open it. Gladio feared to find himself in front of another maze of tunnels, but fortunately the Warrior's sarcophagus was there in front of them. Without hesitation, Noctis stretched out his hand to claim what was his.

For a moment, Gladio believed that nothing would happen, that the Old Kings would have perceived Noctis' hesitation and wouldn't bestow him the Katana. Instead the weapon lit up, shattering its stone prison, and penetrated into Noctis like all the others.

The Chosen King turned, challenging him with his eyes. Gladio merely nodded in approval. "Let's go," he simply said, refusing to acknowledge aloud that, after all, if the Old Kings still considered Noctis to be trustworthy, his resolution evidently didn't falter as much as he feared.

"Let's go," Noctis retorted, nodding in turn, without asking for satisfaction.

"Wait!" Ignis stopped them.

"Is everything okay, Ig?" Prompto asked.

Ignis took a deep breath. "It bloody well isn't. I won't go back to that train if we don't face the matter,
now, all together and once and for all. We can't go on like this. First on Magna Fortia, Gladio, you said that if Noctis doesn't wear the Ring, we won't come out alive from Gralea. Well, I can tell you that if we don't cooperate again, we won't even get there." He waited for a reply, but there wasn't any. Gladio felt exhausted and couldn't oppose. "It seems to me that there are two knots to be dissolved. One is about me. My eyesight won't come back, and this can't be helped. Yet I have decided that I will go through with you all to the very end."

Gladio had hoped until then that the difficult clashes inside the quarry would persuade Ignis. "No, I object. Be reasonable, Ignis!"

"Gladio, what the hell is wrong with you?" Prompto yelled, opening his arms. "We'll take care of him!"

"I'm not saying we wouldn't do it, but..."

"Then the choice should be up to him, don't you think? You're trying to impose your point of view again by showing attitude!"

"It's not only his life at stake!"

"I know that perfectly!" Ignis cried. His voice rumbled through the quarry.

Gladio felt emptied. He joined Noctis and laid a hand on his shoulder. "That's fine. The Crystal and the Royal Weapons are his legacy. The time has come for His Majesty to say something about it. D'you agree that Ignis goes on with us in these conditions?"

He thought Ignis would have opposed, but instead he nodded. "Gladio is right. Noct, you are the king. One cannot lead by standing still. A king pushes onward always, accepting the consequences and never looking back. So, the decision is yours."

"But I..."

"Before you answer, Noctis, let me face the second knot with Gladio." He turned to him. "The Warrior has just given Noctis his power, and also the Old Kings whose weapons we retrieved. And so did Titan, Ramuh, Leviathan – three Astrals. Who are you to doubt? Noctis is up to it. He only needs time. When the time comes, he will be ready and will do what he must. You won't have to do it in his place."

"He will be ready," Prompto also said. He smiled. "And when that time comes, we'll all be together. I already told you in Altissia, Gladio: it's not all on your back."

Gladio looked at them for a long time, and they looked at him. He was the oldest of the party, he liked to consider himself mature and sensible, and he cared about the well-being of his friends, yet at that moment they made him feel insensitive, unreasonable, a child who insist on stamping his feet and shouting to be right. Stay focused and don't exacerbate an already tense situation, Silia had advised him the day before, and instead he had demoralized them more than they already were and provoked them to the point of putting one against each other.

"Shit." He crossed his arms. "It seems that I became exactly like my father, after all. Fine. But let's all stay on guard."

"Let's go," Noctis nodded. "All of us."
"E pluribus unum" > "Out of many, one"
Silia and Darius hold a long conversation with Erik Arnaut, the chief of Cape Noah, in order to talk with the Imperial civilians in quarantine. After finding cohesion again, Gladio and the others move on to Gralea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

36

Non vox sed votum

I

Cape Noah was a small settlement of ancient foundation that still retained several traces of Solheim's architecture. In the surroundings there were plenty of ruins – the hunters had thoroughly explored the area without finding traces of royal tombs, though – and over the years the old buildings still standing had been adapted into modern houses. When Niflheim hadn't yet looked out over the sea, and relations between the two countries were friendly, Cape Noah had been a thriving commercial town; the first, inevitably, given its proximity to the Imperial territory, to fall under Niflheim's control without possibility of recovery when the Wall had been withdrawn.

"Cape Noah was one of the first places that the newly formed Kingsglaives tried to regain," she told Darius as they dismounted the bike. Almost nothing in the town had changed, the little she had seen, but her reference inn had disappeared, converted into a Crow's Nest. "It was useless. We started our careers with a debacle. Once it was clear that regaining and especially keeping Cape Noah was impossible, Madame Aubumbrie put forward a wise proposal: the commercial landing which, since the withdrawal of the Wall had been frequented mainly by hunters, would become an outpost of Meldacio subdued to the Empire but led by hunters. The Empire had nothing to say, provided there was a permanent garrison there. The King couldn't do anything but accept, and ordered Drautos to withdraw."

"Yet, it doesn't look like an occupied town," Darius noted, looking around. The simple and unkempt clothing of the Meldacio hunters – leather pants, a short-sleeved T-shirt and a reinforced protective vest – was definitely out of place on him, who continued to stink like a refined Crown Citizen, but the new scars on his arms, the bruises on his knuckles and the hair, now short, mitigated that impression.

"Yeah," she had to agree with him. Several hunters could be seen around, but no magiteks. The chaotic and industrious atmosphere wasn't very different from that of the Meldacio HQ. They would mix easily with the other hunters. "I haven't been here for ten years. I, too, was expecting something different."

"Wasn't it like that in Ambrosia?"

That question surprised her. She shook her head. "Ambrosia was occupied twenty-four years ago."
The first years of the war, despite the magiteks not yet being so cutting-edge, were the most ferocious. Think of Keycatrich. When the Imperials entered Ambrosia, after defeating all resistance, both the local and the forces put in place by King Regis, they implemented a fierce policy of repression." They had talked for a long time, during the hours on the motorbike, and even more when they had camped for the night near Lake Vesper and the alcohol had melted their tongues. Now that they were at Cape Noah, in the midst of a mission, Silia had no intention of thinking of her father or of talking about him. "C'mon, let's get to work."

She pulled out her cell phone and texted Boris, Ghiranze's informant. Before talking to the local authorities – she had never spoken to Beatrix Thorley, whom Meldacio had put in charge of Cape Noah ten years ago – she wanted more information.

The cell phone rang not even twenty seconds later. Ghiranze told me you'd get here. See you at the Crow's Nest.

Boris, it turned out, was a Meldacio hunter in his forties. Blond hair already streaked with gray, a strapping guy with unkempt beard. He greeted them warmly, inviting them to join him at his table as if he had met two old friends, evidently to do a little scene for the other patrons. Someone just turned to look at them, but immediately returned to his occupations without apparently considering them worthy of further interest.

Once they were seated, he held his hand tightly to both of them. "You must be Hartwood," he whispered. He had a prominent scar under his right eye. "And Magnus. Ghiranze told me why you came."

Silia wondered how much Ghiranze had told Boris. If that washed-out mannequin had uttered a single wrong syllable, she would come back to find him and teach him the lesson she hadn't taught him in Prairie.

"What exactly did Ghiranze tell you?" Darius asked, stiff, evidently animated by the same sentiments.

The hunter winked at them. "Not that much, easy, guys. Ghiranze holds a lot of his professional information secret, that's why I occasionally give him some info on how we do here in Cape Noah. But before authorizing him to use my name and to give you my number, I wanted to know who would come to look for me." He looked at both of them. "Two hunters who gave him information to write an article about the fall of Insomnia, he told me, and who in turn want information about what's happening beyond the sea. I've some brain, you know, so I've been content with his answer." He lowered his voice even more. "You want to talk to the Imperial civilians in quarantine, don't you?"

Silia nodded. Perhaps, after all, she wouldn't smash Ghiranze's mouth.

"The twenty-two people are still isolated in the air fortress just outside the town. No one else turned out to be infected for the time being. The Imperial authorities here at Cape Noah will send them home at the end of the security period, or so they say. If you want my two gils, they'll never get there alive."

Darius crossed his arms. "What do you mean?"

Boris looked around to make sure no one was watching or listening to them. "You haven't seen what happened on the day of the landing. The Imperials have pretty much fomented the citizens against the refugees. And, shit, there are eight children among them. The crowd didn't slaughter them just because Arnout got between them."
"Arnaut? Erik Arnaut?" Silia blinked. "Tall, red-haired, about forty-five?"

"Him," Boris confirmed. "He took over from Thorley when she died."

"Hartwood, don't tell me you know him."

Arnaut had been part of the resistance in Cape Noah when the Kingsglaives had fought to tear off the outpost from the Empire, but Silia had no intention of talking about it before Boris. Arnaut hadn't fought on the front line, but from him and other hunters they had had precious blows about the forces fielded by Niflheim to control Cape Noah, and at last he had agreed to escort her and her squad, in charge of the sabotage of one of the Imperial bases, inside the fortress. He had some good skills in combat, but it was evident that he had never dealt with a last-generation MA. Although they had pulled him out alive after blowing up the base, Arnaut hadn't been particularly pleased with the retreat of the Glaives. On the eve of their departure, in that same room – where at the time they would eat and above all drink much better – he had told her that the King was abandoning Cape Noah for the second time. Silia was in a foul mood for the humiliation suffered by the Glaives and her left arm was broken in two places. She hadn't been able to reply. After swearing for a quarter of an hour, Arnaut had looked at her, ordered two more beers, and told her to hurry up, drink her beer, and get the hell out because he was feeling like fucking and she was half his years.

"I know him," she replied evasively to Darius.

"And is it good or bad news?" Darius asked cautiously.

"Good, I think. Arnaut is okay." Right after she had said it, Silia realized that in ten years many things could have changed and that even Titus Drautos had seemed much more than okay to King Regis and not just him. Moreover, even if they had left on good terms, three quarters of Lucians still spat on the ground when they heard about Kingsglaives, so she wasn't at all certain that he would receive her in a friendly way. "He was. Is he still okay, Boris?"

"He drinks too much, but apart from that he's a decent man. I wouldn't want to be in his shoes. Since the Meldacio has more or less openly sided with the Kingdom, the ground's burning up under his feet."

Darius looked at Boris, then at her. "They're going to bump him off, you mean?"

The hunter shrugged. "Arnaut did a good job here. Or at least continued Beatrix Thorley's good job, which was to keep the citizens quiet, the hunters and the Imperial garrison without incidents. But he's a man of Madame Auburnbrie, and Madame Auburnbrie is no longer persona grata."

"How many Imperials are there?"

"A score of officers and sixty-four magiteks. The most of them are on standby, but ready to take action in case of unrest."

"Not so many," Darius noted.

Boris stiffened. "It's been years, here, that we have patiently tolerated the Imperials who, in turn, do nothing more serious than go around eating and drinking for free."

Silia realized that they had gone too far. "We're not here for the garrison. As soon as we have managed to talk to the refugees, we'll take our leave."

"It's not to me that you've to address for that," Boris retorted, still on the defensive. "If you want to meet Arnaut, by now you'll find him in his office at the local Meldacio office, with a half-empty
bottle on his desk. Go back to the main road, turn left at the first intersection and look for the two-
floor building with the mission bulletin board. But don't hope too much that he'll accept to help you."

II

They easily found the building. Just as easily they were allowed to pass as they showed their
Meldacio's credit cards and said they intended to take care of the Royalisk, the most urgent and
dangerous hunt mission available at the time, and that they wanted information from Erik Arnaut,
who had put the bounty on the beast.

The man at the reception said something into the intercom and Arnaut agreed to receive them in his
office on the second floor. Nobody accompanied them, no one in sight in the hallway.

It was Arnaut himself who opened the door when they knocked at his office. He looked older than
the ten years they hadn't met. The red of his hair hadn't yet given way to gray, but had faded into a
rosy blonde. His beard indeed was beginning to show traces of gray, and he had more wrinkles and
scars on his face. He was holding an unlit cigarillo in his mouth.

"Hi, Arnaut."

In the space of a moment, the expression of the man crumpled like a sheet of tinfoil. He closed the
office door in her face.

"I see you always leave a nice memory of you."

"Shut up, Darius." Silia knocked again. "By Odin's cock, Arnaut, don't be such an asshole. We
haven't met for ten years."

"Too few," he replied, but he opened the door again. "You haven't grown a fucking inch. I already
know I'll regret it, but what the hell are you doing here, Hartwood? Did you come to say 'hello' to
your Niff friends?"

After all, it seemed Arnaut still didn't love the Empire too much. Good to know. "No, I know they're
your friends now," she provoked him. "I'm always with Lucis. I come on behalf of the Immortal."

"Shout it out louder, why don't you?" Arnaut moved aside to let them in. He looked at her from head
to toe again. "Fuck, Hartwood, thought you were all dead at Insomnia, you Glaives."

"Almost. I'm the only one left."

"What luck. What brings you to the bloody furthest corner of Lucis?"

"Always the same reason: war."

"Is there another one? The war between Lucis and Niflheim turns out to be over on May 16th."

"For you, maybe."

Arnaut shifted his examination to Darius. "What about him? Is he your boyfriend, Hartwood? Or a
simple unfortunate victim you involved in one of your low-profile missions?"

"An unfortunate victim," Darius introduced himself by stretching his hand. Arnaut took it
unconvinced. "But I wasn't involved by her. Darius Magnus. A Crownguard from Insomnia."

"Is that so? Sit down," he invited, introducing them to a second room. He pointed to two chairs in
front of a huge mahogany desk. "I'm curious to know what the Immortal wants from me."
They sat. "Actually, I thought I would find Beatrix Thorley. What happened to her?" Silia asked, lighting a cigarette without asking for permission.

He didn't protest. "She died two years ago."

"Did the Niffs get rid of her?"

"No. People also die of illness, Hartwood. She threw up blood and a piece of her lung. Even your Glaive tricks couldn't have helped, I guess. Too bad, she was a good woman."

"So now you're at the head of this outpost? Did the other hunters refuse to give their ass to the Imperials?"

At that zinger, Arnaut resented. He tapped a hand on the desk top. "Hartwood, I haven't yet kicked you out of my office and from Cape Noah 'cause I haven't forgotten that you saved my life. But I won't accept that a Kingsglaive accuses me of collaborationism. You sold Insomnia to Iedolas Aldercapt."

"I haven't sold anything to anyone."

"Worse still. You let those who sold Insomnia to Iedolas Aldercapt use you as a fool."

"Arnaut, another word and I swear I'll cut your tongue off and I'll put it in your..."

This time it was Darius who gave a dry slap on the desk. "I'm sorry to interrupt your affectionate rendezvous, but we don't have time for this. Arnaut, we all know what the Kingsglaives have done, but Hartwood, though as pleasant as a cactuar up your ass, has the trust of the Immortal and Madame Auburnbrie."

Arnaut grinned in Darius' direction. "Oh, I don't doubt it, or she wouldn't go around waving so lightly the name of the fifth most sought-after person in all Lucis. In any case, I should have known that between my phone call with Auburnbrie and hers with Marshal Leonis, the time of a fart would have passed. Nice work, Madame Auburnbrie. She puts me in charge of this powder keg with the precise responsibility of keeping me neutral. You know what I think about the Empire, Hartwood, but I accepted because I was born here and I'm fond of this place. I manage the outpost as best I can, mediating with the Niffs, and believe me, it's like walking on tiptoe over Jabberwocks' wide open mouths, then Insomnia falls and Madame Auburnbrie sets her mind to support the claims of Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum, even putting a bounty on a big shot of the Imperial army. Result? The Jabberwocks' jaws are closing on my balls. What the fuck does the Immortal want from me right now? No, wait," he interrupted them with a peremptory gesture, "don't tell me. I bet it's no coincidence that you've showed up here three days after the landing of the Imperial civilians."

Judging by Arnaut's yap, Boris was wrong: the opaque bottle on the desk must already be empty. "We want to talk to the quarantined people, in fact."

"Sure. Do you also want me to put a fire flask in my ass and remove the safe?"

"Arnaut, it's important. Do you have any idea about what the arrival of a refugee boat from Niflheim means?"

"Of course: a sea of shit, Magnus," he replied simply. "By playing with daemons, the Niffs have ended up doing something so huge that even civilians have noticed it. Let me guess, the Immortal hopes to discover something that can be exploited for the benefit of Lucis. But I can't see his army. D'you want to wage war on Niflheim again with hunters, laborers and a handful of Crownsguards? Oh," he snapped his fingers. "I forgot you have a Kingsglaive. This changes everything indeed."
Silia gave him the finger. Despite everything, she was glad to be dealing with an Erik Arnaut and not with a Camelia Clastra. They spoke the same language, and she wouldn't need to mince words.

"What about the refugees? Have others turned out to be infected?"

"No. But that doesn't mean the remaining twenty-two are safe. The Imperial garrison has tried in every way to stir the citizens of Cape Noah against them."

"They want to get rid of them without too much noise before the refugees can spread the word about what's happening to Graela," Darius deduced.

"Correct. So my position, right now, is even more troublesome. I managed to get them to put out only the infected civilians and to isolate the others in quarantine, but now the Niffs want my head."

"Did you get to know something before the Niffs brought them in quarantine?"

Arnaut looked out the window. "I already said everything I know – and what I suppose – to Madame Auburnbrie."

"Disappeared villages, hundreds of daemons and a horde of monsters is not enough. Where do they keep the refugees?"

"In a base just out of town, very similar to the one we infiltrated together ten years ago, Hartwood. I've sent some hunters there to keep company with the Niffs on watch; an unnecessary precaution, because if the Imperials decide to place a bomb and then declare later that it was a citizen of Cape Noah frightened by the contagion, there's little I can do."

"If we wiped out the whole Imperial garrison..." Darius began to say.

"If you wiped out the whole Imperial garrison," Arnaut interrupted him, "it would be open war with Niflheim and, as Hartwood knows, we are so close to the Imperial territory that if you come down to the port and spit, you'll probably hit the forehead of a Niff in Cape Esther."

"You're right. It's so much better to stay here emptying bottles, waiting for the Imperial garrison to receive from Graela the order to take off your chair and your ass. And Cape Noah from the Meldacio, of course."

A cold silence descended on the room.

"Hartwood," Arnaut hissed, his jaw so stiff that she could almost hear the grinding of his teeth, "get the fuck out of here. The both of you," he pointed out, gesturing toward Darius.

Darius stood up before she could reply. He addressed one of his most enchanting smiles to Arnaut. "Arnaut, I wouldn't want to add more pressure to your already burdened back, but I would like to remind you just one thing: Hartwood has been more gracious than her usual, but we don't really need your cooperation. We could just get out of this office, kill the whole Imperial garrison and interrogate the civilians."

"Arnaut, please," Silia warned him, pulling half of the sword out of her scabbard before Arnaut could pull up his rifle from under the desk. "Do we really have to get so far?"

Arnaut stared at her, then at Darius, then flung the rifle to the floor with an exasperated gesture. "Fuck you," he exclaimed in a low voice. "Fuck you. In the end you're all the same, aren't ya? Niflheim, Lucis, Meldacio. You only have your fucking war in mind."

"Once, you had it well in mind too," she reminded him. She stood up too, her hand still gripped
around the handle of the half-drawn sword. "I can't blame you if you tried to protect Cape Noah, but that wasn't peace, nor it is now, and if we let the Empire, it will never be." She turned to Darius. His reference to her graciousness was a veiled accusation of lack of decision, but she was sure that Cor, in her same circumstances, would have tried to field all the alternatives before acting sword-in-hand endangering civilians. "Darius, I'm about to tell him something I shouldn't tell to an alcoholic blather. Get out of that door, if this doesn't suit you."

Darius sighed. "I'll stay. I hope you know what you're doing."

_I too hope I do._ "Arnaut, if you spread what I'm about to tell you, it'll be panic. But I suppose that sooner or later everybody will know. Princess Lunafreya Nox Fleuret has died in Altissia. The High Chancellor of the Empire killed her."

Arnaut wasn't impressed. "Is this one of the Immortal's tricks? The Empire took the Oracle back into custody. Why would they get rid of her?"

"Because the Princess was awakening the Astrals to help the Prince against Niflheim."

"It was the Empire that allowed her ritual in Altissia!"

"To eliminate the danger – Leviathan – once and for all. They fear another accident like the one in 745, when Shiva attacked Niflheim."

Arnaut looked at Darius. It was evident that he was desperately trying not to believe them. Suddenly, Silia was glad she had met Dino Ghiranze in Prairie. Most people didn't know shit, and every person who had let himself be convinced by his article, once out, would have been a person stolen from the clutches of the Empire.

"If the Oracle is dead, then the Starscourge..."

Darius merely nodded. "It is like that."

"Holy shit." Arnaut rubbed his face, then looked around lost. "Lend me your lighter, Hartwood."

She handed it to him, preparing herself to give the finishing blow. "You said we only have war in our mind. You're right. But this war is now much more important than it was a few months ago. It's no longer a purely territorial issue. The survival of the human race is at stake. Niffs have been playing with daemons for at least thirty years, but now there's no longer an Oracle to stop the spread of the Scourge. Twenty-six refugees arrived from Gralea and four were infected. Tomorrow, fifty-two of them could come, half of them being infected. The day after tomorrow two hundred people could come, all of them infected. And even if you blew all the barges in sight, the Plasmodium spreads by air; a storm, a breath of wind, and we would find ourselves with dozens of new outbreaks in Lucis. We need to know if and when something like that is going to happen."

Arnaut was deadly pale. He didn't answer.

"The Crystal and the last heir of the Lucis Caelums could be the key, if not to annihilate the Scourge, at least to prevent Aldercapt from spreading it further through his experiments," Silia went on. "The Crystal is in Gralea, and that's where Darius and I are heading. But before going to Gralea we want to know as much as possible, even if only to be able to give the Immortal information in the event that our trip to Niflheim is one way. I've already disappointed you once, Arnaut, when I told you that the Gaives would have taken over Cape Noah and that they would have allowed Lucis to win the war. I was an arrogant bitch of eighteen, but now I'm not, and I won't again make the mistake of promising you things that are not in my power. I can't tell you we will win this war. I can't tell you
Cape Noah will come out unscathed. I can't tell you we will save the human race. I can only tell you that I'll talk to those fucking Imperial civilians one way or another, because it's in everyone's best interest, and that if you give me a hand there will be fewer victims, if nothing at all."

Arnaut didn't answer for a long moment, then he jerked. Both she and Darius mechanically moved their hands over their holsters, but the man just took the bottle on the table and put off the cigarillo in the ashtray.

"Hartwood, I knew I would regret it. Where you are, there's trouble." Arnaut seemed to have lost all his boldness, even in his voice. He took a long swig, and Silia would have liked to join him, but it wasn't the right time. "Do whatever the fuck you want. Enter the base and talk to those people. But if you must do it, at least try to give Cape Noah as much time as possible with Niflheim."

"Time," Silia repeated. "We'd also need time."

"You will have time," Darius said, "if word spreads that the Prince of Insomnia has sabotaged the Imperial base near Cape Noah."

It seemed that while she and Arnaut were busy monologuing in turn, Darius had thought. Arnaut looked at Darius and tapped a finger on his right temple. "Has your friend gone mad?"

"Darius? No. He just has a brain that works more nicely than mine and yours put together. Spit out the plan, buddy."

Darius smiled. "We sabotage the base and take the refugees out. Even if they had been infected a minute before you took them up, it's three days now. The Starscourge has a course that varies according to the individual, but fast. If nobody has turned into a daemon or is throwing up black pus, they can go where they want without reasonably posing a danger to anyone."

"And what about this story of the Prince of Insomnia?"

"The Prince of Insomnia and his retinue have sabotaged Imperial bases for two months. The Niffs of the garrison will do a lot of questioning around. They will activate the magiteks. They will patrol the area. They will raise their voices, yeah. Maybe they will accuse you of favoring him, because of the position of the Meldacio, and that's why I'm afraid we'll have to stun your hunters at the base, but I can't think of anything better."

"You two are insane." Arnaut slumped wearily against the back of his chair.

Moreover, she thought, if the Niffs think the Prince in Cape Noah sabotaging Imperial bases, they won't know he's in Niflheim. "Darius, did I tell you how happy I am that you came with me?"

"Three times."

"How can you make people believe that the attack is Prince's job? Will you shout it in a megaphone while you're fighting?" Arnaut had returned to making pitiful jokes. Good sign.

"Not us. The Imperial refugees will shout it as they escape from the base. Your hunters will repeat it tomorrow. The Niffs will also believe it. We'll be so discreet and fast that, as far as they will understand, Somnus Lucis Caelum himself might have stunned them."

Arnaut had to take another sip from his bottle before he could speak. "If you harm a hair on my hunters, Hartwood, I'll come and harm your neck, should it be the last thing I do."

"You have our word of honor," Silia promised. "You'll find them a little smacked, but safe and
almost sound."

"And what are you planning to do with the Imperial civilians later?" Arnaut wanted to know.

"After learning what we are interested in, we'll help them to disperse in the woods. I'm sure Madame Auburnbrie will find a safe place somewhere where they can settle."

"You said you don't have time to waste. Let me handle this. How long will it take for you to sabotage the base?"

Silia looked at Darius. "Fifteen minutes?" she smiled.

"Don't be so fucking braggart, Hartwood." Arnaut stood up, scratching the back of his neck furiously. "Let me talk to Madame Auburnbrie. If all goes well, you'll find some men ready to take over the civilians and a safe passage to Cape Esther for you."

Silia opened and closed her mouth twice. "A safe passage?"

"Don't gasp like a bass. You said you were going to Gralea. Unless you wanted to swim, you need a silent boat and someone who can pilot it at nighttime up to Niflheim. I know that man."

"That would have been the last part of our long bargaining. You anticipated us, Arnaut."

"I had no doubt. However, don't call it 'bargaining', Hartwood. A bargain entails benefits for both parties, and I will only have trouble with it. Call it a dirty moral blackmail."

"Call it whatever you want," Darius cut off. "Just remember, Arnaut, if you're planning some dirty trick in order to save your ass and your place, I can promise you'll pay for it after we'll finish dealing with the Niffs. Do I make myself clear?"

Arnaut waved his hand as if he didn't give a shit about Darius' mistrust. "You made your point, man. Just to be as clear as you've been: if I were planning something, you would have had the Niffs already on you ten minutes ago. As a matter of fact, I don't like Niffs."

"Arnaut won't play any dirty tricks," Silia pointed out. "Because if he does, he knows perfectly I'll use his balls for earrings."

Arnaut whistled. "Oh my, you're really way more gracious than ten years ago. Last time we met you said to me that, hadn't I watched my fucking mouth, I would have found my own dick in my mouth and my tongue in my ass. By the way, Hartwood, you're not half my age anymore."

"I'm not, but I still can do what I promised ten years ago. Let's go, Darius, let the man do his job. Perhaps we can shoot down that Royalisk for free while we wait for the night."

III

Despite their good will and their renewed cohesion, the journey to Gralea didn't proceed immediately. The stop of the Magna Fortia at Cartanica station, which they took advantage of to retrieve the Royal Arm in the quarry of Fodina Caestino, was scheduled for five hours, but the train, amidst the complaints and the discontent of the passengers, remained there for ten. The sun, they noted with dismay, already set at five-thirty in the afternoon, and this despite being August.

After getting cleaned up in the train hotel car and wearing fresh clothes, they took a walk and stopped to eat at the station restaurant. Less fearful of betraying themselves, now that they were again focused on the mission and not on their bad moods, they looked around and kept an ear on people's
The Magna Fortia, it turned out, was half empty because everyone thought Gralea was "no longer safe" and none of the travelers was going to the Capital for pleasure. Not only did the Starscourge afflict Niflheim as well, they learned, but it seemed that mass demonifications were increasing more and more, as confirmed by the early sunset. It was at least a week, a man in suit and tie sipping a whiskey told to the barman, that Emperor Aldercapt didn't issue statements about it; indeed, he hadn't been showing in public or on TV, and all the declarations he had released wanted to sell to the people that military experiments and mass disappearances were not connected. The barman replied that, with all he had heard, he wouldn't go to Gralea even under payment. The man in suit and tie answered with a grimace that indeed his company didn't pay him enough.

In the restroom, while he was washing his hands, Gladio listened to an interesting conversation. "Everything has gone to hell since we lost half of the fleet in Altissia. Aldercapt went out of his mind," a man in a queue to use the bathroom was saying to another. "In my opinion he lit such a burning fire under Minister Besithia's ass that the research labs let themselves get carried. What the fuck does he still want? Lucis is bent. Altissia is destroyed. Tenebrae is subjugated. And after all, what we'll get for it?" His interlocutor, horrified, looked around and placed his suspicious gaze on Gladio, who continued to wash his hands, pretending not to listen. "Will you shut up?" he hissed. "No," the first man answered. "I'm gonna ask to be transferred to Accordo, if we can get into the city. Gralea is under martial law, even if nobody says it openly."

"I, too, had the same impression," Prompto declared when Gladio met him and told him what he had heard. "A little while ago I was taking pictures of the view from the bridge, and I overheard a conversation. A woman said she had no news from her sister who lives in North Gralea. Seems that the Ministry has put the west and north suburbs of the city in quarantine and that there is no news of the people who live there. She also said that Gralea Publishing, the newspaper of the Capital widespread in all the Imperial territory, hasn't been coming out for a week."

Noctis and Ignis, who had gone together to make stock, came back with the coup de grace: Ravus Nox Fleuret had been arrested and sentenced to death for high treason after the events in Altissia. Although the humiliation he had suffered from the High Commander still stung - or perhaps because of this very reason - Gladio couldn't feel any pleasure at the news.

"It was him who gave order to retreat the army," Ignis explained. "And he was declared the sole responsible for the massive casualties. It may be true, but news has been manipulated again; everyone believes that Leviathan has been eliminated. Listening to people's conversations, I had the confirmation that Emperor Aldercapt has full control of the media and has been using them for thirty years to brainwash his subjects. No one is particularly enthusiastic about the war, I believe, but they see it as second-rate news that has no major impact on their lives, since the human infantry has been replaced by the magiteks."

Noctis murmured something almost inaudible. Spurred to repeat, he said full of shame. "The same thing happened to Insomnia. Nobody was interested in the war any more, apart from my father, the Council, the Royal Chancery, Marshal Leonis and the Kingsglaives. That's what happens when you let someone fight for you." Nobody could contradict him. "I don't know what will happen in Gralea," he resumed, "but now I'm ready to fight my own war."

Gladio smiled. The fierce pride he felt hearing Noctis utter those words dispelled a little worry. "Our war," he corrected him, winking. "You know what? Perhaps, after all, not all evils come to harm. If the army has headaches with daemons in Gralea, maybe they'll be too busy to look after us."

"Or maybe," Ignis answered with a grim voice, "we'll be too busy with what keeps the army busy to
be able to infiltrate."

Just after eight o'clock at night, finally, the speakers announced that the delay of the Magna Fortia was due to the impossibility of contacting the central station of Gralea, probably due to trivial problems with the lines, and that the train would have continued anyway. The news convinced many passengers not too enthusiastic to stop in Cartanica; the isolation of the Capital was another cone of shadow on an already nebulous and worrisome situation.

Thus the train, even more empty, entered the heart of the Empire. They no longer could see the sea – it was too dark – but the gaunt lighting outside revealed hours after a paradoxical sight: sand dunes and expanses of ice side by side. They were about to enter the eternal snow region.

"Eusciello," Ignis said when they described the disquieting landscape. "It's been like this since the Empire killed Shiva in 745. We should go through the Ghorovas Rift bridge soon, and you'll see the Glacian's body still in the ice."

But the last thing Gladio saw, before drifting off without any warning, was a disturbing snow front.

Chapter End Notes

"Non vox sed votum" > "Not a voice, but a wish"
Ab occidente calamitas

Chapter Summary

Silia and Darius manage to infiltrate the Imperial base near Cape Noah. They had hoped to learn from the Imperial civilians something that could help them in Gralea, but things across the sea seem worse than what they had expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

So, I apologize for the delay, but I can't keep pace with a weekly update anymore. Again, this is a Silia-and-Darius-centric chapter. It's quite slow, I am afraid, but I really care about paving the way to the infiltration in Gralea. Next chapter, I swear, will focus again on Prince Noctis' retinue.

The end of the second period of the story is very near. I can now assume that the total of chapters will be around 50, although I will publish afterwards a few short 'extras' that will tell the story of some original characters, or some missing scenes I couldn't add before for a matter of internal coherence or length of the chapters. I hope you enjoyed Pro aris et focis so far and that you'll keep on reading until the end.

37

Ab occidente calamitas

I

The military base just outside Cape Noah was a medium-sized air fortress. Silia had lost count of all those she had infiltrated during the war. Darius had sabotaged two of them with Irwin, Adrian and Devan, so it wasn't a new experience for him either. They pulled over in the near bush, hidden in the shadows, waiting for the agreed time to begin the operation.

"How can you be so sure that your friend Arnaut won't betray us?" Darius whispered, on his knees beside her. He didn't like the hunter, it was obvious.

"I'm not sure of anything or anyone. Don't make me name Titus Drautos."

"Yet, you gave him a lot of information."

"That the Empire already knows, in case Arnaut decides to divulge them."

"The Empire knows we are heading to Niflheim as well?"

She didn't answer him.

"I'm not crazy about it, because the more I know you, the more I think you're out of your mind, but you're leading this operation, Hartwood," Darius whispered again. She heard him sigh with tight lips. "And you don't trust anyone, but I trust you."

Silia smiled, turning her head slightly so he couldn't see her. "I hope so, otherwise we won't go very
far into the Imperial territory. We'll have to rely a lot on improvisation."

"Right now let's just get through this. The magitek generator is that totem with red lights, right?"

She nodded. "Correct. In the bases where you've been it wasn't operational yet. It gives energy to the fortress and the magiteks. It must be destroyed, if we want put the base out of commission."

"It doesn't seem to be such a low-profile action, as you boasted with Arnaut just before."

"If you blow it up with a fire flask, you're right. But if you know exactly where to stick the tip of the sword and how to move it, the generator is deactivated without too much noise." She waited for a dirty joke that didn't come. Darius was focused. A good time to tell him what she had in mind before they went to the base. "Don't tell me to fuck off for what I'm about to say. We must not harm the hunters. But there'll be three Imperial guards as well. Are you sure you can do it?"

"Pardon?"

"You've been talking for hours about wiping out the garrison. But they're not just magiteks. They're not dangerous animals. They're not daemons. How many people have you killed in your life, Darius?"

Darius took a few seconds to answer, and he did so in a poisonous voice. "You know what, Hartwood? Fuck you."

She ignored his insult, checking her watch. "Three minutes to go. Darius, if you're not perfectly sure you can do it, leave the humans to me and take care of the magiteks. Hesitate, and you'll find a large caliber bullet in your head. Or I'll find it in my head."

She turned to look at him. Darius' face was in the shade, so she couldn't decipher his expression. "I'll do what is necessary, Hartwood."

Silia nodded. "I just wanted to be sure. If you have the chance, you can just stun them, but make sure you do it right. Two minutes."

Both watches, perfectly synchronized, beeped when eleven o'clock came. They didn't need to talk; they snapped out of the bush and ran towards the east walls of the base. Darius leaned down with cupped hands to give her the leap and allow her to cling to the edge. Before lifting herself up, Silia gave a quick glance – no one in sight. She pulled herself up, flattened on the walkway, and seized Darius' hand to pull him up too. They remained silent, in the shadows, analyzing the situation and memorizing the times and the patrols of the magiteks. Only twenty-three of the sixty-four estimated by Boris were active. Three surveillance lights projected a cone of light that moved following an apparently random pattern. No MA in sight – which didn't mean there wasn't any inactive somewhere.

Among the warehouses that had to contain weapons and military vehicles, they identified one well-guarded by five people at the northeast corner of the base: two hunters and three Imperials, just as Arnaut had told them. The first watch of the night.

"The isolation container is there," she whispered.

"I've seen it. Let's jump down and hide behind that crate."

"On my three. One," the nearest patrolling magitek turned. "Two," the magitek began to move away. "Three!" she hissed, when they were out of sight.
They had agreed to clean up the base by aiming at one magitek at a time, dragging it into the shadow if possible, knocking it down and then hiding its body, or alternatively attacking two of them when they moved side by side and it was impossible to do otherwise. No room for errors, they both knew it, no second chance, and they made good use of the one they had. They made their way with speed, coordination, precision and above all silence, avoiding the cones of the searchlights, up to a large armored truck.

"Eleven," Silia whispered, leaning her back on one of the huge wheels of the vehicle and pushing the decapitated body of the last magitek under the truck with her foot. From there they could glimpse both the entrance to the isolation structure and the generator. "Area 1, clear. No alarms. All perfect."

"Now the hard part." Darius raised his head in the direction of the generator, releasing his semiautomatic from the holster. "Come on, I'll cover your back from here. Run to the base of the generator and do what you need to dismantle it quickly."

"No." Silia unhooked her backpack, opened the zip and pulled out a couple of flasks. She checked that the safety was properly inserted and put them in the pockets of her jacket, just in case of need. "You said you're ready to do what is necessary. Soon the magiteks that we haven't eliminated will notice the anomalies in the patrol schemes and will raise the alarm. Let's optimize time and risks. You'll take care of the guards of the Imperial civilians while I put the generator out."

"One day this shameless boldness of yours will kill you, Hartwood."

"I like more optimization of risks," she smiled. "When the generator goes out, hunters and Imperial guards will get distracted. It will be the right time to strike. Shoot them in the head or attack them. It's up to you, Darius."

Darius didn't get involved in her attempt to mitigate the tension. "It's not them who worry me. The other magiteks will come to the generator, them and the MA's if there are any, and you will find them all on you. What if they had a machine gun? We don't have time to lift all the tarps and check all the guard posts to make sure."

"And if so? You can't cover my back from a machine gun. Don't worry about it. If I smell shit, I'll take cover. If we both do what we have to do quickly and well, nothing will happen." She touched his knee. "By the way, last chance to get back, man."

He slapped her hand away. "Hartwood, this is the last time I'll tell you it's all right. Next time I'll smash your face and leave you here."

Silia smiled, without getting offended, and raised her hands in an apologetic gesture. "I'm going. Good luck."

Darius didn't answer. With a last nod, he turned and walked away to the isolation structure. Silia didn't have time to see how he was doing. She slipped behind a container, looked around to make sure the area was clear, and kept moving towards the generator. Three magiteks were on guard, she saw. A rifleman and two swordsman. They were stationary in place and there was no way to deal with them one at a time. Her only consolation was that, if they had spotted her, Darius would have an easy time with the guards at the isolation container.

She had no intention of giving that noble swanky an easy time. She aimed at the rifleman – who was partially giving her his back – snapped, clung to his waist with her knees and beheaded him. One of the swordsman attacked, but Silia threw the body of his companion on him and hurled one of her two swords under the chin of the other, the only area left exposed by the armor. She grabbed the helmet of the first swordsman, overturned him and stuck her sword behind his neck, then jumped to
give the coup de grace to the other.

The area is clear.

Silia looked around and counted up to three before jumping on one of the rectangular panels protruding from the generator and leaning on the support of the diffusion crown, being careful not to touch it, or she would have found herself on the ground with her internal organs fried. One of the Glaives, Meredith of Squad 2, was a genius able to hack the defensive systems of the Imperial bases. Ordinary mortals like her, on the other hand, had had to learn to sabotage the generators thanks to the information from the only Insomnia war lab, which in turn owed virtually all its discoveries to the samples recovered from the Glaives.

Here, that bastard Drautos had explained to them directing the laser pointer on the screen, it's not particularly complicated: to stop the power supply, it's enough to destroy the diffusion crown. A medium-powered flask would suffice to blow up the crown, but as I will never tire of remembering you, you can't always solve everything with an explosion. Drautos had looked precisely in her direction. You must learn to reduce risks. Discretion is often your best weapon, if not your silver bullet. You have swords: use them on these. He had pointed to some iron cables that clearly led the energy generated by the diffusion crown to the rest of the power supply. You cut the conductor, the power goes out. Simple and clean. Nyx, at that point, had raised his hand and gave voice to the question that everyone had thought: Captain, with all due respect, how can we be sure that this device won't explode in our face? Drautos had frowned. Cut off the cables without touching the diffusion crown and none of you will blow up.

Silia didn't blow up. Keeping to the ledges where the cables were channeled, continuing to look at her own back for fear that other magiteks would come and use her as a target shooting, she moved sideways from one panel to the other, destroying the cables with quick slices. When she had cut twelve out of fifteen, the generator simply went out, and she found herself in the dark, just as, for a few moments, the whole base. Then, predictably, some small emergency generators turned on. She jumped down and flattened herself against the support of the generator.

"What's happening?" she heard. Alarmed tone. One of the hunters, probably.

"The generator turned off."

"A failure?"

"Necessarily."

"Our generators do not fail," an annoyed voice said. "I'm going to s..."

Silia took out the second sword and ran to give Darius assistance.

* 

Darius had done very well even for himself, she found out with relief. The Imperial guards were on the ground. Two of them, if they weren't dead, didn't have very long. One had his throat cut, the second a gash in his back; as for the third, Darius was twisting his arms behind his back. The hunters were unconscious, or so she hoped.

"Help me tie them up," he told her as she approached, forcing the man's head to the ground. "We leave this one alive so he will tell his bloody comrades what the Prince of Insomnia does to those who have devastated Lucis. Did you understand me, asshole?" he said, bending on him. "We are from the Prince of Insomnia's retinue. Tell your buddies." With a dry gesture, he crashed his head to
"Are you sure he'll be still able to talk to someone?" she asked, looking around for something to tie the hunters and the Imperial. She pulled down some plasticized steel cables from one of the containers and threw them to Darius. Just by scruple, she bent to feel the pulse of the two Imperials – dead – and the third – alive, even if he had his right temple cracked against the asphalt paving panel and she honestly didn't know what conditions he would wake up in. The hunters were alive as well. "Great job, Darius."

"I was forced to do it," he justified himself, tense, confirming that he had never killed a man. "I wasn't fast enough, and they were about to raise the alarm."

"It's okay," she said casually, to reassure him without giving the idea of wanting to do it. The first time she had killed an Imperial in the flesh, Silia had experienced an unexpected and ferocious euphoria. *One down,* she remembered thinking, *one down of those bastards who killed my father and invaded my home.* When the battle was over, she had returned to look at the corpse with the ripped chest, and had remained watching it until the Captain had ordered the retreat. She had bragged with her teammates of her first murder, of the first Niff bastard she had got rid of. Then the night had come and she had woken up screaming. "It's all right, Darius. Let's free the civilians."

Darius was sweating. In the light of the neon, she could see thin drops trembling on the tips of his hair and sliding down his temples as he tied one of the hunters, a woman in her thirties. Since he had left Insomnia he'd had many experiences on the field, but he hadn't seen yet what she and her comrades had seen on the front, and the Marshal as well, and now also the Prince and Gladio and their friends were seeing. It was right that Darius saw him, if he wanted to overcome his own limits, and Silia had every intention of bringing him back in one piece to Orior after having shown it to him.

She turned to the container, from which the Imperial refugees, alarmed by the sounds of struggle and gunfire, had begun to shout, demanding to be released.

II

The base behind them now looked like an empty shell in the dark. It was one o'clock in the morning, and if luck had assisted them, the garrison of Niffs in Cape Noah would have taken hours – the change of guard was at six, Arnaut had said – to realize that the magitek generator was deactivated and that something wasn't right. They led the group along the paths of the woods, as agreed, advancing more and more in the deep – the men along the sides of the column, the women and children in the middle. Darius took good care of the only daemon they crossed, a Jotun, even before civilians could even notice the threat.

That was the first time she had met Imperial civilians. They had come out of the container prudently, the women with the children by the hand or in their arms. There was one of them that could have been, at most, two years. They had struggled to make them understand that it wasn't the time for questions, because they had to leave the base as quickly and quietly as possible. Some of them were uncertain and wished to stay and rely on their countrymen. Others were even convinced that they had done a blitz to capture them as political prisoners.

It took the dry and threatening ways of Darius, still tense from the murders, to move them. *You sure can stay here,* he has said, raising one arm upward, *in the dark. If you're lucky, someone from Cape Noah will arrive before dawn. If you are unlucky, something else will come from the woods.* At that point, four men and the woman with the two-year-old child had followed him, and all the others, not too convinced, had let themselves be persuaded. Silia kept wondering what she and Darius would do if some or all of them had refused to come.
They found the Meldacio's hunters exactly in the clearing where they had to be, with three armored cargo vans for animal transport.

"Here you are," the shadow of a woman said, pulling away from the other shadows. She seemed to be a little over twenty years old. "I'm Maela Perez. They're Eduard, Lorin and Golnar," she said, pointing to the other shadows. The other three hunters greeted them. "We're ready for the special transport. Madame Auburnbrie told us that you need some time to talk with them before we take them away. Be my guest. The area is safe, but I advise you to not take too long."

"Magnus," Darius introduced himself. "She's Hartwood. Where will you bring them?"

"To Vesper, for the time being. Then we'll see. There's plenty of room."

"Please, thank Madame Auburnbrie again for her invaluable collaboration," Darius recommended. "Tell her she will soon have information from Marshal Leonis."

"It will be done. Will they give us problems?" she asked, gesturing with her head towards the group.

Silia shrugged. "I can't promise you anything. They're frightened people who don't know what's going on. Try to not use force under any circumstances. And, if you can, answer their questions."

"We'll do it. Madame Auburnbrie told us to keep in mind that this is not a kidnapping, but a rescue. If some of them want to leave, we will let them go. At their peril, of course."

"Of course," Silia had to agree. "Now we'll talk to them. If you brought water, food, alcohol, it's time to take them out. Nobody is hurt, fortunately."

"What's the situation at the base?" one of the other three hunters inquired.

"The magitek generator is down, two dead Imperial guards, one incapacitated. The hunters are unharmed," she replied before Darius could. "But reassure Madame Auburnbrie that we have passed off ourselves as members of the Prince Noctis' retinue, as agreed."

"Of course. I allow myself to rush you."

Silia nodded, patted Darius on his shoulder and turned to reach the civilians, still close to each other as if they feared an attack by the hunters. She retrieved the flashlight, adjusted it to maximum brightness, and planted it in the soil so that she and Darius remained inside the cone of light. She raised her arms and showed her disarmed hands to everyone.

"Before letting you go with the people who are taking you into custody, we have to hold you back for a few minutes. I repeat again that we have nothing against you. You're not political prisoners, but refugees. The people you see there belong to a paramilitary organization that will take you to safety. When you feel up to it, you can leave wherever you want. Not…"

"Whom do we have the pleasure to talk to, miss?" an overweight man with glasses and authoritarian look interrupted her, trying to make a show of force.

Silia frowned. She had never been interested in titles and ranks, but in situations like that, when she couldn't use force and lacking an intimidating physical structure, it would have been convenient for her to place a captain or lieutenant before her own name. "Silia Hartwood, sir. I was a Kingsglaive."

"And who are you speaking for?"

A businessman, a manager, someone accustomed to giving orders and speaking for others. I bet my
"As someone who has just saved your ass," she replied dryly. The man squinted, incredulous. "Thanks to the recent phases of the war unleashed by Niflheim, you won't easily find diplomats in Lucis. You won't find high authorities to beg for asylum. Only self-managed people who are trying to figure out how to fix all the shit that your Emperor dumped on us." She probed their expressions. The fat man seemed to have deflated a little. Someone looked down. Silia forced herself to look at the children to block the anger that was beginning to build inside of her. "But we're not here to talk about the war. I repeat once again that you don't have to fear any repercussions. I'm sorry for what happened to the four of you who were infected, but there was no choice. I hope this is clear. The Starscourge is spreading to Lucis and we can't risk new outbreaks of the infection."

"The Oracle!" a woman shouted angrily. "The Oracle could have healed them! You murdered them!"

"There was no time," she was forced to lie, and hated herself for it. People had the right to know that Princess Lunafreya was dead, but in other ways and at other times; Cor had clung on to this when they had discussed the information to be given to Dino Ghiranze. Let's wait some more time, he had told her. If the Prince retrieves the Crystal, perhaps we could find a way to stop the Scourge. Unleashing panic now won't help anyone. We risk a hunt for the infected ones. "The traces of Her Grace Lunafreya were lost after what happened in Altissia."

"After Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum has unleashed Leviathan, do you mean?" a male voice asked. Murmurs of assent echoed it.

Silia bit her lip, ready to reply, but felt her shoulder grasped.

"Hartwood, with your permission. If we start arguing, we'll still be here until tomorrow." Darius stepped forward. "My partner has stressed three times that you're not political prisoners and that you must feel safe, so perhaps not all of you are clear that we're in a hurry and quite pissed off. I am Darius Magnus, and I was an officer of the Crownsguard in Insomnia, before your emperor stormed it from within by setting a trap to our King under the guise of a peace treaty and then blaming rebel terrorists." He put down every reaction with an imperious gesture of his hands. "We need answers from you, before letting you go, and I assure you that we'll have them, at the cost of actually sitting here all night, or at least until a bunch of daemons, enticed by our presence, shows itself. I can't guarantee, under such circumstances, that we can protect everyone. Is this clear to you?"

No reply. Darius unhooked his sword from the scabbard, but didn't pull it out.

"I said, is this clear to you? I didn't hear any response."

Several voices confirmed that yes, everything was clear indeed. Silia had to restrain a half-angry smile.

"Good. We have set up a lift for you in a safe place, and the people who will handle it will answer your questions while you are traveling. You will hear different versions of what they have always told you. You can believe it or not believe it, I really don't care. What I care about is to warn you to not try to interfere with them, especially by using force. The Meldacio Hunting Association is extremely concerned about the protection of the people of any nation, but it doesn't love that its members are harmed, especially if they have been sent to help you. The associates are many, they are everywhere and, as hunters, they are very good to follow the tracks. Is this clear too?"

This time the civilians answered immediately. Darius allowed himself a friendly smile. "So, if everything is clear, we can start with the questions. We don't need to talk to all of you. Is there anyone from the army or connected to the army?"
Without much hope, Silia waited for someone to come forward. Everyone shook their heads. She had imagined that would happen.


Silence. Disappointed, Silia clicked her tongue. "Is it possible at least to know what exactly you're running from? We are not here to process anyone. Speak freely."

Still silence. Silia was about to definitively lose her patience when a man separated from the group. "Listen," he said. He was wearing dirty clothes – like everyone else – but even Silia realized they were expensive. "I will talk with you as long as we can go on. I don't know that much, nobody knows that much, but I will try to give you all the information I can. In the meantime, if you have water, please give it to the others. In the past days they fed us regularly, but it was a strenuous walk in the woods and, as you have seen, there are children."

"Of course you'll have water," Silia said quickly. "And food, and whatever you need. We're not slave drivers. Reach the hunters," she told the rest of the group. "They'll give you something to drink and eat, and I bet, even some booze to restore you. You can rest in the vans, we won't take too long." She moved all the contents of the pockets into her backpack and, as she went past her, she put her jacket on the shoulders of a girl in jeans and short sleeves. "Good luck," she told her. "They'll take care of you."

A woman in her thirties entrusted her six or seven-year-old child to the hand of another woman, lowered to say a few words to him, then flanked them. She waited until everyone else had reached the vans before speaking. "My husband was in the army," she said in a low voice, though no one could hear it from that distance. "We didn't tell anyone. He was among the four infected.""

"I'm sorry," Darius said. "As we said, there was no other way. We don't know where the Oracle is, and we know no other way to heal the infected by the Starscourge."

She shook her head. "I know. Better this way. Better dead, than..." she didn't complete. "Please hurry up. I want to go back to my son."

Silia nodded and finally put a cigarette between her lips. She offered the package to the two people, to create an atmosphere of complicity, but both refused. She shrugged and let it slip again into her pocket.

"So, what do you want to know?" the man urged them.

"Everything, if we had time," Silia answered. "But we don't have any. When the officers of the garrison find out what happened in the base, they will start the research, and you'll have to be as far away as possible."

"Then the story that you saved us from them is true?"

"You have my word. They didn't want to let you spread what's happening to Gralea. Anyway, I don't know what they told you in Nielfheim, but we don't take hostages, let alone women and children. Now, if you'll excuse me, first things first. We want to know, as precisely as possible, what is the current state of the city of Gralea."

"Unliveable," the man said. "Or we wouldn't have left. I can't tell when or how it all started, because the news circulated in the media is vague and contradictory, but at some point people have simply ceased hearing from their relatives and friends who lived in the western outskirts of Gralea, then the..."
northern suburbs. I'm talking about six thousand people. Someone tried to go and see what had happened and found very tight military checkpoints. The Emperor and the Ministry have declared the state of quarantine.

_Six thousand people. Even worse than we thought._ Silia tried to curb her apprehension. "With what justification?"

"The Vanishing Disease," the man simply replied. "They said that the army was taking care of people who weren't infected and that, at the end of a period of isolation still to be estimated, they would let them go. We have always had cases of Disease, more and more frequent over the decades, but never anything like that. Rumors of army experiments escaped from the control of research laboratories began to circulate. We all know that plasmodium is at the origin of magiteks. And, although the Emperor has minimized, we all know that in Altissia the airfleet has suffered enormous losses. The Emperor publicly declared that our counteroffensive would be fierce. Against whom and how, he didn't say." He glanced at the woman. "Do you want to add something?"

She moistened her lips. "Look, I don't know that much. My husband wasn't a high rank. But recently he was very worried. We had some acquaintances in North Gralea, and..." she looked at them reluctantly. "It wasn't a quarantine. Or rather, it was a quarantine to make sure that everyone passed away."

"Are you telling me," the man replied, horrified, "that the army has left those people to die? Or worse, that they turned into monsters?"

"I'm telling you," the woman continued, dryly, "that actually the big wigs let themselves get carried away and started experimenting with something different from the normal magiteks, or so my husband believed. If it's not a problem, I'll accept your cigarette now." Silia handed one to her, without interrupting her, and lit it. "Thank you." She exhaled a breath of smoke. "In any case, the Disease has spread and multiplied. The more people are infected, the more plasmodium is released. More plasmodium, more infected people. First West Gralea, then North Gralea. My husband didn't want to wait until it reached the city center, and we left with our son."

"Your _infected_ husband," the man lashed at her. "Infected because of the shit that the Empire has done to carry on this war."

"This war that was convenient for everyone and that nobody did anything to stop," the woman pointed out. In the eyes of Silia she earned two or three hundred points. "Anyway, when we went on the road, we had no idea. D'you think we would have risked infecting our son?"

"Stop it," Darius interrupted them, "you'll have plenty of time to discuss it later. In short, the western and northern outskirts of the city are prey to the Scourge which, it's reasonable to suppose, has certainly spread further today. How the Scourge has escaped the research laboratories is unknown."

"And we don't give a shit," Silia said. "If Aldercapt hasn't found a way to stop the infection, Gralea has fallen, and soon the whole of Niflheim will meet the same end." _And then it will be our turn, if the guys don't retrieve the Crystal and find a way to use it against the Starscourge_, she realized with a shiver, but didn't say it aloud. She put out her cigarette on the ground, rubbed her eyes and forced herself to focus. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

"Since the lady is so well informed," the man replied with a derisive sneer, "she can talk to you about the berserker magiteks."

"What's this other story?" Darius asked, after giving her a puzzled look.
"Some magiteks went haywire," the man continued. "Totally out of control. Some turned against
unarmed citizens. That scumbag Alderapt defined them as an 'out of order stock' on TV, as if we
were talking about faulty computers and not of deadly soldiers built using infected organisms."

"They were unplanned units," the woman said. "Isolated cases."

"Isolated cases until the laboratories remain under control," Silia pointed out. "If this isn't the case
anymore..."

"That's impossible. The Zegnautus Keep is armored," the man replied. "It's an impenetrable floating
megafortress, both from inside and outside."

"It's true," the woman confirmed. "The fortress moves continuously. The access is limited and very
restricted."

Even more today, if the risk of something escaping outside or breaking inside has increased. Very
bad news, Silia reflected. If only they had found a way to communicate with the Prince and the
others, they could think a way to get in – the Prince could warp and, if he wore the Ring, she could
warp as well – but they couldn't get in touch with them. Their trip to Niflheim seemed more and
more like a suicide mission into a suicide mission. "Anything else?" she asked, trying to hide her
discouragement.

"Just before we left Gralea, the Emperor adopted security measures worthy of martial law," the man
continued. "Curfew at sunset. Too bad that now the sun sets before six in the evening. Civilian
transport in and out of the city has been reduced to the bare minimum. The Graleans are practically
prisoners at home. People started raising their voices, protesting. To know, mainly, what thefuck
was going on. The reply was other magiteks to quell the unrest. They even inhibited internet
connection to prevent people from exchanging information unapproved by the Ministry. It was then
that some people like me smelled that something wasn't right and started trying to leave secretly."

Silia listened with her arms folded, looking down. All she could think of was shit. "And out of
Gralea? How is the situation in the rest of the Imperial territory?"

The woman shook her head. "Hordes of daemons. They tried to assault our convoy. Not all the way
to Tenebrae, but some regions are invaded for sure."

"What about Tenebrae?"

"It was safe, until we sailed for Cape Noah."

Only the Six know if it's still so by now. Silia reviewed the thousand questions that came to her mind,
now that she could talk to Imperial civilians after so many years, and suddenly they all seemed to be
equally unimportant. She wondered if those answers of dubious utility were worth doing all that
mess with Arnaut and endangering people. They knew nothing more that could help them than they
did before. Perhaps the best move at that point was returning to Orior, reporting to the Marshal what
they knew and crossing their fingers while waiting for the others to return.

"Hartwood, do you have anything else to ask?" Darius asked grimly. He seemed as discouraged as
she was.

"A million things, including how the fuck it's possible that a population of hundreds of thousands of
inhabitants has accepted without reacting not just the war, but that their Emperor was playing with
the plasmodium, a dangerous virus for which there is no cure except the Oracle’s magic. But none of
my questions would help us."
Both the man and the woman opened their mouths indignantly, but Silia rose abruptly. "You know what? These answers don't interest me after all. I don't give a shit about your excuses. You also have your hands stained with blood. But you came to Lucis to escape danger and you'll have help," she replied, not at all amicably. "If Magnus has no other questions, you can reach the others as well. We're done."

The two Imperials looked at him hopefully. Darius shook his head slowly. "You can go," he said, "thanks for your cooperation. And good luck."

*  

When the vans left, Darius and Silia remained looking at each other in the dark.

"What about now?" he asked.

Silia didn't answer immediately. "Now we'll sit and smoke a cigarette and decide how we'll die," she let slip.

"Your optimism always encourages me," he smiled, sitting next to her. "Do you still have your booze?"

"It's running on empty, but it's a good time to finish it," she approved, pulling the flask out of her backpack. She offered it to him. "Before calling the Marshal and telling him that we lost a day to know what we already knew, let's clear up the two of us. We have at least two days of journey in the heart of the Empire before arriving in Gralea. We'll find a horde of daemons that in the best case will kill us, in the worst will infect us. If we're lucky and that doesn't happen, we must find a way to penetrate the Zegnautus Keep, possibly after reuniting with the other four, and honestly I've no idea how we could do it. Remember what I told you yesterday about the Behemoths' pit? I'm untying you, Darius. It makes no sense to die there. If you're not a fool, go back to Orior and continue to help the Marshal."

Darius handed the flask to her again. At least judging by its weight, there was only one last sip. She swallowed it. "And what will you do, Hartwood? Let's hear it."

Silia tightened her lips before answering him. "I've decided that, for once in my life, I don't give a shit about what is wiser to do. The hopes of intercepting him before arriving at Gralea are almost nil, but I'm going to find the Prince and give him a hand entering the Zegnautus Keep, even at the cost of acting as a human target. If I don't meet him before, I will do so much of that mess in Gralea that the defenses of the entire fucking Imperial army will be focused on me."

Darius snorted. "You're delirious, Hartwood."

Silia got up. "Maybe. But I won't return to Orior with my tail between my legs waiting for the end. The Crystal was stolen before my eyes. I'm going to actively help to get it back. Actually, I should have done that a long time ago." She smiled. "I'm going to show my prick boyfriend that I haven't defeated Gilgamesh, but I can still teach him and the other little chicks a trick or two, especially if the Prince decides to grow some balls and wear that damn Ring."

Darius also stood up. "Well. Since I'm here too, Hartwood, I'll tell you that the madmen in the Behemoths' pit will be two."

"Darius," she tried to dissuade him, "I can't force you to go back, but just know that you don't have to do this."

"You're right. I don't have to. I want to. I too am sick of doing what is wiser. I didn't want to leave
Insomnia with Cor's contingent, Hartwood, before the treaty was signed, did you know it? But I had to obey orders. There's no day when that thought doesn't piss me off. So let's call the Marshal, let's tell him what we found out, and let's communicate him that these two madmen, in spite of everything, have decided to go tied and blindfolded in a pit full of Behemoths. Then we can meet Arnaut's 'right man' who will ferry us to Niflheim."

III

Arnaut's 'right man' who would ferry them to Niflheim turned out to be a 'right woman', although Marla, who was between fifty and sixty, was even more masculine than she was. The woman didn't bring them back to the town; she led them through the woods along paths so thick that Silia soon lost her bearings, even though, half an hour after setting off, she began to hear the rustling and the smell of the sea.

They soon found themselves on the coast. Marla led them forward with confidence until she stopped, moved away some shrubs and revealed a rowboat. "I hope you don't get seasickness. The sea is rough tonight."

"No idea," Silia confessed. "Never been on the water. Is this thing safe?"

"Not less than a car, if you can drive it."

"Hartwood," Darius interjected. "Don't tell me you can't swim."

"I've been too busy for the last fifteen years to learn."

"Then be careful." Marla had already started pushing the boat. "If you fall in the water, with this darkness, not even Leviathan herself could fish you out."

Silia shuddered, reaching her to give her a hand. "How long will the crossing last?"

"If you learn to row quickly, if we manage to follow the right currents and if there's no one in sight where I intend to land, in five hours we'll be there. We'd have spent half that time on a dinghy or a motorboat, but we would have had three times the chances of being caught by the Niffs."

"Do you do it often?"

"Cross in secret? Yeah. I've my business beyond the strait."

She didn't specify what business, and they didn't investigate. If Arnaut hadn't betrayed them so far, then Marla was trustworthy. They made the boat slip into the water and Marla immediately took the helm, while she and Darius took the oars. It had been a heavy day, the beginning of the night even more so, and learning to row, coordinating herself with Darius, wasn't a joke. Finally, twenty minutes later, they began to acquire a steady pace.

"I see you don't remember me," Marla said suddenly, breaking the silence. "But I recognized you, Hartwood. You were barely more than a teenager when we met in Cape Noah ten years ago. I was also part of the resistance, like Erik Arnaut."

"Sorry, I don't remember you," she had to confess. She was dying to light a cigarette, but they were still too close to the coast and her hands were full. Who knew how Marla could know where they were going in the pitch dark.

"You've impressed me because... no offense, Hartwood, but such a small soldier draws attention."
"You were all a bunch of kids," Marla went on. "We couldn't understand how you could be so young. How old was the oldest of you, twenty years?"

"Twenty-two," Silia said. "And they let him join just because he already knew how to use the sword. I myself, who started training at thirteen, was almost too old to learn the basics. It's ironic, isn't it? When you're old enough to drink and to put a legally valid signature you're already too old to learn how to fight decently."

"There were endless discussions about it," Darius spoke. "I remember it well. The King wanted to put a limit of fifteen years, already – he noted – well below any age of consent. Drautos told him that if he really wanted the military elite of the kingdom, they would have to train children of seven or eight. The King retorted that such a thing would have been worthy of a military dictatorship and that we would never stooped so low as that. The Council had to mediate because Drautos was right, Marshal Leonis was aware of it as well even if he was contrary, so they set the limit to eleven years."

"You can't have your cake and eat it too," Marla said. "However, it was spectacular to see you in action. You were perfectly organized and coordinated, and those spells... It wasn't your fault if you couldn't hold Cape Noah, it's the position to be unlucky. When I heard what happened to Insomnia, I didn't want to believe it. How could this happen, Hartwood? A betrayal like that?"

At least it seemed that Marla didn't believe she had taken part in it. The fact that Arnaut had decided to help them, that she was with a Crownsguard and that Ezma Auburnbrie herself was supporting them must have dispelled any doubt about it. She shook her head slowly. "I don't think we'll ever find out everything that led to the fall of Insomnia on May 16th. The Glaives were frustrated by ten years of useless battles, made even more vain by the treaty with Niflheim. But it would be too simplistic to put it down like this. Also, no matter how many Glaives have betrayed, there have been so many who died that day for the kingdom."

"Just tell me one thing, Hartwood," Marla continued, after a moment of silence. "What's coming on us? Not just Niflheim, right? Erik looked like a walking dead when he called me tonight."

"If I were in you," Darius commented, "I would leave the west coast."

"Leave Cape Noah, you mean? And to where?" the hunter asked, amused.

"Everywhere. Lestallum would be a good place to start with."

"Lestallum is already regurgitating enough Crown Citizens, those who didn't take refuge in the Galahd Archipelago. And from what should we escape, exactly?"

Silia put down the oars for a moment. Her arms hurt. "From the same thing from which the Imperial on the boat have escaped. The same thing they will take on you if you're not careful."

"Are things so bad?"

"We'll find out in Niflheim. They look even worse. Just be careful. Not just 'bout other refugees who might arrive. Arnaut has already been warned. You should implement isolation procedures with anyone who comes in contact with daemons."

Marla didn't answer. They remained silent for a long stretch of sea again.

"Will Arnaut be fine?" Silia returned to say. She knew very well that the help he had given them, even if it hadn't come to light, would have aggravated his already precarious position, and she hoped
that he would come out unscathed. At that moment the whole world had much bigger problems to cope with, but she couldn't help but think about it.

"Erik? He's always fine," Marla winked. "He's an excellent barker. He wouldn't have come this far, otherwise. He told me what you did at the base. Tomorrow there'll be a big mess in Cape Noah. But the responsibility for security is in the hands of the Niffs. They can't blame Erik for what happened, because they're here to keep an eye on him. I don't know how they will play it. Perhaps they'll say the Prince of Insomnia descended on them with the entire Astrals' pantheon. Or perhaps they'll cover up the whole thing by declaring to their superiors that they have set up the show to get rid of the civilians. Erik wouldn't have tried to help you if he didn't have something in mind to get out of trouble, be sure."

"Thank him again from us. Tell him that if I come back from Niflheim and his ass is still hanging around on his legs, he can ask me anything."

Marla chuckled. "Don't be too keen on promises with him, Hartwood, especially since he likes you. Anyway, I will tell him."

"Look, if we manage to come back to Lucis he can have Darius' ass as well as mine."

Chapter End Notes

"Ab occidente calamitas" > "calamities come from the West"
**Sic nos sic sacra tuemur**

Chapter Summary

The Royal Retinue moves onward through the Imperial territory, but something happens to the train at the station of Eusciello. Without Prompto, in a train with civilians onboard, they can only stop to Ulwaat, in Tenebrae.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**38**

**Sic nos sic sacra tuemur**

I

Gladio woke up, as abruptly as he had dozed off who knows how long before, feeling himself being shaken by Ignis. For a moment, as it happened sometimes, he thought he was in Insomnia and that he had fallen asleep, exhausted from training, at his friend's house.

"Gladio... Gladio!"

He startled. He didn't see the bare and impeccably whitewashed walls of Ignis' living room, he didn't see his cupboard or the only hideous modern-art picture he had hung. He wasn't in Insomnia, but in the Imperial territory, on the Magna Fortia, and it was late at night. Insomnia had fallen. The King, his father, Princess Lunafreya were dead. Ignis was blind. "Damn it," he moaned, rubbing his eyes, sniffing. He felt numb. "I fell asleep without even realizing it."

"Don't worry, nothing has happened. Yet." Ignis was standing next to him. Again, even more than by the scars on his face and his dark glasses, Gladio was upset by his untidy hair and his crumpled clothes. "But the train is at standstill."

"What? There was no other stop until Ulwaat," Gladio recalled, getting up from his seat. He moved his shoulders to reactivate the circulation.

"Indeed, the stop wasn't scheduled. And it was bad timing. Eusciello is an area full of Imperial bases and armament factories."

*Oh, fuck.* Without being able to prevent it, Gladio looked around and lowered his voice. The wagon was almost empty, and all the five men who occupied it seemed asleep, their heads leaning against the headrest or the window. "D'you believe we're blown?"

"I have no idea. When I woke up, Noct wasn't here. Don't worry," he calmed him down, restining a hand on his arm, even though he surely couldn't have seen his anxiety surge, "he's fine, and Prompto is with him."

"Good," he replied, just to say something, even if nothing was actually good. "No announcement 'bout the reason for the halt, I suppose?"
"No announcement at all. We're at a station. Perhaps we should go and have a look in the driver's cab, Gladio." Ignis began to move. "Prompto said they'd check the rear-end of the train and the Regalia."

He followed him, trying to peer into the night through the windows as they walked. He could see some flashing lights from time to time, but with all the condensation and dark they could have been anywhere.

"We're not in Ulwaat, are we?" a man was asking his partner, trying to look out. "It's too early."

"No," she answered. "Judging by the time, it could be Eusciello."

"I can see something on the platform, I think. Several people. In the middle of the night?"

"Maybe, because of the cut of civil transport to and from Gralea, we stopped to pick up stranded passengers."

They left the car. In the vestibule, Gladio barely had time to read the number of the next coach – the 6th, they were still damn far from the head – when an explosion that seemed to involve another section of the train further on, made the ground tremble under their feet. Alarmed voices and shouts, predictably, rose from the cars behind and in front of them.

"They're bombing us?!"

"What the fuck is going on?! I can't see anything outside!"

The sliding doors behind them opened, and a man and a woman rushed toward the closed exit, but Ignis, more ready than he was, cut off their path.

"Stop! We don't know what's going on outside. It's safer to stay on the train. Go back to the car and hide. Stay on the ground. Tell the others."

Almost as if to negate him, other screams, even more terrified, rose from the coach 6. There was a thud against the sliding doors that struggled to open, hampered by something. Once again, Ignis seemed to understand before him, because he rushed to open the doors with his bare hands. Four people poured into the vestibule, trampling a fifth on the ground, probably the one that had fallen or had been pressed against the doors. Gladio was about to stop them and tell them not to leave the train, as Ignis had done, but then he saw what they were running from. Magiteks.

"Go to the back end of coach 7!" he shouted to the passengers. "Ig, take care of them." He went past him, bringing up the Genji Blade and entering coach 6. The broadsword was too cumbersome for such an environment.

The windows of the car were breached. Gladio threw himself on the three magiteks, cutting them off with a few well-aimed blows. He wondered how many of them there were. He also wondered if there were only magiteks. It was night, and the news they had gathered at the station of Cartanica was worse than disturbing. He returned to the vestibule and peered inside coach 7.

"Ig, is everything okay?"

"It is. All quiet on this side." He was sitting next to the young man who had been overcome by the small crowd. Ignis had tied a makeshift bandage on his arm from a ripped a flap of curtain off the window and knotting the garment.

"What luck that you were there," the boy said. He had a well-groomed beard and wore sports
clothes. He had to be the same age as them but, unlike them, his look showed his age. "Thanks, pal."

"You're welcome," Ignis replied, standing up. "Gladio, they said the magiteks attacked them."

"I sure as goddamn shit don't get it," he blurted out. "Why would magiteks attack civilians?"

"And more importantly," a middle-aged man asked, crouched in the space between two seats, "why should they attack the train?"

*Good question. I still suspect that they're looking specifically for us, and we had the brilliant idea of splitting up. "Ig, let's go. Let's hurry up and get to the head of the train."

* 

Gladio had almost lost count of the carriages they had run through. Most of the few civilians who had remained on board were unharmed or nearly so, though terrified, but they had also seen a couple of them dead, even if they couldn't be sure. He and Ignis had made their way fighting – he more than Ignis, actually – and, as he had feared, along with the magiteks several daemons, attracted by the human presence or perhaps deployed by the same Niffs, had blocked their way.

When they found themselves before the umpteenth automatic door to enter the umpteenth vestibule, Gladio was almost sliced open by an Imperial Spearman who broke it down before it opened. He hurled himself to his right, against the seats, and the blade touched him just to his side. Ignis struck the magitek at the center with both his daggers.

"Fuck," Gladio exclaimed, distraught, still slumped against the seat. "That was really close. Ig, you got it right. Nice going!"

Ignis pointed at his own ear, moving forward to recover his daggers. He extracted them from the still buzzing magitek's body and used one to behead it. "I've start getting used to it. Actually, it's not very different from when you instinctively dodge or counterattack even before you see the threat."

Gladio stood up. He was still shuddering from the narrow escape. A fucking distraction, a simple fucking moment of bad luck, and you find yourself gutted by a common enemy. The surviving fragment of the sliding right door still continued to open and close. Irritated, he finished destroying it with a kick. It was then that he saw the man on the ground, under a rack in a pool of blood. He wasn't the first dead man they had crossed on the train and he wouldn't be the last one, but he reached him anyway to ascertain his condition.

He had to be a member of the staff, because he had on a dark gray uniform. His hat, of the same color and with a red visor, had rolled to the ground. Gladio moved the rack aside, turned him, and saw no apparent injuries except one on his head. He checked for a pulse on the man's neck and found one. They didn't have time to help him, but he could at least move him somewhere safer, in the previous carriage.

When he straightened himself with the man on his back, a burst of blows more violent than the previous ones shattered the windows. Gladio threw himself to the ground just in time. He and the unconscious man were reached by a cascade of glass splinters, large and small, that scratched his face and his bare arms.

"Gladio!" Ignis shouted from the carriage. "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine, damn it! Stay down! From the caliber of the blows, it looks like a bloody machine gun!"

"I'm trying to reach Noct!"
Two of the transmitters received from Camelia Clastra in Altissia were still intact. They had given one to Noctis so that he could always be reachable. They had decided that Ignis would keep the second, because of his particular conditions. Gladio fell silent, trying to make out Ignis' words in the midst of the noise that came from outside. He didn't succeed partly because, an inch from his face, the unconscious man opened his eyes.

"By the Six, what the fuck is going on?" he croaked, upset. He tried to get back on his feet.

Gladio grabbed him by his arm. "Stay down! We're under attack!"

The man put a hand to his bloody head, confused, but obeyed. He groaned with a grimace. "My head. I fainted, didn't I?"

"You landed in the tall grass, man, otherwise you'd have been torn to pieces by a Spearman magitek who instead ignored you." And that was about to gut me.

"Who's on us?"

"Who do you think? The Imperial army."

"No way. This is a civilian train."

"Tell them that."

"Gladio!" Ignis was crawling on the ground to the vestibule. "Noct said he and Prompto are fine. They're on the platform."

"Have they gotten off the train?"

"The Imperial troops have a machine gun. The train will blow up at this rate; they've already devastated two cars at the back."

"Shit. The Regalia?"

"I've no idea and it's not time to worry about it. We must find a way to restart the train, or we're done. He and Prompto will do some cleaning out to give us more time."

Gladio sighed tightly. He returned to look at the man in uniform. "Man, I advise you to crawl away and hide between one seat and another. And pray that we can get this train moving quickly."

"Care to tell me who the hell you are?" he asked, crouching down. He looked at him and Ignis suspiciously.

"Two passengers who don't want to be fired in Eusciello," he cut short.

He didn't seem too convinced by his answer. "Do you have any idea 'bout how to restart a train, at least?"

"No, but we'll figure it out."

"Great." The man reached for his hat and put it on. "I'm the second machinist Adam Volker. It was my turn to rest when we stopped. I was going to see why the hell we were still, but there was an explosion and the rack fell on my head."

After all, we got lucky as well that the Spearman didn't tear him to pieces. "D'you feel like going on with us towards the driver's cab?"
"There's not much choice, it seems to me. However, we're close. It's two cars from here."

*

Volker proceeded between him and Ignis. Now that they had a machinist, they'd better hold him tight. They left the vestibule and entered coach 2. The racket of gunfire and explosions was getting louder and louder.

They found out why when they cautiously stopped in the last vestibule. The next carriage – halfway between an engine room and a passenger coach – had been ravaged by one of the explosions. The right side of the carriage, the one on the platform, essentially didn't exist anymore. Which meant that, in order to get to the driver's cab, they would have had to take out the two Swordsmen and the Sniper who stood between them and their target, moving substantially in the open with a civilian to protect. But the worst, no doubt, were the two Grenades on the platform near the train. Perhaps it had been just a Grenade that destroyed the car.

"What can you see, Gladio?" Ignis whispered, crouched behind him. "I've a pretty bad feeling. It's suddenly hotter."

Gladio moistened his lips. "Ig, focus and memorize. Seven paces from here, the floor of the car is broken down on our right; a crack about fifty inches for three feet. There are two Swordsmen and a Sniper. Do you think you can do it?"

"I can do it."

"But he's blind, damn it."

He ignored Volker. For a moment he was tempted to reach Noctis and Prompto after dealing with the Grenades, but Ignis would have needed more help in covering the machinist's back as he restarted the train, in case they were overwhelmed by new threats. "Good. There are also two Grenades on the platform. I'll take care of them. Stay back, Volker, until Ignis gets rid of the magiteks."

"You'll get me killed."

"Gladio, we no longer have ice flasks."

"Then I'll have to knock them out with my blades. Out of these damn cars I can use both the broadsword and the Genji."

"Have I already asked you who the hell you are?"

"Yeah," Ignis cut him short, "and at another wrong time. On your signal, Gladio."

There was no reason to wait any longer; the magiteks were still and the Grenades kept on orbiting in circles without getting too far from the carriage. "Now!" he said, and broke through the sliding doors.

He didn't have a single moment to lose. He had to trust Ignis and draw the Grenades away from the train, in case he hadn't been fast enough and they had ended up self-destructing. He jumped on the platform through the gash and engaged them in combat. Had they been normal Bombs, the whole thing would have been simpler, but it seemed that Gladio had exhausted all the simplicity in his life on May 16. The Grenades, perfectly distinguishable from the Bombs not only for the black rocky ridges on the top of their head – which also was their whole body – but also because they were almost twice as big, could have killed a man by simply crashing onto him with their two tons. What's
more, they were pure lava. As if this wasn't enough, they enlarged every time they were hit, and then exploded. Not a big deal with an ice bomb in hand but Silia's farewell gifts, so comfortable until that moment, was gone.

Fortunately, the Grenades were as slow as they were large, and his broadsword was long enough to hit them without being damaged by fire. No matter how much he tried, Gladio couldn't get them away from the wagon, and this convinced him definitively that they weren't ordinary daemons allured by the human presence, but creatures controlled by the Empire. He managed to take out the first before it exploded, but the second one, he saw, was on the verge of self-destruction.

"Gladio!" Ignis shouted from the carriage. He seemed unharmed. Gladio rolled to the ground to avoid the Grenade, which crashed into a pile of crates without exploding. "We're almost done!"

Getting back on board wasn't an option. The Grenade would follow him and blow up coach 1 and inevitably the driver's cab, and then they would all be dead. Noctis and Prompto, he saw from where he was, were busy with a fucking tank. Again he regretted not having one last ice bomb to throw at the Grenade from the train. Getting back on his feet, he forced himself to focus and think quickly. There in the open, while the bullets whistled around him, it wasn't really an optimal condition.

Bullets.

He looked around eagerly, and found what he was looking for: the body of a Sniper. He ran up to him and retrieved his rifle, then snapped to the train in Ignis' direction. He jumped on coach 1, risking to crash into him, tumbled to the ground and pulled himself up with his gun resting on his knee. He didn't have a perfect aim, that was Prompto, but the Grenade was pretty difficult to miss. "Stay down, Ig," he said, and fired all the bullets left in the rifle.

The Grenade exploded, bringing with it – or so he hoped – a large number of daemons and magiteks around it. Had he been a little slower, and the Grenade a little closer to the train, they too would have been hit by the explosion. The train swayed and inflamed fragments sprang in their direction, but he and Ignis flattened to the ground and came out unharmed.

"In case you're wondering, I just blew a Grenade up with a rifle," he said, helping Ignis to pull himself up as soon as he could speak.

"I heard it pretty well," he sighed. He began to dust his arms and legs and retrieved his can. "Good job. Let's hurry up and reach Volker."

When they got to the driver's cab, Gladio was met with an unbearable stench of blood. He saw the body of the first machinist riddled with bullets – probably by a Sniper – on the floor, Volker sitting in his place and leaning over the controls. He turned, alarmed, when they entered.

"You've made a great mess out there."

"How are you doing here?"

"Almost done," he replied. Gladio peered at the control panel: five screens – two were turned off and shattered by bullets – that showed the tracks behind and in front of the train. Gauges, numbers and warning lights and keys on which neither he nor Ignis could have put their hands on.

"Guys, come back quickly," Ignis said, a hand on his right ear. "We're going to restart the train."

"Done!" Volker hadn't even finished saying it and the train slowly started. One of the displays went from 0 to 10 to 30 and kept increasing. "We made it!"
"Thanks, man," Gladio said. He leaned for a moment on the bloody seat, following with his eyes without being able to prevent himself, the trail of blood up to the body of the first machinist. He felt his guts stirring; in spite of everything, he hadn't yet become accustomed to corpses. "Where are we going now?"

"We certainly won't remain in Imperial territory after what's happened." Volker glanced at him sideways, looked down at his colleague's body, then turned again to the control unit. "I'm taking this train to Ulwaat, in Tenebrae, to where, unless other troubles, we should arrive in three hours. Just so you know, I won't go a mile nearer Gralea, even if you aim one of your swords at my throat."

"We won't aim a sword at your throat," Ignis reassured him. On another occasion, perhaps, they would have, because it was a mess and once in Ulwaat they would have to find a way to go on, or at least someone who could drive the Magna Fortia; but Volker had just saved their asses.

"Good to know," Volker replied, unperturbed. Civilian or not, he was gifted with a lot of cold blood. "I won't ask you who you are anymore. But I hope you will answer one of my questions, if you can: do you know what's going on? Besides Gralea, now we have no answer even from Ulwaat."

"Are you sure the radio is working?" Ignis asked.

"It would seem so, but I can't exclude that it has failed. I hope so. My question?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, man, but we know as much as you do," Gladio answered. It was the truth, after all. "Probably even less."

Volker clicked his tongue. "A coup must have occurred in Gralea, or something like that. First the coms link went down, now the attack. D'you know what? I wouldn't be surprised if the Chancellor took the power instead of Aldercapt, taking advantage of what's happening with the Disease."

"Great." Gladio didn't even want to consider that possibility. "Volker, we go back there, but we'll watch your back. Let's hope nothing else will fall on us."

"I hope so as well, because the control panel is a riot of emergency lights. I don't even know how we managed to leave."

"If you bring us to Ulwaat in one piece, I'll treat you a beer."

For the first time, Volker smiled, tilting his head slightly in his direction. "You've never been to Tenebrae, huh? Beer is notoriously disgusting. But I will let you taste the wine."

With a last wave of greeting, he and Ignis returned to coach 1. Despite it being devastated, he and Ignis needed to talk freely to each other and with Noctis and Prompto, and – he realized when they both inhaled noisily – to breathe some fresh air.

"I'll try to contact Noctis. If they're stranded, we have a huge problem. But I suppose they would have already told us." Ignis put a hand to his ear. "Noct, do you copy? Are you fine?"

Gladio, of course, didn't hear how Noctis replied. Ignis uttered a moan of surprise that was quick to suffocate. "Now you must calm down," he said, keeping his tone steady. "Think straight, Noct. If the Chancellor is involved, then he will probably no longer be where he has fallen down."

"The Chancellor? What the fuck happened, Ig?"

His friend beckoned him to shut up and turned back to talk to Noctis. "I'm worried about Prompto as much as you are, but stopping or – worse – going back with the Imperials after us is out of the..."
question. We can't endanger the people left on board." He paused. "The machinist is taking the train to Ulwaat. We will not proceed towards Gralea for the time being. Can you reach us in the head carriage?" Another pause. "See you here."

Gladio punched the nearest seat, impatient. "Will you tell me what's going on, now?"

Ignis raised his head suddenly. From his expression, he shouldn't have appreciated his small and childish outburst. "I will, but you must calm down as well. Noctis shoved Prompto down off the train."

"What?"

"One of the Chancellor's tricks." He sat wearily on the nearest seat – he actually collapsed, his elbows on his knees and head down. He had hardly fought on the Magna Fortia but he seemed exhausted, and on the other hand, they hadn't had proper sleep for days. "Do you remember when I told you that at the Altar of the Tidemother, after having found the Princess' body, I thought you had reached me too? Izunia is not just able to show himself in other forms, it seems. He can distort reality. Show us what he wants. Noctis believed he had pushed him off the train."

*The Chancellor already knows we are in Niflheim.* Gladio sat down beside him, dejected. Whatever advantage they believed they had, it had already disappeared, or perhaps it had never existed. Moreover, they had lost Prompto. "Why didn't Izunia finish him? It was him and Noctis alone. He could have easily gotten rid of him."

"We're playing a part, without knowing it." Ignis took off his glasses and rubbed his battered eyes. "The more we try to escape, the more we stick to his script. Didn't you notice? Izunia hit Noctis' head, but didn't kill him. He could have. He could have blown the train at any time I bet, and even without the aid of all those magiteks."

Gladio was about to shoot up, indignant. He didn't want to hear from Ignis' lips the thought that, without being able to prevent it, he had entertained as well. "Are you suggesting that...?"

"No." Ignis didn't deny it with the tone of a person who was clearing himself, but as someone who was simply noting an unavoidable reality. "We won't come back. I don't believe that we would be allowed, in any case, even if we wanted to. Must we play? Well, let's play all the way. Perhaps we will play well enough to amaze our director." His lips twisted into a disquieting smile, made even more gloomy by the light of the neon.

Among them, Gladio realized, Ignis was the only one to have clashed with Izunia. Whatever he had seen, heard, or known, the man who had awakened after that fight was so different from the one with whom Gladio had warmly conversed the day before the ritual that, had he not proved to know details of their common past that Izunia certainly couldn't know, Gladio would almost have believed that the Chancellor had taken his place. Gladio feared he sensed that kind of change, those sudden absences, that attitude – not of his eyes, because those of Ignis could no longer see – of his whole face, of his body, as if he held something so crucial that in comparison to everything else it was no longer important. He was more certain every day, but something kept him from investigating and returning to what Ignis had already told them. The truth, simply, was that he didn't want to know.

"Do you think Prompto can still be alive?"

"Hard to say," Ignis answered with frankness. "I have no doubt that a trained person like him broke his fall. Maybe the darkness helped him escape our pursuers. Maybe he will manage to get away with the daemons. And we all have the maps retrieved in Cartanica. If he is alive and fine, he will find a way to continue towards Gralea."
"Too many 'maybes'," Gladio observed, discouraged.

"We survived more uncertain 'maybes'."

"By playing a well-established script, you said it yourself. Maybe Prompto's part is over." That bleak hypothesis, which shouldn't even have been formulated, escaped his lips with a chilling coldness and with the unfounded belief that, simply, it wasn't possible.

"Or maybe the three of us are so unimportant to the Chancellor that, wherever he has vanished to after having stunned Noctis, he won't care about Prompto."

"We should ask Noctis for something personal when he comes back," Gladio threw it out to ease the tension. "To make sure he's not Izunia. Like, if he remembers that time when we got drunk at that official party for King Regis' birthday."

Ignis raised his head. "When we met the Marshal while we were trying to sneak off without being noticed and he clearly pretended nothing happened with a killer light in his eyes, you mean? You have a short memory, Gladio. The three of you were drunk. I hadn't touched a single drop of alcohol as usual; in fact, I tried in every way to dissuade you from doing it."

Gladio patted him on the shoulder. "Touché. I just wanted to make sure it was you. I got off the train for a while, after all."

"That's such a stupid way to check that I don't need to ask you any questions to make sure of your identity."

They both raised their heads when a jingle rang from the speakers. Shortly thereafter, Volker's voice was heard all over.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the second machinist Adam Volker speaking. I regret to inform you that, under the recent circumstances, the Magna Fortia will not continue as planned to Gralea, but will stop in Ulwaat. I repeat: the Magna Fortia will not continue as planned to Gralea and will stop in Ulwaat. For your own safety, I suggest you gather in the head coaches. I appeal to your good heart by asking you to help the wounded people, whenever possible. I repeat..."

II

Looking at Noctis staring out the window, Gladio still wondered if they hadn't gone back to the start with his disheartened mood. While Ignis – apparently – rested between two seats behind him, he got up and took the place in front of Noctis, across the corridor.

"Did you manage to sleep? In a while we should get to Ulwaat. If everything goes well."

He shook his head. "No, but I'm not tired," he lied. He must have fought like a madman out of the train, along with Prompto. Since they had left, all of them had pulled out such unsuspected reserves of energy that Gladio couldn't believe that once he had the boldness to say, maybe after a simple day at fishing, 'I'm exhausted'.

"Maybe we can rest a little in Tenebrae, before going on to Gralea," he suggested. After being so pissed off at Noctis' wish to divert there, now they were forced to stop to unload the passengers and find a way to continue. Served him right. "Who knows, Prompto could have found another means of transport and join us there in a few hours."

"You think?" It was more a mocking challenge than a rhetorical question.
"I think." Gladio crossed his arms on the table, without getting irritated. "Never tell him I told you, but Prompto has come a long way since I met him. He won't let himself be killed so easily. That bioblaster of his is hell, and he knows how to use it."

"If he knew you said it, he would be shocked." Noctis smiled, and it seldom happened by then. "He's always pranking you, but he really cares about what you and Ignis think of him."

Gladio was pleased and at the same time embarrassed. He was always very hard on Prompto, sometimes gratuitously caustic, but he was very fond of him. "I always forget he hasn't received training like ours since he was a child. Just for this reason, his progress is all the more surprising. He shouldn't be so bloody insecure."

He didn't say aloud what he thought, which was that if they believed themselves to be in deep shit when Ignis had lost his sight, now, with another man less, they were sinking in it.

"Prompto suffers a lot from not knowing anything about his origins and, what's more, he found two adoptive parents who never cared about him. Just know that since we left, they haven't tried to reach him once. He doesn't even know if they're dead or alive."

"Are you kidding me?" With a hint of shame, Gladio realized that in those months he had been so focused on the mission and his personal worries that he hadn't bothered to investigate the matter. He had asked Prompto if he had heard from his parents, of course, after the fall of the city, but Prompto had dismissed the question with a smile and changed the subject. Gladio had taken for granted that he had heard from them and that it hadn't been a particularly loving phone call.

"No, I'm not kidding," Noctis answered. "He asked the Marshal, who spread the word, the little he could, but they are two normal civilians and this didn't help. They could be in Galahd. They could be in Lestallum. They could be dead. Prompto has minimized, as always. He said he hopes they're fine, but finding out is not a priority."

"I can't believe it."

Noctis shrugged. "It's always been like that, you know. Have you ever seen him calling home to warn that he would stay out for the night? He was always at my place. You once said that you envied him because he didn't have our bonds and duties, just attending the school. But I didn't envy him at all. Apart from us, he had no one else. He has no one else," he corrected himself.

Gladio didn't answer. He felt depressed, guilty, upset. He wanted to tell Noctis not to worry, that Prompto certainly was fine and would reappear somewhere unharmed. Not only was Noctis linked to his friend more viscerally than he and Ignis were, but he also had to feel terribly guilty for pushing him off the train, even if he had been tricked. But Gladio wasn't used to lying and wouldn't have started at that time.

The jingle that resounded from the speakers throughout coach 2 spared him. Gladio looked back out the window, expecting to see the lights of Ulwaat, and instead he saw only a neon-lit concrete wall. They were in a tunnel.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I need your utmost attention. Don't panic, but move away from the windows and find a shelter. I repeat: don't panic, but move away from the windows and find a shelter. Gladio Amicitia and Ignis Scientia, if you are listening, reach the control room as soon as possible."

Ignis straightened up. The three of them ran out of coach 2, their weapons already summoned and held tightly in their hands, just to find themselves before what they had already imagined and feared: a horde of daemons had again assaulted the train. Some of them were already inside the broken car,
others were walking over their heads, on the outside – they could hear their steps, some light and fast, others so heavy as to make them think that they would break through the roof at any moment. Goblins, Ariadnes, Gargoyles, and it was fortunate that there were no Bombs or Grenades among them, at least so far.

"Ignis, reach the machinist. If they kill him and the train crashes it's the end for everyone. C'mon Gladio, let's get rid of these nuisances!"

The nuisances seemed to have no end, as if the tunnel itself threw them up. They wouldn't be able to stop them for long, and they couldn't keep them from breaking through the windows of the other cars to enter. The train was indefensible.

And then they emerged from the tunnel. Through the gash, Gladio glimpsed in the dark purple that foretold the first light of dawn the silhouette of a dizzying bridge and something huge that moved. He barely had time to think that it was a never-before-seen daemon and that it was the end for all of them, when Noctis pointed a finger at the being.

"I can't believe it. She's Leviathan!"

The huge sea dragon seemed to wrap up in the air, and then threw herself on them with such a shriek that almost made their ears bleed. Gladio grabbed Noctis by his shoulder, clung to a rack and closed his eyes. He was hit in the face by violent splashes while the train swung right and left on the tracks. In his ears was a deafening noise of human cries, daemons' shrieks and roars of water. He ventured to open his eyes, squinting. As in Altissia, Leviathan had summoned smaller water dragons that were wiping out the daemons, sparing them and – he hoped – the other passengers as well.

His relief was short-lived. The train came out of the gorge they were traveling, and what he imagined to be the Fenestala Manor became nearly visible. It had been set on fire.

Noctis moaned, snatching away from his grip. "No!" he shouted. "What the hell...?"

He couldn't answer him. His only thought was: why didn't Leviathan showed herself before?

III

"Did you find something out, Gladio?"

Gladio shook his head, depressed, reaching his friends on the steps of the platform where they were sitting. He made sure nobody was listening to them. "I didn't. I just got confirmation of what we learned when we entered the station, that it was a retaliation against Ravus Nox Fleuret. Gralea must be in chaos, but clearly not enough as to devise such gratuitous wickedness." He bent down to sit with them. "I'm sorry for the people here, but the attack on Fenestala is a big mess for us too. We'll never find Prompto, even if we wait for him here. Too many people."

"And I doubt that at this point we will find a person willing to drive a train to Gralea," Ignis added.

"Noct? Any ideas?" Gladio tried to shake him, but this time he couldn't be hard on him. After they had dozed off for a couple of hours on the platform, Noctis had refused to move from the station – someone must stay near the Magna Fortia in case Prompto catches up with us, he had said, but Gladio suspected that he simply didn't want to go around seeing the place where Lunafreya had borned and lived in those conditions – and he hadn't insisted. He had asked Ignis to stay with him while he would ask around, without too much hope, for a blond guy about six feet tall with a vest and a tuft. Too bad that Ulwaat was full of people asking around for relatives and friends who had gone missing during the attack.
"None," he replied, without taking his eyes off the flaming Fenestala Manor, "if not taking the Regalia and going on without Prompto. This is the last aberration I intend to see accomplished by the Empire."

Gladio could perfectly understand his anger. Niflheim had invaded Tenebrae, murdered Queen Sylva, held her two children as hostages, employed the elder in its army, killed the younger. Now, after having tried and sentenced Ravus to death, it had devastated his city and the palace where his family had lived and reigned for generations. That same building where Noctis had spent months, entrusted to the care of Queen Sylva and Princess Lunafreya, as he recovered from the tremendous injury to his back suffered by a Marilith when he was only eight years old. Gladio was eleven at the time, and he could still remember with extreme clarity the jumble of the kidnapping of the Royal Prince, who had been led out of the Citadel and the Wall in spite of the Crownsguard and the City Guard. The retinue that had taken him into custody, fortunately or unfortunately, had been assaulted by daemons, and only thanks to the report of a group of hunter and the intervention of the Crownsguard and the King himself Noctis was saved. No one had ever told him clearly, but Gladio had made the assumption that it was precisely that episode to accelerate, when Noctis had returned to the Crown City after the invasion of Tenebrae, the beginning of his duties as the future Shield of the King.

He realized that he too was staring at the building, and looked away, focusing on the people around them gathered at the station, waiting for what, he didn't know. He was aware that they should help, or at least try, somehow, but he didn't have the strength. None of them had the strength. He was feeling himself slipping into despair, and the more he'd run out of his energies, the less he was able to cope with it.

"Let's try and call Marshal Leonis," Ignis resolved. "Now we are outside of the Imperial territory. And now they know we're here, in case the conversation was intercepted."

Cor's name brought with it, inevitably, another one. Gladio had seldom thought of Silia since they had left Altissia because she was part of his fantasies of a peaceful future, and those fantasies were less and less probable and increasingly painful in their impossibility. Facing now the chance to speak to her again, he felt his mouth dry, especially since the last time it happened they had exchanged bitter words. "Let's try," he simply agreed. "How could this be any worse?"

Noctis took out his cell phone. In Niflheim, they had found out, radio and telephone connections were controlled by the army, and they hadn't dared to use their last surviving phone for fear of being intercepted. He called Cor's number.

They waited with bated breath to hear nothing, or maybe a distorted trill, as when the connections with Insomnia had been cut, and yet it didn't happen. After about ten seconds, long and tense as hours, they heard the Marshal's voice.

"Your Majesty?" The disbelief and relief in his voice almost moved Gladio. "Are you alive? Are you in Niflheim?"

"Thanks to the Six, or at least some of them, literally, we're safe, Marshal," Noctis replied. He rubbed his eyes. "Or rather Ignis, Gladio and me. We lost Prompto."

"Lost? You're not saying that..."

"We don't know. He has fallen behind. We're not in Niflheim, many things have happened and we've been forced to stop in Ulwaat. The Empire has bombed Fenestala Manor, Cor."

"Easy. Easy, all of you." By the Six, how reassuring it was, hearing the Marshal's harsh voice. They
thought themselves adults and smart, but compared to him they were a bunch of brats groping in the dark. "Let's start all over again. I have to update you on a couple of things as well, but you go first."

No mention of Silia. Knowing her, she could also be there beside him, silent, deeply focused on listening and not at all willing to interrupt the conversation just to say hello. Or maybe she wasn't at the camp, or simply, on that occasion, Cor hadn't thought it necessary to involve her. He would try to talk to her as soon as that phone call was closed.

Both he and Noctis looked at Ignis, the most orderly and concise among them. Gladio laid a hand on his knee. "You speak, Ig."

He nodded. "Fine. We retrieved the Royal Arm in Cartanica, as planned, Marshal, but the stop was longer than expected, because all communications with Gralea are cut, as Noctis said. We have listened to people's conversations. Not even the Imperial citizens seem to know exactly what is happening, but everyone agrees on a sudden and massive surge in cases of Starscourge infection. We are talking about thousands of people nobody knows about, probably daemonized. As far as we know, Gralea could be deserted today and Emperor Aldercapt barricaded in the Zegnautus Keep with the Crystal."

Cor didn't comment in any way. "What else?"

"The Magna Fortia, the train we were traveling on, was attacked by the Empire at the Eusciello station. Magiteks, daemons, an exceptional deployment of forces. I suppose they were looking for us. Fortunately we managed to start the train again, but Ardyn Izunia attacked Noctis and Prompto. In the scuffle, Prompto fell from the train, and Izunia stunned Noctis, who therefore couldn't help him. We have no news about him."

"The Chancellor knows you are in Niflheim, then."

"So it is," Noctis confirmed. "And nevertheless, he didn't kill me when he could have."

"I doubt the Chancellor's aims still coincide with Emperor Aldercapt's. The events that occurred in Altissia confirm that. With regard to Ardyn Izunia's aims, I admit I can't even try to guess them. I've seen a lot, in my life, but such a character remains obscure to me."

"He doesn't aim for the Crystal," Gladio intervened. "It's already in Gralea. Nor for the Ring, as the Empire does; he could have taken it from Ignis and Noctis in the Altar of the Tidemother."

"He aims for the Prince," Cor replied in an obvious tone. " Haven't you understood yet? He wants him in Gralea, with the Crystal and the Ring."

Noctis sighed. "And we're going right there. What should we do, Cor?"

"This is a decision that you must make for yourselves. This is no longer just a war against Niflheim, as you sure know. The Scourge has escaped the control of the Empire, perhaps due to an accident in the military labs of Gralea, and at this rate it will spread out of its borders, decimating the population of Niflheim and Tenebrae, then it will be the turn of Lucis. It's equally obvious, however, that by going to Gralea you will play the Chancellor's game, following a plan we are unaware of."

Gladio shuddered. "So we should just come back, you're sayin'?"

"As I told you, this is a decision that you must make. The other option, just so you are aware, is going back to Lucis and waiting for the end. A group of refugees escaped from Gralea confirmed to Magnus and Hartwood what you have supposed about the Scourge. Bombing the whole continent wouldn't be enough to prevent it from getting to the East."
"We'll go on, Marshal," Noctis decided, without a moment of hesitation, without consulting them. "There's no turning back. We have decided it in Cartanica, the all of us. Prompto would agree as well. And retrieve the Crystal could be our last option to stop the Scourge."

"We will go on," Ignis said. "What could happen worse than the extinction?"

"Accelerating it with our own hands," Gladio noted. Noctis and Ignis jerked their heads towards him, so he hurriedly raised his hands. "We will go on," he also repeated. "I don't like the other option at all, if we can even call it 'option'."

"Very well," Cor agreed. He hadn't tried to influence them, but it was obvious that he had hoped for their choice. "Now, listen to what I'm going to tell you. Hartwood and Magnus left Orior five days ago to join you. The last time I heard from them, they were about to ferry incognito from Cape Noah, where they have talked to the Imperial refugees. I don't know what route they took. I don't know what means they are moving by. I don't know what they are facing."

Gladio leaned over the phone, unable to restrain himself. "Silia?" he asked incredulously. "And Darius? In Niflheim?"

"If they're still alive," Cor said with his usual warm optimism. "Guess I don't need to tell you who had the idea."

No, he didn't need it. The Coeurl had awakened.

"Marshal," Ignis interjected, "we are so grateful to you for sending us support. I acknowledge perfectly the skills of Darius, who contributed to my training, and I do not need reassurance about those of Hartwood, who was a Kingsglaive. But we have no way of knowing where they are now. We cannot rush to their search all over Niflheim, just as we cannot go looking for Prompto, and we can't wait for them here, hoping they decide to go to Tenebrae."

"I am perfectly aware of this. That's why, at another time, I would have ordered Hartwood and Magnus to come back after being in Cape Noah."

"But you didn't," Noctis pointed out.

He heard the Marshal sigh. "Sometimes it's better not to issue an order, if you have the certainty that it won't be obeyed and that you will be forced to take serious measures against those who disregarded it. Remember this for the future, Majesty."

Gladio hadn't yet managed to decide whether the news gave him more joy, relief, or distress. Having Silia at his side at a time like that meant, in all likelihood, seeing her fall on a mission with a chance of success very close to zero. But now there was nothing he could do to prevent it and, had he been in her place, he would have acted the same way; indeed, probably he wouldn't have agreed to retire in the second line for so long. Wherever she was, he was sure that Silia was feeling much more alive than training men and reading books in Orior.

"In any case," the Marshal went on, "although foolish, and in this regard I am sorry to observe how Hartwood has badly influenced Darius, they're not so much so as to not know that finding you in Imperial territory is like finding a needle in a haystack. So they told me to tell you, had I ever heard from you, to wait for them at the eastern gate of Gralea..." He paused. "Tomorrow at dawn."

"Tomorrow at dawn," Ignis repeated. "We can do it, if we find someone who accepts to drive the Magna Fortia. The railway passes through the mountains and it's the fastest way to reach the Capital."
“Calm down.” Cor Leonis' voice was hard. "I told you that Gralea was in chaos when the Imperial refugees left the city, or so they told Magnus and Hartwood. I don't know what awaits you guys, and the same is true for Hartwood and Magnus. So, if you don't find them there, don't wait for more than an hour. Don't wait at all, if you see that it's impossible or too dangerous. They will do the same. In that case, you will infiltrate the Zegnautus Keep separately."

"Roger." Gladio found himself smiling. He still couldn't believe it. "I know that we are in Imperial territory with a missing member and one with reduced capacity, traveling to a city that is probably prey to chaos, and with the intent to penetrate an impregnable fortress without a plan but now, I don't know about the others, I've the feeling of having my back a little more covered."

"Don't rely too much on it. Hartwood and Magnus could be anywhere."

"We still have to find someone to take us to Gralea," Ignis pointed out.

"Marshal," Noctis said, bringing the phone to his lips. "I know that nothing has changed, but I wanted to let you know how much talking to you has encouraged us. We will do our best, this is a solemn promise."

"I'm sure of it," Cor replied. "You are the Chosen King, Majesty. The Astrals are on your side, thanks to the sacrifice of Princess Lunafreya. This, Ardyn Izunia can't take away from you. Stay together, whatever happens, and do not lose heart. See you soon."

"Goodbye, Marshal. And thank you for all."

Chapter End Notes

"Sic nos sic sacra tuemur" > "Thus We Defend Our Sacred Rights"
Chapter Summary

With an unexpected help, the Royal Retinue finally reaches Gralea.

39

Altum silentium

I

Though reassured by the phone call with the Marshal, their attempts to find someone willing to drive a train to Gralea were, predictably, a total failure. They didn't have enough money to convince someone to risk their own life; Gladio wasn't even sure that such an amount, as to convince a civilian to accompany three strangers through the heart of the Empire to an isolated city under martial law, did exist. Without knowing what hand to play, he went back to look for Volker, who offered him the promised glass of wine but reiterated his categorical refusal to continue. Gladio even went so far as to expose himself, guaranteeing him a safe pass for Lucis later, but Volker looked at him over his glass, raising an eyebrow with a skeptical air. They both knew that even if they would reach Gralea and get in, they would likely not come out. The man advised him once again to let it go; none of the train drivers at the station, at any price, would have faced that journey.

They had given themselves three hours from their conversation with Cor to find a machinist; three hours more for Prompto, if he had simply been stranded, to reach them. It didn't happen, of course, and they eventually resigned themselves to returning to the Magna Fortia to retrieve the Regalia, their last option left.

"Well, look who's there!"

He recognized the female voice even before turning and seeing Aranea Highwind advance towards them on the station platform, with the same odd – and sexy – fighting gear she had wore in Vaullerey, but without her helmet. Gladio was about to summon his broadsword, but then he noticed she was unarmed.

"Aranea," Noctis said bitterly, but he didn't move to attack. "What are you doing here?"

"Heard around that a bunch of crazy guys are lookin' for someone to take them to Gralea," she replied in an amused voice. "I had some doubts, 'cause they talked about three people and not four, but 'a huge tattooed man' and 'a handsome refined boy with a pouting air' convinced me that it was you."

"Guess we've got you to thank for this mess?"

"No," Aranea denied. "But maybe you'll thank me for real very soon. Come with me."

Without waiting for them to accept or refuse, Aranea turned and walked away on her high heels. Noctis let out an exhausted sigh and got up to follow her. "C'mon," he told them. "I'm curious to hear what she comes up with."
Satisfied that she had been indulged, Aranea slowed down and joined Ignis as they crossed the station, a path that Gladio had made many times back and forth that day. "What did you do to your eyes?"

"I got injured in Altissia," he cut short.

"Can you see?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That sucks. What a cruel world, depriving women of two beautiful eyes like yours."

Ignis didn't answer.

They went down the marble staircase. She could have led them to an ambush, Gladio pondered, and they were following her blindly. Aranea had already attacked them once, without much conviction to be honest, and could have done so again, even among civilians; but maybe Aldercapt had instructed her to capture them and lead them to Gralea, an inconvenience which, if nothing else, would have solved their problem of getting there. They walked along the bridge that led into the city. Ulwaat, Gladio had realized, was pretty much made of bridges, like Altissia, but instead of the islets the buildings were built on rock plumes.

"Care to tell us where we're going?" Noctis asked.

"You said you want to go to Gralea. She stopped again. "Care to tell me where the fourth of you is?"

"We've lost Prompto."

"The blond guy with hair like Chocobo's butt? Is he dead?"

"We don't know."

"Then," Aranea replied, leaning her hands on her hips, "quit moping, keep hoping. From personal experience, if there isn't a corpse to cry on, it's not yet time to cry."

"Spare us your advice. We lost Prompto because of the Empire and the Chancellor. And now this," Noctis said harshly, gesturing to the Fenestala Manor. "If it's not you, who should we thank?"

"A horde of daemons, last night."

"Summoned by the army you are fighting for."

"I fought for. My guys and I decided to resign. We're in the search and rescue business now." She paused. "I decided to unilaterally terminate the contract that bound me to the Imperial army after what happened in Altissia."

"That is?" Ignis' voice was mocking. "Are you referring to the involvement of civilians, the assassination of the Oracle or the attempt to murder an Astral?"

Aranea stopped again. This time, even though Ignis couldn't see it, she gave him a look that was anything but cheerful. It was the first time she showed an emotion different from her sardonic irony. "You know, Bright Eyes, we don't all have the luxury of being born in a prosperous and guarded city like Insomnia. And the Astrals haven't been so benevolent to all of us. When the Glacian attacked the Empire in 745 she didn't pay attention to civilians. I would tell you to take a look at the
remains of the villages from the bridge over the Ghorovas Rift to get an idea, but there's nothing left of
them, since they were razed to the ground by the snow storms unleashed by Shiva while marching
towards Gralea."

"I do not know what can pass through the mind of an Astral," Ignis replied, "and I feel sorry for the
civilians. But not the Astrals, nor Lucis, started the war."

"I know that. But when you find yourself inside, it doesn't matter who started it. You just want it to end."

"Of course it matters." Noctis was indignant. "Joining the army of those who attack or those who are
simply defending themselves is not exactly the same thing." Aranea didn't answer. She just looked at
them severely and perhaps with a hint of shame. But all three were waiting for an answer to Noctis' correct
observation. "I'm not proud of all the things I've done," she finally said, without giving any explanation or
justifying herself. "And I wouldn't trust myself if I were you. But I want this filthy business with the miasma
to end. There have already been too many victims. And you want to stop Adercapt, so I will help you as I can."

"Is your weapon a magitek lance, or do I remember incorrectly?" Ignis pointed out again with a
thorny smile.

Aranea inclined her head slightly towards him. She frowned for a moment then, unexpectedly,
smiled. "Do you want to get to Gralea or not?"

"We would like to," Ignis answered again. For the first time since they had left Altissia, he was the
old Ignis. Despite Prompto's gossip, groundless or not, a certain ironic harmony between them was
evident. "Preferably as free men, preferably incognito, preferably from the east gate."

"Anything else?" she snorted, amused.

"Preferably within tomorrow at dawn."

"So many requests. We'll see what can be done."

They no longer spoke as Aranea led them to a rocky clearing, deserted except for two men in
uniform. One was wearing a white trench coat and a black visor hat; the other a black trench coat
with a funny peaked hood.

"Biggs and Wedge, two of my men. They can take a lickin'."

"Only if we have to," the man in white trench coat said, turning to Aranea. "What's all this about?"

"Driving a train. To Gralea."

"That all?" the man in black trench coat asked, ironically. "A walk in the park, with what's happenin'
in the city."

"So, do you know what's going on?" Noctis asked.

"Not exactly. Those who knew for sure are probably dead." Aranea leaned her hands on her hips.
"We can just guess. All coms are cut. The last order issued to the army, unfortunately, was to bomb
Fenestala Manor. Then, nothin' more."

"In Cartanica and on the train people talked of an uncontrolled spread of the Scourge. The Disease,
as you say," Gladio observed.

"I am afraid it's true and I am afraid Gralea is probably a dead city by now. Maybe I'll go and have a look, but not now. I've things to do." She didn't say what. "Anyway, I don't force anyone to risk his life, just to be clear, Wedge."

"I didn't say we won't do it," the man in black trench coat – Wedge, it seemed – replied. "I just said it won't be a walk in the park. Who are the fools who want to go to Gralea at a time when everyone wants to escape, anyway?"

"The fools are the prince of Insomnia and two men of his retinue."

Biggs and Wedge stiffened immediately.

"Huh. Oh... forgive me, Your Majesty," Biggs said awkwardly. "We had no idea."

"We'll take you where you want, Your Majesty, if that's what the Commodore orders."

Aranea frowned. "I don't order, I already told you. The moment I left, you followed me freely."

"And we will continue to do so, Commodore," Wedge replied with a smile. "When you're ready, we can leave."

At that moment Gladio understood that, if she was able to arouse such loyalty in her men, Aranea, as well as damn strong, must also be damn reliable; on the other hand, if she had earned such a high rank among the hierarchies of the Imperial army, that didn't have to amaze him. He wondered if it was the case to keep trusting in strangers. Izunia had done them some favors whose price they had yet to find out.

"Thanks," Noctis said, bowing his head. He had decided. "Thank you very much."

She waved her hand nonchalantly. "Yeah, no sweat, Prince. If you manage to stop Aldercapt, it will be so good for everyone. Biggs, Wedge, thank you for your cooperation. Go back to the station with the guys, they'll show you where the train is."

"Aranea," Ignis said, "since you are in the search and rescue business now, we have another favor to ask of you."

"The favors begin to pile up, and I've just resigned," she winked. "But if you ask me, Bright Eyes, I could do this too for free."

Ignis made half a smile. "Actually the favors are two, but not at all demanding. The first is, if you meet our blond friend, Prompto Argentum, please reassure him that we are safe and inform him that we are proceeding towards Gralea."

"That's easy. The second one?"

"The second is very similar. We have just found out that a rearguard from Lucis is trying to reach us. Two people."

Aranea chuckled. "A substantial rearguard, huh?"

"It is," Gladio felt obliged to intervene. "A Crownsguard of Insomnia and a former Kingsglaive."

"A Kingsglaive?" Aranea blinked. "They acted nicely in May, huh?"
Noctis crossed his arms. "Coming from you, who have fought for the Niffs, makes me laugh. Anyway, she's trustworthy."

"'She'? And how will I recognize them? I doubt they're hangin' around in full uniform."

Ignis and Noctis turned to him. "Hm," Gladio gasped, raising a hand from the ground to where he thought Silia's head must more or less be.

Aranea laughed. "Is one of the two a child?"

"No," Gladio couldn't help but smile. "She's a woman nearly thirty, about this tall. Slender more than muscular. Brown hair down to her chin by now, I think, even if it could have been cut or shaved. Green eyes. She carries two one-handed swords. Oh. I doubt it will be visible since this damn cold, but she has a huge Coeurl tattooed on her back. Her name's Silia Hartwood."

"Gotcha. The other one?"

"Darius Magnus. A man in his mid-thirties. Tall, muscular, long graying black hair. He carries a two-handed sword. They could be anywhere, like Prompto, and I don't think they'll go through Tenebrae, but you never know. If you see Hartwood and Magnus, tell them that we have received the Marshal's message and that, if possible, we'll meet them at the East Gate tomorrow at dawn. Tell Prompto too, if you meet him."

"Hartwood and Magnus," Aranea repeated. "I'll remember. This Hartwood seems easy to recognize. Very well. I'll grant these favors, if I have the chance. I'll call in the debt when the time comes."

"You said you would do it for free!" Noctis protested.

Aranea smiled. She had such a beautiful and provocative smile, and such a prosperous bosom, that she would have melted any man of sound mind. "I don't want money, Prince. But later perhaps I'll ask for a date with Bright Eyes."

Ignis, a million-to-one shot, blushed. Gladio didn't laugh just because it was definitely not the time, but exchanged with Noctis a look that was worth a thousand words.

"I dare to say this is not the right time to joke," Ignis replied, more sour than it was needed, confirming his embarrassment.

"How serious and diligent you are!" she exclaimed. "I like you even more. Get on the train, guys, you can trust Biggs and Wedge. Whatever happens, they'll take you to Gralea."

"Fine. Thanks, Aranea." Noctis stepped forward and held out his hand. "If later you don't know where to go, or what to do, and you want to continue dealing with search and rescue business, go to Lucis. Look for the Immortal."

"Marshal Cor Leonis?" she said, amused, taking his hand. "He's a legend. The Imperial army has been searching for him for months without success. We'll see."

"Luckily you didn't find him, or you wouldn't be here doing us favors," Gladio winked.


II
The journey to the Imperial Capital was long and cold. They didn't talk much, sitting in the dining car – Biggs and Wedge had dropped almost all the empty and half-destroyed wagons, but kept that – because they spent most of their time sleeping in turns to restore their strength for what they would face in Gralea.

Gladio was awake precisely as the train sped along an apparently endless bridge that ran over the Ghorovas Rift. The day they left, he had teased Prompto because he believed that Hammerhead, seen on the map, was close to Insomnia, but this time everyone had enormously underestimated the vastness of Niflheim. Looking down at the snowy expanses of that vertiginous gorge, thinking of the ruins of the villages Aranea had talked of and feeling observed by the dead eyes of the body of the Glacian, Gladio wondered where Silia was. He saw no roads beneath them, in the valley illuminated by the glittering glow that Shiva's body emanated, and wondered what route she and Darius had or would have take, as long as they would meet the East Gate of Gralea. In addition to the daemons, even the frost worried him. Silia was a Kingsglaive, and certainly she must have traveled and fought in adverse weather conditions, but Darius was a crown citizen; outside the heated train, it must have been at least 5 °F.

Unlike the period he had spent in Cape Caem, Gladio couldn't, nor wanted, to imagine their hypothetical reunion. He terribly missed Silia when he allowed himself to think about it – he tried not to allow it – but for the first time he was starting to understand what she really meant when, sitting by Samuel with a mug of beer, she'd tell him about the front and the tragic relationships between comrades. Since they had left Insomnia, they had risked their lives almost every day, but now, in Niflheim, if it was highly unlikely that he would come out alive, the possibility of them both coming out alive was less than zero.

No point in thinking about it by now, he repeated to himself, sweeping again the condensation on the window away with his arm. But it would be tragically ironic, to die without meeting now that we both are in Imperial territory.

"It seems that, after all, we'll have to content ourselves with the blessing of three of the six Astrals," Noctis said out of nowhere, apparently awake. Gladio turned; he too was looking out of one of the windows. "I suppose the Glacian will no longer give her blessing to anyone."

"I would settle for going through the gorge without incident," Ignis retorted, his eyes still closed.

Gladio sighed tightly. "I'm more concerned about what we'll find after the gorge."

No sooner than he said it then the train started to slow down, in a screech of metal on frozen metal as if to make their ears bleed. They were all tossed forward when it stopped. An emergency brake, of course, and right on the bridge.

"I want that on the record. This time you jinxed it," Gladio commented, pointing his finger to Ignis.

Ignis opened his mouth to reply, but he was interrupted by the usual speaker jingle.

"Hm, your Majesty?" Biggs' voice crackled – or maybe it was Wedge's; he kept confusing them even though one was dressed in white and one in black. "You certainly noticed that we have stopped. We were forced to. The windshield froze suddenly, and the cameras in front of and behind the train seem covered, probably from the snow. The radar sensed an obstacle on the bridge."

Noctis reached the intercom. "We got it. Guess we have to go and see."

"Hope it's just a quick snow-shoveling job," Gladio commented, putting on his jacket and pulling up the zipper. The three of them prepared to get off the train.
When he was on the tracks, Gladio felt his breath cut off, and not just from the cold. The Glacian was gigantic, and she was trapped in an expression of such pain that he was overwhelmed. Was she somehow still alive? Did she still feel something? He didn't have time to think about it, because the obstacle wasn't, of course, a quick snow-shoveling job. Some ice was really blocking the way, but before destroying it they had to get rid of yet another daemons' incursion. Small, damn fast Snagas, but also dangerous Wraiths, able to suck up vital energy. The worst nuisance, however, was a huge insectoid daemon similar to a four-legged armored mantis, and equipped with six huge claws which, they experienced literally in their flesh, could hurl laser beams or be thrown at the opponents.

There were no airships in sight, so the daemons weren't controlled by the Empire. Perhaps, after all, for once it was a simple bump in the road. As far as they knew, the gorge was swarmed with daemons, so then it was no surprise they had ventured on the bridge. Again, going up on the train after shoveling away the snow curtain, he hoped that Silia and Darius would be fine.

It was his third last logical thought before he stopped feeling his body, suddenly, from the extremities to the head. The penultimate was that it was impossible that inside the train it was colder than outside. The last was that he thought he saw Chancellor Ardyn Izunia; it demonstrated that the simple bumps in the road were a luxury they should no longer expect to enjoy.

*...adio? Ignis? Wake up!"

"For the Six, how fuckin' cold. For a moment more, Gladio couldn't move. He remained motionless, without hearing nor feeling anything except Noctis' voice.

"Gladio! Ignis! C'mon!"

Gladio had to call on all his willpower to pull himself up. He had never felt so cold in his life, not even in the Greyshire Grotto. "What the hell happened?" he managed to ask, his jaws stiff. Struggling not to chatter his teeth, he rubbed his arms to reactivate the circulation and to shake off the ice crystals, then his legs. He was pretty sure they wouldn't withstand his weight if he had tried to get up.

Noctis was kneeling on the ground in the corridor between him and Ignis. His friend was trying to sit as well. "Luckily you both recovered!"

"What happened, Noct?" Ignis asked, peeling the ice from his glasses. "Are you fine?"

"Yeah." Noctis had a concentrated, adult look that gave him the creeps. "I saw the Glacian." He raised his right arm, and a weapon materialized in his hands. It was a trident. The Trident of the Oracle, one of the Royal Arms. Whatever had happened while he and Ignis had fainted, Noctis had been busy.

"The Glacian?" Gladio repeated.

"She's alive. She has always been alive, all this time, watching over Luna and also over us. Her body was here, in the Ghorovas Rift, but her soul was in Gentiana. She was Gentiana."

Gladio blinked, running a hand through his damp beard. At another time, he would have asked Noct if he was going mad. "The High Messenger has always been Shiva, you mean?"

Noctis nodded, letting the weapon disappear. "Somehow, she was. She has..." he hesitated.
"She has...?"

"She gave me her blessing. The Glacian is with us now, like Titan, Ramuh and Leviathan."

Neither he nor Ignis could speak. It was good news, but Noctis didn't seem glad. "Did you see Izunia?" he asked them, looking down.

"For just a moment, and I wasn't sure," Ignis answered, confirming it to him as well. "He was behind all this, then?"

"Who can say?" Noctis replied. "By now it's a blind fly, you know. The Glacian froze him. I saw him go to pieces with my eyes. Maybe it was his projection. Maybe he's somewhere in Gralea laughing while he's waiting for us. I'm not him, by the way, before you ask me something odd again to prove it. Sorry, guys, but it's not the time." He ran a hand over his eyes.

"Noct, are you sure you're okay?" Gladio asked.

"I am," he confirmed, but he didn't get up. "I have to... I need to be alone for a while. Could you go and see how Biggs and Wedge are doing? If something happened to those two, we're in trouble."

Rising painfully, Gladio nodded. Gentiana, in addition to the power of Shiva, had given him the Trident, the Royal Arm that belonged to the first Oracle and then to Princess Lunafreya. He could only imagine how Noctis was feeling at that moment. "Sure, man. Ig, can you get up or your joints are frozen?"

"I can get up," he replied, bracing himself against his cane to pull himself up. "Let's go."

III

"Hartwood, I am here. Shall we go?"

Silia looked up from the weeks-old newspapers she was flipping through on the counter. The diner where they had stopped was much more than warmed up and she was stewing, although she was only wearing her sweater, while Darius had his snow jacket and even his scarf on too. She wasn't too surprised; temperatures in Lucis were warm or mild most of the year, with the exception of the mountain regions west of Cleigne where she was born, and she doubted Darius had ever felt the real cold until they had moved to Niflheim.

"I'm in the same hurry as you are, but let's take ten minutes more, Darius. It will be a long night out there. How's your thigh injury?"

He grimaced. "You've made the stitches so big that I will have a horrible scar."

"I didn't have time to do a fine job. As long as they keep..." She nodded to the man at the counter. "Chief, can you bring us some more coffee?"

The owner made a nod that could be either of assent or as no, but turned to the coffee machine. Everything in Niflheim smelled like post-apocalyptic. In Lucis they had discussed so much about how to keep a low profile once in enemy territory, but they had discovered that it wasn't necessary at all. Daemons seemed to find them more than appealing, but as for humans, no one paid any attention to them, probably because they didn't drain black pus and they didn't look like magiteks, and if the Kingdom had still had an army it would have been a good time to take it to Niflheim and invade the country. Or maybe not, because in a week, half of the men would have been infected with Plasmodium. As they had supposed, they had met entire caravans of Imperial civilians fleeing towards the East, and soon they would try to reach Accordo and Lucis by sea, as long as they
managed to get to the coasts. Halting them was impossible, and it was impossible to predict what would happen in the following weeks. Certainly there would have been clashes and many casualties.

At another time, Silia would have been careful not to walk around in the middle of the night trying to put together snow equipment with the clear intention of venturing into the Ghorovas Rift. And at another time, they would probably have been bombarded with questions and reported to the local authorities as suspicious people. But there were no more local authorities in that fucking hole at the end of the world. The Imperial officers in the flesh had died and the magiteks had gone berserk for some fucking reason and had attacked the civilians. Most of the inhabitants had left the town, and Jadzia was almost deserted.

Darius didn't press her anymore to go. After all, he didn't crave to venture into the icy lands they had to cross. He sat on the stool next to hers, and Silia noticed that he hadn't taken advantage of the stop in the diner to shave his new beard, as she had believed when he had seen him disappear into the toilet. He looked wild, ferocious, and she wondered if a new man or a broken man would return to Orior, if they returned at all. "Have you found out anything interesting?"

Silia showed him the front page of the newspaper. "High Commander Ravus Nox Fleuret sentenced to death for the demise in Altissia," she read aloud. It dated back to 28 July, three weeks after the events in Altissia. "The High Commander Ravus Nox Fleuret was tried and found guilty by the military court. During the trial he publicly admitted, without providing any justification for his actions, that he ordered the withdrawal of the army from Altissia during the operations to contain the Archaean."

"That's one-month-old stuff already." The diner's owner pushed a long jug of coffee in front of them. No espresso coffee in Jadzia, unfortunately. "You want to know somethin'? Just ask."

Silia filled both cups. The crippled man wasn't a threat, they would be away from the town within an hour, and he certainly wouldn't phone Aldercapt or Izunia to warn them that two suspicious guys were heading to Gralea. "Thanks, Chief. Can you tell us who replaced Ravus Nox Fleuret?"

"Nobody I know of."

Darius brought the coffee to his lips. "Do you mean there's no new High Commander?"

"Take a look at those other papers," the man merely answered, contradicting himself.

Silia nodded. They were dated beginning of August. She read a few sentences aloud. "More people disappeared into thin air in the southern suburbs of Gralea. After the mass disappearances in West Gralea and North Gralea and the quarantine of the areas, still no statement by the Emperor or Minister of Research Verstael Besithia, yet the count of the victims has risen to 10.327 ... The Emperor denies any connection between the disappearance of the civilians and the progressive increase of the daemons sighted outside the city and that the facts are connected to the experiments performed in the lower areas of the Zegnautus Keep. He does not issue further details on the quarantine ... The civilians who attacked the magitek garrison in Central Place have been condemned ... The Emperor blocks all outgoing civilian transport... riots at the Central Railway Station. A magitek patrol opened fire on the citizens ... at least 76 people killed by the daemons in the last three days. Emperor Aldercapt continues to deny that these are the consequences of the experiments... We ask all readers to remain calm and reach the shelters..."

"That's it," the man interrupted her. "No new High Commander, and I don't know if there's a new Emperor. Those are among the latest newspapers got there. Now Gralea is isolated. I wonder if it was Aldercapt who gave the order to attack Tenebrae last night."
They had already learned about it on the radio. There were no more newspapers, but somewhere outside Gralea someone was still broadcasting. She and Darius had consulted to determine if they should divert and reach Tenebrae, in the hope that the Prince and his retinue had headed there – the Fenestala Manor had been Princess Lunafreya’s home, after all – but at last they had decided to not risk and to continue towards Gralea, or they would have missed the date agreed for the encounter at the East Gate, provided that Cor had managed to reach the guys to pass them the message and that there was indeed a meeting. "Who knows. Whoever did it, one thing is certain: at this point it was an act of unjustified cruelty."

The man nodded. "The ol’ Aldercapt would never have done it. It was Besithia and the Chancellor who fucked his head."

Silia carefully avoided reminding him that Niflheim had been at war with Lucis for more than four hundred years and that the fighting had been raging long before Besithia and Izunia appeared on the political scene of the Empire. She emptied her cup of coffee.

"What can you tell us about the Chancellor?"

Darius' question would have dispelled any doubts about their foreign origin. But, as expected, the man merely shrugged his shoulders without caring. "Not much, like everyone. He appeared from nowhere more or less thirty years ago as a collaborator of Verstael Besithia. Besithia was made Imperial Minister of Defense, he was made Chancellor. All this happened in 725."

"After the Glacian's defeat," Silia deduced.

"Yeah." The man leaned against the counter and rested his face on the back of his hand. He bent his lips in a caustic grimace. "You know, in Niflheim we're born with the bad habit of always pretendin' nothin's happenin', but even we noticed somethin'."

"What, Chief?"

"Izunia looks great for his age. In the 20s he looked like a middle-aged man. And now..."

"...he looks like a middle-aged man," Darius completed for him. The two of them had never met him, but they knew his appearance. But no wonder, if half of what Gladio had told her was true, he wasn't human.

The owner of the diner nodded. "A creepy guy, that one. As far as I know, nobody likes him."

"And yet his and Besithia's research made you win the war."

"Yeah, and look what we've got." The man straightened up. He fumbled in the pockets of his vest and pulled out a half cigarillo, which he placed between his lips. "Half the Empire turned into monsters. Who knows? Perhaps Aldercapt has made war to conquer a place to escape to when everythin' is invaded here, not because of that fuckin' useless stone he brought back from Lucis."

"Chief, just out of curiosity. Why do you keep a diner open in this deserted place and didn't go with the others?" Silia wanted to know, and also to change the subject.

"Because I'm a cripple, if you hadn't noticed, Miss, and I wouldn't go far. And more, what difference does it make? The Disease will go beyond the sea. The light keeps the monsters away, and as long as there's energy in Jadzia, I'll stay here to open and close my diner for those few people left, as I've done for the last forty years. When the electric light goes out, and sooner or later it'll happen, I've a rifle behind the counter. The first shots are for the monsters. The last is for me."
Samuel, Silia realized, the owner of the pub she and Gladio had attended for months at Insomnia. That's whom that man reminded her of. She bet the old Sam would say and do the same. Who knew where the fuck he was. Probably in the archipelago of Galahd. Or maybe he was still behind his bar in the suburbs of Insomnia and the Niffs had never discovered him. She was suddenly assailed by nostalgia for those months she had complained about so much, and above all by the desire to see Gladio at least once more. "Well, Chief. When the time comes, if you want to make a bang and take with you the diner and three or four buildings in the surrounding area, use it on a Grenade. You'll spare the last shot."

He lowered his head in an ironic bow. "Thanks for your advice, ma'am. Now you tell me: why in the hell are you going to the Ghorovas Rift?"

Darius folded his arms behind his head. "We heard Gralea is a pleasant place to visit, especially in recent weeks. What about the Ghorovas Rift?"

"I can say you won't come out alive," the man retorted. "But if you must go, I can only suggest you to cover yourselfs properly, to bring spare snow chains for your car, and to enjoy the view of the gigantic ice tits of the Glacian, because they will probably be the last thing you'll see in your life."

"What's the fastest road to get to Gralea from the east gate?"

"There are no proper roads. There used to be once, but now the storms covered them with snow. Try to keep the Glacian's body always on your right. The jeep you parked outside may be able to continue, but I wouldn't bet my life on it. A snowmobile or an airship would be better, but they took them all away."

"We'll have to rely on the jeep. Before we go, Chief, do you have something strong to drink?"

"Take away a couple of bottles of what you want. It's on the house. But first let's have a drop together to the end of the time."

"Hartwood, are you sure you don't want to stay here? The two of you would get along."

**IV**

The Zegnautus Keep was so large that, seen from below, it looked like a huge gray ceiling dotted with flashing lights.

"Do you see a way to get in?" Ignis asked, his head tilted upward as if he could see the great fortress as well.

"There's a connection to the city. A sort of lift or freight elevator. Let's try and make our way up there. If the lift doesn't work..."

He dropped the sentence. If it hadn't been operational, his only option was to climb onto the elevator cage with Ignis on his back, and it would have cost them precious hours, not to mention that he would get to the Keep completely exhausted, if he had ever arrived there.

"How far is the elevator?"

"I'm not good at calculatin' crow fly distances. Let's say two miles. But the road's completely cluttered. Train wagons, overturned trucks, dead cars. And, needless to say, not a living soul, just daemons." He sighed. "Let's recap. We're unarmed, save the swords Izunia gave us, we're separated from Noctis, we've a daemon horde all around, and we've to break into an impenetrable megafortress. Did I forget something?" *Apart from the fact that one of us is blind?*
He was trying to stay focused and purposeful, but it was damn hard. The daemons' attack on the bridge had slowed them down and they had missed the dawn. Worse was that the shy sun, barely visible in the fog and the snow, had set not even four hours later, so they were again at the mercy of the daemons. Worse still, the Magna Fortia had stopped again in the tunnel leading to the East Gate, again because of the daemons, and they had found out with horror that none of them could summon any weapons, as if some of Noct's magic didn't work. They had launched themselves at breakneck speed on the Regalia and Noctis had driven full throttle in the tunnel to cross the gate before it closed, but they had lost King Regis' precious car and, shortly afterwards, they had lost Noctis as well, as they become separated because of a precarious convoy that had collapsed at the wrong time. And then Izunia had appeared and given them weapons, just to disappear immediately before they could use them to attack him. They had no choice but to follow Noctis' tracks.

"Gladio, please," Ignis pleaded.

"Okay, I'm sorry, man." Gladio sighed. "I'm runnin' out of all my reserves of strength, patience and constructive optimism. I still need a bit to get into the resignation phase."

Ignis, on the other hand, had already gotten in it, or perhaps it was the lacking of expression of his eyes that made him think so. "Let's go to the elevator, since it's the only way to get on. Ironically an airship would solve all our problems, but even if we had one, we wouldn't know how to fly it."

* *

The two miles to the elevator, as long as they were just two, were long and exhausting, and the empty cars and clothes left on the ground gave him the chills. All those people had tried to leave the city and had been stopped by the army, slaughtered by the daemons and turned into daemons as well. His mind couldn't grasp the thought of all those dead – Gralea had been as populated as Insomnia – and if they didn't do something to stop the Scourge, they would increase more and more. Any Snaga he smashed could have been a child until the day before. Every Arachne, a mother like the Naga they had met in the Fociaugh Cave. The thought made him sick, but there was nothing to be done. Every daemon that breathed on his face, every wound they inflicted on him, could have infected his blood.

It took almost an hour to reach the building where he had seen the elevator cage. They encountered none but other daemons, there as elsewhere. Gladio wondered how longer he and, above all, Ignis would have endured fighting uninterruptedly without resting, and how they could have rested knowing that Noctis was alone ahead of them.

Much of the warehouse's furniture was on the ground or in pieces, and on the right a huge metal grill seemed to have been literally smashed. There were no signs of an explosion, so it must have been a Jotunn or something just as big and strong. He didn't see, however, the creepy empty clothes that the victims of the Plasmodium left behind when they turned into monsters. Whoever worked in that building must have managed to flee before the invasion.

On a steel industrial rack, Gladio noticed a battery powered radio. Without knowing what to expect, he approached and turned it on.

"This is the Imperial Security Bureau." It was clearly a recorded message. "A situation has arisen in several research sectors. All civilians must relocate to their designated refuge stations immediately. Failure to evacuate will result in incarceration or another appropriate disciplinary procedure. This emergency broadcast will be repeated until the situation has been resolved. The Imperial Security Bureau thanks you for your cooperation."

"Try switching the signal," Ignis suggested, approaching him.
Gladio continued to press the same key, waiting—hoping—to hear a living voice. If someone was broadcasting from somewhere, that meant that there were survivors. But it didn't happen. Whatever key he pressed, whatever frequency he tried to tune in to, there was only the same announcement repeated.

"No use," he warned Ignis, discouraged. "Maybe there are people hidden in these shelters the announcer talks about, but we've no way of looking for them, and even if we find them, it would be useless. We would only take on us tens or hundreds civilians we wouldn't know how to help."

"However, we have confirmation that everything started from the laboratories. Perhaps we should gather some documentation to bring to the Marshal. As soon as we find Noctis, clearly. It could help us shed some light on what happened over the past few weeks." Ignis folded his arms. "Did the daemons escape the labs... or were they released by their master?"

Gladio shivered. "D'you think this could be Izunia's job? But why the hell should he destroy the Capital of that Empire he has been helping to fight the war for thirty years?"

"I told you, and the Marshal also said it: I doubt that Aldercap and Izunia's aims still coincide, if they have ever really coincided."

"But he won't destroy just the Empire at this rate. He will destroy life throughout Eos."

"Maybe this is his purpose. I repeat, Gladio: whatever he is, Izunia is not a man like you and me. Let's try to keep it in mind."

Gladio ran a hand over his eyes. What hopes did they have against such a... being, even if they managed to recover the Crystal? What if Noctis was already in his hands? "Damn. Let's hurry up."

*

Fortunately, the elevator worked. They went out on a deserted corridor on whose walls, in white giant letters, read the inscription A-00. Ground floor of the Keep, Sector A, or so Gladio imagined.

They had no idea what route to take. That floor looked like a maze of dead ends. As they wandered blindly, Izunia's irritating and querulous voice resounded all around as if amplified by a speaker.

"Are you stuck, gentlemen? Please, this way."

"Are you having fun, you bastard?" Gladio couldn't help but ask, not knowing where to direct his question. "I will make you pay for all this."

"Your rude ungratefulness offends me. I have given you weapons to fight, indications on how to proceed, yet you keep on threatening me."

Suddenly, the voice stopped sounding amplified and seemed closer. Sensing his presence, Gladio turned, sword in hand, beside himself. He stopped his attack just in time not to kill Noctis.

"Noct!" he exclaimed, lowering his sword. "I can't believe you're here. Are you ok?!"

"I'm fine," he said harshly. "But really one can't count on you two."

"What the fuck d'you mean?" Gladio was so mad that moved forward and shoved him. "We got separated 'cause of your fuckin' habit of always runnin' ahead by yourself!"

"It's not my fault if you slow me down."
Back to that point. Gladio couldn't believe his ears. This time he would really punch his face. "Now you've really stepped over the line, man."

"Gladio, don't," Ignis warned him, hard, placing himself between him and Noctis.

"Ignis, try to get in the way again, and this time I swear..."

"With such a rough attitude, I am not surprised that even that trained dog Ravus Nox Fleuret could beat you," Noctis said.

Gladio's mouth went dry. The humiliation that the High Commander had inflicted on him and which he believed he had overcome by defeating Gilgamesh in the Taelpar Crag was regurgitated again from a wound that wasn't totally closed. Noctis was smiling. It's just that, evidently, it wasn't Noctis. He had let himself play like a jerk.

"Izunia, I'll kill you."

"You should learn to control your temper, kid," Izunia teased him again using Noctis' voice and body. "Or you won't go far. I remember that King Regis' Sworn Shield was much more judicious, so much so that he ended up sitting in the Council. Did you know him? He sacrificed himself for the King despite having no chance against General Glauca."

Ignis took him by the arm. "Gladio, forget him. Let's go."

"Forget him? I'll..."

"No," Ignis shook his head, trying to drag him away. "We don't know who or what it is. It could be a projection. It could be Izunia himself. But it could also be an unlucky guy that Izunia is showing us with Noctis' features. Let's leave."

"Here, listen to your friend. He's much more reasonable, but equally reckless. What did he believe, in Altissia, that the Ring would have given him the power to defeat me? I'm not General Glauca. I could have killed him, but killing a blind kid wouldn't have given me any joy, and I didn't want to cause further pain to His Majesty. He had already lost his loved betrothed. It would have been too much for him."

Gladio had to make a superhuman effort to turn around, and the pain in his forearm caused by Ignis' fingers clawing at his flesh helped him. They moved away from the puppet with Noctis' appearance.

"Oh no, not that way!" the apparition said again, cheerfully. Behind him, the wall with the inscription A-00 slid to its left, revealing a passage. "Nothing up my sleeve, I can swear it. Go on this way and you will find the stairs to go up to His Majesty, but be careful, kids."

"And you believe that..."

Noctis' doppleganger disappeared before his own eyes as if he had never existed. It was an apparition, after all. Izunia was trying to play with their minds, but Gladio would never allow for it again.

*

The only direction they could follow was upward, because surely Aldercapt didn't keep the Crystal in the warehouses or in the lower labs. Whenever the route allowed it, they would climb up the flights of stairs, trying to rely on the evacuation maps they sometimes found hanging on the walls. Orienting themselves in that maze of corridors wasn't easy and, frustrated by the knowledge of losing
a lot of time, unnerved by Izunia's dirty joke, they had to stop and go back several times.

The daemons weren't the only enemies that infested the Keep; in a warehouse behind a metal door with flashing green lights, which according to the evacuation map had to lead to a flight of stairs to the upper level, they found apparently haywire magiteks. They were easier to break down, because they were uncoordinated and sometimes even deprived with a limb or two, but on the other hand they were damn more ferocious and more ready to self-destroy than a Bomb or a Grenade. It must have been the berserk magiteks they had heard of from the civilians.

Behind another automatic door that opened when they approached, they finally found an area deserted like the previous ones but apparently well lit and clear. The walls were covered with screens bearing the Niflheim insignia – a red and white tripartite rectangle with a specular golden and black dragon – and all around them there were machineries, screens and panels.

"I think it's a control room, Ig."

Ignis smiled. "Wonderful. Perhaps from here we will be able to monitor the rest of the Keep, or at least some areas. Do you see any operating terminal?"

"Everything seems to be operational here. The problem will be getting our hands on it." His computer skills didn't go beyond a personal computer or a smartphone but, unless he accidentally triggered the self-destruction of the whole Keep, he didn't think he could make their situation any worse.

He lowered himself to the nearest panel. He crossed his fingers and set to work, trying to open a way for Ignis and himself and perhaps to track down Noctis.
Mortui non mordent

Chapter Summary

The walk inside the Zegnautus Keep reveals itself, as expected, long and tortuous. On the tail of the Royal Retinue, Silia and Darius try to make up the hours that separate them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

40

Mortui non mordent

I

"Must I live to sacrifice? Must I die to make things right? Do I dare believe in hope when surrounded by night?"

"Hartwood, I can hear your depressing songs even through the hood and the scarf."

"I'm trying to not collapse and let myself freeze to death."

"If you sing another word, I swear I'll do it."

They had been going on foot for four hours, and she was quite certain they had advanced very little. They had kept as far south as possible from the Ghorovas Rift where the Glacian's body had radically changed the climate and turned half Niflheim into a frozen land but at last, after their brief stop in Jadzia, they had to enter its western reaches. The storms were probably not as strong as in the very heart of the gorge, but it was snowing violently there too; they were exhausted from the long journey and the continuous clashes and, moreover, they were stranded.

"What time is it? I think my watch froze."

"Does it matter? The sun has set two hours ago, although it's still one in the afternoon. We have missed the appointment with the Prince, provided that Cor managed to convey the message to them and that there was indeed an appointment, and I've no idea how much longer it will take for us to reach Gralea."

She was in a bad mood. They were bundled up in heavy clothes uncomfortable to fight in, yet not adequately protected from the cold, they were slowed down by violent blasts of snow and daemons, and they had just the enormous shining bulk of Shiva, barely visible in the storm, as a reference to orientate.

"Where's the zeal you were bragging on, blathering about putting Gralea on fire?"

Silia raised an arm towards the gigantic body of the Glacian. "Frozen. Together with my ass."

The irony she used to reply ill agreed with the despondency that was mounting inside her, more and
more nagging as the hours passed. She thought it would have taken them less time to cross the valley. And she believed it would have been easier. Although she had grown up in the mountains, she had never gotten lost in a snow storm. Walking was exhausting enough. If they'd keep on fighting in those conditions, daemons would have tired them out.

Perhaps they had been mistaken from the beginning. They should have looked for a boat, followed the coasts of Niflheim and entered the city from the west, where Shiva's influence began to subside but where, on the other hand, they knew they would meet thousands of daemonized people and certainly wouldn't have met the Prince. Damn it, the Six alone could know what they should have done. Now it was too late. They could only move forward to Gralea hoping to get there alive and in time for something.

"Hartwood, we can't go on like this. We must rest," Darius said aloud, his voice barely recognizable amid the roar of the wind and the layers of his clothing.

"And where?" she grinned, stopping. "Here, in the middle of nowhere? We can't see fuck. Just snow and trees. We're exposed to attacks, and if we sit down, we freeze."

Darius also stopped. Silia thought he wanted to answer her sourly, but instead he raised an arm in midair. "Shut up a second."

"But what...?"

"Shhht!"

Silia fell silent. And she too heard it in the wind. The roar of an approaching engine.

"A car?" she whispered. "No. It doesn't sound like a car."

Darius unhooked the torch from his chest and started waving it. Silia was about to ask him what the fuck he was doing and if he really wanted to reveal their presence to who knows who, but then she realized that they had no choice. At that moment, a human presence to ask for information, or an Imperial magitek to steal the vehicle from, was more than welcome. At that moment she would have agreed to ride a Grenade on the verge of self-destruction if it would take her to Gralea.

The noise approached. Silia had no idea if it had strayed after seeing Darius' signals or if the vehicle would still have passed close to them, but a few tens of seconds later they saw two lights approaching. It wasn't a trick of her imagination. It was a snowmobile with a person on board.

The snowmobile stopped beside them, and a woman dismounted. She was about five and fifty feet tall, her clothing was totally unsuited to the cold, and her face was concealed by a helmet with draconic features that left open more skin than it protected. She was wearing a long fur-lined black coat, tight on her waist and over her breasts, leather trousers, and a red scarf with matching fingerless gloves. She had a pair of red boots with absurdly high heels for someone who had to walk in the snow. Only a freak could walk around like that in the Ghorovas Rift. It was encouraging, since, hooked on her back, she had the biggest spear Silia had ever seen.

The woman stopped at a safe distance from them. She didn't extract her weapon, although they had unsheathed theirs, ready to defend or attack. "For some reason," she began in a jolly tone, barely muffled by the wind, "you don't look like two hikers."

"Neither do you," Silia replied.

The stranger slipped off her helmet with slow movements, a sign that she didn't want to provoke their reaction. Not yet. She was young, perhaps slightly older than she was, as Silia had already guessed
from her voice. "Put down your weapons," she said, with a faint note of threat. "You've revealed your presence willingly. I don't want to attack you unless you intend to do it first."

"Forgive our mistrust, but we're in the middle of nowhere and the occasional meetings don't always come under a good omen," Darius retorted, without lowering his sword, descending to her level of irony. "Who are you, o young lady with a bad taste in fashion?"

She laughed. "Look who's talking. Have you looked in a mirror recently?"

"No. Too busy trying to not freeze in the Ghorovas Rift, and making our way through snowstorms and hordes of daemons."

"If you have entered the Ghorovas Rift on foot, at night, you've earned all your misfortunes."

"We lost our jeep. A pack of Wraiths. Night and day, however, are now very arbitrary concepts."

"Even a car, in case you didn't notice, is of little use here." The woman rested her hands on her hips. "D'you mind lowering your scarves and removing your snow-glasses? I like to know who I'm talkin' to."

Cautiously, continuing to wield one of her swords, Silia lowered her hood, pulled back her scarf and took off her protective glasses. Even Darius, after a moment's hesitation, did the same. The cold was so pungent that it burned her face, and she wondered how that woman could stand it. "Are you happy now?"

She nodded with a smile. "Since you're too rude to introduce yourselves, I'll do it. Former Commodore Aranea Highwind."

"Oh, what a smart girl," she snapped. "Slow your roll, Hartwood."

Silia froze when she heard her surname.

"I did my homework, too. Honestly, I've to thank you. Now that I've met you, I've three favors to collect from Bright Eyes."

She didn't understand shit anymore. "Will you explain yourself? How do you know me? Who's Bright Eyes?"

Aranea Highwind frowned with amusement. "A Kingsglaive and a Crownsguard. You're even shorter than you were described, Hartwood. And they hadn't told me Magnus was such a handsome man, however poorly dressed, or I would've gotten on your trail before."

"Highwind, no time for bullshit," Darius retorted, sourly. "Explain yourself, or fight."

"A little nervous, aren't we? I met the Prince, the big tattooed guy and Bright Eyes in Ulwaat. They asked me, if I ever met you, to tell you that they received the Immortal's message. But I fear it's too late for your date. They missed it too, but by now they should already be in the Zegnautus Keep."
They're alive. Silia hadn't realized how much the eventuality that it wasn't so worried her until that moment. Or at least, they were until recently. She lowered her swords. "They have received our message from the Marshal, then? Damn it," she let slip in the direction of Darius. "After all, we could have reached them if we hadn't wandered in the storm for hours."

"They took the shortest route. Yesterday they got on a convoy driven by my guys, Biggs and Wedge. There were three of them, because the blond chick was separated from the others the day before and I found it in a lab in the mountains. We split up, but I bet he too is heading to Gralea, if he isn't already there." She looked at them with a mocking smile on her lips, probably enjoying their astonished expressions. "Twenty minutes ago, I could get in touch with Biggs and Wedge. Their train was attacked by daemons just outside Gralea two hours ago. The Prince and the others took their car and continued on their own."

"You helped the Prince to get to Gralea?" Darius asked. "Why on earth?"

"Didn't you hear that I introduced myself as a former Commodore? I deserted. Believe it or not, the Empire turns me sick. I enlisted as a mercenary to fight a war, but they really went too far. I feel I have been used by Chancellor Izunia, and I don't like being used at all. And what I saw and learned in the labs in the mountains, I liked it even less. So, I believe I'll help the gloomy prince to recover the Crystal, in the hope that there is still hope, and I'll gather more information in the Keep. D'you want a ride? I'll charge Bright Eyes for this favor too."

"Ignis Scientia," Silia realized. "You've such a good taste for nicknames, huh?"

"Don't think badly, I used to call him that even way before. I've a thing for green eyes. Yours are not bad too, actually, but I've other likings, and even if it was the case, you're not my type."

"A ride, did you say?" Darius cut her short.

"Don't be jealous, Magnus. I already told you. I'm going to help the little prince to recover the Crystal and to gather other information. I'm going to Gralea. To the Zegnautus Keep. Aren't you headed there too?"

Darius turned to look at her. Silia pursed her lips. She didn't trust the mercenary. She shook her head slightly.

"If you don't want to," Highwind said again, going back to the snowmobile, "I won't insist. After all, it would be very tight, riding this with three. Gralea is that way." She pointed west. "On foot it's five or ten hours, depending on how quickly you walk, how many storms will rage from here to the end of Ghorovas Rift, and how many daemons will attack you. But I'm sure that a Crownsguard and a Kingsglaive won't let themselves be troubled by such trifles."

"Does my opinion matter, Hartwood?" Darius asked openly, with a hint of controversy.

"It depends. What's your opinion?" she asked, although she already knew what he was about to suggest.

"We should get on that damn snowmobile and go with her. It's not the time to play who the Alpha female is, Hartwood, not with the Prince and the others already in the Zegnautus Keep for at least an hour. I said I would follow you to Gralea, not that I would die with you in the snow."

Silia sighed. If indeed the Prince had trusted her, perhaps, after all, they could trust her too. Or, maybe not. The Prince had trusted Izunia as well. "All right, calm down. Partly because, if we don't go on together, we'll find her in our way in the Keep, unless we get rid of her now."
"There's also that option, you're right," Highwind smiled. "Killing me and taking the snowmobile, if
you can. But I've the feeling that you won't. The Kingdom of Lucis is not famous for employing
such unscrupulous fighters. That's why you lost the war."

They didn't know how to respond to that.

"And besides," she said again, "I'm familiar with Gralea and the inside of the Keep. Can you say the
same?"

"How long will it take with your snowmobile?" she asked her.

"If all goes well, two hours. I'll lead you into the Keep through the shortest route from the one I
suppose the Prince and his retinue took. Perhaps we'll find them still safe and sound."

"Let's go," Silia cut short, standing beside her. "We are on a mission on behalf of Marshal Cor
Leonis, Highwind. We must reunite with the Prince and his retinue and give him support in the
retrieving of the Crystal. If our goals coincide, we can work together to penetrate the Keep. Let's call
a truce?"

Highwind stretched out her gloved hand. She smiled. "Truce. But just out of curiosity, Hartwood:
how the hell did you survive among the Kingsglaives? When the Imperials were shooting head-
height, they couldn't find your head?"

Silia gave a half smile, squeezing Highwind's hand in a fierce grip to which she responded with the
same intensity. "It happened lots of times. How convenient, huh?"

II

"There're tons of deleted files and missing data." Gladio couldn't understand. He kept searching in all
the directories. All the cameras to which they had access from there showed nothing useful, but he
memorized the halls and corridors where he saw the greatest gathering of daemons. "Why would
anyone take the trouble to delete surveillance tapes while the world's imploding?"

Ignis leaned against the terminal next to him. "An automatic security measure could have been
activated. Are you sure there's nothing left?"

Gladio shook his head, but a few seconds later he found something. "Wait- There's one. It's almost
like they wanted us to see it. Automatic security measures my ass!"

"What does it show?"

He ran it. The video was damaged and partial, because at first he saw on the screen just static, even
though he could hear a voice he didn't recognize.

What of the Hydraen's power? What of my precious Ring?

The images became clear. It was the Throne Room of the Keep, or so it seemed, because he saw
Emperor Iedolas Aldercapt himself and, in front of him, Ravus Nox Fleuret from behind. The usual
movement of irritation and anger, sharpened by Izunia's words, re-emerged, and Gladio clenched his
fists.

By the hand of the Oracle, they are with the King now... their rightful owner. And someday soon, he
shall use them to purge our star of its scourge.

But the Crystal is mine... I am the one True King!
Nay, it is Noctis and none other.

Ravus, after all, had indeed rejected the Empire after his sister's death, as Ignis had guessed in Altissia and as his death sentence for high treason had confirmed. When was the video going back to? Before or after the release of the news of Ravus' sentence? Nothing in the recording made him foresee.

Behind Ravus, three Wraths appeared. Perhaps Gladio was about to witness his death sentence. Yet, Ravus would never let himself be knocked out by any common daemons.

...certainly not a puppet of the darkness and the daemons he has borne.

You are the puppet... and you must die.

Ravus fought against the daemons, but he was thrown out of the room by the violent clash. As if to confirm the video had been left specifically for them, the shot changed immediately and continued to follow him. The fight had pushed Ravus off a suspension bridge, and he was clearly wounded. And then Gladio saw Noctis coming.

At last you have arrived, Noctis. The gods have shown you their favor. As Blood of the Oracle, I present you your father's glaive. Now go forth, my King. Shine your light unto the world.

Gladio didn't have time to wonder how Ravus could have King Regis' sword, because Noctis stretched out his right hand and, instead of taking the glaive, he summoned one of the Royal Arms – perhaps the Blade of the Mystic, his movement had been too fast to distinguish anything else that a semitransparent blade – and severed his arm. Ravus fell on his back.

Gladio let out a groan. As violent as Noctis' anger might be, however frightened and frustrated he might be, such a gesture wasn't like him. And then he realized he was letting himself be played again. He wasn't looking at Noctis.

Spare me your sycophancy. I have indulged your fake heroism for far too long. You tried to save the world in my stead, but it wasn't enough. The Crystal chose me, not you.

Noctis turned into Izunia. The Chancellor threw a handful of papers on Ravus' unconscious body, then finished him. Rejection hurts, doesn't it?

The video ended as Izunia walked away. King Regis' sword remained there, Ravus' arm still clenched into its handle.

"That wasn't Noct, was it?" Ignis asked. He seemed to need no summary of what Gladio had just watched.

"No. Just that scumbag chancellor posing as him again."

"It sounded like Ravus wanted to return His Majesty's sword."

"You were right, Ig," he had to admit. "Ravus loved his sister. He loved her so much he let himself be subjugated by the Empire to protect her. And in the end he accepted her sacrifice and recognized Noctis as King. I feel sorry for him."

They remained silent for a few seconds.

"Come on," Ignis urged him. "The Chancellor has wanted us to know what he can do to Noct. Let's hurry."
Seen from above, Gralea looked breathtaking, and certainly it had to be even more so the previous week, when it was still lit and inhabited by living people. Silia couldn't understand if it was bigger than Insomnia, but certainly the Imperial capital as well, until recently, must have given home to hundreds of thousands of citizens.

Who are now hundreds of thousands of daemons.

Probable in Gralea more people than what remained in Cleigne, Duscae and Leide put together had already died. For a moment she felt dizzy at that thought, or perhaps it was fatigue. She had to lean against the control panel, next to Biggs, and focus on the maneuvers of descent of the airship towards the Keep to get rid of the thought.

"Hold tight, Ms. Hartwood," Biggs told her, perhaps misunderstanding. "Five minutes and we hit the land."

Silia just shrugged without answering. They had agreed to proceed with Aranea Highwind, but the presence of two full-uniformed Imperial officers antagonized her. She had suffered too many oppression at the hands of such people as a child, and she had killed too many of them in later years. However, even if she wouldn't have admitted it even under torture, the encounter with Highwind had saved them precious hours wandering in the storms and at least another one, if not two, that they would have lost to cross the city to the Keep and to find a way to enter it. Not really a silent arrival, landing on an Imperial airship, but Biggs and Wedge had assured them that the city of Gralea, and probably also the Keep, had other more important things to worry about. She had few doubts about it. "How far from the landing area to the room where the Crystal is kept, Highwind?"

"Don't ask me stupid questions," she replied with a frown. "It depends on how well you and the Crownguard can handle what we find inside. It depends on which lifts and automatic doors work and which we'll have to bypass or break through. If you were expecting a guided tour, you picked the wrong time of year."

Silia was too tired to argue, so she took it. She rubbed between her eyes and checked the equipment again. She and Darius had got changed again, because in the Keep their snow clothes would only have hindered and slowed them down. Since they had left almost everything they had in the jeep when it had broken down, they had resigned themselves to wearing the Imperial uniforms they had found in the airship dug up by Biggs and Wedge. Hers, needless to say, was too big for her. Nothing in her life she had missed so much as her custom-made Kingsglaive uniform she had thrown away in a gesture of anger and rejection before leaving the Citadel, on the day of the attack.

Darius didn't participate in the banter. He was sitting on the floor just behind her, his arms crossed over his chest, his head lowered and his eyes closed. His face was cracked from the bitter cold, his hair still wet, and his split lips stood out red amidst his week-long salt-and-pepper beard. For a moment she thought he had fallen asleep, so she gently kicked his knee. "C'mon, swanky noble."

She called him that out of habit, but Darius Magnus was no longer a swanky noble. He had set foot outside Insomnia for the first time just over two months ago, yet he had traveled with her to the end of the world covering her back as the best of comrades. "We're almost at the end of the line."

"The line of our journey, or the line of all?" he asked, opening his eyes. He wasn't sleeping after all.

"Who's the downer now?"

"I hadn't yet seen how messed up Gralea really is."
Highwind clapped. "If you're going to cry, do it later."

"No one will cry," Darius assured her, pulling himself up. "I'm terribly sorry for the civilians, believe me, I can't even conceive such a number of casualties, but the Empire, as an idea, has got what it deserved. Aldercap wished to make Niflheim the new Solheim... and Niflheim met the same end as Solheim. He challenged the Astrals, experimented with the miasma, launched a cataclysm whose scope will exceed even the one in the books about the Ancient Era. I only regret that the whole Eos will bear the brunt, not just Niflheim."

Silia was expecting Highwind's spiteful reaction, if only out of shame, since she had contributed to all this, but there was none. Neither she, nor Biggs and Wedge who were sitting at the controls answered him. Highwind approached the windshield and leaned her hand on the glass.

"If the Prince retrieves the Crystal..."

"Perhaps," Silia replied. "And perhaps not. We no longer have an Oracle. We just have a descendant of Somnus Lucis Caelum left."

Highwind shook herself, or maybe she just shivered. She lowered the useless armet of her helmet over her face. "Then let's stop talking about disasters and cataclysms and let's get moving to reach him."

~~~XV~~~

It was cold when they got off the airship in the small military airport. It was very windy as well, and Silia had to hold down the edges of her jacket so that they didn't slap her while she looked out from the parapet. It was impossible to tell how high they were, because the clearing was indented from the rest of the Keep and she could see only concrete floors.

"This way, guys!" Highwind exclaimed, as if they were on a guided tour after all, pit-patting on the asphalt. Silia exchanged a last significant look with Darius before shrugging and following her.

She heard no engine noise, no vibration. They could have been with their feet firmly placed on the ground, for all she knew. Certainly the Niffs powered the Keep with miasma, like everything, and once again she was astonished by the level of technology that the Imperials had achieved. Zegnautus must have been, or more likely still was, a miracle of engineering. Powered with death, but still a miracle.

"This is one of the entrances to the Keep," Highwind explained as they walked among the abandoned crates and aircrafts. No enemies in sight for the moment, but the empty clothes on the ground left no room for doubt as to what had happened to the people who worked there. "They're few. There's a central lift that goes up from the city, usually guarded, but not anymore, I bet. Probably the Prince and the others entered from there."

"Guess they couldn't just have reached the top floor directly," Darius deduced.

"Well guessed. There're many elevators in the Keep, but none that leads from the lower to the higher levels, for security reasons."

The first daemon to appear, coming out of a pool of black slime, was an Iron Giant. They had lost count of all those they had took down since they were in Niflheim, and they moved mechanically: Darius snapped to his left, Silia to her right. He scrapped to avoid the lethal sweep of its huge broadsword and hit its ankle, unbalancing it, and the ten tons of the monster fell onto the ground, destroying everything within reach. Silia rushed to riddle the daemon with blows, but she had to step
aside a few moments later to not be involved in Highwind's attack who, propelling herself with her weapon, made a dizzying leap and then dropped into the Iron Giant's head, crushing it. The daemon dissolved, reabsorbed by the asphalt.

Darius whistled. "Well, Highwind, not bad."

She adjusted her helmet. "Thanks. You were so well coordinated that I felt myself forgotten."

"Next time warn me you're coming at me with a 70 pound spear," Silia lashed at her.

"80," she specified. "The enemies warn you when they attack?"

"Then next time, instead of dodging, I'll counter as if you were an enemy."

Darius went past them to get away. "Know what? Thought it couldn't be worse. A megafortress invaded by daemons. And instead I've just realized that I'm in a megafortress invaded by daemons together with two bickering women."

With a final look of defiance at Highwind, Silia followed him. They didn't wait for the mercenary to precede them: they saw in the distance a huge circular platform with a cylindrical structure that was clearly an elevator. They met no other daemons along the way, but they saw unmistakable traces of struggle. The asphalt of the pavement was chipped and, here and there, cracked. There were broken vehicles, destroyed containers, even an overturned airship that lacked a section like a slice from a cake. Scattered all around the platform were inactive and dismembered magiteks.

Darius guessed what she was thinking too. "The guys have been here," he said, looking around. "Not so long ago, I suppose. I bet that half of this mess was made by Gladio, not an Iron Giant."

Silia smiled. "I think so, too. They must have taken that elevator."

"It's not an elevator," Highwind contradicted them, coming closer. "But a service freight lift. The Crystal passed by here when they brought it from Insomnia."

"Iedolas Alderacpt put it under his bed?"

"He could have done so. Iedolas Alderacpt has gone completely mad in recent years."

"You all say it, here in Niflheim, but we've always been at war, and we've entered the fiercest phase when Iedolas' father wasn't born yet."

"I'm not denyin' it," Highwind conceded, "but with the Imperial citizens he has been a righteous monarch, until he began to allocate appallin' sums to Verstael Besithia and his research about the miasma."

"While he was butchering civilians over the sea, or even just a few miles away, in Tenebrae." Silia was getting pissed off. She climbed the stairs of the platform, and almost attacked nothing when the sliding doors of the elevator opened automatically in front of her.

"Calm down, Hartwood," Highwind said, a derisory note in her voice. "His time is up, haven't you noticed?"

Time up or not, Silia intended to take him to Lucis to answer for his crimes. The matter had come up with the Marshal, in Orior, the evening before their departure. Their priority mission was to reach the Prince and support him in the recovery of the Crystal, but, if the right conditions had been met, she and Darius were authorized to take the Emperor and Minister Besithia alive. Can we also take the
Chancellor alive? she had asked Cor, almost laughing, and judging by the way the Marshal had
looked at her, she had been sure for a moment that he would cancel the mission and that he would
kick her ass out of the camp, of Lucis and of Eos.

They entered the freight elevator. On the control panel, Highwind pressed the key corresponding to
the code D-06. "This is the highest plan we can reach from here. We're about to enter the labs area."

The trail of destruction that the Prince, Gladio and Ignis had left behind continued within the D-06
area as well. It was a labyrinth of corridors and halls, some of which were sealed, and it was evident
how the guys had wandered for a long time, stopping in dead ends, turning away because of the
clashes, and coming back often to take other paths.

Thanks to the clean sweep the guys had made, Silia, Darius and Highwind found the path quite
clear, even if not completely. Certainly it took them less than the others to reach the upper floors,
because Highwind, as she had announced, knew the winding paths of the Keep and how to bypass
the controls of the locked automatic doors. They had to fight their way through daemons and
haywire magiteks, but not as much as they had feared.

"Thought at least someone had survived in here," Darius let slip. "It's a fucking fortress."

Highwind adjusted her spear on her back. "In as out. The infection started from here and you saw it's
not so easy to reach the exits. Perhaps someone is alive in the upper levels, because Highwind, as she had announced, knew the winding paths of the Keep and how to bypass
the controls of the locked automatic doors. They had to fight their way through daemons and
haywire magiteks, but not as much as they had feared.

"The radio message we heard earlier spoke of refuge stations," Silia pointed out, keeping on
walking. "Maybe there's still someone. Not every organism succumbs to the Scourge."

"And if so," Highwind said, "what would you do? Goin' and look for them?"

"Highwind, stop talking as if I'm an emotional recruit. I'm not going to take charge of the civilians.
I'm just trying to estimate losses. I can't believe that an entire city, as big as Insomnia, is completely
gone."

"I would start getting used to the idea if I were you," Darius said dismally. Had they not been in deep
shit, Silia would have found amusing how, after teasing her for three quarters of their journey about
her catastrophic predictions, now he was the one talking like a hoodoo. "However, this place looks
like a Solheim ruins complex," he stated. "You breathe death."

"You breathe miasma," Highwind corrected him. "But you're not wrong. The first daemons they
started the experiments with came from there."

They stopped to wait for the elevator doors to open. Silia took advantage of that momentary truce to
question her. She and Darius had talked with many civilians in the last days, but she never expected
to have the opportunity to talk to a soldier. "How much do you know about it, Highwind?"

"Little," she admitted. "I was an operational arm. I was admitted to the Councils, but frankly, when
Besithia'd begin to explain, I didn’t understand that much. But I found out a lot of things in the
mountain labs."

"For example?"

"For example," Highwind replied, preceding them in the elevator, "the magiteks have the same
genetic make-up as Besithia. They're human clones infected with miasma. No wonder they've
always disgusted me; only Chancellor Izunia is more slippery than Besithia."
"Using his own DNA… his own fuckin' children. He's even sicker than I thought," Darius hissed. "We should take him to Orior and make him spit out what he knows. I bet he's barricaded in a safe place with the Emperor."

"And you would lose." The elevator closed behind them and began to rise. "I met Besithia in one of the labs I've searched yesterday, along with the blond chick. He was in no condition to talk to anyone. He became a daemon himself. Worse still, his soul merged with his latest magitek weapon and attacked us. He called it *Immortalis.*"

Darius clicked his tongue, anticipating her. "Too bad. Perhaps he could have been useful, if not to better understand the nature of the miasma, to find out how to subjugate the daemons. But I can't say I'll shed a single tear for him. He ended up as he deserved: overwhelmed by one of his own creatures."

The elevator reached the floor D-08. "I believe he wanted it," Highwind contradicted him, stepping out into the corridor. No one in sight for now. "Think about it. Immortalis. He wanted to defeat death. He was himself his last subject of experimentation."

"If you're here, I assume that he didn't succeed in defeating death." Silia noted with relief that the signs of struggle continued even there. It was the right path.

Highwind grinned. "You assumed well."

"So," continued Darius, proceeding behind them, "it was his shadow, along with Izunia's, behind Emperor Aldercapt's atrocities?"

"Izunia's shadow is more likely to be behind both of them," Highwind corrected him again. She slowed her pace to stand beside him, which she did whenever she could. The mercenary liked handsome men, Silia understood, but she would have been disappointed by Darius. "Besithia was a brilliant mind, even if crazy, but human. Izunia's not."

"And what is it, then? An apocryphal Astral that the Cosmogony forgot to mention?"

"It could also be. Since I saw him the first time, he hasn't aged a minute."

"Maybe he's a High Messenger of the Gods, like Gentiana, but a corrupt one."

A door opened before her, and Silia found herself alone in a huge empty room. Another lab, she deduced from the terminals running along all the walls and an empty cage that probably once had contained a daemon, or perhaps a magitek. She approached a desk to check if she could find any useful information.

When the heavy red shadow fell on her, Silia swerved to her right just in time to avoid it. She clashed against a shelving unit, taking it down, and managed to soften the impact and get back on her feet, but the red shadow attacked again. A number of sharp claws she couldn't quantify flung against her, but this time she was ready to parry them with her blades, one after another.

In those few moments of stalemate she finally managed to take note of her opponent's appearance. What she had blocked with her blades were not swords or claws, but *scythes* that penetrated the creature's own hands. Another huge claw rising from its chest almost touched her. Silia felt her hair stand as she met its eyes. She had slaughtered dozens of different breeds of daemons, but that was the first time she came across an apparition so monstrous as to make her shiver. The daemon looked like a skinned devil, although its face was unquestionably human. It was walking on human thighs that ended in animal paws armed with claws. And it visibly breathed miasma. It had to be an
experiment created in the Zegnautus labs. As repugnant as the Starscourge was, it had never been able to generate such an abomination, not even in Solheim's time, as far as she had ever seen.

The daemon spread its wings and jumped back to disengage. Without losing eye contact with it, Silia heard the automatic doors – Darius and Highwind, who had been left behind in the corridor, were coming. She wouldn't have given them the satisfaction of showing herself having a bad time; she jumped forward, and this time it was she who attacked. The monster swerved to the right, and the blade of her left sword found emptiness, but the other tore its wing. Silia put her feet down and slid behind the daemon to hit, but it disappeared in a black cloud before she could touch it.

"Hartwood, are you okay?" Darius asked, upset. "What the hell was that? I just caught a glimpse of it."

"A daemon uglier than the others. And it's not dead. I don't think so." Silia got to her feet. "Highwind, do you know wh..."

"You Crystal thief! It's mine!"

The daemon reappeared among them, materializing from the same black cloud where it had disappeared. It reappeared on her, actually, and just her instinct allowed Silia to avoid the lunge of its scythes that surely would have sliced her in two. She fell to the ground, face down, the daemon on her, a sharp pain in her left arm. She lost her grip on the sword.

"Hartwood!"

Darius and Highwind attacked the daemon from behind. The beast uttered an outraged verse and turned to counter the new assailants by cutting deadly slashes. One caught Darius in his chest, but Silia took advantage of that moment of diversion to remove the daemon with a kick of her prosthesis and roll to the side. She thrust her right sword into the creature's neck.

The daemon screeched horribly. It opened its monstrous wings and disappeared again into a black cloud. Silia ignored the pain in her arm and rushed to retrieve the lost sword and reach Darius.

"For Odin's cock, Darius, you okay? You okay, man?" She put his arm behind her neck and lifted him. She didn't know the import of his injury, but the daemon could again fall on them at any moment and anything was better than being gutted.


Highwind grabbed Darius' other arm, and they ran out of the room. "There are reinforced-door dorms for staff on each floor. Hartwood, can you bring him?"

Without stopping, Silia glanced at her left arm. The wound, just above her elbow, was deep to the bone, and she and Darius were leaving behind a scary trail of blood. Her hand hardly moved. "I can. But I can't hold the sword."

"Damn it," Darius swore again. "We've been in the Keep for half an hour, and we were already going to get ourselves killed."

"The fuck was that thing, Highwind?"

"Not a clue. Never seen a monster like that. And it spoke, right?"

"I hurt its neck."

Silia knew they had little chance of getting out of the Keep alive already before leaving Orior, but she didn't imagine it would happen even before meeting Aldercapt or Izunia. Her
arm was a wreck, and from what she could see of Darius' wound, it wasn't just a scratch. "I can swear I heard its tendons tear apart."

"Forget it, and hope you damaged it enough to discourage it from trying again." Highwind kept looking in all directions, nervous. She, too, feared finding it again on them. "The dorm's at the end of this hallway."

"Hartwood, let me go and draw at least one sword," Darius protested, trying to free himself. "I can walk."

"Yeah, and I can fly." Highwind teased him. "Quench your pride, Magnus, at least until the dorm. We'll take a look at that wound and then decide what to do with you. It's clear you can't go on."

"We can't rest," Darius said, jerking free from their grip. Surprisingly, he really managed to stand on his own. "The guys are above us. And there's nothing to decide. I'll go on."

"Ain't goin' to get myself killed by draggin' a dead weight with me!" Highwind retorted, for once devoid of her demeanor. "Hartwood, tell him somethin'. You've to decide about you as well."

Darius turned to her. He had the look of someone who would have bit her meat off if she dared to contradict him. Her arm was hurting like hell, she felt faint, and she had to keep moving her fingers so that her left hand wouldn't go numb. She sighed. "Darius, Highwind's right. We need to catch our breath. But I won't leave you back. If the Prince wears the Ring..."

"You've been waitin' for the Prince to wear that damn Ring for days," he interrupted her, exasperated. He had to be barely able to stand. "Maybe he already put it on, and you can't use your powers because Prince Noctis is not King Regis."

"You're right," she had to admit. She didn't tell him that, some hours earlier, while they were on the snowmobile and approached Gralea, she had begun to sense the presence of the Crystal. If she focused, she could feel that reservoir of power but, as when she hadn't yet learned to master magic, she couldn't tap into it. She approached Darius and again took his arm to hold him up. "But if we find them, we can at least rely on healing potions. So let's go on, but we need to stop the bleeding and rest for a while."

Darius accepted her help. She felt his weight on her as he leaned his arm around her neck. "Thanks, Hartwood," he whispered.

"Highwind, we appreciated your help," she forced herself to say, starting to walk again, "but you're not bound to us. You can go by yourself." Silia knew perfectly they would need her armed hand now more than ever, but she still was a soldier, enough to know the mercenary would have a better chance by going on alone. Yet, she wasn't enough a soldier anymore to leave Darius behind, as long as he could stand.

Highwind folded her arms over her big breast, following them. "Thus spoke the one who a little while ago said I'm not an emotional recruit." She was a soldier as well, after all.

"Thus spoke the one who knows she can do it without leaving a comrade behind," Silia retorted.

"Jeez, are you braggin' about or do you really believe what you're sayin'? Your arm is out of service, Hartwood."

"It's not the first time. I've another one. And two legs."

"One," Darius noted.
"You're both cracked. Don't you really care about your head?"

"No, or we wouldn't be here," Silia retorted. "Two tied and blindfolded madmen in a pit full of Behemoths."

She didn't know where Darius found his strength to laugh without fainting. "I'd have preferred a thousand times the Behemoths than that monster who tried to gut me."

**IV**

They again left behind another lift. Gladio was now pure adrenaline. Since in the Keep, they had taken three short breaks to catch their breath, drink and eat something – their last proper meal had been in Cartanica – although neither of them wanted to, not with Noctis somewhere above them.

That new area of the fortress had to be the actual labs section; he would have preferred to avoid it, because there was a greater concentration of berserker magiteks and the daemons were stronger and fiercer, but since they were going blind, they couldn't do anything other than go upwards.

They found themselves in another control room, much larger than the previous one. There were twice as many terminals, and many of them showed the Crystal from different angles.

"I can see the Crystal on the screens, Ig," Gladio said, his voice trembling with emotion. As far as he knew, it could have been three or thirty floors up, but seeing their target gave him strength anyway.

"Good news, at last," Ignis sighed. "If the Crystal is still at his place, maybe we can reach Noctis before we get there."

Gladio checked the screens carefully. Everything seemed quiet, apart from daemons. "One thing is certain, Noctis hasn't gone through here."

"How can you say that?"

"There's a block of some kind protecting the Crystal, as in the Palace." He approached the terminal. "He's behind us, after all? Or he preferred to not touch anything here?"

"Not necessarily," Ignis told him. "This place is a maze. We don't know where Noct came in from. We don't know what path the Chancellor made him take. Can you turn off the block?"

"In the Sanctuary the Imperials blew it up with bombs, Silia said. Are you sure we want to risk using the terminal? What if it activates any security measures?"

"We have no more magik flasks," Ignis reminded him. "We must take the risk. Are you up for it? Read me what you see."

The Zegnautus Keep was putting a strain on his technological ignorance. Gladio sighed, touched a key, but immediately met the first obstacle: the small screen in front of him lit up red.

"*Insert authorized security pass.*"

"I supposed it," Ignis took off his glasses and began to clean them using a flap of his jacket; a useless gesture by now, a legacy of his old tic when he was about to focus. "Are there any clothes around, Gladio?"

Gladio understood what he had in mind. He looked around and saw three lab coats hanging from a rack, one leaning against the back of a chair, and, inevitably, another one on the ground. Searching
them, unexpectedly, he found what he was looking for, or so he hoped: two similar security passes, one under the name of a certain Benedikt Esmund and the other under the name of Vydia Waldermar.

"Bingo! Let's see if Benedikt and Vydia had the right permissions," he said aloud, returning to Ignis in front of the terminal. He located the slot and inserted Benedikt's pass. *Access denied.*

*Come on, Vydia,* he thought, trying the second card.

"*Authorized access. Welcome, Vydia Waldemar.* It worked, Ig."

"Good. Let's see if our luck holds. Search for a log of her last operations."

Gladio obeyed. He saw a long list of seemingly useless operations, though, he learned, Vydia had at least access to surveillance cameras. He would take advantage of it later, but first he had to get rid of the block.

Ignis was right. A week earlier, Vydia had fiddled with the Crystal security system. "I accessed the security system menu. Let's see if... yes!" He punched the metal desk. *"Disabling the system for routine maintenance... Disabling the system for extraordinary maintenance."*

"How much time do we have?"

Gladio continued fiddling following his intuition, until he found an information window. "One hour for the first. For the second, we can set the time."

"Try the second one, then. Does it let you enter six or seven hours?"

"Will it be enough?"

"In six or seven hours we will be dead, prisoners, or out of here, Gladio," Ignis answered tiredly.

Gladio sighed. He selected eight hours, read all the windows of security notices that followed, and when the program asked him again whether he intended to proceed and informed him that any operation that hadn't been previously authorized would have exposed the user to the corresponding disciplinary sanctions, he typed *Y*.

He looked at the screens with bated breath. The reddish rays to protect the Crystal were extinguished.

Without being able to prevent it, he grabbed Ignis by his shoulder. "Ig, you're great. We made it! Let's go!"

"Before going on, can you find out anything else from the terminals?"

Gladio was about to forget it. He went back to work. That terminal had access to a limited number of areas, he found out, and tried to connect to all of them. Only daemons, in the first five, but the sixth shot brought his stomach up to his throat. Three live people, two of them on the ground. Silia, Darius and Aranea Highwind.

"Ig!" he exclaimed with a strangled groan. "Ig, I can see them!"

Silia pulled up Darius, helped by Aranea, and they ran away, disappearing from the screens. They left a long trail of blood behind them. Gladio pressed another key, alarmed, and found them in a corridor. He saw Darius wriggling violently out of their grip, but his face was partially facing away
from the camera and so he couldn't read his lips. He saw Aranea's alarmed and angry expression though, and he didn't like it at all, and even less did he like to see Silia's bloody left arm hang inert against her side. They were arguing heatedly. He wondered what the hell had been able to beat Silia and Darius like that and to erase the perpetual gleeful expression from Aranea Highwind's face. But above all, he wondered how they could continue inside the Keep in those conditions.

"You can see who, Gladio?" Ignis asked impatiently. "Noctis and Prompto?"

"No. Silia and Darius." Gladio reached out and touched the screen, in correspondence of Silia's face. "They're with Aranea Highwind. And they're not good. They're injured."

"Aranea is with them? Can you figure out where they are?"

Gladio continued to press keys in bulk, convulsively, until he saw a code appear at the bottom left of the screen. "Here. Area D-08. Two floors after the elevator. They're following our same path. Ig, wait for me here. I…"

He broke off, understanding in time the extent of what was about to escape his lips. Ignis said nothing, he didn't even look at him – he couldn't have – but Gladio understood what would have happened if he had completed the sentence. Ignis wouldn't have tried to stop him, he wouldn't have blamed him, but he would have gone on alone.

He clenched his jaws until his teeth hurt, then took a deep breath. "We have to find Noct," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Silia and Darius know how to take care of themselves. They'll reach us."

Ignis nodded without commenting. Gladio retrieved two healing potions from their equipment and placed them on the terminal. With a little luck, Silia and Darius would find them within an hour, perhaps less. He rummaged around again in the room until he found what he was looking for – a sheet of crumpled paper and a working pen. He scribbled a message and stuck it between the flasks:

We saw you through the surveillance cameras but we must reach Noctis. We can't wait for you. We go on through the door on the left. See you in the Crystal Room. Gladio and Ignis. After a moment of hesitation, he added: Take care.

Silia would understand. Indeed, Silia would have kicked his ass, had he acted differently. Their whole relationship was based on that assumption, and yet it made him feel bad anyway. With one last look at the screen, he took a few steps toward the exit from the control room.

It was then that the huge daemon appeared before them. He couldn't have defined it in any other way than a skinned devil with more claws than limbs.

"Thieves cannot escape the hand of justice! The Crystal is mine. Never shall I lose my grip! The Crystal, the light, the power... All of it... mine!"

The monster raised its head to the ceiling and spread its wings, then pounced on them.

It was not up to Gilgamesh, of course, but it was soon clear to Gladio that he and Ignis had never met such a kind of daemon. It was clouded in a violet mist of miasma clearly visible to the naked eye, as if its body generated it more than the common daemons. And it spoke, damn it, as the Naga of the Fociaugh Hollow did. Disconnected, obsessive words, all related to the Crystal and its power. In addition to its voice, its face retained some traces of the features a man – because he couldn't have been anything else – had once owned, horribly transfigured.

They had to dip into their residual strength to get rid of it. The daemon was inconceivably agile in spite of its size, and it could count on a large number of weapons that seemed to rise directly from its
body and which it used to attack the both of them at the same time. Moreover, it was able to dissolve into a black cloud and then re-materialize elsewhere in the room without warning.

Finally, the daemon seemed to curl up on itself. It folded his wings, hiding its monstrous body from their sight, and vanished into nothingness once more.

"I will not allow you to take it!"

Baffled, Gladio kept looking at the spot where the daemon had dissolved, panting. He had never seen anything more disturbing.

"I can't feel it anymore. Is it dead?"

Ignis' question stirred him. He straightened slowly, continuing to look around. The room was huge, and it could reappear anywhere. "No. I don't believe it is. But it has dissolved. I mean, not as usual. Nothing was usual about that… thing. Shit, did you hear it?"

"It was obsessed with the Crystal."

"Which in theory should keep them away." He ran a hand through his sweaty hair. "I don't understand. Maybe it's like a lantern for night butterflies, even if it can kill them."

"We would have found a horde of daemons at the doors of Insomnia in recent years, in that case. No, I think it was an atypical daemon. Maybe an experiment escaped from the laboratories."

"Whatever it is, it's still on the loose. Bet it was that thing that nearly killed Silia and Darius."

"It could also kill Noctis and Prompto."

"Will there be a time when we'll stop adding items to the list of shitty things?"

"Oh dear, I can see the light fading from your friend's eyes."

"Here, we just missed him." Gladio gritted his teeth in a guard stance, but Izunia was nowhere to be seen. This time he wouldn't listen to his words. He wouldn't let himself be provoked.

They left the room and entered a new corridor on the right, closed at the bottom by another automatic door with bright green lights which, they had by now understood, signaled that the door was operational. It opened in front of them, in fact, revealing a warehouse.

"Wrong way!"

Dead end. Increasingly pissed off, Gladio resigned himself to turning back.

"Gladio, come here," Ignis called him, a few feet ahead.

"You were out of my sight for a moment," Gladio realized, turning back. "What did your uncle give you for your eighth birthday?"

"My first cell phone, so I could always be reachable when I was alone with Noctis." Ignis smiled, perhaps involuntarily, and stretched out a hand to the bare wall. "Come closer. I can feel a draft coming from here, but there is nothing, right?"

"Nothing at all," Gladio confirmed. "Unless..."

The wall began to slide to the left, revealing another corridor and a flight of stairs.
"Well done!" Izunia's voice chirped again. "Maybe you should hurry up. I think he's stopped breathing."

Gladio let Ignis go past him and took off his right arm sleeve, which he stuck between the wall and the door to prevent it from closing and to signal to Silia that they had passed from there. The room at the end of the new corridor was one of the staff dormitories. They went in to check that Noctis wasn't taking a break there, but it was empty. They returned to the corridor and took the way to the left, but a closed automatic door blocked them. They resigned themselves to go back one more time and found a passage on the right that before, he was sure, wasn't there.

"I feel like a piece moved in a board game," he told Ignis, bowing to place his second arm sleeve. "A very irritating and boring board game. And I've always hated board games."

"Because you don't want to apply yourself. Be quiet for a moment, Gladio."

He obeyed.

"Can't you hear it?"

He heard nothing. "What?"

Ignis fell silent for a moment. "Noctis' voice. I'm sure. Follow me." He went beyond him, rushing into the new passage.

"Ig, wait!"

They found themselves in another control room. On the left an electrified grid closed the passage. Beyond the electrified grid there were Noctis and three magiteks, among two other electrified grids that were closing on him.

"Noct!" he shouted. He had no way to reach him. "Noctis!"

"Gladio, is that you?"

"We're here!"

"Gladio, no time to lose!" Ignis urged him. "There must be a way to stop the grids!"

Gladio threw himself on the control panel. He began to press random keys. "Shit. Are we sure that we can from here?"

"I think we were brought here just for that."

He didn't talk anymore. He kept on searching everywhere, but he couldn't find a command.

"Gladio, hurry up!"

"No fuckin' idea what to do!" he exclaimed, exasperated, turning to Ignis.

And then he saw it. They had focused so much on the control panel that he hadn't noticed the junction box next to the door.

"Damn it, will you do somethin?" Noctis shouted.

"Ig, move over." He pushed him abruptly, brandishing the broadsword, and smashed the panel.
The electrified grids deactivated and opened wide. Noctis jumped towards them and threw himself into the control room. He fell heavily to the ground.

He was soaked and he had a wound on his forehead, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. Panting, he looked up at them. "That was really close. You guys took your t..."

Ig pointed one of the daggers against him. "Noct, what kind of joke did Gladio arrange to teach you a lesson when you were sixteen?"

Noctis blinked, then frowned. "Call it a joke! He ambushed me on my way home from school and kidnapped me with Devan and Marvin, that idiot, just to prove I wasn't watchful enough! And Cor also gave him his blessing!"

Only then did Gladio notice that Noctis had the Ring of the Lucii on his right hand.

Chapter End Notes

"Mortui non mordent" > "Dead men don't bite"
Chapter Summary

Silia and Darius make their way through the Zegnautus Keep with Aranea Highwind, grieved with a painful awareness. Meanwhile, after finding the Prince, Gladio and Ignis reunite with Prompto as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

41

Haec olim meminisse iuvabit

I

Their stop at the lodgings had lasted for half an hour – more than they would have liked, infinitely less than they needed – but, with the aid of the makeshift bandages that had reduced bleeding and a little chemical support recovered in a medicine cabinet, they had managed to get back on their feet and go on. Aranea Highwind was still with them because, between a zinger and an insult, the mercenary hadn't proceeded alone as it would have been wiser to do.

Her left arm was almost useless. Perhaps – but she wasn't sure at all – a heal or a Prince's curative potion could have restored her tissues enough to allow her to use her second sword again, but for the time being it would have to stay in the scabbard. As for Darius, the daemon's slash had opened a gash beneath his breastbone, not deep enough to kill him, but still incapacitating. As a matter of fact, Darius shouldn't have even been able to get up from the cot. Instead, he was upright at her side, walking on his legs, and he was even able to get rid of some magitek. The power of amphetamines. She had already tried them on the front, even if only in cases of life and death, because together with the pain they dulled the senses and the real perception of danger; Silia had always thought – and still thought – that she wanted to fully enjoy the moment of her departure and not leave stoned.

So, two floors up – D-11, or so the writings on the walls read – when she saw Chancellor Ardyn Izunia standing in the hallway before them, his hat resting on his chest as if to greet them chivalrously, at first she thought it was a hallucination by amphetamine. Their host in Jadzia was right; he looked like a middle-aged man, attractive though somewhat creepy, tall, with red hair and amber eyes.

Silia stopped. She squinted her eyes, almost expecting him to disappear, but it didn't happen.

"Look at that, more of our prince's acquaintances... Or, might they be just onlookers?"

"Ignore his voice," Highwind hissed. She was the forerunner, since she was the only almost unharmed, and so the closest to him, but didn't attack. She didn't even pull out her spear. She just kept on walking.

"Commodore Aranea Highwind... raised from the sewers of Gralea to one of the highest ranks in the Imperial army... it seems we ignore the meaning of the word 'gratitude', huh?"
"Don't listen to him."

Izunia advanced towards them, passing Highwind by without paying her any attention anymore. Silia drew her sword and stood in guard stance, putting herself between him and Darius. He looked like a snake wrapping itself around a prey too small, just for fun. "Who are your new companions, Commodore Highwind? I don't know them. And since I already know all the people I'm interested in knowing, I assume I am not interested in them. Perhaps. What could I do with them?"

"Just walk," Highwind told them impatiently. "If he wanted to kill us, he'd have done it already. Whatever you see, just walk."

Silia was about to ask what the hell she meant, but Izunia's snake-like gaze met hers. It was as if someone had poured hot, slimy, stinging oil on her. "Wait. I feel something in you, ma'am." Izunia raised his head, narrowing his eyes. "Magic. Your body conducts the magic of the King. What are you, ma'am? Oh..." Izunia was tall, almost as tall as Gladio, and had to lean bend his back and neck to face her. He wasn't a living person. How could the others have not noticed that up to that point? "Oh my. I didn't know there were other Kingsglaives left."

"Hartwood, come away." Highwind's voice this time was imperious.

"General Glauca has gifted the Empire with invaluable services. Think about it: he created an army of deadly fighters for King Regis to feel safe. He chose them, trained them, constantly caring for them. After ten years, there were less than fifty left... the strongest... the most resilient. And he chose the less foolish ones among them. Those who did not feel so bound by an oath to a king already condemned to death." He tilted his head to the side. "You weren't among them, I suppose, or you wouldn't be here, with a Crownsguard and former Commodore Highwind, trying to get to His Majesty Prince Noctis. Oh, look. Since all your comrades are dead, perhaps in the end you weren't that fool, right?"

Silia looked away and tried to follow Highwind's advice, but she saw Titus Drautos in the middle of the corridor. Her first immediate thought was that Cor was wrong and that Nyx had failed to kill him in Insomnia. The second was that, apparition or not, she wanted to slaughter him, and her hand spasmed, but she stopped at the last moment. Was Izunia able to produce apparitions? The Titus Drautos who was now a few steps away from her looked more tangible than ever, perfect, from the diagonal scar under his right cheekbone to the hard mouth that for fifteen years had dispensed warnings as well as advice and encouragement. Had Izunia known him, to be able to reconstruct him with such precision? Or could he tap into her mind and her memories?

"Hartwood, Magnus, I'll tell you one last time, then I'll leave you here: let's go."

Darius. Silia managed to look away from Titus Drautos and turned around. Her friend's shocked expression made her realize that he was definitely not seeing Titus Drautos nor listening to the same words, and that they had to leave that corridor quickly.

"The time has come, General Glauca. The city will fall precisely at the hands of your Kingsglaives.

Everything is ready, Imperial Majesty.

It is a pity that you failed to bring more of them to our side. They would have been an injection of new forces in our armies. You have created war machines far too bent to duty, General.

If you'll allow me an observation, Imperial Majesty, we do not need men so blind as to not understand where the wind is blowing. Removing them will not be too burdensome."
Highwind's hand closed around her left wrist, making her moan in pain despite the amphetamine, before she could attack him. "Hartwood, didn't you hear me?" If Izunia had tormented her by showing her something, she didn't seem to mind. "The Chancellor likes to play with people. What the hell do you think you're seeing?"

Silia pulled away, shoving her. "Highwind, get out of my way or this ends badly."

"If you don't put away your weapons, I promise you, that it will end badly," she retorted poisonously. "D'you want to kill one of the Prince's retinue or even the Prince himself?"

"What the fuck are you babbling about?"

"Haven't you understood yet, you moron? Izunia shows you what he wants. The blond chick, Prompto, told me he was pushed off the train by Prince Noctis who thought he was attacking Izunia."

Ignis had reported seeing Gladio just before Izunia attacked him in Altissia. She should have remembered that. Mortified, Silia sheathed her sword. She was a war veteran, yet she was about to let herself be played like a newbie. Highwind glanced at Darius, then returned to look at her disapprovingly, but she didn't mock her. "I swear, this really is the last time: let's go. And take the Crownsguard with you. He's about to faint."

Darius was waxy. He was holding a hand under his breastbone, where he had been wounded, and the other on his mouth. Whatever Izunia had said or shown to him, had left its mark.

"Come on, man," she whispered, approaching Darius, her hand outstretched to take his arm and hold him up.

Darius stepped aside, dodging her as if she had tried to hit him. He seemed to recover. "No use, Hartwood, I'm fine. Let's go."

As they continued, Silia turned one last time. Drautos, Izunia, or whatever it was, had disappeared. It was only then it occurred to her that she could sense a faint, almost imperceptible well of power, akin to those of late King Regis and young Prince Noctis.

II

Darius wasn't fine at all. The effect of the amphetamines was about to wear off – she too began to feel tired and painful again – and the encounter with Izunia must have touched a sensitive string. She herself still couldn't block out of her head Titus Drautos' image, which had brought to the surface all the anger and despair that overflowed when Cor Leonis had revealed to her the extent of the betrayal perpetrated by her Captain. He had not simply deceived and betrayed his King, he had not simply deceived and betrayed the kingdom of Lucis; he had deceived and betrayed them, the boys and girls he had chosen, trained and raised who would follow him to the death. Silia had always loved the King and the Kingdom and fought for them, but the King and the Kingdom, for her and those boys and girls sent to war, had the face of Titus Drautos.

One floor up, the skinned daemon attacked them again. She had already expected it, but this time, when it avoided Highwind, who continued to lead the way, and ignored Darius, the weakest among them, she knew with certainty that the daemon had it out for her. The hypersensitivity given by the amphetamines helped her to perceive the movement of air and to anticipate its appearance; she dodged to her side, and the creature fell to the bare ground, its scythes stuck in the floor. Silia noticed with dismay that it was perfectly unharmed; whatever wound she had inflicted on him, now it was gone.
Highwind's huge spear wasn't of much use in those narrow corridors; she could only handle it horizontally, and there was no room to spin it. So the mercenary did the same thing she would do, she charged the daemon as if she had a ram in her hands and impaled it. Her blow was so powerful that the monster was pushed inside the laboratory from which they had just come out, Highwind in tow. Silia snapped to join her, but the automatic door closed in front of her.

She struck it with her sword, aware it would be useless; it was an armored door, and she hardly scratched it.

"Highwind!" she shouted. "Are you OK? This fuckin' door just closed!"

"I know," she heard Highwind say from inside with a dumb voice. "I closed it. You're in no condition to deal with it again. Go on while I keep it busy."

"My ass!" she replied, humiliated, striking again – uselessly – the door. The wound on her arm had reopened and it hurt like hell again. "Highwind, open this fucking door!"

"Hartwood, try to stay clear." It was the first time Darius had spoken since they had met the Chancellor. The daemon had not touched him, but he was paler, if possible, and more and more tried. If the daemon had attacked him, he would have had no chance. Nevertheless, Silia couldn't decide to proceed. "We have to go. I don't know how long I'll be able to cope."

Silia pursed her lips. With a final blow of frustration at the armored door, she resigned herself to follow him.

~~~XV~~~

On the third attempt, she managed to convince Darius to rest a few minutes in the armored lodgings of the floor. He could hardly stand – the both of them, actually – and she was hoping that Highwind would reach them.

She was the first to go in, cautiously, but the lodgings were empty.

"Free," she said, lowering her sword. She sat on the nearest bed and took off her backpack, carefully leaning her injured arm on her knee. It hurt less now, and that was a bad sign, because it meant she was losing sensitivity. "We're also almost running out of water. I don't like the idea of drinking in a place so dense with miasma, but there's little we can do. We've lost too much blood."

Instead of reaching her, Darius leaned against the door. He was staring at the floor.

"C'mon, man," she urged him, patting the mattress. "Let me take a look at your wound."

"Hartwood, we need to talk."

He must have realized he couldn't proceed. Quieter now that they were in a reasonably safe place, Silia tried to play down the situation. "Darius, I know it's a very romantic time to declare yourself, in a keep full of daemons and haywire magiteks, the two of us locked up in a dorm that smells like Imperials, but..."

Darius' response was taking off his jacket and shirt.

"Wow, are you serious? Thought I wasn't..."

The surprise became horror when Darius undid the makeshift bandage. Along with the blood, the wound was draining a blackish liquid.
"By the Six," Silia whispered, and felt herself missing for a moment. She had to lean with both her hands on the mattress, and struggle to make the room stop whirling around her. It couldn't be really happening.

"The Six won't help us," Darius replied laconically, touching the purple halo of his wound. "I'm infected, Hartwood. Izunia was kind enough to warn me, and to show me what will become of me within a couple of days at the most. Not a pretty sight."

Silia joined him. "We'll find a way," she lied, and it wasn't so unlike her; such a thing, ten years ago, she would never have done it. There was no way. "Let me treat your wound, or you'll bleed to death before…"

"Don't you dare come closer!" he shouted, holding out a hand to keep her away. "I don't want you to catch it too."

"I could have already caught it, for all we know." The idea touched her only then.

"Undress, then."

Silia did it in a hurry. She ripped her jacket off, then her shirt, and loosened the bandage on her arm. No halo, no black pus. Only blood. At that moment she couldn't feel relief.

Darius evidently could, because he tightened his lips and took a deep breath. "Thank Six. Now move away."

"Like hell. Let me do your bandage again."

"Hartwood, I told you to stay away from me."

"I've been breathing miasma with you since we entered the Keep. I've been breathing miasma for ten years. If I've to catch it, I'll catch it anyway."

"I don't want you to catch it from me."

"Then stop me," she challenged him, holding both her hands towards him. Her voice trembled.

Darius stopped her, or at least he tried. He punched her right in her face, not a playful blow. Silia felt her lip split, but her arm hurt so much, and her despair was such, that she didn't even feel the pain. She straightened up, spitting out a lump of blood.

"Did you vent, now?"

"Why didn't you parry it, you moron?"

"To make you feel like shit."

"Well, thanks. Actually, I felt wonderful until a few seconds ago."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. Silia rubbed the blood off her lip. When she raised her head and looked at her fingers, she found out that her hand was trembling like her voice and that her vision was blurry.

"Hartwood, tell me you're not crying, or I'll give you another punch."

"I'm not crying," she denied on impulse, because she never cried, or rather, she hadn't cried since the night she arrived in Orior, and she hadn't cried on a mission since Hans had died. And yet, no matter
how hard she tried to clench her teeth, she was crying.

Darius didn't give her another punch. He merely shoved her violently on the bed.

"Hartwood, I'll give you fifteen seconds to stop whining and start acting like a Cor Leonis' man again, then I swear that I'll break your face. You're my partner on this mission and, by the Six, if you've ever been my friend for a fucking minute in the last few months, you must calm down and listen to me."

His cool, quiet voice dulled her despair and reminded her where they were and why. She rubbed her eyes, fought back a last sob, then raised her head. After the surge of anguish he had put down on her, Darius had pulled himself together. She struggled not to be outdone.

"Can you hear me now?"

All she could do was nod.

"Good," he agreed, and leaned over her, clenching her shoulders. "We both know, Hartwood, that it's over. The Scourge doesn't forgive, there's no longer an Oracle to stop its spread, and every hour that passes I will be less and less present to myself. I'll go on with you as long as I can to help you complete the mission, namely, to find Prince Noctis, Prompto, Ignis and Gladio, and retrieve the Crystal, but I can't leave Zegnautus Keep. I can't go around infecting other people." He tightened his grip on her shoulders. "I want you to give me your word of honor that, if I lose my mind, you'll take care of it. And, even if we don't know what will happen in the next few hours, once we have done what we need to do, I want you to make sure that I died before you leave. I'm not going to infest this fortress with the other daemons we have met so far."

Silia clenched her jaw because she was about to start crying again. Darius wasn't asking her anything absurd; in his condition, she would have done the same. She opened her mouth to assure him that she would do it, but no sound came out.

"Hartwood, did you hear what I said? Give me your word. Otherwise, I swear to the Six, I'm ending it now that I'm in full possession of my mental faculties, unlike you, it seems." To give strength to his threat, he unhooked the gun from his holster. "I will back out my mission, but you give me no choice."

"You have my word," she promised. She raised her right hand to her forehead in the Crownsguard's military salute, then, almost without realizing it, she leaned it, closed fist, against the left side of her chest in the Kingsglaives'. "You can count on me, Darius."

Darius nodded without smiling. He put the gun back in his holster and lowered himself painfully to pick up the jacket from the ground, but he didn't wear it. He pulled out a battered pack of cigarettes from an inside pocket.

"Six, what a jerk," she insulted him. "Yesterday you said you were fresh out."

"I've the last three," he replied quietly, sitting at her side on the mattress. "We're smoking two now. The last one is for later." He placed a wrinkly cigarette between her lips, and lit it, staring into her eyes, then lit his own. His hands were perfectly still. "Do you want to help me with the bandage, if it doesn't make you sick?"

On the front she had handled the guts – and also their contents – of her wounded comrades, nevertheless she felt a thrill of distress as she touched his purulent wound. But she wouldn't pull back. With the cigarette between her lips, clumsy because of her almost useless arm, Silia prepared a
swab for his wound and bandaged his waist, covering the cut and all the surrounding infected area. Regardless of the Scourge, it must have been very painful, yet Darius didn't complain, he didn't even make a face. He stared at her the whole time, smoking, his head slightly tilted.

"If the moment of memories and confessions is about to begin, warn me and I'll leave," she told him, tightening the knot.

He gave a half smile. "Do I look like a sensitive pussy?"

"Don't tell me you're thinking that you'd like to try having sex with a woman before you die, then."

"Who said I never had sex with a woman? However, even if it was the case, she should be a woman who looks like a woman, otherwise it doesn't make sense, Hartwood."

"Too bad."

"I'll tell Gladio."

"Go ahead. I never promised him exclusivity."

"Hey, you two, am I interrupting something?" Highwind's provocative voice sounded from behind the door, along with an annoying and rhythmic knock. She was fine, then. The mercenary walked in without waiting for their answer, limping, and stopped in front of the bed to stare at them with her hands on her hips. "Oh, by the Six, I was just joking. Is this really the time? Wounded and covered in blood? You're just two perverts."

"For your information, blood is a great lubricant and endorphins make you feel less pain," Silia retorted, tossing her cigarette. "But now you've ruined the moment, Highwind."

"So, you're excluding me like that?" She smiled. "And I even brought you a present."

"Unless it's the Crystal or Ardyn Izunia's head, Highwind, I don't give a fuck," Darius retorted dryly, getting up to put his shirt back on. He evidently had no intention of sharing with Highwind what had happened, and Silia would respect his choice.

"If you really don't want them, I'll keep the healing potions they have left, then."

Silia stood up. "Healing potions? What are you talking about?"

Highwind waved three flasks and a piece of paper. "I found them in plain sight in a control room nearby. I saw the Crystal on the screens. Seems the big tattooed guy and Bright Eyes paved us the way."

She definitely was the real Highwind and not another Chancellor's trick. Silia took the note from her hands. With a jolt of emotion, she recognized Gladio's almost unintelligible handwriting.

We saw you through the surveillance cameras, but we must reach Noctis. We can't wait for you. Gladio and Ignis had been separated from the Prince, then. We go on through the door on the left. See you in the Crystal Room. Gladio and Ignis. Take care.

"I don't need them that much," said Highwind. "Maybe you should use two, Magnus. You're the worst one."

"Exactly. They would be wasted on me. But maybe two could fix Hartwood's arm fully."

Silia crumpled the note and put it into her pocket. She flung a potion out of Highwind's hands and
smashed it on Darius' sternum without giving him a chance to react. "We need you standing, you asshole."

"Hartwood, what the fuck…"

"Thank me for not smashin' it in your pretty face in return for your punch. As for you, Highwind, I saw you're limping. We need you standing, too. What's yours, a disinterested altruism or a stupid and excessive confidence in your skills? Use a fucking potion and shut the hell up. Thank you for bringing them to us instead of using them all, by the way. But next time you lock yourself in a room with an opponent who targeted me, I promise you'll pay for it."

She thought Highwind would respond in kind, but she just smirked. "Hartwood, what the hell happened to you in the last twenty minutes?"

What had happened to her was that her comrade, who she had promised herself she'd bring back alive in Orior, was doomed; and that Gladio, with a fucking note that merely warned he couldn't wait for her because he had to go on and reach the Prince, had reminded her that at least one of them still had his priorities in mind and hadn't just curled up crying in a dorm.

Silia didn't answer Highwind. She took the second flask and smashed it on her left arm. She remained for a few moments with her eyes closed, absorbing the regenerating power of the potion. It was cool, and invigorating, like fresh water after days of scorching heat. She could feel Prince Noctis' immature print. It was not as powerful as a heal, but she felt light, well enough again. The pain subsided, and she felt the itch of the tissues of her arm that slowly began to reconstitute.

She opened her eyes again and rubbed the blood from her wound to examine it. As she imagined, it had only partially closed again, and probably would have resumed bleeding sooner or later, but she was able to move her arm and arch her fingers decently. She could handle again her second sword and wield it.

"Let me see how your wound looks now, Magnus," Highwind was saying.

"Is it a pretext to see me bare-chested again? You've already watched enough, Highwind. It's much better, anyway."

"Highwind, hurry up and use your flask," Silia ordered. "Unless something cut off our legs, this is our last stop."

III

"So," Noctis said, as they proceeded, "Silia and Darius are somewhere behind us."

Gladio nodded, swatting a surge of apprehension. He looked at Noct's right hand once more. "Thought once you'd wear the Ring, she could use the Glaives' magic again."

"You forget that we still can't summon weapons ourselves," Ignis remarked. "There must be something in Gralea that inhibits Lucii's powers. I sensed... I don't know, like a disturbance, before we stopped being able to use them."

"Now that you point it out to me, I felt a strange sensation a while ago. There was a red thing alike to a giant chandelier above a round building. I felt, like, a buzz in my head. If it's that device that restricts my power, it has no effect on the magic of the Ring, however."

"On the magic you can use, at least. By the way, what can it do?" Gladio asked.
Noctis held out his hand to a Snaga wandering the corridors. The Ring illuminated with a reddish light and released a stream of clearly visible energy. The Snaga seemed to crumple, shrieking in pain. And then it disappeared.

Noctis lowered his hand. "Death. It absorbs vital energy from the target. When I entered the Keep it wasn't like that. I could do it for a very short time. Now I can deal with the Snagas, if they're not too close, and with the magiteks, if they're not too fast. I can only damage other daemons a little. There's another counterattack spell, Sancta, that is not so effective. And a much stronger spell with effect on the whole area, my father called him Altern, but it leaves me exhausted and vulnerable for a long time."

"Noct," Ignis said gravely, placing a hand on his shoulder and forcing him to stop. "Does the Ring have any effect on your body?"

Noctis blinked, then turned to look at Gladio. He grabbed the neckline of his shirt and pulled it down, revealing whitish scars on his chest, like those on Ignis' face. Gladio couldn't breathe for a moment. Then the scars began to fade until they disappeared completely. Noctis leaned his finger to his lips briefly, as if inviting him not to tell Ignis – a gesture of unusual delicacy on his part, which almost moved him.

"It's like... it drains something from me too," he said. "The first time I used it, it hurt. Then I got used to it. I can't believe my father wore it for so many years, constantly, to keep the Wall erect. Now I understand so many things… my grandsire, Mors, and his decision to scale back the Wall. My father and the treaty… how much longer would he have been able to hold the city?" He resumed walking, head down. "For the first time I asked myself why he didn't give it to me, as his father had done with him. Perhaps he didn't consider me capable?"

"No," Ignis answered. "Perhaps he knew you were meant for something more important."

Gladio added nothing. Among them all, he had been the one who had insisted that Noctis put the Ring and accept the consequences. Now that he had been satisfied, he couldn't enjoy it. "D'you think you can use it against Izunia?"

"Honestly? I don't think he's afraid of it. Or he would have already taken it away from me. By the way... I was hoping you were with Prompto. Izunia's voice has long tormented me about you, but above all about him. He said he has... a nice skeleton in the closet."

"What kind of skeletons can a guy like Prompto have?" Gladio retorted, and almost laughed. "However, we looked for you as we could through surveillance cameras, but no use."

"By the way..." Noctis pointed ahead.

They were in a new control room where three doors opened. Two red lights flashed on the doors, instead of green ones.

"It's closed," Noctis said, after trying to open the nearest one. "Let's see if we can open them from those computers."

"I'm on it." Gladio approached a terminal and inserted Vydia's pass. He also wanted to access the surveillance cameras again to ascertain the conditions of Silia and Darius. He managed to open the door in the east side of the room, but the other, no matter how much he tried to unlock it, didn't work.

"Shall we go?"

"Just gimme a moment, Noct."
He took two minutes, patiently scrolling through all the cameras from floor D-08, where he had last seen Silia, to D-13, where they were now. He didn't see them. Nor did he find Prompto. But he saw that in the control room where they had turned off the security system protecting the Crystal, the healing potions had disappeared. He couldn't stop himself from smiling.

"So?"

"Calm down," he said, straightening, still smiling. "I haven't been tinkering. Going through that door I just opened, there are prisons, or something like that. Maybe they keep Prompto there. I haven't seen him, but there are no cameras inside the cells, they're just in the corridors."

Noctis didn't have them repeat it twice. He ran out the door – without waiting for them, as usual.

Gladio sighed, put his hand on Ignis’ shoulder and gently pushed him forward. "C'mon, man."

Ignis nodded. "No trace of Silia, Darius and Aranea on surveillance videos, I guess?"

"No, but I think they got the pots. If so, they keep us closer and closer."

"Gladio, we have found Noctis. Perhaps…?"

"I don't like repeatin' myself and I like talkin' the talk and walkin' the walk," he interrupted him, continuing to walk towards the door. "Noctis wore the Ring. He accepted his role and the dangers, pains and responsibilities that come with it. I will not be outdone. No looking back. Let's find Prompto and go get that damn Crystal."

~~~XV~~~

Prompto was exactly where he had supposed, inside one of the cells, grotesquely chained to a butterfly-shaped device, or perhaps a cross. Gladio hurried to unhinge the handcuffs with his bare hands. Anyone who had dared to chain his friend that way would have to pay a lot for it.

"Hey man, are you all right?" he asked, helping him to his feet. He had never been so happy to see him.

"Are you hurt, Prompto? Do you need something?"

Prompto was a bit sore – he had bruises on his face and a diagonal cut above his left eye – but for the most part he looked unharmed. He paused for a moment to catch his breath, bent over his knees. "I'm fine. Thank you, guys. Thanks, Noct. Tell me, were you worried about me?"

"Are you kidding me?" Noctis was indignant, shrill. "Of course I was worried about you. We all were. What kind of question is that?"

Prompto smiled. "I knew it. I knew you would come looking for me. That's why I told myself I couldn't die. Before I wanted you to tell me that I'm not a fake. That I'm the real me."

"Are you kidding me?" Noctis was indignant, shrill. "Of course I was worried about you. We all were. What kind of question is that?"

Prompto smiled. "I knew it. I knew you would come looking for me. That's why I told myself I couldn't die. Before I wanted you to tell me that I'm not a fake. That I'm the real me."

He had to still be confused. Gladio ruffled his hair, as he had done when Prompto was still a boy, and the difference in height between them was much greater. "This is still to be seen. Who's waiting for you in Leide, Prompto?"

Prompto looked at him dazed for a moment. Then he smiled again. "Cindy. Even if I'm not really sure she's waiting for me. Who knows how many men are buzzing around her in that workshop. But why such a question right now, Gladio?"
"Izunia keeps on playing with us," Noctis said, crossing his arms. "On the train, in Eusciello... I'm sorry, Prompto. I didn't mean to push you down, of course. But the Chancellor made me see you with his appearance."

"Let's not think about it anymore." Prompto stretched a hand, as if to put it on his shoulder, but he didn't. As extroverted as he was, he had never been the physical type.

Ignis nodded. "Let's go. And as we go, tell us what happened to you."

"In a little while. But I think we should go look for the neutralizer now."

"The what?" Noctis asked.

Prompto nodded. "Don't tell me you didn't ask yourself why you can't summon your weapons. I had to use normal automatics I found around."

"We asked ourselves indeed, especially as the powers of the Ring work."

"After falling off the train, I ended up in the first research laboratory founded by the Empire in the arctic regions. I'll tell you better later, along with everything else. I read some files about a device they were testing. They call it electromagnetic neutralizer. It produces waves that inhibit others. Think of Noctis as a radio transmitting the powers of the Crystal. The device disturbs the radio waves, so that we can't hear them. They built it to interfere with the Wall and the Kingsglaives' magic."

"Fuck," Gladio exclaimed, impressed. Prompto had always been the one of them most versed in technological issues. Had he been with them, when they entered the Keep, he would have opened a way already from the first computer. "That's why Silia didn't use the Glaives' powers to heal her wounds."

"Silia?" Prompto asked.

"She's here in the Keep with Darius Magnus. And Aranea Highwind."

"Is Aranea already here? We got separated yesterday in the facility I was talking about!"

"Clearly we have a lot to tell each other," Ignis smiled, adjusting his glasses on his nose. "But first things first. Noctis, you said earlier that you saw a device similar to a chandelier that radiated reddish light, right? And that you perceived it as a buzz."

"That's right," the interested party replied. "On this very floor. Let's go back. I'll try to retrace the path I took to get here before we met."

~~~XV~~~

They proceeded backward, following Noctis. Along the way, they updated Prompto on what had happened to them after he had fallen off the train: their arrival at Tenebrae and the discovery that Fenestala Manor had been bombed, the phone call with Cor Leonis, the journey on the Magna Fortia to Glaea, Shiva's blessing. Prompto was extraordinarily silent – he didn't interrupt them as usual with loud exclamations and stupid questions – and he kept his head down, his eyes shifty. Gladio wondered what had happened to him in Glaea; they hadn't simply locked him in a cell, they had chained him.

They found themselves again in an outdoor area. The Zegnautus Keep was really huge. Beyond a bridge, in the center of a round building, Gladio saw the enormous device similar to a chandelier. He
thought he heard the hum of which Noctis spoke, but it could also be suggestion.

They crossed the bridge. Looking down, Gladio saw only other concrete floors. No matter how he looked around, he saw no taller buildings, which meant they had reached the highest peak of the Keep. The Crystal must have been near.

The red lights that flashed on the only access to the building signaled that it was broken or armored by the junction box near the door. There was no key to press, no slot to insert the pass he had found.

"The door is closed," Noctis stated.

"I sense that feeling again, and very strongly," Ignis observed.

Noctis looked up. "Maybe I could warp to the top."

"We just found each other again, Noct, I don't think we should be separated again," Gladio pointed out to him.

"Is there no other way to enter?" Ignis asked.

"There is," Prompto stated. He passed between them, approached the junction box and placed the back of his right hand on it. The red light immediately turned green, and the door opened.

"But what…?" Ignis began to say.

"I'd have told you soon. I have it too. Like the magiteks, I have a codeprint tattooed on my wrist." He slipped off the glove, showing it to them.

"Impossible," Noctis said. "We've known each other for five years and…"

... and Prompto has always gloves on, or at least a wrist band, even when he sleeps, Gladio realized. "But why?"

Prompto looked at the ground. "Because I'm from Niflheim. I always knew. Not exactly something I could say growin' up in Lucis. As a child people avoided me because I was overweight; imagine if I had revealed something like that." He rubbed his eyes. "Forgive me. It wasn't clear to me, either. But when I fell off the train, magiteks found me in the snow. I thought they would attack me, and instead they brought me in alive to a lab in the mountains. I also met Ardyn Izunia. He told me that I would finally have the chance to meet my father."

Noctis kept looking at him with wide eyes. "Your father?"

Prompto nodded, raising his head. His eyes were bright. "Magiteks are vaguely human. We already knew this. What we didn't know is that what's human comes from clones of Verstael Besithia, the Research Minister." He put his hand on his chest. "I am one of those clones."

Gladio's throat was dry. He couldn't speak, and none of his friends did. Here's the skeleton in the closet Izunia was talking about.

"I saw clones asleep in tubs. They were exactly like me. I got chills. You've no idea how it feels. They infect them with plasmodium. On purpose. Until they become daemons. Then they kill them, and collect the miasma produced to use it as fuel. For magiteks, but also for airships, for MAs, for weapons..."

"It's horrific," Ignis whispered.
Prompto nodded. "Besithia is horrific... he was. We met, at last. Only, he was no longer human. He had been infected; indeed, I think he infected himself to merge with his last weapon, the Immortalis. Aranea and I defeated him. Then we separated. But when I got to Gralea they captured me again."

"How did you get to Lucis, Prompto? When you were a child, I mean," Noctis asked.

"What I know is that, twenty years ago, a spy from the kingdom of Lucis managed to infiltrate one of the labs and took test subjects away. One was me. I've no idea what happened next. I only know that I was brought to Insomnia and two civilians adopted me. I'm sorry I never told you. But you guys... you're like the only friends I've ever known." His voice broke. "I didn't want that..."

"You didn't want what?" Noctis stepped forward. "Did you think we would treat you differently just because you were born in Niflheim?"

Prompto closed his eyes as if he had hit him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I did everything to be at your level. I didn't... I didn't want to be left behind."

Noctis shoved him. "You're a stupid. A real moron."

"Noct..."

"Who cares where you're born? We're friends, Prompto."

"I don't... I don't know, I..."

"Can't believe it," Gladio said, scratching his head. Prompto had held in such a weight for years and had still always been the most cheerful and rowdy of the group. "All this time you were havin' problems with your roots when you were always the first one to not add weight to those of others."

"True," Noctis added. "When did you ever treat me as a prince?"

"Never so much as a 'highness'," Ignis said. "And you never treated me and Gladio as nobles."

Prompto rubbed his eyes. "I still haven't figured out if you're trying to comfort me or if you're reproaching me."

"C'mon, crown citizen," Noctis retorted in response, gesturing with a finger for him to get a move on. "We've more important things to do than listening to your whining."

"C'mon, guys!"

Gladio patted his arm. "Move on. We've already lost too much time to look for you."

Again Prompto lowered his head. "I'm sorry, Gladio. You could... Silia, I mean, she's here too, right?"

Gladio's lips tightened, but he managed to smile. "Mind your own business. For your information, my future wife can perfectly take care of herself, unlike you. And she's not alone. Darius is one of the best Crownguards. Not to mention Aranea. Hey, Ignis," it occurred to him, "at last she found them all. Now you must go out with her. What a nuisance, huh?"

"Who must go out with whom?"

"Ignis. With Aranea. It's the payment she demanded in exchange for the promise to tell you, Silia and Darius that we would meet this morning at dawn at the East Gate of Gralea, even if we didn't make it."
"Jeez, now I understand the jokes!"

"What jokes?"

"Aranea's. She kept repeating she had to collect from Bright Eyes."

"But look at how much she cares about it. And Ignis keeps on being coy."

"Gladio, we need to deactivate the neutralizer, you know?"

"Don't change the subject, Ig. Okay, Aranea's not exactly a pretty, slightly languid girl as you like, but..."

"I'm gone two days and everythin' happens."

"When you finally feel like it," Noctis shouted from within, "come and have a look in here!"

Gladio entered the building, laughing. He was so happy that the group was together again, that he had almost forgotten how much shit they were in. He went through the door.

The inside of the round building was the throne room he had seen on the surveillance videos, where Ravus had confronted Aldercapt before being thrown out of the fight with the Wraiths. It was completely empty now. Approaching the throne, Gladio saw Aldercapt's robe abandoned, his gloves on the armrests, as if the Emperor of Niflheim had evaporated as he was sitting.

"By the Six," Gladio whispered. "Unless Aldercapt is goin' around naked, he too has transformed. We may have already killed him and we still don't know."

"What do you mean?" Ignis asked, approaching him.

"His clothes are on the throne. Left behind, like all those we've seen so far."

"It seems that Aldercapt loved to have control of the whole Keep from here," Noctis stated aloud. "There are panels and terminals everywhere."

"Or maybe," Ignis said, "he has barricaded himself in this control room in the last few days to escape the Scourge, but it was too late. That's why we found it sealed."

"Why didn't he run away?" Prompto asked.

Ignis carefully climbed the three steps that led to the throne, as if he wanted to personally make sure that Aldercapt wasn't there. "Because he is obsessed with the Crystal, that's why. He could not achieve its power without the Ring."

"After all the people he killed to get it," Noctis whispered angrily, staring at the mechanical appliances. "Let's turn off this neutralizer and take it back."

"And how?" Gladio asked. "I bet that here not even Prompto's codeprint..."

"Just give me your broadsword."

Gladio handed him the weapon received from Izunia. Noctis practically snatched it from his hand and used it to smash all the terminals, one by one, with ferocious rage. The reddish light of the device above their heads went out.

Gladio tried to focus and summon. The Genji Blade materialized in his hands. Prompto, he saw, was
holding his bioblaster, Noctis the Trident of the Oracle. Ignis had his daggers again.

"I'd say it worked. We're back on the track," he smiled.

"Now the only thing missing is the Crystal!" Prompto exulted. It looked like he was himself again.

IV

As they walked down the hallway, Silia felt the air being sucked out of her lungs for a moment. Her hands began to tremble uncontrollably, as she returned to vibrating with an energy she hadn't felt for months. Without being able to prevent it, she knelt down and waited for that feeling of euphoria, comparable to another amphetamine trip, to pass, and to be able to control it again.

"Damn, she's having convulsions."

"Just what we need. The hell is wrong with her?"

"I don't know, but help me hold her down. She'll bite her tongue off."

"And we would be so sorry about that?"

"Stay away from me," Silia hissed. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths to calm herself. The affinity with magic was born with her, she had gradually developed the power to control it, and she had never experienced such a sensation, as if something was lurching in her veins. Anything could happen, such as when particularly sensitive children ended up blowing something up or setting fire to someone.

She opened and closed her fists several times, trying to focus, to put into order the chaos and to channel it. Then she turned the palm of her right hand and cast a fire.

"I can't believe it," she heard Darius say. "It's the magic of the Crystal."

"You can bet on it." She felt like laughing and crying together. "The next daemon that approaches, I'll roast it."

"From our last halt in the lodgings she's been shouting orders right and left like a general," Highwind commented. "What will I have to endure now that she also has magic?"

"Thank the Six, Highwind, instead of complaining. Now I can shield us with magical walls if the skinned daemon returns to attack. And I can heal wounds."

"Heal yours first," Darius reminded her.

He was right. In those months she had had time to forget the fundamental rule of those who act as a magical support in the rear: first themselves, then the others. She canceled the fire and cast a heal, leaning her right hand on her left arm. The disordered power she could sense in every fiber of her being was correctly channeled: it flowed from her fingers and re-entered her body as a life force. Silia felt the pleasant warmth of magic completely blocking the bleeding, restoring muscles, nerves and connective tissues, restoring her energies, and at the same time, she felt something of her weaken.

"Give me a few minutes to store more magic power," she said. "I can't do miracles with your wound, Darius, but you will see that now it will be another story."

Unmistakable clashing noises above them made all three jerk their heads up.
"Oh my, look at that timing," Highwind smiled. "Seems we've reached the guys. Above there's the hangar that leads to the armored room where the Crystal must be."

Chapter End Notes

"Haec olim meminisse iuvabit" > "It will delight us to remember these things some day"
The Crystal is near and Noctis must take a crucial decision. Silia, Darius, and Aranea reunite with his retinue but have to face an unexpected course of things.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

I

"The empire shall span all the lands... by the Crystal's light we shall flourish... I shall arise as ruler... of the world..."

Those were the last words, uttered in the horribly deformed voice of the skinned daemon before it dissolved. Yet it was precisely the Crystal, conveyed by Noctis' powers, to annihilate it.

"It was Emperor Iedolas Aldercapt," Ignis said in a whisper, turning on his side to stand up. He had taken a nasty blow to his head and Prompto, in helping him to get up, smashed one of their last potions on him.

Even Gladio, when the daemon attacked them again, had understood it. It couldn't be otherwise, not when the clothes of the not-dearly-departed His Imperial Majesty lay abandoned on his throne. "Yeah. He got what he deserved, I think. Izunia gave him an extra punch, but tens of thousands of innocent people have already met the same end because of him."

"He wasn't immune, either." Noctis looked worn out. It was Death, the most powerful spell of the Ring, that had allowed them to weaken the daemon enough to kill him before he vanished, but the effort hadn't left him unscathed. The whitish marks, the temporary scars left on his body by the Ring, had also appeared on his face, like macabre tattoos, and hadn't yet completely faded.

"Will anyone be immune?"

"There must be, or we would have already died out in the days of Somnus Lucis Caelum."

From one of the terminals, thanks to the invaluable Vydia's pass, they had finally managed to access a complete map of the area; they were headed for an elevator that would take them first to another open hangar, and from there to the Crystal Hall. Who knows why Aldercapt, if he really was so obsessed with it, had kept him locked even from himself. Perhaps the plasmodium that had already taken root in his blood suffered from its proximity.

On leaving the elevator, they found themselves in a storage area. It was cold – Gladio hadn't yet figured out exactly how high they were located – and the sweat froze on his skin as they climbed a metal ladder that took them to a huge and enormously empty area. The hangar.
"That way," said Prompto, pointing to the next elevator.

"Your Majesty, your precious Crystal awaits you" Ardyn Izunia's voice returned. "To liven things up, I thought I'd take you on a stroll down memory lane. Of course, memories decay with time."

Turning around, Gladio felt a very strong sense of deja-vu, which had the same effect as a barrel of boiling pitch that had been knocked over him. Ravus Nox Fleuret, seemingly appearing out of nowhere as in Aracheole, without they any warning of his presence, was walking slowly towards them. Unlike in Aracheole, however, High Commander's left side was decomposed into a blackish sludge that dripped from his eyes, his nose and his mouth; a revolting and pitiful sight.

Even from there, Gladio could smell the miasma. Ravus Nox Fleuret hadn't simply been killed, he had been daemonified. In all probability, they had before their eyes the last stage before the final transformation of the host body.

"Kill me," Ravus begged them. "End it."

"Oh, by the Six," Prompto gasped, getting up. "Is that Ravus? Her Grace's brother?"

"Or what's left of him," Noctis said. "He was infected, too."

"We must kill him," Gladio heard himself say. His hands were shaking. "We can't leave him here like this."

"Prompto," Noctis said, raising his arm again to use the Ring. "Keep an eye on Ignis."

"I already have both on him."

Ravus wouldn't have allowed it in any case. He was no longer himself. He attacked them.

For all those months, Gladio had believed that one day a reckoning would come – just him and Ravus Nox Fleuret. There was no sporting duel, though, no one-on-one fighting to the death; they faced him four against one. None of them could afford to die, not when they were so close to the Crystal, not when the salvation of the world was in their hands. And all of them, Gladio was sure of it, wished to give back to Lady Lunafreya's brother his dignity, snatching him from Ardyn Izunia's perverse games with an honorable death.

The plasmodium, Gladio soon realized, had increased Ravus' already superhuman skills. He noticed it when – another deja-vu experience – he found himself face to face with him, their swords immobilized in a clash. The strength of the High Commander's arms couldn't be compared to the man who had crushed him in Aracheole. Gladio could feel all his muscles screaming in pain. He gritted his teeth and broke Ravus' block. He was not the man who had been crushed in Aracheole, either: he had descended into the Taelpar Crag risking his life, and he had defeated, one after another, Nergal, Enkidu, Humbaba, and the immortal spirit of Gilgamesh, the Shield of the Founder King. All of them had bestowed on him not only confidence in his abilities, but powers and techniques that no human training could teach.

Unlike daemonified Aldercapt, Ravus seemed immortal. As much as Noctis wore out using the magic of the Ring, as much as they hit him, he seemed not to be affected by their blows, nor – of course – to feel pain. Every time he fell, Gladio hoped it was the last, but the High Commander always stood up and went back to attacking them. Every time he got up, Gladio looked up for a moment in the secret hope that Titan, Ramuh, Leviathan or Shiva came to their rescue, but it didn't happen. The Six – the Four – hadn't shown up since Shiva appeared to Noctis in the Ghorovas Rift, as if something in Gralea pushed them away, or as if they were waiting again to find out if they were
worthy of their favor.

Gladio never knew how long after, but Ravus fell once again – his body, ravaged by the Scourge and their attacks, knelt and then collapsed supine, unsteadily – and didn't rise again. Without relaxing, they approached cautiously.

"A sad end for the High Commander," Gladio uttered bitterly.

"It's horrible," Prompto said, looking away.

Noctis summoned a long-sword. Gladio looked at it, and in a flash of hallucinated understanding he recognized King Regis' weapon, the same Ravus had tried to give back to the fake Noctis. The Chosen King took it with both his hands, tilted it vertically, and gave Ravus the coup de grace. His corpse dissolved, not unlike what happened to all the other daemons.

At least now he has found peace. Can the same be said of his sister?

He looked up at Noctis. "Is that your father's sword? How d'you get it?"

"I found it earlier. So many things have happened and I haven't had time to tell you all. I saw Ravus dead before we met again. But now I don't know if it was really his corpse before he daemonified, or Izunia's trick." He made the sword disappear again. "He wanted to give it back to me. I understood this by reading the letters he had with him. Someone scattered them so I could find them."

"Izunia," Ignis whispered. "We found a surveillance video that recorded his death. It was the Chancellor."

"I thought so. There's no one that creature shows respect for, in life as in death. Anyway, the sword pierced me and then broke into shreds of light like all the Royal Arms we found. I believed the Trident was the last one."

"The Thirteenth. Your father, Noctis, has joined the ranks of the Kings who protect us." Ignis touched his right hand. "His power is in here, like all the Lucii who preceded him."

"I know that." Noctis clenched his fist, looking at the Ring. "I saw him when his sword pierced me. A shadow."

"Guys, we got company again!"

Gladio had already felt the sudden intensification of the miasma even before Prompto's startled exclamation. All of them had become more sensitive to the insane aura that preceded the appearance of daemons, and in that case it was frighteningly intense. The daemons didn't emerge from the floor one by one, as they always did – they emerged in rows.

"Stay behind me," Noctis said, and stretched his right arm out. An incandescent white light was generated by the Ring, but it didn't hit the enemies; it seemed to condense and generate a crack into nothingness, which sucked up a dozen daemons.

Alterna, Gladio realized with bewilderment. If Noctis, who had the Ring for a few hours, could trigger such destruction, who knew what King Regis had been able to do.

Noctis collapsed on his knee, his face already marked with white scars. Gladio grabbed him by his arm and put him back on his feet. "Take it easy, Noct. You're not used to the power of the Ring. We don't know what could happen to you if you overdo yourself." We know it indeed. Ignis' eyes. Ulric's life.
Prompto stepped forward, shooting down five or six daemons with his bioblaster. "Ig, stay with Noctis until he gets his energy back. Gladio, get a move on. They keep comin' out."

Prompto was right. No matter how many of them Alterna had sucked out, no matter how many he cut down or Prompto riddled with blows, they were slowly circling them on each side. There were already more than he could count.

"We're fucked" he said to Ignis, after he had broken down a Reaper who was about to gut him. "If three of them continue to spawn for everyone we get rid of, at this rate they'll wear us down."

"There's no other choice. Noctis!" he shouted to get his attention. "Noctis, you've to go on alone."

Noctis turned, bewildered. "What?!

"If you are able to retrieve the Crystal," Ignis explained patiently, "we have a hope. If you stay, we will all likely die here."

"Iggy's right," Prompto supported him. "It's our only chance, Noct."

"But what about you?!"

There was no other choice. He wouldn't have wanted to part with him again, after all the effort to reunite, but it was clear that they were in a desperate situation. "We'll manage somehow. Just move!" he growled.

"Your friends are right," the Chancellor's utterly unsolicited opinion showed itself. "You could still get to the Crystal... if you went on your own. But they will have to stay behind. What will you do, Noctis?"

"Don't listen to him!" Prompto shouted, lowering the bioblaster after riddling a Snaga with bullets. "He's just trying to piss you off. This is our choice, Noct. Don't worry about us. Go!"

Noctis stood still for a moment, looking at them, and Gladio thought he wouldn't move.

"Get to that damn lift!" he lashed out at him again, beside himself. "This ain't a game, Noct!"

"Damn it!" Noctis rubbed his eyes. "Damn it. All right. All right. But try to hold on."

For once, Noctis listened to them. He threw himself towards the elevator and went up, disappearing a few seconds later from their sight. Gladio hoped it was the right move, because they had sent him into the Chancellor's mouth alone. No, he corrected himself, Silia, Darius and Aranea are behind us. Even if we die, maybe they'll join him. But let's try and stay alive as long as possible.

Easier said then done. The daemons showed no sign of ceasing to appear. They no longer had many healing potions, and they were almost completely exhausted. He didn't know how much longer they could handle.

"Fall back!" Ignis shouted, and Gladio snapped aside, avoiding the claw of one of the Snagas. They stood in a triangular formation, covering each other's backs; Ignis on his left, Prompto on his right, a desperate defense pattern rather than an offensive one. A pattern he didn't like at all.

Gladio had never seen such a compact gathering of daemons. It seemed that, after all, Izunia didn't consider their presence necessary any more, if it ever had been so. They were surrounded on every side, and there were dozens of Snagas, fifteen or twenty Reapers, five Gargantuas and even three Gargoyles. They were waiting, as if they were coordinating the final attack on a prey who was
already done for. Them.

This time it's really, really, the end.

He clenched his jaws and his grip on the broadsword and the Genji. He would fight to the bitter end. He saw the Snagas snapping, quick as deadly rodents. He saw the Reapers sliding on the floor, the huge Gargantuan trudging – the floor vibrating with each step – the monstrous Gargoyles spreading their wings. And then he saw that first charge shattering against a cloudy veil materialized a feet away from his face, and being thrown back by the same violence of its impetus.

A magical barrier. The last time Gladio had seen one, he had met the same end of those daemons and had crashed his back against the wall of the Citadel Training Hall.

"And you said it's me who comes at the last moment like in a fuckin' movie?" he shouted, turning around.

High up behind them, standing on a container with both her arms still raised, was Silia.

He didn't have time to tell her anything else, because Darius Magnus and Aranea Highwind instantly flew by in the hangar and threw themselves on the daemons.

"Can't believe it! The cavalry's here!" Prompto cheered.

Gladio shook himself to wakefulness. It was not the moment to be distracted, not with dozens of daemons around, not with Silia casting spells left and right trusting they were careful not to let themselves be roasted by friendly fire. Now that Darius and Aranea had broken the enemy ranks, he was the first to leave the triangular formation and throw himself back into the fray.

Silia, however, didn't remain as a support in the rear; she warped instantly to his side. She must have fixed her arm with a heal after the magic inhibitor was destroyed, because she was handling both her short swords with confidence.

"Ready?" he asked, lowering his broadsword.

"Ready," she replied.

Gladio brandished the weapon towards her. Silia jumped and used it to give herself the leap, a move they had tried in Insomnia during their evenings at the Training Hall. Their combined physical strength hurled Silia faster and more violently than a bullet. She swooped down on the daemon horde, mowing down eight of them by swirling her swords, then straightened them against a Reaper, splitting it in half.

It was the first time Gladio saw a Kingsglaive in action. Silia was able to instantly combine deadly physical attacks performed by warping, magical walls on which daemon attacks were broken, and spells so powerful that, by comparison, the flasks she had given him were fireworks. Aranea Highwind, with her magitek lance, was no less lethal, and Darius Magnus was not considered Cor Leonis' right-hand man because of his pretty face. The horde of daemons that had pounced on them had seemed to him endless, yet began to thin.

When the last Gargantua had dissolved, the all of them remained motionless, waiting in guard stance for other daemons to appear, but it didn't happen. Panting, Gladio wiped the sweat from his forehead. A puff of blood remained on his hand, perhaps from a cut on his eyebrow.

Silia was a few steps away from him. They looked at each other. Despite the situation, the urgency to reach Noctis, the confusion, Gladio moved to embrace her. But Ignis moved even faster than him,
"Putting himself between them.

"Silia, I apologize, but I have to make sure it's you. What was the last thing you told me before we sailed from Cape Caem?"

She blinked, then lowered her swords. "Sounds fair. I gave you a fire flask and I asked you to watch Gladio's ass."

Ignis hadn't told him. "True. And I replied that I would watch his back, but not his backside. Darius, do you still remember the Sotherby's bartender? What's her name, again?"

"He's a man, I can assure you personally, and his name is Elias. Prompto, what did I say about your hair the first time we met? Incidentally, I still think that."

Prompto blushed, flattening his tuft. "Oh, for the Six's sake! It's a crest! A crest!"

"They're the real ones," Aranea exclaimed, raising both her arms. She had a bad scratch on her face. "I've been puttin' up with Hartwood for hours and I can assure you the Chancellor couldn't do worse."

"I'm the one who has been putting up with these two bickering women for hours," Darius contradicted her. "For the Astrals' sake, I finally have someone else to talk to."

Dazed, Gladio returned to look at Silia. She was filthy with blood, sweaty, and bagged in an Imperial uniform too large for her. She looked beautiful.

"Hey!" he greeted her, smiling.

"Hey," she said gravely. She covered the distance that separated them and stretched her arms towards him. Gladio almost believed she wanted to hug him, but Silia, keeping him at a distance, leaned one hand on his left side and one on his forehead and cast a heal. The adrenaline was such that he hadn't even noticed he had a torn side, perhaps from a Snaga's claws, or a Reaper's sword. He risked fainting with relief when the pain he didn't even know he was feeling suddenly vanished.

"Where's the Prince, Gladio?" she asked. As on the beach at Cape Caem, she seemed distant, absorbed. She had bruises and cuts, old and new, on her bloody face, and a split lip that she hadn't taken care of fixing.

"He took that elevator down there," he forced himself to answer, resisting the temptation to kiss her now that she was so damn close. It wasn't the time for that either, and he was sure she wouldn't appreciate his momentum. "You saw that wall of demons, we covered his back to give him a chance to get away. We must hurry and reach him."

Silia withdrew her hands. "Is anyone else injured?"

"Prompto," Darius replied. "His left arm."

"It's nothing," he said, trying to hide it behind his back. "No time for this."

Silia didn't listen to him. She approached Prompto, cast another heal and took his arm in her hands. "We don't know what we'll face in a while. We need to be as healthy as possible. Ignis, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Hartwood, thank you."
"Silia," she corrected him sharply. She reached him anyway, peered at him carefully for a moment, then lowered herself to place a hand on his leg, just above his knee. Ignis' trousers were torn and bloody.

Ignis moaned. "It was just a scratch, Silia," he lied.

"Maybe. By the way, thanks for the pots, guys. They could have saved our lives."

"What hurt you?" Gladio asked.

"A daemon that looked like a skinned devil."

"He attacked us more than once. Now it's definitively dead. He was Emperor Aldercapt."

"Damn it, I would have bet!" Aranea exclaimed, snapping her fingers. "That daemon was obsessed with the Crystal."

"He attacked Noctis while we were separated. He wanted to retrieve the Ring."

Silia rubbed her arms. "That's why he had it so much with me. He sensed the magic of the Crystal."

"Silia, we really appreciated your help," Ignis interrupted her. He turned to look at the others. "We are grateful to the three of you. But we must proceed. Noctis is alone."

Silia nodded. "See you upstairs then. Be careful. Darius, can you hold out a little longer?"

"Don't worry about me. See you later, Hartwood. Be careful, too."

Gladio opened his mouth to ask her what the hell she meant, but Silia turned her back on them and threw one of the two swords across the hangar, literally disappearing from his sight and then reappearing tens of feet away. She barely touched the ground, seizing the weapon again, and launched the other, warping again. He didn't see her anymore.

"What a showoff," Aranea commented, crossing her arms. "I suppose we have to go after her."

"Hey, big boy." Gladio felt a hand rest on his shoulder. It was Darius. A piece of his old life, before he left Insomnia, before of all. He was immensely glad to see him again. "I couldn't tell you before, but fuck, guys, long time no see."

He smiled at him. He struggled to recognize Darius with his unkempt beard, his short hair, in an Imperial uniform stained with blood, he, whom he had never seen with a hair out of place and the Crownsguard uniform less than flawless. "Long time, yeah. I didn't think I'd miss your fussy face so much, Darius. You cut your hair?"

He touched his nape, as he hadn't noticed it until that very moment. "I've found out that it's kind of hard to keep it well in a military camp. Now, Gladio, I've been dying for months to ask you this but seriously, Hartwood? I had a better opinion of your tastes."

Ignis and Prompto laughed. Gladio touched his hairline and scratched it. "What do I say? Taking care of the capricious prince of Insomnia for ten years must have developed in me a questionable and masochistic taste for intractable people. By the way, let's hurry to reach them."

II

At the foot of the round building, the warping broke off and Silia found herself kneeling on the floor, exhausted. Again, as when she had approached Grealia, she could feel something of the Crystal but
couldn't use the powers of the Kingsglaives. A flicker of panic clung to her stomach; the Prince was
dead. Or Izunia had taken the Ring from him. Everything was lost.

No, she told herself, getting up. The Prince's not dead. I still feel him. I feel the Ring. It's the Crystal
that...

There was just one way to find out. She ran to the circular elevator. With her heart pounding
furiously in her throat, she waited for it to bring her up, where the Crystal had to be, where the Prince
had to be. And, so she imagined, Ardyn Izunia as well. The others were who knew how far behind
her; the Prince's fate could depend on her alone.

The sliding doors of the elevator opened onto an illuminated walkway. She didn't see anyone, she
didn't hear a voice. Bad sign. Although she was almost at the end of her very last strength, after the
almost uninterrupted succession of warpings in order to get there as quickly as possible, she rushed at
breakneck speed.

She slowed down only when the lighting faded and she saw the emptiness below her. The walkway
now ran at the center of a huge cylindrical hall – probably the one that until recently had been
protected by lasers, which were then deactivated by Gladio and Ignis. She accelerated again, because
at the bottom the walkway entered a circular portal.

A mass more than a hundred inches high, suspended on chains, drew all her attention, and for a
moment Silia found herself again in Insomnia, in the Shrine, before the bombs exploded. This time,
however, the stone didn't shine with unnatural blue-violet light. It was faded, inactive. That was why
she could still vaguely perceive a trace of its power, but no longer use it.

In front of the Crystal there was no Prince, nor – it was of little comfort for her to notice – his corpse.
There was only Chancellor Ardyn Izunia, his back to her. If she had the absolute certainty that it was
him she would have attacked without delay, but she merely stopped three or four steps away.

"Izunia, get away from there," she threatened him - if he was him.

She would probably have been more intimidating if she had still breath. Pursing her lips to hold her
pants, her legs and lungs burning, she leaned into a guard stance.

"But look, if it isn't the Kingsglaive," Izunia declaimed, turning. He smiled, quiet, and didn't seem to
want to take any position of attack or defense. He nodded at the inactive Crystal behind him. "Again
without magic, and again without king."

She would die, it was sure, and after her, as soon as they arrived, the others would die. She knew it,
she had always known it since she had left Orior, and she was ready. "Where's the King, Chancellor?"

Izunia advanced toward her on the walkway. "He's holed up in the Crystal with the Draconian."

"In the Crystal?"

"Don't you know the legend of the True King, Kingsglaive?" Izunia didn't even look at her. He
walked absorbed, going past her, and Silia found herself unable to attack him. That being was vile,
but it was also an enigma that perhaps no one would lose. "Oh my, nowadays young people know
so little. But it doesn't surprise me. History is written by the victors, after all. Two thousand years ago
the Draconian, by means of the Crystal, chose the one who would purge the world from the Scourge,
and bestowed on him the Ring of the Lucii."

Silia didn't answer. She turned, continuing to follow him with her eyes.
"You must be thinking of Somnus Lucis Caelum, of course, the Founder King. It's not that, Kingsglaive. The Ring would have housed the souls of the Lucii until the coming of the Chosen King. The Scourge, in fact, was halted but not purged, because the Chosen King had yet to be born from the Lucian lineage. And thus for two thousand years the Scourge has continued to exist in the heart of Eos... the ruins of Solheim."

And the Empire brought it back to light when it started experimenting with miasma, Silia realized, thinking back to what Highwind had told her a few hours before. "Why did you help the Empire release it once again? What do you hope to achieve?"

Izunia stopped. Silia heard him produce a false laugh, but he didn't turn to look at her. "Me? Nothing, Kingsglaive. Not me. We all are in the hands of the gods, don't you know that?"

"Do you plan to speak in riddles for much longer?" she defied him. "What would that mean, the Prince is in the Crystal?" What the hell should we do now? she was about to ask him, because Izunia, the culprit of everything, the one who had unleashed the apocalypse, seemed to be the only one on Eos to have answers, apart from the Six, and the Six didn't seem willing to give them to anyone.

"I bet you have a lot of questions, and they are holding your hand from attacking me. But I'm tired, Kingsglaive. Tired of this Keep, tired of Niflheim, tired of it all. Aren't you tired? You fought a useless war, following a Captain who betrayed you. In fact, we have all fought a useless war following someone who has betrayed us." He raised his hand, listlessly, and a sword materialized in his fist.

Silia prepared to fight back. Answers or not, that bastard had caused countless deaths, and who knew how many would follow. She couldn't kid herself about the outcome of that confrontation with an immortal being endowed with inconceivable powers, but she wouldn't let him go away unscathed. They had let him do whatever the fuck he wanted for too long.

"Indeed, no." Izunia lowered his arm, suddenly changing his mind, and the weapon disappeared. "It's not worth it. I don't see why I should grant you the death that everyone like you desires – in battle, gloriously, against a stronger opponent. You will have the death you have already written on your head, Kingsglaive, not another."

What the hell is he talking about? "Don't think you can fuck with me like this, Izunia."

She threw herself on him, both swords in hand. Highwind stopped her last time, but now she wasn't there. She wasn't the only one to attack. On the other side of the walkway, Gladio had thrown himself on him, and their swords risked impacting when they hit the Chancellor almost simultaneously. It was then the turn of the bullets of Prompto's bioblaster.

The Chancellor fell, his body almost severed horizontally at the waist and vertically from the shoulder down, and riddled with blows. His wide-brimmed hat rolled away.

Panting, Silia stared at his body in disbelief. "An illusion, again," she said, already ashamed of being played once more. "He can't be d..."

"Noct!" Prompto shouted, running on the walkway around the Crystal. "Noctis!"

Gladio grabbed her shoulders. "Silia, are you okay? Where's Noctis?"

Silia opened her mouth to answer him but, at that moment, at their feet, Ardyn Izunia started and got up, laughing, not before picking up his hat. They remained motionless, horrified, unable to attack him again. From the wounds they had inflicted on him, from his mouth, from the sockets of his
orange, spirited eyes, without pupils, streams of rotting black fluid dripped.

"He's a daemon," Gladio said in a whisper, clenching her shoulders, just as she too finally realized it. "He's a fucking daemon."

Still laughing, Ardyn Izunia walked away, without a glance at them, going past Darius, Ignis and Highwind just as he had passed her earlier.

"Silia!"

Prompto was behind her, and touched her arm. "Silia, where's Noctis? He's not dead, is he?"

"I already told the Kingsglaive," Izunia chanted, his footsteps echoing on the metal grating of the walkway. "He's not dead. The Chosen King is in the Crystal. But don't worry. I will wait for him patiently until our next meeting. After all, one, ten or a hundred years, what difference you think it makes to me?"

III

Without consulting each other, they all left the Crystal room. No trace of Izunia. They sat on the footbridge, dejected.

Silia had collapsed beside Darius, her head resting in her hands. Once again, Gladio felt the urge to hug her, but it wasn't the right time yet. It didn't seem to him the right time for anything else other than to collapse himself with his head on his knees. He had no idea what the fuck Izunia meant, but Noctis was in a place where couldn't be reached. He felt drained, undone.

He wasn't the only one. Everyone was drowsy in a sort of incredulous numbness, or perhaps, since the immediate emergency was over, the adrenaline was exhausted, and they were about to buckle from fatigue and discomfort.

"What happened in there, Silia?"

It was Ignis who broke the silence. He was looking towards Silia, his arms folded.

"What you've heard," she replied without raising her head. Her voice seemed to come from beyond the grave. "He's holed up in the Crystal with the Draconian, so that freak said. He also said that the Scourge has been for all these years in the ruins of Solheim, that it was never completely purged by the Founder King because he wasn't the True King. Noctis Lucis Caelum is the Chosen King. If we still had some doubts, now they're dispelled. The Crystal absorbed him and then… it went off."

"Guess it sickens you, believing that Izunia got rid of the Prince and the Crystal," Aranea said. Gladio liked the mercenary, but at that moment he would have gladly put his hands around her neck.

"No." Silia struggled up. "He didn't. I keep sensing it."

"Sensing what, pray tell?"

Gladio noted that everyone was hanging on her word. Silia raised her right hand and arched her fingers. "Think of a fistful of clay that changes from hand to hand. Each hand leaves its mark. The fistful of clay is the power of the Crystal in its pure form. The Ring that channels it leaves its trace. King Regis, who wears the Ring, leaves his own. Then the fistful of clay comes to me, the Glaive."

She looked back at Aranea. "When King Regis died and the Crystal was taken away, I stopped feeling that energy. Today I sensed again the Crystal, the Ring, and a mark different from King Regis': Prince Noctis'. I can still sense them, all three. And not just theirs."
"What do you mean?" Prompto asked.

Silia pursed her lips. "Izunia. A part of his powers comes from the Crystal. Not all of them, or he wouldn't have risen after we slaughtered him right there. I don't know. I can't understand."

Gladio tried to process that revelation. He couldn't understand either. When it came to Izunia, everything became incomprehensible, illogical. One thing was certain: Noctis was still alive. Silia wouldn't have given them false hope if she hadn't be perfectly sure of it.

"We can't stay here," Ignis noted. "It's too exposed. Let's move to one of the armored lodgings. I think it's time for a strategic briefing, before taking the Crystal and leaving."

"Good idea, Bright Eyes," Aranea agreed, taking a few steps. She stopped abruptly. "And before we leave, let's look for a control room and make a copy of this." She rummaged in her pockets and showed them what looked like a memory card.

"What is it?" Gladio asked.

"Data, collected here and in the lab where the blond chick and I were yesterday – or maybe it was now the day before yesterday? I've lost track of time. Anyway, inside there're files, info, reports, records... Bring them to your Marshal. Who knows why, I doubt there will be info 'bout a treatment of the Disease, or Gralea wouldn't be like this, but maybe you'll find something interesting to use."

"Thanks, Highwind." Silia seemed to force herself to say. "I don't know what we can do with it, since our labs were in Insomnia, but maybe in Lestallum someone will be able to get something out of it."

"Oh," Prompto interjected, rubbing his right wrist. "I also have a lot to tell the Marshal."

Darius also stood up. "Before the strategic briefing, I need Hartwood for a few minutes. We've one last thing to do."

"There are still many daemons around, Darius, not to mention Izunia," Ignis reminded him. "And again, Hartwood can't use the magic of the Ring. If the Marshal has given you an additional task, I think we should carry it out together."

"No, it's just about Hartwood and me." Darius joined her and leaned his hand on her head, a gesture of affectionate confidence that, as far as Gladio knew, Silia allowed nobody. "Gladio, your girlfriend and I have become quite intimate in the past months. She said she never promised you exclusivity."

Aranea made an amused sneer. "Girlfriend? You and the tattooed beast? I understood well then, a little while ago. I've a million jokes on my tongue, almost all gross, but I suspect it's not the time."

"No, it really isn't, Highwind," Silia retorted, annoyed. "I'm in, Darius, if we really must."

"We must. One last effort, Kitty, then you and Gladio can get a room," he winked.

"Darius, fuck you," she replied, resentfully, but let him gently push her forward.

Darius seemed to change his mind because he turned back to them. He was damn pale, with dark circles under his eyes, but none of them looked much better. He smiled. "I almost forgot to tell you that you've come a long way, guys, since you were getting in my way at the Training Hall, asking me for advice. The Marshal knows this perfectly, and he's proud of you. I can only imagine how you feel, unable to reach the Prince, but at least he's alive, if we have to believe that one." He nodded towards Silia. "Hold on. You especially, Ignis."
"Thanks, Darius," Ignis replied, perplexed. "But…"

"Highwind, where's the nearest lodging?" Silia asked, interrupting him.

"The last one we stopped in, floor D-11."

"Great. It's filthy with our blood. See you there soon."

"Silia?" Gladio tried to draw her attention, but she didn't turn around, blocking him with a peremptory gesture that could be have been either annoyance or a greeting.

"Stop shooting the shit," she ordered. "Find a way to move the Crystal. Let's meet in a while."

They preceded them in the elevator, without haste, in silence.

"Are you sure she's your girlfriend?" Aranea mocked him, pressing the button to pull the elevator up again.

"Shut up, Aranea," he replied, more sour than necessary. Silia's temper was shitty as always, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that something had happened. It had to do with Izunia.

"Lucky you."

"By the way, if I may ask, what are you doing in the Keep, Aranea?" Ignis asked her.

"Me? I told you, in Ulwaat, that I had things to do. I was around looking for intel 'bout what was happening. In the Ghorovas Rift I met Magnus and Hartwood, and instead of killing each other we decided to go into the Keep together. Shortly after entering, we were attacked by the skinned daemon. It was about to gut Magnus. Then we also met Ardyn Izunia, or perhaps it was one of his projections."

"Did he try to trick you too with some dirty play?"

"Of course. Your fiancée, Whopper, has almost gone mad. And Magnus turned white as a sheet and didn't utter a word for an hour."

This confirmed his assumptions, even if he couldn't understand what Izunia could have shown them that was so shocking. He didn't know Silia, nor did he know Darius. He knew nothing of their past.

"Then we parted," Aranea continued. The elevator doors reopened, and the four of them entered. Aranea pressed the only key, and the elevator began to descend. They would return to the outer area where they had fought against Ravus and then against the daemon horde. Probably they would find there a freight elevator to lift the Crystal on an airship. "And I found your potions and saw that you had disabled the sec system that shielded the Crystal. Good job, by the way."

"Aranea," Gladio interrupted her. "Any idea 'bout what the hell they still have to do here in the Keep?"

"Not a clue, Whopper, I tend to mind my own business, and those two were rarely a warm and funny company in the last hours. They only said they were here to help the Prince recover the Crystal on behalf of Marshal Leonis."

The elevator doors reopened. No trace of Silia and Darius, as he had guessed. Who knew where the hell they had gone. Gladio looked around, but there was not a living soul; the seven of them had cleared every daemon on that floor. It took the elevator maybe two minutes to get back up and down.
Darius and Silia couldn't have left them so behind, unless they were running.

"Sorry, guys," he said. "See you in the dorm."

"Huh?" Prompto exclaimed. "But Gladio, you heard them. They…"

He didn't let him finish. He separated from the group, walking quickly, then running. He probably wouldn't have found them, but he wanted to try anyway. He retraced the outside area, crossed the hangar, and took on yet another elevator to return to the heart of the Keep.

He was back in the maze of corridors and laboratories. He saw no signs of struggle, nor anything that could show Silia and Darius' previous passage. He kept his ears well open, running, tracing the road backwards, until a shot rang out on that same floor.

There were still other daemons or magiteks left, after all. Gladio summoned his broadsword to rush and give them support, and risked slaughtering Silia when an automatic door suddenly opened to his right. Had he not refrained at the last moment, it would have happened, because she didn't react, she didn't even move to block or dodge the blow. Her hands were trembling, she was ash-gray, and for a moment she seemed not to recognize him or where she was. It was just a moment, because she blinked, rubbed her eyes, and when she looked at him again, Gladio saw that she was perfectly present to herself again.

"What are you doing here?" she asked quietly, advancing. The automatic door closed behind her. "I told you to wait for me in the dorm. Let's go."

Gladio lowered his sword, glanced at the closed door, then again at her distorted face. "Silia, are you okay?"

"No," she replied simply, pushing him away. "Let's go to the others."

"Where's Darius?"

"Nowhere, now. He's caught it."

"What?" He chased her, horrified. He had already understood, but refused to understand. He leaned his hand on her shoulder to stop her. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"The Starscourge."

"Are you sure?"

She jerked free. Only then did Gladio realize that under her long Imperial jacket, hooked to her belt alongside her swords, she had Darius'. "I'm pretty sure. By now it's a bit too late to ask anyway, don't you think?" Her voice broke. "Let's go back to Orior. We must go and report to the Marshal."

Gladio turned around. Darius had been one of the Crownsguard seniors who had trained him. There was too much difference in age for them to be really friends, but they had known each other for a lifetime, they'd hang out in the same places, they joked and drank together. He liked him – he had liked him. He was tempted, but didn't enter the room. It would have served no purpose. Two like them had certainly gotten it right.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked, unable to hide a hint of resentment.

Silia started walking again without looking at him. "I didn't have to tell you. You heard what Darius said. He probably wanted to avoid a fucking sob-sister scene. Or worse, that you tried to stop him."
Gladio rubbed his face. He couldn't get over it. The call of that room behind him was still strong. "Darius and I had known each other for almost fifteen years, Silia."

This time Silia stopped. "Oh, yeah?" she asked in a poisonous voice. "My condolences."

Gladio felt a flicker of anger, before realizing, in order, two things: the first, that he had been equally tactless with Noctis, if not more, when he had faltered after Princess Lunafreya's death. The second, that in Orior Silia must have tighten with Darius, one of those immediate and untangled friendships that arise in unexpected situations and don't need time to solidify, and that she had just witnessed his suicide – perhaps she had even helped him.

He hastened his pace, caught up with her, turned her as he had done in Cape Caem and hugged her to his chest. She tried to wriggle away. She insulted him. She punched him violently in his arms and back. She begged him to leave her. Then she finally gave up. She seemed to sag in his arms. She was trembling.

"It's all right," he whispered to her, although nothing was right. He should have also done so with Noctis when he had awakened in Altissia and discovered that the Princess was dead and Ignis blind. He should have hugged him and told him that everything was right, even if it wasn't. He would have wanted to. "It's all right, Silia," he repeated.

Noctis was gone now, Darius was dead. Nothing was right.

IV

In the lodgings, when they reached the others, Prompto, Ignis and Aranea were not the only ones to learn shocking news. The Crystal had literally vanished shortly after they had separated. Since Noctis had disappeared there was the first real moment of confusion, while everyone flocked with questions and mutual requests for explanation.

"That's enough. Let's just calm down, all of us," Silia brought them to heel; after her moment of dejection in the hallway she had taken over the reins of the entire situation. She turned to Aranea, who continued to argue that the Crystal must have been taken away from Izunia: "Nothing changes. If the Prince is inside the Crystal at the behest of Bahamuth, Izunia can do very little, even if he has taken it."

"Oh yeah?" Aranea retorted mockingly. "Since when do we know what Izunia can and can't do?"

"Right question," Silia replied, "to which I answer with another question: even if that's the case, what can we do?"

"I don't think Izunia took it," Ignis intruded. "It vanished, we say. We saw a blue light, and when we took the elevator back to see what had happened, the Crystal was gone."

"And Izunia is not able to make anything disappear or generate blue lights, right?"

"Are you telling me that after he's gone before our very eyes, he just waited for us to take the elevator and then sneaked back to take the Crystal?"

"By the Six, I don't understand you," Prompto whispered, his voice so low and angry that they all turned to look at him. Even if he had been a Crownsguard for few days, Darius had trained him as well, and he had been the one most shocked by the news of his death. "I just don't understand you. Darius Magnus is dead, and you're sitting here arguing about what happened to the Crystal."

Silia jumped to her feet and Gladio was sure she would break Prompto's face. He would have broken
it too, at that moment, because Prompto wasn't in the hallway, he hadn't seen her face when she had left the room where Magnus died, he hadn't held her in his arms while she was trembling, he didn't know how much superhuman effort it must have taken to pull herself together. She would have smashed his face, and Gladio wouldn't have stopped her.

Silia didn't break his face. She merely stopped in front of the bed he was sitting on, her hands in the pockets of her imperial uniform – perhaps that gesture he himself knew all too well, a way to trap them somewhere so as not to use them otherwise – and looked at him for a moment in silence.

"Darius came to Orior knowing he could die," she said harshly. "As I did. And as you did. Well, sometimes it really happens. It happened. Perhaps it's better this way, by his own hands, than gutted. Or maybe not. Maybe being gutted is better than suicide. Who can say? But it's certainly better than turning into a daemon."

Prompto lowered his head. He didn't answer.

"Darius died," Silia repeated, "performing his duty. And now is not the time to think about him. Not even about Prince Noctis, if you must know, because there's nothing we can do about it, as I was saying to Highwind. Let's face it." She turned to look at them all, in turn. "Wherever he is, wherever the Crystal is, our role is over. Prince Noctis is the True King, I have no doubt about it, as I have no doubt that he is alive, and will fulfill his destiny when the time comes. But there's another role that belongs to us: surviving the Scourge and helping as many people as possible survive the Scourge while we wait for him."

Gladio thought back to their yacht trip to Accordo; Ignis had said that Silia was cut from the same cloth as the Marshal, and Cid had agreed. At that moment, watching her chill them with that inflexible look, almost ruthless in its sternness, Silia resembled him more than ever. He had painfully loved the intimidated woman with whom he had danced at Cornelia Doge's party; he had loved the fragile and disoriented woman with whom he had had sex in Insomnia the evening before he left; he had loved the defeated woman with whom he had walked on the beach at Cape Caem and had loved the woman distraught by the death of a friend, who ten minutes before had trembled in his arms. But for this woman, the one who was reminding all of them that they couldn't afford to cave in, not yet, because there was much more at stake than their personal affections, he didn't feel mere love. He felt a military respect, almost a devotion. This woman, he would follow her in battle, he would entrust her his life, his companions', even Noctis', blindly.

"We'll do it," he said, standing up too. His hand almost moved to rise to his forehead in the Crownsguard salute. "We will do it. Let's go back to Orior. We need to talk to Cor Leonis."

Only then, for the first time since they had met again, Silia smiled at him. She nodded.

"If I'm allowed to interrupt this noble expression of intent," Aranea said, "I'm sorry for Magnus. He was a handsome man, and above all he knew how to fight, and only the Six know how much from now on we'll need men who know how to do it. But Hartwood's right, it's not the time to mourn the dead, 'cause there will be many others."

"What are you going to do now?" Ignis asked her.

"Dunno," she admitted. She laced her fingers together, twisted them and stretched elegantly. "First of all, I'm going to retrieve Biggs and Wedge and then my other men left in Tenebrae, if they're all still in one piece. Then I'll think about it. Maybe, having nothing better to do, I could really consider the idea of helping the Immortal. The East will be safer than Niflheim, at least for a while. Plus, you owe me a date, Bright Eyes," she winked. "Prolly we'll see again later... what's the name of the Immortal's camp, again?"
"Orior," Silia replied.

"Orior," Aranea repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It's the ancient language. It means to be born. Or arise."

Aranea chuckled. "Seriously? I don't know if it's more irony or good luck, with what's coming at us. Out of curiosity, which of you will pilot the airship? You weren't able to drive an automated train to Gralea by yourselves."

That aspect of the Crystal recovery plan, actually, had never been put on record. Gladio scratched his hairline.

"The real question is, who would have piloted the airship to bring the Crystal back to Insomnia?" Silia seemed to read his mind. For once, she was on the same line as Aranea. She looked at them, waiting, but this time, in addition to severity, there was a bit of fun in her eyes. "Just like I thought."

"We can give you a ride at least until Tenebrae," Aranea offered.

"No need," Silia replied. "I learned how to fly vehicles during training. Aircrafts of the Kingdom, of course, not of the Empire, but how different can they be?"

"Now I understand how Darius could stand you, Kitty. You're like an army knife. Including size."

Silia didn't even frown, chilly as before: "Highwind, close your mouth or I'll punch it."

"Well," Gladio said, before Aranea could respond properly, "let's go back to the hangar and see if we can find an airship."

"I agree," Ignis also said. "I must confess I could use some sleep. It was a difficult day."

"Call things by their name, Ig. It was a shitty day," Prompto stroke out.


"We could start the Shit Club" Silia replied, a bitter smile on her lips.

"And let's brace ourselves," Aranea also said, "cause I got the bad feeling that a sea of shit awaits us."

*

They returned to the first hangar, where Biggs and Wedge, Gladio enjoyed to find out, were alive and well and were waiting for Aranea aboard an Imperial airship. The two men were the first ones, when they asked them where the Prince of Insomnia was, to whom they announced the news. From their dismayed and almost embarrassed expressions Gladio understood for the first time that it would not be so easy to explain to all the others that no, the Chosen King wasn't dead, he had simply been absorbed by the Crystal and the Crystal was now gone. While Silia was following Aranea's men inside their airship's control room to receive instructions – he heard her ask whether it was fed to dead children too – Gladio considered that Cor Leonis, after skinning them alive with his glacial look and made sure they weren't self-deluding, would certainly have believed it. The members of the Crownsguard? They would have believed anything Cor Leonis believed. The problem was all the others.

No, Gladio corrected himself, staring at the black hole that was the city of Gralea beyond the
parapet, the real problem, as Silia said well is that, regardless of whether Noctis is alive or dead and what everyone believes, the Starscourge is still here and we must prepare to face the worst. Or at least resist until Noct returns.

Aranea still stayed with them, having Orior's coordinates transferred to her otherwise useless cell phone. After checking them for a few seconds, an impertinent smile painted on her face. "A valley in the Greysham mountains, huh? A good place for a base. No wonder we never found the Immortal."

"You didn't look for him so well, I suppose," Ignis provoked her – perhaps a little revenge for the mercenary's constant zingers. "The Marshal certainly didn't hide in Orior. There is no inhabitant of Leide, Cleigne and Duscae who doesn't swear to have seen him go around on his motorcycle."

Aranea lowered her cell phone, still smiling. "My job was to find you, not Marshal Leonis."

"You found us in Steyliff," Ignis retorted. "And you helped us. Why?"

"Chancellor's orders. You're persistent, huh? D'you want to know if there's another man in my past, Bright Eyes?"

Ignis once again ignored her provocation. "No. I ask you this because, if you come to Orior, the Immortal will want to know. You fought for the Empire, Aranea. But we will vouch for you. We all trusted you - Noctis, Gladio and I when your men brought us here to Gralea, Prompto within the research laboratory, Silia and Darius here in the Keep - and so far it has turned out to be a wise decision."

Aranea blinked, as if she didn't expect that answer. "A sea of shit awaits us," she said, repeating the same words she had uttered inside the lodgings, and turning to look at the city. "and I helped bring it here. You enlist to eat, after one of the Astrals has turned your home village into a frozen land and you ended up in the slums of the Imperial City; you find out that you're apt to fight and that, within an army that now relies on to mechanical infantry, it's still well recognized. Every day you raise the bar of what you pretend not to see. Every day you raise the bar of what you pretend to believe. That the Imperial garrisons in Lucis are regularly slaughtered. That the studies on miasma and plasmodium are perfectly under control and that they are fundamental to win this war. That the war must be won not by a pure territorial question, but because the Lucis Caelums have for centuries arrogated to themselves the right to own and use the Crystal, handing it down from generation to generation and prospering while here, in Niflheim, we are running out of resources."

Gladio had smelt that Aranea's personal war had to do with the Astrals when, before they left Ulwaat, she had hinted venomously at Shiva, but he didn't think she had been directly hit. And yet, something else of her words struck him. "Resources?"

"You came from Cape Esther on the Magna Fortia," she simply replied. She seemed exhausted. "Have you seen the quarries, the desert, the desolation? To build weapons, magiteks, airships you need resources. Copper. Silicon. Lithium. Adamantine. Not to mention the enormous amount of energy to produce them. The Great War also had worn down Niflheim. Fifty years, maybe a hundred, but no more, and it would have been a barren land. That's why the Empire uses miasma as a source of energy. But it was not enough."

"The miasma is produced by demonized human beings," Ignis reminded her. "People" he pointed out, mercilessly, making a gesture towards Prompto, "used as fuel."

"It was the bar I was talking about, Bright Eyes. I didn't know. I thought I didn't know. I assumed that the miasma couldn't come just from the ruins of Solheim, but I was only interested in fighting and get ahead."
"And what has changed now?" Ignis asked again.

"Accordo," she replied. "After Accordo, before they imprisoned him, I was able to talk to Ravus Nox Fleuret. He told me to stop deceiving myself and letting myself be fooled. That there were more things to be discovered about the Chancellor and Besithia than what was clear. That Izunia had killed his sister and hadn't taken the Ring from the Prince when he could do. At that point I started looking for answers, and the more I found, the less I liked them. When the order to attack Fenestala arrived, I deserted and went to Tenebrae to try to prevent it. Without much success," she admitted. "Are you satisfied now, or do you want me to tell you the story of my life in detail?"

They didn't answer her because, behind them, Gladio heard a sound of engine ignition. The airship lights came on then, a few seconds later, went out again.

"I'll come to Orior and tell all this to your Marshal," Aranea concluded. "And I'll try to do what I can to make amends."

"Aranea," Ignis said again, severely bowing his head. "We are grateful for all the help you have given us and will give us in the future. I don't know which way things will go from here to the next few months, or even days, but..."

Aranea laid her finger on her lips. "Don't say anything else, Bright Eyes. Apocalypse or not, it's my intention to collect what you owe me. After all, I found them all – the blond chick, the Crownsguard, the kitty, and I didn't just tell them a message."

"I always pay my debts," Ignis replied, and smiled unexpectedly. "We'll talk about it again in Orior."

Things were taking a decidedly unlikely turn and were it not for Noctis disappearing somewhere, Darius' still warm corpse in the Keep and a looming apocalypse, Gladio would have found it hilarious.

"Hey!"

Silia reappeared on the airship pier. "I think I memorized everything my head can memorize right now, after all that has happened and forty-eight hours of being awake. Enough to take off, at least."

"Take off?" Prompto let slip. "And then?"

"Silia, are you sure?" Ignis dared to ask. "We can take a car. There's no need to rush."

"There is," she contradicted him. "Each additional day to prepare Lucis for what is coming is precious. Let's look for a small airship."

"Biggs, Wedge, time for us to get out of the way! Don't want to be in their same air space when Hartwood takes off."

V

When Gladio suddenly noticed the presence of a fifth person in the hangar, at the feet of the chosen airship they were going to take, it caught him so off guard that he didn't react immediately. Silia was the closest and she was also the quickest; she snapped towards the intruder and pointed one of the two swords at his throat.

Her throat, actually. The intruder was Gentiana, the High Messenger of the Gods, only that Gentiana, Noctis had told them, was Shiva, the Glacian herself, and Silia was pointing a blade at her throat.
"Silia!" he exclaimed, raising his arms slowly. He doubted Silia could harm the Glacian, but the Glacian could turn Silia into a block of ice by simply snapping her fingers. "Silia, stop, for the Six's sake. She's the High Messenger. The Glacian herself."

Gentiana slightly opened her eyes, looked at Silia, then smiled, tilting her head slightly to one side. "Please, Kingsglaive, it is not necessary. Rest your anger. I am not the one you fear."

"And how do I know?" Silia retorted angrily, without lowering her sword.

Gladio opened his mouth to warn her, but again, suddenly, he felt himself to be naïve; how did they know it wasn't another trick by Ardyn Izunia who had followed them to pester or manipulate them?

Shiva – if it really was Shiva – stretched her elegant hand and grabbed Silia's left arm, just above her elbow. Gladio feared a violent reaction, but Silia didn't move. He saw her eyebrows frown and her lips part as she stared at Shiva, bewildered, and when the Glacial withdrew her hand she lowered her swords and slowly sank to the ground onto her knees. Gladio didn't know if she was paying her respect to the Goddess or if her legs had simply given up.

"Arise, Kingsglaive, because from now on you are no longer allowed to bend." Shiva turned to them. "And so it is for you, companions of the True King. The Long Night awaits you, and your shoulders must not waver, your arms must not tremble, nor will your eyes cease to see. The Five have granted the Chosen King their blessing, but before he can purge the world from the Plague, the Crystal shall bestow on him the power to fulfill his role." Her gaze shifted onto each of them in turn. Gladio felt himself freeze. "And yet, everything will have been in vain if there will be no longer a humanity to save from darkness."

She looked back at Silia. "The sins of the Kingsglaives have been redeemed. The Draconian has looked into your hearts and gives you his favor again. When the Chosen King returns, the Crystal will grant its power to you again, but until then you will have to rely merely on your own strength. However, the Draconian guarantees you its protection. As long as you fight for the light, the Scourge will not poison your flesh. Not even the Draconian owns the power to extend this protection to all humanity, but those who prove themselves worthy will be able to benefit from it."

Silia got up. She violently took off her uniform jacket and her shirt. He saw her claw her left arm, where Shiva had touched her. "You will have the death you have already written on your head, Kingsglaive" she said, looking back at the Astral, and Gladio didn't understand.

"It was not written," the Glacian replied. "Few things are already written."

"Why now?" Silia whispered angrily, continuing to clench her arm. "Why not before?"

Oh, by the Six, she was infected, Gladio realized with horror, laying a hand over his mouth. Silia was infected, like Darius.

"I can understand your grieving, Kingsglaive," Shiva interrupted her in a sweet voice. "But do not make it worse with anger. The Crowsguard could not be saved. His body had already been corrupted, beyond all human and divine intervention, when the Draconian awoke at the moment when the Chosen King touched the Crystal. The Scourge does not act on every mortal in the same way. An hour or two more, and you would have been condemned as well."

Silia lowered her head. It wasn't a helpless gesture of surrender to a higher will, but rather a sign of defiance, like a child who turns his back to the parent who's blaming him. Gladio was worried about the turn things could take.
"Do have faith," said Shiva, addressing them, without changing the sweetness in her voice by a note. "And fearlessly await the return of the Chosen King, for He will fulfill the Prophecy."

"Wait!" Prompto tried to say. "When?"

Prompto had no answer, because the Glacian had disappeared. Gladio hadn't lost sight of her for a single moment, yet he had failed to distinguish the exact time when she had stopped being there in front of them.

"Sorry," Ignis said, breaking the silence that followed. "I don't…"

"I had it too," Silia told him, putting on her shirt again. Her voice was firm, as were her hands as she dressed. "The Starscourge. I had also caught it, as Darius did. I bet it's not a coincidence that it happened right now. I bet it was the daemonified Aldercapt. Or maybe Izunia himself."

"Are you feeling fine?" Ignis asked her before Gladio could do it.

"I'm fine. The Scourge is gone, it seems. This pisses me off. If the Six could do it, why not before? Where were they as we struggled in the Keep to retrieve the Crystal with Izunia playing with us as if we were lab mice in a test maze?"

"Shiva spoke of the Draconian's blessing," Prompto ventured to say. "Will we also be immune to the Starscourge? And what did she mean when she spoke of the Kinglaives?"

"Not the faintest idea. The Astrals keep on playing, as you see." Silia ran her hands through her hair in an exasperated gesture, then turned to him. Gladio wondered how she felt, knowing she had been so close to meeting the same end as Darius. Had she realized she was infected, she wouldn't have been there with them in that hangar. Gladio had an idea that she wouldn't even have warned him. She would have simply disappeared in the Keep the way some wild beasts hid to die alone, and he would never have heard from her again.

"Yet," Ignis said, and his lips curved into an unexpected smile "the Six have just confirmed that Noctis is alive and will come back."

"Yeah, and that hell awaits us." Silia returned to look at the airship. "We'll talk about it as we return to Lucis and put together the information to be reported to the Marshal. But first, let me take a test drive by myself. I don't think that Bahamut's blessing will protect us if I crash the airship in the open sea."

Chapter End Notes

"Hic sunt leones" > literally, "here be lions". It refers to the medieval practice of putting illustrations of lions, dragons or other mythological creatures on uncharted areas of maps where potential dangers were thought to exist. It's like saying, "from here my knowledge stops".
When they reached Orior the rain was coming down in buckets. Despite the Glacian's words that had assured them that Noctis was alive, if ever Silia's words needed confirmation, the last stretch of road had been, as well as difficult to cover with the flood, silent and depressing; Gladio had at least kept himself busy driving because Silia, six hours earlier, had collapsed exhausted against the commands of the airship and had apologized stating that it was better to take the car they had loaded and arrive a few hours later to Orior, but alive. After landing near Longwythe, Gladio had been pleased to be able to somehow relieve her, even though he had been forced to wake her up not even four hours later; they no longer had a sat-nav and none of them would have been able to navigate the mountain roads that led to the camp, especially with a non-existent visibility.

Finally – it was about 4 in the afternoon but, between the rain and the increasingly early sunset, it seemed like ten o'clock in the night – after a long bumpy road between rock walls, they emerged into a clearing protected on three sides. Gladio distinguished in the dark and through the curtain of water flashing lights and lamps that soon illuminated two guard towers and an iron gate. They were in an Imperial vehicle, Ignis reminded them, and Silia told him to stop at a safe distance. She went into the downpour to make herself visible to the men on guard on the turrets. The gate was immediately opened wide, but Silia didn't return to the car. He saw her go in without even turning to wave them forward.

"Gladdy!"

Despite the drum of the rain on the roof and the windshield, Gladio heard the distant voice of his sister. He hurried to park where two soggy men pointed them to, and Iris almost didn't give him time to get out before flinging herself into his arms. There was also Talcott, and not just him; careless of the rain, a small crowd was gathering quickly around them, stunning him. He no longer saw Silia. Holding his arm behind Iris' shoulders, Gladio ruffled Talcott's wet hair, and replied with anesthetized smiles to his old mates of the Crownsguard who greeted him and the others with pats on their back and rowdy jokes. On another occasion he would have been excited to see them again, but at that moment he just wanted to report to Cor Leonis, wait for him to suggest what they should do, and sleep.

He managed to see Silia again. She was walking towards Cor, who in turn was reaching them at a brisk pace. Gladio gently pushed everyone away to join them, followed by Prompto and Ignis.
"Hartwood, at last. I almost had written you up as dead," the Marshal was saying.

"I apologize, Marshal. The lines in Gralea are cut off, and in any case my cell phone was smashed somewhere before we reached Gralea. I had no way to communicate."

"It doesn't matter anymore, since you're here." Cor scanned them with his eyes. "Where is Prince Noctis? And what about Darius?"

"Cor, it's long, damn long, to explain." Gladio combed his wet hair back, looking around. He had no intention of triggering alarms before talking to him. "Let's go somewhere inside."

"Come on," Cor agreed. "But are you going to tell me where Darius is?"

Silia pushed aside her Imperial jacket, unhooked Darius' sword from her belt and handed it to him without a word. The Marshal grabbed the handle looking at Silia in search of confirmation of what he had clearly already understood. She shook her head slowly.

"Marshal, I'm sorry. I must tell you that Darius has fallen."

"Oh, by the Six..." Gladio heard Alex moan. "Darius. No way!"

"Gladio, Ignis, what the fuck happened?" Marvin asked. "Are Darius and the Prince dead?"

"The Prince is dead?" someone shouted.

"Noctis isn't dead!" Prompto screamed. "Don't even say it. He's in the Crystal!"

Cor jerked his head up. In an exasperated gesture that Gladio had never seen him perform, even when some of them, as kids, made him lose his temper in training, he grabbed Silia by her shoulder. "Stay calm, everyone. I order you to return to your duties. You will know all there's to know when I decide. Hartwood, Amicitia, Scientia, Argentum, come to report in my pavilion. Now."

Without ceasing to clench Silia's shoulder, he turned and took her with him. Demoralized, Gladio and the others followed him. The rain seemed to burn on his face.

Cor left Silia only when they were inside a dry tent - his pavilion, Gladio believed. She stood there with her head held high, her hair dropping water, waiting. Cor ran a hand over his wet face, squared his shoulders, then turned to them.

"Now, will you tell me what the hell happened?"

II

"So," Cor recapped, "the Prince has disappeared. Izunia told you he's in the Crystal with the Draconian, and the High Messenger, who actually was the Glacian in disguise, has confirmed it to you."

Silia felt compelled to intervene. "And I confirmed it, too. Prince Noctis is still alive. I still feel the magic of Crystal, the Ring and Prince Noctis' energy."

Cor looked up at her. The hunters and the volunteers out there would have seen only Marshal Leonis' usual adamantine calm, but he couldn't deceive his men of the Guard, and he couldn't deceive her; the news of Prince Noctis' disappearance and Darius' death had managed to dent the Immortal.

There's no more accurate "shitmus test" than the Marshal, and now it's dark brown. Silia nibbled at
"Why did Izunia let you go?"

"Because he doesn't give a damn about us," Silia replied simply. During the four hours of drowsiness in the car she had continued to obsessively relive the last moments with Darius, but also that minute or two when she and Ardyn Izunia had been alone. He had raised his hand to kill her and then he didn't. *Not worth it*, he had said. It would have been a trifle for him, yet he hadn't considered her to deserve that minimum effort. Nor an honorable death. She had been infected and she would have ended up shooting herself in the mouth as Darius had done, as soon as she had realized her arm was starting to rot. Or maybe not; maybe she wouldn't have noticed it in time and would have yielded her mind to the Scourge. The principle of hysterical laugh passed completely by. "I don't know what he gives a damn about. Izunia is a daemon, Cor. Ardyn Izunia is an extremely ancient and powerful daemon, perhaps as old as the Founder King, and he's obsessed with Prince Noctis for some reason."

"I think he's somehow bound to the Lucis lineage," Ignis completed for her, taking off his glasses. In the last few hours Silia had been busy piloting the airship or sleeping, and that was the first time she could clearly see his scars, made even clearer by the gloomy light of the neon that illuminated the Marshal's pavilion. Gladio had told her that his wounds had been whitish, but now the scars were purple, as if someone had splashed paint on the right side of his face or sewed a patch of the wrong color on him. She had seen lots of scars in her life, and had a collection on her own, but this one, although similar to a burn, didn't look like anything she had ever seen. "I believe Noctis escaped him. Or maybe he himself allowed him to escape. He said he will wait for him for as long as necessary."

"And how long will this be, according to you?"

Prompto's question remained unanswered. Silia was quite convinced that Prince Noctis wouldn't disappear for just a day or a week or a month. *Men* reasoned in terms of days and weeks and months. *Gods* reasoned in terms of years, decades and centuries. Maybe millennia.

"What do we do now, Marshal?" Gladio wanted to know. Silia knew that everyone, inside that pavilion and outside, had that question on their lips and were waiting for his answer, and the Marshal knew it as well.

Cor looked over their shoulders, towards the covered entrance of the tent. He spoke in such a low voice that she barely heard it in the ticking of the rain on the tarpaulin of the pavilion. "I have to think about it. I'll be frank. I've been waiting for days for news about the retrieving of the Crystal or about your death. Not this one. Do you have any idea about what will happen in the coming weeks?"

No one replied. They all had it.

"Lucis, Niflheim and Tenebrae no longer exist. The war is over. I would like to be able to rejoice but, with the Oracle's death and the accident at the Zegnautus Keep that accelerated the spread of the Starscourge, soon these lands will be at the mercy of a horde of daemons like we have never seen."

It was nothing they hadn't imagined before, but hearing the Immortal say it aloud suddenly made it real. Silia nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. "There's nothing we can do to stop the Scourge," she added. "But we can entrench ourselves and try to contain the damage. The question is, how?"

"Let me have a few hours to think about it. Go and rest. Not you, Hartwood. Stay a few minutes more, if you feel up for it."
Silia didn't feel up for it, because in the last forty minutes they had already eviscerated all the details of her and Darius' last days and the others' last few month, so it was clear what the Marshal wanted to talk about with her alone; yet she nodded, while the other three got up. Gladio was the last to leave, and for a few moments he stood in the doorway of the pavilion to look at her. He too was silently asking her if she felt up for it. She did her best to dismiss him with a convincing smile, to which he replied with an imperceptible nod of his head before closing the curtains.

Now that they were alone, Cor abandoned himself to a noisy sigh and leaned his forehead against the palm of his hand. "Tell me how it happened, Hartwood."

Now that they were alone, Silia flopped on the stool in front of his desk. She collapsed on her elbows, and the tremors she had managed to hold back up to that moment at last vented. "I'll save you the details. Shortly after entering the Keep with Aranea Highwind, Darius and I were injured in the clash with a daemonized Aldercapt. He infected us with the miasma. I think so. Izunia himself could have infected us, as far as I know, but the infection started from our wounds. Shortly after we met Izunia in the corridors, indeed. He can... change his appearance, show you things. Darius told me he showed him what would happen to him soon." The Marshal didn't ask what he had shown her, and she was grateful for that. Izunia had projected Drautos because he knew nothing about her except she was a Kingsglaive, but incidentally he had hit the mark, and she had no intention of talking about it with Cor. "Darius wanted to complete our task, so he didn't do it immediately. He made me promise to take care of the issue when the time would come, had he not been able to do it by himself, and to make sure he died before I left the Keep."

"Did you do it?"

"Yessir," she replied. She lowered her hands to her knees, and squeezed them to reduce the tremors. It had already happened to her, during the war, having to accelerate the end of a doomed comrade; it had been hard, but nothing compared to what had happened in the Keep because, unlike her fellow comrades, Darius had been perfectly himself when he had blown his head off. She had just touched that gun. Darius had done everything. Yet she felt as if she had personally pulled the trigger.

"You did your duty, Hartwood." A rather dry way to comfort her, but she was pretty sure it was the best that Cor was able to do, and she appreciated his attempt.

"Thank you, Marshal. Darius was..." A reliable comrade. A friend. "Damn good. I couldn't have done it without him."

Cor didn't comment in any way. "Is there anything else I must know?"

"There is. He told me to tell you he regrets leaving you at such a time. And that certainly you will be up to it. As always." The rest, she didn't tell him. Darius' last words would remain between her and Darius.

Looking at the face of Cor the Immortal who tried not to show her his pain, Silia felt the urgency to get up and leave that pavilion to go and look for Gladio. She pulled back the stool to go out and leave him alone with his mourning.

"Hartwood, I haven't finished yet," he held her back, suddenly brusque.

Silia let out a sigh. She rubbed her eyes. "I'm listening."

"I want you to leave the camp."

Her head jerked so abruptly that she almost heard her neck snap. "What?"
"I'm not throwing you out. We must reorganize. Train other men. You said before that we'll have to
entrench ourselves. But everyone in the same place would be suicide. With the help of the Meldacio,
we will put up other camps like this. I want you to lead one, and keep training men like you've done
so far. Take the time you need, but not too much, to choose a suitable place away from here and
some of the men you trained by yourself. I only ask you not to take away my Crownsguards,
because I have the feeling that you will have your back well-guarded."

Silia took a few seconds to find again her power of speech. It took to her more time to work out what
he was asking. "Cor, Marshal, I'm honored by your trust, but..."

"But, what?"

"But I'd rather stay here," she dared to say, hitting the desk with the palm of her hand. "Things you'll
need to think about will increase even more now and Darius is gone. I want to stay in Orior with
you, Marshal."

He stared at her for a moment, drumming his fingers on the desk. She thought he would be pissed
off, and instead he sighed like an exasperated parent. "Grow up, Hartwood. I've just given you the
responsibility of a team. Men and women who will live or die according to the orders you will give
them."

"Is that supposed to convince me?" she objected.

"You're no longer a soldier," he went on, as if she hadn't spoken, "there's no longer an army, and
you can't just stay there forever with your mouth half open waiting for a higher to tell you what to
do. I will guide you from here, of course, but the team will account to you."

"But..." she tried to protest again.

"I don't need a deputy. I already have Dustin, Monica, others, to help me out. Darius and I have
known each other for almost twenty years, and you must not, nor can you, take his place. But you
can be one of my arms far from here."

Silia pursed her lips. "You can't give me the responsibility of a team. There were no intermediate
grades among the Kingsglaives, as you know. I am not capable."

This time Cor raised his voice. "Good. Since you're always waiting for orders and directives,
Hartwood, just to ignore them when you don't like them, this is an order. Obey, or pack your stuff
and get off my feet."

"You can't be serious."

"I am. I don't need you in Orior."

"Fine," she said, defiantly. That wasn't true. He needed every damn man able to handle a sword.
"Kick me out."

He sighed again. "Hartwood, don't be silly," he resumed, with softer voice, and reached out to touch
her hand. Silia had cleaned up in the Keep's hangar, but in the light of the neon she saw a halo of
orange blood on the back of her hand. It could have been hers, but it could also have been Darius'.
When she had made sure he was dead, if there was any need, she had gotten her hands dirty.

She had to appeal to all her self-control to keep herself from taking her hand away from his touch.
Yet she also wanted to turn it upside down and take his. If there was a man who shouldered all the
world's weights by himself, that was Cor Leonis.
"I saw you teach people to fight in the camp, I saw you give orders, and above all I saw people obey with confidence. At Insomnia you did so well that Dustin stepped aside and left the command to you, with excellent results. You are perfectly capable, Hartwood. And, even if it's none of my business, let me tell you the same words I said to Prince Noctis the night before he set sail for Altissia: I don't know what awaits us in the future, but there's nothing wrong with carving out moments of happiness in all this crap that surrounds us."

Only then, slowly, Cor withdrew his hand. From the way he did it, Silia had the sudden certainty that he too had been about to hold her.

"I don't want to hear another word of objection, Hartwood. Go to the others."

III

She found Gladio, Ignis and Prompto still awake, as she expected, sitting around a stove in one of the covered booths. With them were Dustin, Monica, Alexandra, Marvin, Adrian, August, Irwin and Devan – what remained of the whole Crownsguard, Silia almost forgot that in another life they had been Gladio's friends – Iris and Talcott. Iris was sitting next to her brother, but when she saw her she got up to make room for her.

"Stay, Iris," she said wearily. She had almost no more voice due to fatigue. She sat down heavily on the ground, hugged her knees and rested her forehead for a moment.

Monica came up with a towel. Silia felt herself almost faint with gratitude when she put it on her head. "We were told what happened. I'm sorry, Silia," she said, grieving, her hands resting on her. For a moment Silia thought she wanted to hug her, but she didn't; Monica was too discreet. "I had known Darius since he was a kid. He was a tough guy, but..." Her voice broke. "Gladio said you stayed with him until the very end. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything," she replied. "And thank you, but I'm fine. Really." She raised her head and rubbed the towel over her wet hair. "The Marshal wants to put up camps with the collaboration of Meldacio and entrust one to me. Tomorrow morning he will have a clearer picture and will talk to everyone."

"Camps?" Alexandra asked.

"Yeah," she replied, taking off her soggy shirt. "Camps like this, to train other people in combat and protect those who can't fight. Tomorrow morning the Marshal will summon us all to let us know what he has decided. It will be a long night for him."

"For us, too," Devan observed. "But you should rest. Dry off, eat something, and go to sleep. No offense, but you look like ghosts, the four of you."

"Perhaps we are." Ignis' voice seemed to come from beyond the grave. "Perhaps we never left the Zegnautus Keep."

"Iggy, please," Gladio snorted. "As if it wasn't depressing enough already."

"Say, how long have you not had a hot meal? It's not dinner time yet, but I can arrange you something to eat," Monica offered, standing up.

"I'll help you!" Iris also joined.

"And give Hartwood a drink. She looks like someone who needs a nip." Devan gave her such a friendly look that he caught her off guard. They had never loved each other much, but perhaps, after
all, the emergence of an apocalypse ends up nullifying aversion and dislikes.

"I need it, too." Irwin stood up. "I'm going and getting the bottles of gin I hid. The Marshal won't approve, but I guess we need it all."

"Yeah, we should all have a drop, in memory of ol' fag Darius Magnus," Marvin intervened. Monica and Dustin looked at him disapprovingly, and Prompto, Iris and Talcott snapped their heads in his direction. "Don't look at me like that," he justified himself. "Darius was a friend, he was a great fighter with brass ones, better than all of us on that front. I'm not denying there have been clashes between us in the past, but I respected him. I don't know if I would have had the guts to do what he did."

"He was a friend," Alexandra also said, and her voice broke. "And he would have kicked your ass hearing you talk about him like that. So go and get that gin, Irwin, let's have this drop to his memory, and then let's stop with soppiness."

"If you don't mind," Gladio said, getting up, "I'm going to call the Marshal too. I know he doesn't drink and he doesn't like others doing it, but perhaps on such an occasion he'll want to join us for a few minutes."

Silia imagined that he wanted to take the opportunity to exchange a word with Cor in private. They still had had no way. As he walked past her to go out, Gladio stopped in front of her, looked at her for a moment, and without warning he took off his jacket and threw it at her. "Silia, I've been wanting to tell you for a while, you should really do something about your habit of taking your clothes off in front of everyone."

"Is this really the time?" she lashed at him sourly, irritated by the general laughter that Gladio's remark aroused.

"Gladio, don't worry so much, I don't think there's anyone in Orior who hasn't seen Hartwood half naked yet," Marvin winked.

"You're a bunch of white-bread Crown citizens," Silia lashed at them. "On the front..."

"...on the front, finding yourself without clothes was the least of concerns. Sometimes we even found ourselves without guts," Adrian mocked her voice. "By the Six, we heard her rant against the volunteers for months repeating on the front this and on the front that. You chose such a Miss Congeniality as a girlfriend, Gladio. Only Darius could stand her."

Irwin laughed. "The only thing of the men Hartwood misses is the cock, so I'm sure at some point he fell in love."

"Nay," Silia contradicted him, forcing herself to joke despite the thought of Darius being a screwdriver stuck in her rib cage. "I tried to hit on him lots of times, but no use. I told him that in fact I didn't have a cock, but if he liked ass..."

"That's enough!" Monica's voice towered over hers. She flushed, plugging Talcott's ears. "You're worse than a bunch of foul-mouthed high school students. If the Marshal hears you..."

"I'm going to call him right away, so we finally stop with this barrack talk," Gladio warned them. He had definitely not appreciated the turn taken by the conversation after his innocent attempt to downplay a moment of tension. Silia, on the other hand, knew perfectly the vulgar and unpleasant humor that was unleashed among comrades in a moment of bitterness, especially if they had just lost a comrade.
Irwin leaned against the door of the barrack before going out himself. "Anyway, welcome back, Hartwood. I must admit we missed you, since the Marshal has stuck us with the training of those jerk-offs in your place these days."

Cor, a few minutes later, had returned with Gladio, and had joined their brief toast with a few words, only to return almost immediately to his pavilion. Silia, Gladio, Ignis and Prompto had strived to swallow what Monica and Iris had brought them – meat and vegetable soup with generous pieces of black bread – more to regain strength than to satisfy appetite. Monica was a good cook, but at that moment whatever Silia put in her mouth felt like water and cardboard.

Prompto's head dangled, Ignis was waxy, and even Gladio kept on blinking because of the sleepiness. It was half past 6 in the evening, so when they entered one of the two dorms, it was still empty. Prompto threw himself on the first cot he found, and August accompanied Ignis to another close by. Silia was looking for her place, if they hadn't already screwed it, when Gladio took her arm.

"Is there a quiet place where we can be alone?" he whispered in her ear. "But I warn you, I'm falling asleep."

"Good to know, 'cause I'm falling asleep too," she replied. "There's a covered, unused guard tower on the east side of the camp. No idea why hunters built it, since it overlooks the mountains and no dangers come from there. We use it as a warehouse. Occasionally I went there to be alone or to drink with Darius."

"Let's go with the turret, if it's dry."

They tried to move away discreetly, a difficult undertaking in a camp where, discreet, there were not even the latrines; rain and darkness at least gave them some cover, and they climbed up like two conspirators on the turret. It was dry, contrary to them, even if the drafts weren't forgiving. Trembling with cold and exhaustion, they stretched out on the floor and covered themselves with a tarpaulin retrieved from stock crates.

Despite being exhausted and both of them collapsing asleep a few minutes after lying down together, Silia came in and out of sleep, continuously, for hours. The weight of Gladio's arms on her shoulders and chest, his breath against the back of her neck, helped her to stay calm and to get rid of the remnants of nightmares that continued to assault her as soon as she fell asleep and from which she inevitably awoke trembling. She dreamed of Ardyn Izunia, dreamed of Darius, dreamed that Prince Noctis had turned into a daemon. She dreamed of herself turned into a daemon, intent on hunting the Prince in the corridors of the Zegnautus Keep – that had been a very close one. She dreamed of returning to Lucis and finding it an expanse of daemons with Cor, also infected, in the lead. She dreamed of a desolate Insomnia. She dreamed of bringing Gladio's gutted corpse through the battlefield on her shoulders, just as she had done with Hans'.

Even Gladio's sleep was agitated, and she wondered twice whether to wake him up. Was he dreaming of Prince Noctis? Or, like her, of the horrors they had seen in the Zegnautus Keep? The ones that would come?

"You awake?" he whispered to her at night, snatching her from an upset half-sleep. She was still shaking from yet another nightmare where Darius shot himself in the head.

"I am."
"You're shaking," he said, and tightened his grip on her chest. It wasn't because of the cold – it was warm under the blanket, with Gladio's huge body leaning against her back and legs, and just for that reason she hadn't slipped away from his grip to go and spend the night elsewhere instead of stubbornly pursuing that tormented sleep.

"Sorry," she whispered. "Did I wake you up?"

"No. I've been awake for a while. You ok?"

"I'm fine," she lied.

"You know, I was thinking this is the first time we've slept together. Actually, this is the first time I've ever slept with a woman."

"Are you kiddin' me?"

"No. I'd never stay to sleep by the others. Always thought that sleepin' with a woman is even more intimate than using the toilet in front of her with the door open."

She snorted a laugh, taking his hand. She intertwined her fingers with his. "Did you actually use the toilet in a girl's house with the door open?"

"Yup. One time. Didn't think about it. She closed the door saying that I sucked."

"Delicate thing. Did you get some rest?"

"Dunno. I guess not. I can't figure out what time it is. I feel like we laid down here five minutes ago. Everything hurts. But I'm not cold."

"It's at least five hours, actually. However we don't have to get up if we don't want to. It's still late at night."

He forced her to turn toward him. He touched her eyelashes, her cheekbone, her lips. "D'you want to talk? Or d'you want to go back to sleep?"

"Talking is better."

"Good. D'you want to talk about Darius?"

His name brought to her mind splinters of that night's dreams. Not your head man, we're not in a movie. If your hand shakes at the last moment, it's an agony, even if I'm here. She had guided Darius' hand and brought the barrel of the gun to his mouth. They had looked at each other knowing perfectly that it was an opportunity for a last two-way joke they wouldn't have given a voice to. That was not just a dream. It had really happened.

"No," she replied, trying to ignore the screwdriver in her chest. "D'you want to talk about Prince Noctis?"

"No," he admitted. "Fine. Let's talk about the near future. Have you thought about what Cor told you?"

"About the camp?"

"About the camp."

"I was thinking of calling Cid Sophiar by radio and ask him if I can make camp in Hammerhead. It's
a good location and close to Insomnia. And it's the only way he and Cindy have to keep the workshop open there."

"Seems a great idea to me. You know I'll come with you, don't you?"

"I didn't want to ask you."

"Why on earth? Where else should I go?"

"Dunno. You can stay here. I would have, off the records. I almost fought with Cor about that."

"If Cor wants to spread Lucis out of hunter camps, no sense we all stay here, you know. Why shouldn't I come to Hammerhead with you?"

"You know why."

"No, I don't. Don't tell me again things haven't changed. Everything has changed, again."

"Thought we would never be able to be together."

"We're already together."

"You understand what I mean. To physically stay together. Being close. See each other."

"Living together or something like that, d'you mean?"

She nodded. "With what's happened, with what's coming, it seems to me as..."

"As if we should feel guilty about having the opportunity to do so."

"Exactly."

"I feel that way, too. There was Noctis. There is still Noctis, I mean, he's not dead and will return, but for now there's nothing that stops us from being together the way you mean."

Silia didn't answer.

"I've been thinking about it for hours since we left Zegnautus."

"And...?"

"And even if this is the worst time to ask you: will you marry me?"

She stiffened. "Gladio, don't you think it's a bit too much?"

"Why?"

"Because it's all a mess, from now on. And when Prince Noctis will come back..."

"It's already all a mess," he interrupted her. "And when Noctis comes back he'll have a married Sworn Shield. That won't stop me from fulfilling my duties, and not even yours."

"You say so," she deluded him. "And then," she tried again, "maybe we find out we aren't right together."

"I've already seen the worst of you in Insomnia."
"You really think so? We didn't live together in Insomnia. We may not be able to stand side by side without fighting."

"Good," he replied, kissing her. It was the first time since that night in Cape Caem. She didn't believe it would happen again. "I love fighting with you. Will you say yes, then?"

"No," she replied, kissing him again.

"Remember, I've already warned you I'll ask you every day until you say yes."

"Do as you wish. D'you think Ignis and Prompto will come with us?"

"I'm pretty sure. You still want to talk?" he asked, breathless, his hands sliding under her shirt.

"No," she smiled, unlacing his belt.

"You want to sleep, then?"

"No. I think I'm pretty awake now. But didn't you say everything hurts?"

Gladio arched his pelvis. He was pretty awake, too. "Now that you've unlaced my belt, there's something that hurts less."

IV

Cor Leonis' speech, which was held while all those present at Orior crowded around his pavilion, was followed by an unsuspected as well as grave silence. No manifestation of panic or frustration, even among civilian volunteers.

"Now you know all there is to know," the Marshal concluded, his voice not half a tone lower than when he had begun to speak, almost one hour before. The only thing he had overlooked was Ardyn Izunia's supernatural nature, but otherwise he hadn't hidden anything from them, not even what had happened to Prince Noctis. "I will decide in the coming days who to entrust the camps to and where. Each of you will be free to comply with my provisions or to refuse; this is not a military dictatorship.

So much for each of us being free to comply with his provisions or to refuse. He had thrown on her the responsibility of a camp with the delicacy of a Jotun. But she understood why he had said it – people under his orders would probably have had to account to Meldacio members and vice versa, depending on the composition of the camps. Joining forces would inevitably lead to a reshuffling of roles, resources and responsibilities. A huge mess.

"It will take weeks to fine-tune everything, so I demand the full cooperation of all of you. I don't want to dishearten you, but I reiterate again the concept: the contagion will spread exponentially, and there is no cure. We must all maintain the highest degree of attention and do what must be done. Don't get in touch with anyone you're not sure of. Almost all the people capable of fighting are gathered in Orior at this moment. If you bring the Scourge here, it's the end. When King Noctis Lucis Caelum returns, there will be no one to reign over."

Thank the Six he didn't want to dishearten them, Silia thought, looking around. Gladio, Prompto, Ignis, Iris and Talcott were next to her. They all looked at the Marshal, focused. They had no way of knowing to whom Bahamut, apart from her, had extended his blessing, nor was she sure that she
would be worthy of it forever. Everyone should have looked at themselves against the Scourge.

"The first wave will be the worst. Gralea is already invaded, and the Scourge is spreading. By now it must be already in Tenebrae, and soon it will reach Lucis, then Accordo and the other islands. After the first wave, which will decimate the least resistant, it will have just begun. We won't be able to avoid killing the daemons, and every daemon we'll kill could be the one that infects us."

"I am not a biologist, but it's easy to foresee what will happen: when darkness is complete, many animal and plant species will become extinct. We will have to organize ourselves to provide for the sustenance of all. The light is the only thing that keeps the daemons away, so keeping the electricity grid active will be the priority."

Silia noticed that Talcott was quivering. She put her hands on his shoulders and held them there without speaking. At dawn – at the time when dawn should have been – she and Gladio had woken Ignis and Prompto to tell them about Hammerhead. Prompto, as Gladio thought, had almost not let him finish and had said there was no place where he wished more to settle – only then did Silia understand some Gladio's jokes about Cid's niece. Ignis, on the other hand, had tried to hold back, claiming he wouldn't be able to give them active support in fighting, at least for the time being. Gladio and Prompto had protested indignantly; she had been more prosaic, reminding him that not only armed arms were needed, but also responsible and organized people to help her with the arrangement of things, and that she couldn't think of a better person than someone who had looked after the Prince of Insomnia for more than fifteen years. As for the fighting, Hammerhead would certainly have been less chaotic than Orior, if he thought to settle there, and he would have been able to undertake a focused training course. Unless, she had concluded, you have other plans with Highwind. I think she will find Hammerhead quite easily, even though the Six know how much I wish she didn't. Ignis had accepted, not before tightening his lips in an annoyed grimace at the laughter that her statement had aroused in Prompto and Gladio.

Then it had been Iris' and Talcott's turn: Gladio, he had told her, had no intention of delegating again the custody of his sister to someone else, least of all to Cor Leonis, whose concerns would have multiplied. Silia had replied that before announcing to the kids – once again in three months – they would have been taken from one place to another, he should at least ask them what they wished to do. Gladio had replied he saw no reason why his sister should stay in Orior when she could go with him. Silia had retorted that wasn't the point, and anyway his sister was already fifteen and it was time for her to start making decisions for herself. Ignis, announcing himself as a future peacemaker, had said that Iris, in fact, was old enough to decide, that in Orior she would be equally safe if not more, and that he was certain that if Gladio had sincerely explained to her that he wanted to keep her safe personally, she would understand. It proved unnecessary to ask anything; apparently, Iris had already set her mind, namely, she wouldn't accept again that Gladio left her somewhere, and she wanted to train with Silia, a resolution more than shared by Talcott. All settled down without tragedies, then. Silia only had to choose which of her guys she would take with her – no more than two or three, for the time being.

"I hope I answered all your questions in advance, because I won't have time to listen to them. The members of the Crownsguard and Silia Hartwood are as informed as I am and are available to you. I am aware that many of you have families far from here but – should it be necessary to stress the point – you won't help anyone by rushing to reach them. What you have heard today will be spread in every corner of Lucis, and instructions will be sent to every town, village or outpost. For the last time: don't give up hope. Keeping a cool head will be essential."

Silence melted like snow in the sun when Cor, without another word, turned and went back to his pavilion, followed by Dustin and Monica. Even then there was no real display of panic – all those people were in a military camp and not elsewhere for a reason – but many of them were predictably
worried about relatives and friends, as the Marshal had supposed. The glue that had held them together – Prince Noctis and the hope of rebuilding the kingdom of Lucis – was now put to the test for the first time after the fall of Insomnia. Some would have stayed in Orior, others would have moved to the shade of the new camps, and certainly everyone would have followed the provisions of Cor Leonis and the Meldacio, but it was clear they would do it because they had no choice, not for faith.

"They don't believe it," Iris whispered, demoralized, next to her. "They don't believe Noctis will return."

"It doesn't matter," she replied quietly, continuing to hold Talcott's shoulders. "As long as they do what they have to do. Iris, Talcott, let's go to the radio station and call Cid before Cor seals himself again there. Then we'll show the camp to Gladio, Ignis and Prompto."

"Hartwood, ma'am?"

They couldn't cut the crowd. People still had so many questions, Cor had just informed everyone she had answers, and they found themselves surrounded. A wall of demoralized and worried familiar faces. They had good reasons. Silia couldn't clearly distinguish a single sentence among their crossed voices, but listening wasn't necessary to suppose. She let go of Talcott's shoulders, raised her arms, and commanded them to calm down.

"Enough. Stop honking like a Cockatrice's roost," she snapped, looking around. There were Tina, Colby, Marc, Jenkins in the front row – she didn't see Kamal – and at least a dozen other people flocked to talk to her. "You heard the Marshal. Keeping a cool head will be essential. What the fuck is it still not clear to you after he talked for almost an hour?"

"Boss, what happened to Magnus?"

Cor hadn't indulged on Darius' death, but that hadn't surprised her. The wound was still too fresh, and there was no reason to go into details – with some exceptions Darius, unlike her, had never truly grouped with the people at the camp. "The Marshal said it, didn't he?" she replied to Tina. "He's dead. What d'you care about how? He died as he always lived, with his balls in their place. Perhaps one day someone will write his name on a memorial stele, but now is not the time."

Tina startled at her abrupt reply as if she had slapped her face.

"Any more useless questions?" she asked.

"Will Niffs come to take refuge in Lucis?" a middle-aged hunter who occasionally showed up at the trainings asked, without even trying to hide his contempt. Someone around them muttered an assent.

"It's already happening, and we can't do anything about it. The Marshal also said this: don't take up arms against the Imperial officers left here, if they're not up to fight. But, if it was not clear enough, let me explain better: if I hear that any of you dares to harm a hair to a Niff who is not up to fight, even worse, a civilian came from overseas, I'll rip your ass with my bare hands." She had no authority, because the hunters accounted to Meldacio and the others to Cor Leonis, but she said it anyway. "Get it into your head, the war is over. Aldercap died, Besithia died, Izunia disappeared after turning against Niflheim. If this thing goes on for long, so few will be left of humanity that every life will be precious. And even if this wasn't the case, civilians have nothing to do with it. Is this clear, Humbert?"

Humbert opened his mouth indignantly, probably to argue, but Silia anticipated him. "Humbert, I warn you, another word about it and I'll kick your ass. Don't make me fight with the Marshal. It's not
the day."

Humbert closed it.

"So, is this clear? I didn't hear you."

"Yessir," he replied, lowering his head.

"Now I heard you." She looked at the faces around her, looking for defiant expressions. She found none. Only concern, perplexity, anguish. "Any more useless questions?" she repeated again.

"Can I come with you?" Colby stepped forward.

"I had come to ask you the same," Marc said, too.

Other people joined them. Apparently word got out she would lead a team. They wouldn't let her go so easily. "I haven't decided yet," she tried to dissuade them.

"Then you could take me with you," Colby repeated. "I've made lots of progress, Boss."

"True, but..."

"You will need a hunter, no offense, Boss," Indira said, smiling. "Not some young probie who can hardly hold a sword."

"You account to Meldacio, Indira," Silia replied.

"Madame Aubumtrie won't forbid me to follow you, if you say yes."

"What's this, a competition?" Marc stepped forward, shoving Indira.

"Jeez, guys, give her rest." Jenkins, a cigarette between his lips and his hands in his pockets, quelled them. "She saw hell in Niflheim. And Magnus died. Show some respect."

Everybody fell silent, looking down. She was about to say that wasn't necessary, but Kat, the youngest among her guys, spoke in a soft voice.

"I'm damn scared. The Marshal never said the word 'doomsday' but that's what he meant, didn't he?"

They were all staring at her now. Silia sighed, rubbing her chin and finding her fingers stained with blood. She hadn't rested so much that night and was still tired. Every single muscle still hurt, and Gladio had inadvertently reopened her lip split by Darius' punch. That fucking idiot had almost broken her tooth. The screwdriver between her ribs turned on itself again.

"Silia, you all right?"

Silia jumped when Gladio touched her shoulder. That was the maximum she could allow him in front of her guys. She couldn't take them all with her, but until she left Orior she wouldn't have turned her back on anyone who came for her advice, encouragement or reassurance. And she would have shown herself no less than ironbound with them.

"Yeah. Go ahead with Iris and Talcott. I'll join you in a little while. Perhaps."

Chapter End Notes
"Mutatis mutandis" > literally, "once the necessary changes have been made"
Chapter Summary

While Gladio, Ignis and Prompto are trying to cope with again a substantial change in their lives, Silia has to face a shocking discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

44

Meliora spero sequorque

I

Gladio found Silia in the turret where they had slept – more or less – the previous night. She was laying on her back on the damp planks of the floor, her arms spread, her eyes closed. He thought he'd never seen her in such a relaxed state, and he stayed on the ladder for a while, his elbows on the trapdoor frame, watching her.

"I shouldn't have stopped," she said, without opening her eyes. The ladder creaked badly; no surprise she had heard him come up, and no one in Orior, from what he had seen, weighed as much as he did.

"Why?"

"My muscles are so numb I feel I'm in rigor mortis."

Gladio jumped up and joined her, kneeling at her side. He smiled. It was odd, looking for her and finding her, having something to tell her and telling her, wanting to simply look at her and looking at her. And it was even odder embracing the idea that he could do it the next day, and the one after that, as long as luck assisted them and they stayed alive. "What muscles?"

"All of them. If you want to give me a massage, you could start with the only calf I've left."

"It depends."

"On what?"

"Will you repay me?"

"Mh. Maybe."

Gladio snorted a laugh. "I'll take it as good." He grabbed her ankle, lifted it, and started massaging. Silia's left leg, like the rest of her body, was a bundle of unsuspected muscles, and they were all as hard as marble. He could believe they hurt. He didn't feel different, after fighting almost incessantly in Niflheim. "Did I wake you up?"

"I wasn't sleeping. I've been hiding."
Too bad she was wearing a pair of black leather shorts, or he would have had the excuse to undress her. He went up to gently squeeze her calf, rubbing it with delicate upward movements, firmly pressing where he sensed more tension. "How many more of your guys have come looking for you?"

"All those I've trained regularly and don't hate me and don't account to Meldacio, and even someone who should account to Meldacio. In fact, I could spare myself the effort of hiding. But you never know. Someone might think of a round two."

"It's hard to be popular, huh?"

"It's not about that," she said with a grimace. She opened her eyes. "I don't know how to explain. Cor Leonis is their lighthouse right now. But until yesterday it was just theirs. Now everyone has understood he'll become responsible for almost everything. There're other people who matter, of course; Cassandra Gavril in Lestallum who'll have the upper hand because of the Exineris, Madame Auburnbrie who's the leader of the hunters, but Cor Leonis is the Marshal who held the resistance against Niflheim. So they're looking for a more accessible figure to refer to for questions and doubts. Moreover, Cor hasn't yet established how many camps there will be and to whom entrust them, but it has been rumored that I'll lead one."

Silia was playing coy, because all day long Gladio had done nothing but turn his head around when he heard a voice mention her, something he wasn't used to. There was talk about her return to Orior and her journey in Niflheim with Darius, about whom she would take with her, whether she would allow the chosen ones to take their families, where she would settle. No wonder she had squabbled with Cor because she wanted to stay; those people with whom she had lived side by side for almost three months held her in high esteem. Orior had become her home.

Cor had begun to summon the people to whom he would entrust the camps. He hadn't asked them – Gladio, Ignis and Prompto – and he wouldn't do so, or so he had said when Gladio had invited him to join them in raising a glass to Darius; You will need freedom of maneuvering when the Prince returns. Moreover, he had added, I suppose you'll want to stay with Hartwood, and people can't account to two leaders of equal rank. That was the first time he'd spoken openly of their relationship. Gladio had only been able to nod.

He didn't say it, but I'll have to account to Silia myself, only then he did realize. That would be messy. Until that moment he had only had to account to two people – his father and Cor Leonis, and the King through a third party. Since he had left Insomnia, not even them. He lifted Silia's leg and rested her bare foot on his shoulder to gently massage the ligaments behind her knee. "You put up a nice place here. Nothing is missing: an infirmary with a doctor, a gunsmith, a training field, a local radio. I had two words with my old mates from the Guard, but not as much as I'd have liked. Cor started giving directions for the camps, and they're all very tense. None of them is dying to have such a responsibility, but nobody wants to refuse."

"Don't tell me," she replied.

"I also talked to David Auburnbrie, Madame Ezma's son. Last time we met, we tracked him in the midst of Malmalam Thicket, just before leaving for Altissia. The guy gets into trouble quite often, seems to me."

"Oh, Dave." Silia snorted a chuckle. "That's because he always struggles to lend a hand to everyone and ends up needing help himself. He'd show up here sometimes, partly to tell Ezma how the Marshal is doing, partly because he enjoys Orior. Not really sure he's the best out there, but he's a good fellow, and everybody likes him. I met his mother at the Meldacio HQ. She's a though-ass woman. Must have broken lots of bones in her day, and even now, you should see how she stands
Gladio had no doubts. "We met her, too. I picture you like this, as an old woman, supervising everyone from a straw chair in a porch full of flowers, but barking orders left and right and swinging a cane stick."

He thought she would get pissed off, instead she laughed. A beautiful sound he hadn't heard in so long that it stirred his guts. "What about you? Where will you be?"

For the first time since he was in Accordo, Gladio found out he was still able to fantasize. "Me? Let me think. Hunting, with a big dog like Umbra."

"Won't you be Marshal of the Crownguard?"

"And how am I supposed to do that? Cor will never die or retire." She laughed again, and he joined. He loved to be able to make her laugh. He loved to be able to touch her like that, while she was laying on her back. To make her melt in his hands. "All this," he went on, "in the suburbs of Insomnia, in a beautiful wooden house in the outskirts, like the one in Cape Caem. Indeed, no. We'll stay in Cape Caem. By the sea."

"Make up your mind."

"I'll make up my mind. There'll be plenty of time." Meanwhile, he had reached her thigh and slowed the pace of his massage. Silia's muscles would benefit less, but perhaps he would achieve another kind of effect. "Speaking of the sea, I read the special edition of Meteor Publishing. It pisses me off, having to admit it, but that idiot Ghiranze did a good job. He was able to tell clearly and linearly everything has happened from the fall of Insomnia till the appearance of Leviathan in Altissia."

"Old stuff already," she replied, getting serious. She closed her eyes again. "I mentioned to Cor I'll try to get in touch with Ghiranze to update him in detail. The news we have reported from Gralea is already bouncing from one end of Eos to the other, but the Meteor will help us make everything more official. People love print media. They'll be more confident if they read the Prince is alive."

"When are we going to Hammerhead, Boss?" Gladio couldn't wait to get a taste of that future, even if it was a single-place tent. Actually, as he hadn't told Silia the day before, he felt a sense of guilty happiness; towards Silia, because he kept on unconsciously turning around to look for Noctis, jerking every time he'd see someone who distantly resembled him; towards Noctis, because while he was massaging her woman's leg he didn't have the faintest idea about how he was – was he sleeping somehow? Was he suffering? Was he scared?

"Next week. I told Cid as well. First, let's see how things play out, what news is coming. And I'll put together with Ignis a list of things we need to get. Weapons. Equipment. Plus, I still have to decide which unfortunate guys I'll take with me."

From her tensor muscle, Gladio moved to the sartorius, and then to the long adductor, just below her groin. "Troubles in choosing?"

Silia nodded. "Gladio, they will account to me. What if I got them killed?"

He tilted his head to kiss her ankle. "You won't get anyone killed. I'll be there to take a look in on them, too."

"But the responsibility will be mine. That's why I haven't decided yet. I would like to take away someone who already knows how to look after himself, but I can't take good men and leave all the newbies to others. There already will be me, you and Prompto to fight properly in Hammerhead."
And Ignis, in a short time."

"D'you really believe it?"

"I really believe it. Ignis is perfectly trained, and the ability to react of a good fighter comes only partially from his sight, as you know. If we reacted to the dangers only as we see them, we would all be dead. He only needs to reset his combat attitude. It will take time, I don't say no, but not so much as you think. Paradoxically, all the small tasks of everyday life will be harder for him. But don't pity him too much. When the sun no longer rises and we're all forced to live under electric light, he will hardly notice it."

Gladio stifled a frustrated groan. That thought almost succeeded in softening his erection. Almost. He slipped his fingers under the leather of her shorts. Silia never wore underpants, and this time was no different.

"Gladio, I came here to think," she complained, but instead of escaping she arched even further, planting her heel in his trapezium and leaning her artificial foot on his other shoulder.

He lowered the zipper of her shorts. "Well, you'll think better in ten minutes or so."

II

Less than ten minutes or so later, the semi-rusted ladder creaked again. The turret was getting damn crowded. Silia pushed Gladio away and rolled over to retrieve her shorts.

"Damn it," he complained, pulling himself up to put his pants back on. "Thought you said no one ever comes here."

"It used to be like that." She put on her boots and began to tie them. The last thing she wanted, just over 24 hours from her return to Orior, was to get caught half-naked with Gladio Amicitia between her legs. If it was one of her guys who had come to bust her balls to convince her to be taken to Hammerhead, she'd send him the way he had come without using the ladder.

"Got a bad feeling," Gladio said, hoarse, his breath still short.

"What?" Silia asked, standing up.

"That we'll have to make it this way very often."

"Story of my life, man."

It wasn't one of her guys. It was Dustin Ackers himself, she saw looking out from the trapdoor. The man stopped halfway down the ladder.

Dustin's face was grave, stiff. "I apologize to bother you, Silia, but it's quite urgent."

"You aren't bothering me," she lied. "Dustin, did something happen?"

"Yes. No. Not really. You should come to the Marshal." His tone was grim. "Only you, Silia, if you don't mind," he added, as if he knew perfectly that she wasn't alone.

"I'm going down immediately," she said, alarmed, to him and to Gladio. To not waste any more time, she let herself slide down the trapdoor, landing crouched on the damp ground. Without waiting for Dustin, she headed directly to Cor's pavilion, and when she arrived she found Monica on guard.

Monica. On guard. There was never anyone on guard at the Marshal's tent. The Marshal didn't need
anyone to guard his tent.

"Go in, Silia," she said to her, without a greeting, and pushed aside the curtains just enough to let her pass, not before making sure no one was browsing. Silia entered.

The first thing she noticed was that Cor wasn't alone. A stocky man, not too tall, whose appearance she couldn't recognize, was sitting in front of the Marshal's desk, his back to her. The second was that Cor had a terrible expression. A lethal mix of gravity, anger and perplexity that she had rarely seen in his face.

When Cor looked at her, the man turned back, and Silia's mouth went dry as if she had never drunk in her life.

"Oh, by the Six. Libertus," she whispered. He was thinner, and had cut his hair, but it was him. "What the fuck...?"

Libertus startled, not less surprised than she was. "Silia?"

Before she could pounce on him, Cor stood up and slammed both his hands on the desk. "Hartwood, stop."

"Why on earth?" Silia asked, restraining herself. "I want to smash his face, since he dared to show it."

"Calm down in my pavilion," he said sharply. "Sit down like a civilized person and listen to everything you need to know."

Silia paid no attention to him. "What the fuck are you doing here?" she repeated, in a lower voice. "You helped the Niffs turn off the Wall. I was about to blow up because of your fucking bombs."

"Hartwood, last warning," Cor admonished her. "Mind your tone, or get out of here."

Outraged, Silia folded her arms tightly. She looked away from Libertus, otherwise she would've jumped on him, and forced herself to sit as far away from him as possible, not before pulling a cigarette out of her pocket. She lit it, and as far as she remembered, it was the first time she did it under the Marshal's pavilion. Cor grimaced, but didn't comment.

Libertus didn't seem impressed by her outburst of anger. His hands quietly resting on his knees, he even dared to smile. "I didn't think I'd see you here, Silia."

"I could say the same." Her voice was a hiss. "That's the reason for all this secrecy. If it's known that, sitting here, there's the Glaive who actually allowed the Imperials to enter Insomnia... Where have you been hiding for all these months, Libertus?"

"Hartwood," Cor interrupted her again. She had become accustomed to his calls to order, but in all those months he had never reprimanded her with so much perseverance. "I didn't call you here to interrogate him, so don't start a barrage of questions and just listen. Ostium is not the last one besides you."

The sins of the Kingsglaives have been redeemed. The Draconian has looked into your hearts and gives you his favor again. The Glacian wasn't just talking about her. There were other Kingsglaives still alive.

Her cigarette fell out. It was one of the last, and so she leaned down to take it despite her hands trembling. She tried to calm down, to keep in mind where and with whom she was, and managed to
pinch it between her fingers and put it back in her mouth.

"Who?" she managed to ask.


She believed she hadn't understood. "Balthier?!"

"Not so many," Cor agreed, "but they are six other perfectly trained people like you, Hartwood. At this moment, compared to the forces we can count on and with the times approaching, it's almost an army."

"Yeah, an army," Silia replied dryly. "And is it good or bad news?"

"We'll find out."

"Where the fuck have you been so far? Thought I was the last one. If none of the others was involved in Drautos' betrayal, why did they wait three months to give news?" She blinked, then asked it. She didn't want to believe that the Glacian had deigned a traitor of her presence. "You received a visit from the High Messenger, didn't you?"

"You too, then? I supposed it. She told us where to find Marshal Leonis. How long have you been here, Silia?"

"Since May 19," she replied. "Instead of hiding, I came and look for him to do something, even without a divine intervention. But I can understand you, Libertus, I didn't place any bombs at the Citadel."

"It wasn't me," Libertus protested. "Even if I take full responsibility for it."

Cor gestured wearily with his hand. "Ostium, start again from the beginning. Maybe this could be the time when we can finally put the pieces back together about what happened to Insomnia." He looked away. "Not that it's that important now."

Libertus sighed. "First of all," he began, "I knew nothing of the Captain's double betrayal until the end. I had no idea. The days before the fall of Insomnia, I joined a group of Lucian rebels."

"What the fuck are you saying?" Silia snapped again, but immediately lowered her voice, or this time the Marshal would have kicked her ass out. "The rebels were with Glaucia!"

"True," Libertus confirmed. "But I didn't know it, nor did I know that Glaucia was Captain Drautos and that other Glaives were aware of it. I deserted by myself, I did it publicly, when they brought Crowe's corpse back into the city, and I joined the Lucian rebels. They said they wanted to sabotage the treaty signing ceremony. Whatever the other Glaives planned, incited by the Captain, I knew nothing about it. You have my word."

That, Silia could believe. Libertus wasn't particularly valued by the Captain, so he must have been manipulated without his knowledge.

"So," the Marshal deduced, "there was a third party complicit in Niflheim which contributed to the fall of Insomnia and which however wasn't directly related to the Kingsglaives' betrayal. Ostium, what happened in the days immediately before the attack?"

"The treaty with Niflheim was publicly announced on May 10. We, the Kingsglaives, after ten years
of being killed by the Imperials, learned it from the TV, along with the rest of the ordinary crown citizens."

"It was your Captain's idea," Cor said. "Not the King's or the Council's. Now it's not difficult to imagine the reasons. He wanted to incite as many Glaives as possible against the Kingdom."

"I couldn't believe it. We were almost all from the provinces, some of us still had families there, and those families would have passed under the Imperial control, yielded by the same King we were fighting for. Suddenly, from military elite we had become wastepaper. Yeah, I deserted," Libertus admitted, "and I would do it again, under the same circumstances, but, for the Astrals' sake, I'd never have collaborated with Niflheim. On the contrary, I wanted to keep on fighting the Empire alongside the rebels, because they convinced me that was their purpose, so I gave them my high-level pass for the Citadel. I didn't want Crowe's death to be in vain."

At least about this part he's telling the truth. He would never have killed Crowe, nor helped those who had killed her. "Crowe is the Glaive who had to escort Princess Lunafreya to Altissia," Silia explained to the Marshal, and suddenly realized that almost every word she spoke had stopped having a meaning: Crowe was dead, the Kingsglaives didn't exist anymore, Princess Lunafreya had been killed by Ardyn Izunia, and Altissia was destroyed. "She was killed by betrayal of her own comrades. I'm sorry for Crowe, Libertus. She was a good girl. But she wasn't the only one, even though she was the first."

I'm sorry for Crowe, especially since I had to be in her place. Who knows why Marius had said it before they fought in the Citadel. Perhaps he had wanted to humiliate her. Or perhaps it was a way to suggest he had tried to protect her one last time. She would have never known it, as she would have never known what would have happened if he hadn't done so. She would have died. Or she would have survived and known about the treason of some Glaives.

"The Captain said that probably Niflheim's hand was behind her death."

"Nyx believed it too, but he had doubts about everything else." Silia threw the cigarette to the ground and crumpled it under the heel of her boot. The conversation with Nyx in the rain, while he was clenching all of Crowe's possessions seemed centuries away. "You were too out of mind to think clearly, in those days, but Nyx came to talk to me about his suspicions. He believed there was a mole at the Citadel who had informed the Empire that the Prince's wedding would be held in Altissia and that a Kingsglaive had been sent to escort Her Grace Lunafreya there. He was right. But he certainly didn't imagine that the mole was our Captain and that Crowe's killers were other Glaives."

Libertus rubbed his temples. "I was such an idiot. The rebels had made arrangements with the Empire. Glauca had promised he would deliver Insomnia to them. I didn't know it, I swear. They manipulated me. There are no justifications for my actions, and I'm ready to answer for them, but I want you to know at least this. I didn't even know about the kidnapping of the Princess. It was a way to ward off from the Citadel the Glaives who remained faithful to the King, as well as to get rid of Her Grace. It worked. When I realized what I had done..." His voice broke. "I tried to make amends. I joined Nyx and Princess Lunafreya and unmasked Lazarus and the Captain. Lazarus, can you believe it? We had known each other for twenty years."

Silia could believe it. Even though Marius had become an asshole, she still couldn't believe he had come to the side of the Niffs, not even now that she had known of his son Luc. And that conversation between Marius and Luche she had eavesdropped... if she had asked any more questions, if she had insisted with Nyx, if she had held Marius in her apartment to make him talk...

Too many 'ifs'. Too many 'who knows'. It doesn't matter anymore.
"Tell me, Silia, why weren't you on that airship?"

"I convinced Nyx to let me go to the Shrine. Something didn't smell right to me. Sarah, Legato, Sam and Caesar wanted to follow me. Marius Gaunt, Chad Norton, Amber Nesrin and Aron Kitz were waiting for us there. I have no idea if they personally placed the bombs or if Drautos, alerted by Nyx, sent them to stop us from defusing them. The fact is that my comrades died, that the bombs exploded, and that the Crystal was stolen. How on earth did Nyx use the ring, by the way?"

"I have no idea," he admitted. "I know what I saw: that he wore it and acquired exceptional power. I categorically exclude that Nyx could have had only one drop of royal blood. Nyx told me to take the Princess away, safe. Before leaving, I told him I would wait for him at Galahd... but we never met again."

"The Ring," Cor Leonis nodded. "It lent him its power but required a sacrifice."

Libertus lowered his head. "Guessed it. I had no hope of seeing him again, after so long time, but..."

Silia pulled that thought away from her mind. "So," she concluded, "you stayed hidden in Galahd until the High Messenger arrived. What did she tell you?"

Libertus licked his lips. "That the Prince has been incorporated into the Crystal to gather enough power to end the Long Night. That now that there's no longer an Oracle, the Scourge will spread uncontrollably, and that the sins of the Kingsglaives have been redeemed. We have the Draconian's favor again, as long as we use the power we have left to protect the survivors. We won't be affected by the Scourge."

"Nothing more?" Cor asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me the rest."

Cor glanced at her. "A lot has happened in recent months, Ostium, and it would take too long to tell you about it now. Suffice it to say that soon most of humanity will be changed into daemons, creatures that hunt and crave those who have remained human. The miasma will darken the sun more and more, until there is no more light. The world as we know it will no longer exist."

Libertus watched him in amazement. "And all this... is my fault?"

"Don't have such a high opinion of yourself," Cor deluded him, shaking his head. "You were just a tiny plug, an unaware piece. Insomnia fell that day, May 16, thanks to you too, but your contribution was a drop. The city would have fallen anyway; the King no longer had the strength to keep the Wall erected. That's the reason for his desperate attempt to save Insomnia at the expense of the provinces. How many times, Libertus, have you been forced to choose between losing a comrade and saving more men? Even Niflheim, however, was just an unaware pawn of something much older and more dangerous. That, Ostium, doesn't relieve you of your betrayal. You broke a sacred oath, serving your King and your Kingdom to the best of your strength. Others, in similar circumstances, have continued to do so. Even after the King had died."

Libertus had moist but determined eyes. "Marshal," he whispered, "I understand that perfectly. Do what you think is right."

Cor Leonis straightened and looked at her. Silia, that day in Insomnia, had hated Marius with a fierce hatred. For his betrayal, for the King, for the death of his massacred comrades. If she had met Libertus with the knowledge of what he had done, days after the attack, she would have slaughtered him without remorse with the same feelings, but now she understood what Cor meant: they were all
bishops, knights and pawns of a perverse and abnormal chess game. All of them had been deceived and manipulated, some more, some less. Now that she saw the whole chess board, and not just the neighboring squares, it all seemed much less important. Lucis, Niflheim, Tenebrae, Accordo: names, only names of places that no longer existed. Moreover, even if human justice had wanted to rage on Libertus, the divine one, who knows for what reason, had rehabilitated the Kingsglaives' faults. The Glacial had showed herself to Libertus.

"Hartwood?" Cor asked.

"Why are you asking me?" she wanted to know.

"Because I was the Marshal of the Crownsguard and Libertus Ostium has betrayed the King and the Kingdom of Lucis, so it's my right and duty to judge him. But before that, he has betrayed the Kingsglaive army, so it's your right and duty to judge him as well."

Silia shrugged. "The Six have already judged him, so it's not up to me or you to put him to death. The Glacial has graciously informed us with her polished language that in order to deserve the blessing of Bahamut we must continue to work our ass off. Libertus has been hiding like a rat for months. It's time he works to contain the damage he caused. But you had already decided, right, Marshal?"

Cor didn't answer. He turned back to Libertus. "If you want to collaborate with us, stay at the camp. We'll find something to do for you and the others."

Libertus let his hands slide down to his knees and lowered his head. "Thank you, Marshal Leonis. I will do what I can."

"Hartwood, Ostium said the other Kingsglaives will arrive in the coming days. I would like you to postpone your departure to meet them."

Silia nodded slowly. "I'd have asked you myself, Cor... Marshal," she corrected herself. Apart from Balth, she didn't know any of the surviving Glaives so well. Elea and Tabul were teaming up with Nyx and Libertus. Delilah was in Squad 2. Luka in the 1. Sadda in the 3. Miles in Squad 4, the same as Marius. "I want to talk to them. I want to look at their faces and ask them why they didn't show up before. Can I tell Gladio, Ignis and Prompto about this conversation, Marshal? Or do you prefer to do it by yourself?"

"Go ahead," he said. "But beware of those who listen, for now. I don't want fights at the camp, Hartwood. I don't want Ostium to be slaughtered while he sleeps, and I don't want to have to put to death one or more of my men for doing it."

Silia nodded and started to leave. "Silia," Libertus stopped her. He smiled, seemingly relieved. "I'm glad you're still alive. I'm sorry for your comrades. Caesar, in the last months before returning to Insomnia, had been assigned to my squad. He was a good mate, skillful and brave. He was twenty-three, wasn't he? The same age as Crowe. Can you find some time to have a word with me before the others arrive? The two of us alone?"

Silia froze in the doorway. She came back, joined Libertus, and punched him in his face. She didn't know if she had moved too fast for both of them, or if Cor and Libertus himself didn't even try to stop her. But then Cor was behind her and caught her wrists in an iron grip.

"Hartwood," he said, but his voice was almost sweet, not an order. "That's enough."

But she had no intention of raging on Libertus again. When Cor saw she wasn't resisting, he let go of
her hand.

"No, Libertus," she uttered quietly, as if between her former comrade's question and her answer, nothing had happened. Her punch hadn't been strong, Libertus' chair hadn't even tipped over. "I don't have time, and I don't want to talk to you. I agree with everything the Marshal has said and decided but, for the Six, don't believe I've forgiven you. Never dare to mention Caesar in front of me again, nor any other of my comrades, if you don't want me to crack your face."

III

When she came out of the pavilion, Monica was still there, and Dustin had joined her as well. They turned to look at her with understanding – they must have heard her tones over the top and the Marshal's continuous reprimands, though perhaps not her punch. Who knows how much they knew about Ostium and the Kingsglaives. Who knows what the Marshal would have said and to whom. The coming of a Glaive to Orior, three months before, had unleashed discontent in the camp, but in the meanwhile the horror of the fall of Insomnia had been overwritten by further horrors, and besides, as they kept repeating themselves, the war was over.

"Is everything all right, Silia?" Monica asked in a low voice.

Silia reached into her pocket for another cigarette and placed it between her lips, deciding that, for once, she had enough. "Everything's alright. Please, if the Marshal sends for me again and one of the Six, Izunia himself or the Prince on a white horse is not coming down, tell him I'm in the training field throwing a few punches and it's better for everyone if I stay there."

Already while she was saying it, even before seeing the expressions of disapproval of Monica and Dustin, she felt unfair. As Libertus had shown himself in Orior, Cor had sent for her almost immediately to get her involved. It was her right to know that a Glaive had come at the camp and that others were coming, of course, but not to attend their interview.

"Sorry," she apologized. "If someone needs me, I'll be there for a while."

She walked away between the tents towards the field, her head down to avoid meeting the eyes of someone of hers who could return to the attack. She would have told Gladio about Libertus, of course, and Ignis and Prompto, but not now. She had exhausted all her reserves of self-control and wasn't sure she could answer their questions without getting angry.

"Ah, I recognize that stride. That of stay the hell away or I'll rip your throat out. Can I come closer, Coeurl?"

Silia immediately identified the voice. She stopped abruptly. "Oh, for the Six, Balth, I didn't know you were already here!"

Balthier, his appearance decidedly wilder than when she had met him in his bourgeois apartment back to Insomnia, came forward. He had a wild beard, ratty hair, and a dirty thin coat with his empty sleeve in the left pocket. Silia was so overwhelmed she allowed him to slip his arm behind her neck and draw her closer to his chest.

"I can't believe it," she said, grabbing his face by his rough-bearded chin and turning it left and right. People were probably staring at them, but she didn't give a shit. "Balth, are you still whole?"

"I wasn't whole even before May 16," he corrected her, shaking the stump of his left arm. "But for the rest, yeah, I'm whole."

"What about your wife? Your children?" she asked, but judging by his casual attitude she didn't
think anything had happened to them.

"They're safe in Lestallum, for the time being." He looked her up and down. "Shit, Silia, you look so
damn well. War's really good for you, huh?"

Silia folded her arms. She certainly wasn't good – her best friend had shot himself in front of her a
couple of days before, Libertus had showed himself in Orior as if nothing had happened and the
apocalypse was coming – but, compared to when they had met in Insomnia, she was physically
much better. "How did you get here? Did you manage to leave the Crown City without troubles on
the day of the fall? What happened to you in these last few months?"

"The same as what happened to tens of thousands other people: we took refuge in the archipelago
northeast of Cavaugh. Where Ulric, Luche and Libertus were born. People were more hospitable
than the crown citizens had been with us, thankfully. In Galahd I met Libertus. We came here
together."

"Do you know what he did?" she couldn't help asking.

"He told me everything."

"And didn't you break his face?"

"I did. Didn't you see his bruises?"

"Now he has another one."

"After punching him I let him explain. I don't know if I'll be able to forgive him, but he's less guilty
than many others. And he's up to mend what he did."

"Yeah, that's what he said to us too. The Marshal accepted him."

"The famed Immortal. Can't wait to meet him. I'll introduce myself to him shortly. Given Libertus'
delicate position, I thought it best they talked alone. Only they weren't alone, I found out." He
smiled, ambiguous. "You really went all out here, huh? I heard a lot of people mention Hartwood. I
couldn't believe it was you. Thought you were dead in Insomnia along with the rest of the Glaives,
even if I'd heard someone survived."

"Yeah, it's a news I found out just today. I'll tell you about me later. But now tell me about you.
What are you doing here?"

"Same as Libertus. Days ago I felt the power of the Crystal reactivate. I left the Kingsglaives six
years ago, Silia, but when my fingers started tingling with magic again, I realized you can't just stop
being a Glaive. When the High Messenger came, I no longer had any doubts."

Balthier seemed to be another person since she had met him at Insomnia and had thought he looked
like another person compared to the comrade she had trained with. Evidently, Balth the Insurer had
managed to settle only superficially, and the danger, the emergencies, had made Balth the
Kingsglaive resurface. "Did she appear to you too?"

Balth nodded. "The High Messenger was apocalyptic, to say the least. I smelt shit, so I took my
family and brought them to Lestallum, then I came here to find out what's going on. Now tell me it
was paranoia and I was an idiot to go on a journey like that and we're not in deep shit."

"I'd love to, but we're in deep shit. We've probably never been in so deep of shit until now."
"And if someone who crawled into Bors' storm drain tells me, I believe it."

Silia smiled sadly. "You did well to bring your family to Lestallum. There's light. Come and have a glass, Balth, these are not things to listen to sober."

Half an hour later, in the turret – she didn't know where else to take him to talk in private – Balthier was staring at the bottom of his empty glass, sitting on a crate. "So," he said, "we don't have to worry about the Empire anymore, but about the Starscourge."

Silia nodded. "The Oracle is dead in Altissia. In a little while there'll be no day, Balth, that's why I told you that yours will be safe in Lestallum, with the Exineris to produce electricity. Our only hope is the Chosen King, Prince Noctis, and until then we can only try to survive and protect those who can't do it by themselves."

Balthier looked up from his glass to peer at her. The right corner of his mouth trembled slightly in a tic, as if it was constantly aborting a smile. Silia wondered how he did it with his drugs since May and how he would do it in the future. Insomnia's pharmaceutical labs no longer existed. "You seem to have a lot of faith in him."

She shrugged. "A few days after coming here at the camp, Cor Leonis told me the Prince had been summoned by Titan. For a moment I thought he was shitfing me, or that it was, you know, just a saying. He asked me what I knew about the Lucis Caelums and he quoted the prophecy to me."

"When darkness veils the world, the King of Light shall come," he said in her place. "Everyone knows that line of Cosmogony, even those who haven't read it." He didn't say anything else, but Silia knew very well what he was thinking of.

"Well, Balth," she said simply. "At the time I replied to Cor Leonis I found it hard to believe but I would have fought for Noctis Lucis Caelum anyway, because he was what remained of the royal family I had sworn to protect. But now I believe the prophecy to be true."

"When we were kids you said you had trouble believing magic, even if you had it in your hands. We had Bahamut engraved on our plates yet you'd go around saying it was a personification of the warlike spirit and a way the royal family had to legitimize its power."

Silia chuckled. "True. But do you know what's more idiotic than a man who believes that everything is a manifestation of the gods? A man who stands before a god and refuses to believe it."

Balthier continued tapping the side of the case with his right heel, looking towards the mountains. "It's all so sick. I was still trying to free myself from the nightmare of four years in war, and now I find out the whole world has fallen into a worse nightmare."

"Know what?" she said, blocking his foot because that thump was driving her crazy. "I've more hope now than when we were on the front. King Regis believed in Noctis Lucis Caelum, and Marshal Leonis believes in him, so much that after the fall of Insomnia he put up a resistance to cover his back. The Oracle believed in Noctis Lucis Caelum, and demonstrated it by sacrificing herself to guarantee him the support of the Astrals. The Astrals believe in Noctis Lucis Caelum. Even that fool Izunia told me that Noctis Lucis Caelum is the True King. And if Noctis Lucis Caelum is the True King, there's hope."

He nodded gravely. "Even if Noctis Lucis Caelum is the True King, there's no guarantee that he can defeat Izunia, when he comes back. If he comes back. It could happen in a hundred years, have you thought about that?"
"Then we will reorganize humanity to resist the Scourge for a hundred years."

There was a squeak from below. Someone was climbing up the turret. Silia clicked her tongue, annoyed; since she had returned from Niflheim she hadn't had a moment's respite. She softened a bit only when Gladio's head poked out of the trapdoor.

"Bet you were back here," he told her, pulling himself up onto the platform. He cast a curious glance at Balthier. "Thought you were alone, though."

"In Orior? Not even in the crapper."

"I'll come back after you're done. I just wanted to know what's going on. After talking to the Marshal, you disappeared."

"I was intercepted by someone I didn't expect to meet. Balth, this is Gladio Amicitia, the Sworn Shield of Prince Noctis. Gladio, this is Balthier Carson. He was my teammate at the time of the front, but he retired due to an injury."

Gladio parted his lips. "A Kingsglaive?"

"Yeah, and he's not the only one. Got lots of things to tell you, Gladio."

"If you say injury it sounds like I dropped my sword on my foot," Balthier smiled, stepping down from the box to stretch his hand out to Gladio. Balthier was tall, but he had to tilt his head to be able to look him in the face. "The Shield of the King. It's an honor for me, Amicitia."

"No kidding," Gladio retorted, shaking his hand. "It's an honor for me to meet a Kinsglaive, Carson."

"Former Kingsglaive," Silia specified. "Balth is keen to point this out." As I was until ten days or so ago.

"As for this," Balthier said, leaving Gladio's hand, "I didn't come here to the ass end of nowhere to offer the Immortal my precious services as an insurer. I'd like to resume training so I can start fighting again. I haven't taken a sword in my hands for six years, and now I only have one, but there are things that are not easily forgotten."

Silia couldn't believe it. "Balth, and your family?"

"I could never look them in the face while parasitizing somewhere, knowing I could do something concrete to help. I did it too much, parasitizing, I mean, Coeurl. My wife understood. I'll go and get them when the dust has settled down a little. I won't depend on others for their protection and my own."

Silia covered the two steps that separated them and hugged him tightly.

"Hey, take it easy, Kitty, I'm married."

"She'll be too, in a little while," Gladio replied mockingly.

"Are you getting married? Oh my fuckin' gods. This is really the doomsday. Who's the unlucky guy?"

"Nobody. I never told him I would."

"Oh, you will."
"Wait wait. Will you marry the scion of the noble family Amicitia, Silia? A Kingsglaive coming out of the ghetto of the refugees with the Sworn Shield of the future King? And above all, a Kingsglaive with a Crownsguard?"

"I've just said I won't marry anyone."

"By the way, did I ask you today?"

"It was worth coming all the way to Orior to hear such news," Balth grinned, patting her shoulder. "You'll see when the others will know."

"The others, who?" Gladio asked.

Balthier gave her a questioning look, to which she replied with a shrug. All the anger she had felt and that seeing Balthier had softened, suddenly flowed again. Her face felt hot. "The other Glaives. Six more. Seven. Libertus Ostium is with the Marshal, he's the one who..." She pursed her lips, rubbing her eyes. The last thing she wanted was to stir up the spirits against Libertus, since they had just told him he could collaborate with them. Her spirit was already quite fomented. "One of those who betrayed," she had to say.

Gladio opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. "Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"And what is he doing here? And where were all the others?"

"He's here to make up for his mistakes, he says. Seems he brought the Princess to safety after the fall of Insomnia. As for the others, fuck knows where they've been holed up to. I've every intention of asking them as soon as they'll be here."

On Gladio's face she read all the emotions she had felt and was still feeling, except one: disappointment. He hadn't fought with those people shoulder to shoulder for ten years. And those people, even if hadn't betrayed, had pulled back.

"Hm," Balthier said. "Coeurl, it was a pleasure to see you again, and certainly we'll spend some time together these days while we wait for the others. But now I'm going to look for Libertus and introduce myself to the Marshal. I'll leave you with your husband."

"He's not my husband. Balth, will you do me a favor?"

Balthier was already lowering himself into the trapdoor. "What?"

"Look for Prompto Argentum and Ignis Scientia, Prince's Noctis comrades. You'll find them easily, if you ask around. Send them here. And..."

"And what?"

"The issue about the Glaives who're coming. And what Libertus did. Don't shout it around too much. People are worried and flammable. I don't want trouble in the camp. Let the Marshal decide if, when and how to say it."

Balthier remained leaning against the trapdoor. He winked. "I had missed you being the deputy of the Immortal."

"I'm not. But I care about this camp and the people inside it. They welcomed me after the fall of
Insomnia, when I had no place to go or I knew what to do. Even though I was a Kingsglaive, a member of the military army who was guilty of the worst betrayal in history. These are my people now."

He smiled. "We'll be careful, Coeurl. You know what? You'd have been a much better captain than ours turned out to be."

Chapter End Notes

"Meliora spero sequorque" > "I hope and strive for better things"

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